

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

**THE EIGHTH YEAR**

Sponsored by the North American Division  
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Department of Education

Youth and Young Adults Department

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The Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) has previously reported on the first seven 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 among others. See complete listing at the end of this report]. This project is being sponsored by the North American Division, particularly the Youth and Young Adults and the Education departments. The present paper reports the findings of the eighth year of the study.

**ADVENTIST YOUTH SURVEY 8** contained 47 questions on four pages. The 1994-95 study investigated the percentages who had dropped out of the church or become inactive at some time and the strength of various influences on this disaffiliation. It also looked at those who had returned to active status and the various influences on this renewal. It attempted to ascertain how active the respondents were in various areas of church life and included a scale to measure one

aspect of religious maturity. Standard demographic questions were included, and participants were given a chance to comment about their religion and their church.

### **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 (28%) 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 eighth-year questionnaire was sent out in June 1994, these young people were 22 or 23 years of age (the study began with those 15 or 16 seven years before). As the year passed by, a number turned 24. 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 (at this writing) to obtain current addresses for 262 members of the sample. The Institute is now in the process of contacting the clerks of the congregations where

these young adults held membership at the beginning of the study in 1987 to see if any leads can be developed that would help trace these "lost" members. 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 71 have asked that their names be dropped from the study. In June 1994, the eighth-year survey was mailed to all those (1187 members) in the original sample for whom addresses were available or who had not asked to be dropped from the study even though only 755 had completed the seventh-year survey. All non-respondents were sent a second mailing in August and a third mailing in October. Only those who had completed the seventh-year questionnaire but who had still not responded to eighth-year mailings were sent a fourth appeal in December and a fifth appeal in February.

By April 1995, 684 usable questionnaires had been received, and a few others continue to trickle in. This number represents about 45% 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 1187 potential respondents and make the return rate about 58%.

Another way to view this is to calculate that the 684 respondents are 91% of the 755 who completed the seventh-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 for both the seventh and eighth years it was 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 slightly during the seventh and eighth years.

Would a better response significantly change the information to be presented here? It is very likely that non-respondents are more negative toward the church to some unknown extent. However, one test suggests that the data may be quite accurate. In October of 1994, after two mailings, 578 surveys were returned. The efforts of the final three mailings over five months gathered another 106 questionnaires to bring the total to 684--an increase of 18%. The frequencies for those first 578 surveys were compared with the frequencies for the 684. Of the approximately 170 percentages, most were identical on the two runs. Where differences occurred, they were only one or two percentage points. In only three cases was the difference as large as three percentage points. This suggests that if we could get a larger number to respond, the results would not be changed significantly. As might be expected, the changes that did occur revealed a slight downward turn in church involvement for those last 106 respondents. In general, we can have confidence in this data.

### **Description of the Sample**

Respondents for the eighth year were 38% male and 62% female. Since the original sample was 43% male and 57% female, it is evident that the male response rate has been somewhat less than the female rate. Ethnic backgrounds (almost exactly the same proportions as the previous year) were as follows:

Asian/Oriental	8%
Black	13%
Hispanic	11%
White	65%
Other	4%

One question asked about their major activity for 1993-94 with the following results:

Attended Adventist college	32%
Attended non-Adventist college	22%
Full-time employment	37%
Homemaker	4%
Military service	2%
Unemployed	3%

On the previous year's survey these young adults were asked their plans for 1993-94. It is interesting to compare what they planned to do, as listed below, with what they actually did, as listed above.

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

Those planning on attending an Adventist college pretty well followed through. The main difference between plans and realities is that 11% who planned to attend a non-Adventist college ended up shifting to the work force.

What is the marital status of these young adults as they move into life beyond college?

Never married	74%
Married for the first time	22%
Remarried after a divorce	1%
Divorced and still single	3%

In addition, three persons were separated from their spouses, and one person had been widowed. National statistics have noted that people are marrying later than in past generations. The fact that nearly three-fourths of this sample has never married at ages 22 to 24 certainly supports this finding for Adventist youth also.

The survey asked those who had married to identify the religious status of their spouses:

Married a Seventh-day Adventist	62%
Married a member of another Christian church	21%
Married a member of a non-Christian religion	2%
Married someone not affiliated with any religion	15%

This was one of the questions where a three-percentage-point differential occurred between the October and April frequencies. In the first 578 cases, 65% of those married had married an Adventist. The other three categories picked up one percentage point each when this dropped to 62% in the final tally. Evidently those marrying outside the faith tended to be a bit slower in returning their questionnaires.

As to children, 84% had none, 11% had one child, 4% had two children, and 1% had three.

ICM included two questions taken from the world survey of the Adventist Family. The first asked: "When you were a child, were you ever sexually abused by an adult?" A little over 15% answered "yes."

The second question asked: "Have you ever been physically abused by an adult (a scar, black and blue marks, welts, bleeding, broken bones, etc.)?" Here, multiple answers were possible:

Never	82%
Once	4%
Two or three times	6%
Four to ten times	2%
More than ten times	6%

Finally, two questions about education were included. Participants were asked to check the highest level of formal education that they had attained:

Some high school	1%
High school graduate	7%
Some college	54%
College graduate	31%
Post-graduate education	7%

Reflecting the Adventist emphasis on education, the sample is well-educated. Virtually all have finished high school or academy and 92% have gone on to college. Nearly four out of



ten (38%) are already college graduates, and that percentage will continue to rise as others complete their academic work. We also found that only 12% had never attended Adventist schools at all, 10% had attended for 12 years, and 13% had gone for a full 16 years.

This then is the group upon which this report is based. Even with the considerable attrition from 1987, 684 young adults told the church about themselves. That is still a large study. Here is what they said:

### **Dropping Out of the Church**

At the time they took the survey 90% of the group said they were still members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church while 10% were not. Of course that does not mean that the 90% were *active* members--only official ones.

However, when we asked: "Did you ever, at some time in the past, drop out of church membership or stop attending services?" half of the respondents said "yes." The survey then listed five items that might have influenced them to drop out or stop attending and asked them to indicate if each had no influence, some influence, or much influence on their decision to leave. The percentages listed below combine "some influence" and "much influence" and are ranked in descending order:

Church no longer seemed relevant to my daily life	57%
I wanted a lifestyle that the church doesn't approve	55%
I felt lack of acceptance from the members	46%
I no longer believed what the church teaches	33%
There was conflict with the pastor or a lay leader	22%

Disagreement with doctrines and interpersonal conflict are not the most important influences on dropping out or becoming inactive, although it would be a mistake to discount the seriousness of the fact that 33% and 22% respectively were influenced by these reasons. More pertinent is the perceived lack of relevance to the lifestyle of the young adult and the resulting lack of acceptance on the part of church members. Disaffected young adults are living in a different world than long-time, older church members, and a high wall, difficult to penetrate, exists between them.

### **Coming Back to the Church**

One hopeful aspect is that young people who drop out of the church or become inactive sometimes return. Indeed, 38% of those who left (19% of the whole sample) said they were now back. Again, they were asked to assess the relative influence of factors that might have contributed to their restoration. In the list below the percentages are the combined choices of "some influence" and "much influence" and are given in descending order:

A relative (mother, father, spouse)	71%
Study of the Bible	49%
A caring friend	48%
Had children of my own	27%
A religious radio or television program	18%
A series of evangelistic meetings	14%
A pastor who visited me	10%

By a wide margin relatives have the most influence in the reclaiming process. That ought to encourage everyone who prays for a wandering parent, child, or spouse. Personal Bible study

and the influence of a caring friend also make a considerable contribution. The importance of becoming a parent should be noticed. Of the 27% who said that having children of their own influenced their return, 22% said it had *much* influence. Studies in mainline denominations support the finding that those who have left the church in adolescence report that the responsibilities of parenthood and the desire for their children to have religious training is one of the most important factors in returning to the church. Since 84% of this sample had no children, we can expect this influence to grow as more of the respondents enter the parenting stage.

On the other hand, influences like the media and public evangelism are much less effective although they do make some contribution. Least productive of all was the visit of a pastor. Of the 10% who were influenced at all by this factor, only 3% (four people) said it had *much* influence. Either the pastors are not visiting these straying young adults or their visits are not effective. Either way, the problem calls for a serious reevaluation.

### **Being Active in the Church**

The survey asked: "How active are you in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as measured by the following activities?" The percentages represent those who said "yes" they were doing those things. They are listed in descending order.

Attend church service regularly	56%
Pay tithe on income regularly	49%
Give offerings other than tithe to church projects	46%
Attend church social functions	43%
Attend Sabbath school regularly	33%

Attend other meetings (prayer/youth/small group/etc.)	23%
Participate in some share-your-faith activities	22%
Hold some type of church office	19%
Serve on one or more church committees	12%

These are young adults who, as has been noted above, are generally well-educated and have many talents to contribute to the mission of the church. These figures reveal that, in general, the church has not done a very good job of involving them and utilizing their gifts. In spite of the fact that 90% claim to be members of the church, 50% have never become inactive, another 19% have returned to active status, 56% attend services regularly, and half pay tithe, the involvement index is low. Only about a fifth have been recruited for any kind of outreach or given any church office. Only an eighth have been appointed to a church committee. What it amounts to is that of those creative, energetic young adults who attend regularly and tithe faithfully, less than half have been given any meaningful involvement in their local congregations. No wonder the church is facing a serious dropout problem with its young adults.

### **A Measure of Religious Maturity**

In addition to collecting the information that has been described above, the questionnaire included a religious maturity scale of eleven items (questions 26 to 36). This religious maturity measure stems from the pioneer work of Gordon Allport on orientation to religion. He identified the characteristics of a mature personality from a psychological standpoint and then attempted to apply them to the way a person is religious. Mature religion is "(1) well differentiated; (2) dynamic in character in spite of its derivative nature; (3) productive of a consistent morality; (4) comprehensive; (5) integral; and (6) fundamentally heuristic" (Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual*

*and His Religion* [New York: Macmillan, 1950], 57). At the same time that it provides direction to life as a "master motive," it is flexible and responsive to new information, neither fanatic nor compulsive. It deals openly and honestly with "matters central to all existence," including the difficult questions of ethical responsibility and evil. It produces the ability to "act wholeheartedly even without absolute certainty. It can be sure without being cocksure" (Ibid., 72).

The eleven-item Religious Maturity Scale included in this questionnaire was developed by Roger L. Dudley and Robert J. Cruise ("Measuring Religious Maturity: A Proposed Scale," *Review of Religious Research* 32 [December 1990]: 97-109). The particular items were designed to reflect Allport's formulation. Individuals could respond to each item on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The eleven items are listed below with the combined percentages of those who agreed with the statement either strongly or somewhat:

1. My religious beliefs provide me with satisfying answers  
at this stage of my development, but I am prepared to alter  
them as new information becomes available. 57%
2. I am happy with my present religion but wish to be open to  
new insights and ways of understanding the meaning of life. 63%
3. As best as I can determine, my religion is true, but I  
recognize that I could be mistaken on some points. 62%
4. Important questions about the meaning of life do not have simple  
or easy answers; therefore faith is a developmental process. 84%
5. I could not commit myself to a religion unless I was certain  
that it is completely true. 70%

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|--|-----|
| 6. I have struggled in trying to understand the problems of evil, suffering, and death that mark this world.                                     | 55% |
| 7. Churches should concentrate on proclaiming the gospel and not become involved in trying to change society through social or political action. | 53% |
| 8. While we can never be quite sure that what we believe is absolutely true, it is worth acting on the probability that it may be.               | 65% |
| 9. I have found many religious questions to be difficult and complex so I am hesitant to be dogmatic or final in my assertions.                  | 48% |
| 10. In my religion my relationships with other people are as fundamental as my relationship with God.  | 49% |
| 11. My religious beliefs are pretty much the same today as they were five years ago.   | 43% |

If Allport's formulation is accepted, agreement with eight of the items indicates greater religious maturity while *disagreement* with three of the items (5, 7, and 11) suggests a more mature view. The majority of the youth did agree with six of the eight positive items although significant minorities disagreed. Slightly less than half agreed with items 9 and 10, although more still agreed than disagreed.

The negative items proved to be more problematic. Item 5, "I could not commit myself to a religion unless I was certain that it is completely true" was the most difficult with 70% agreeing and only 18% disagreeing. It is also in contradiction with items 3 and 8 which had

agreement rates of 62% and 65% respectively. Item 7 was less acceptable with slightly over half (53%) agreeing and 29% disagreeing. The most mature answers for the negative items came on item 11. Even though 43% still agreed, 48% disagreed--the only negative item with a favorable balance.

The Religious Maturity Scale was created by adding the eleven items. With a possible range of 11-55, the expected middle score would be 33. However, the actual mean for this sample was 38, indicating a maturity slightly on the high side. A good scale, though, should have internal reliability. That is, the individual items should correlate well with each other. An item analysis revealed that the eleven-item scale had a lower-than-desired reliability alpha of .52. Coefficients of at least .70 are preferred.

We next began removing items from the scale, one at a time, and recalculating the reliability to see if it could be improved. This resulted in deleting the three negative items (5, 7, and 11) since they did not correlate well with the others. That is, subjects tended to respond to them in contradictory ways. Finally, a scale was created from the eight positive items. It was determined that the reliability could not be improved by further deletions. The resulting scale had an better, but still moderate, reliability of .64.

Why this psychometric predicament? Measurement of the construct is tricky for it requires the respondent--in line with Allport's concept--to hold in tension wholehearted commitment to one's faith with flexibility and openness to new light and truth. This is illustrated by statements like: "My religious beliefs provide me with satisfying answers at this stage of my development, *but* I am prepared to alter them as new information becomes available." "While

we can never be quite sure that what we believe is absolutely true, it is worth acting on the probability that it may be."

Individuals are asked to agree or disagree with statements that present what may seem to be opposing ideas. This is difficult for persons with rigid or dogmatic mind sets. Thus consistency on this scale is lower than on the others which have items that are more straightforward. Religious maturity, under this formulation, requires a mixture of humility, openness, and commitment.

The mature faith is also comprehensive. It attempts to integrate all of life into its scheme of understanding. Thus a sample item is: "I have struggled in trying to understand the problems of evil, suffering, and death that mark this world." Such faith is dynamic, never stagnant. It is always growing, always journeying, but never, in this life, reaching the end of the journey.

With eight items, each having responses ranging from 1 to 5, the revised Religious Maturity Scale had a possible range of 8 to 40. The actual range was the same with a tendency for scores to be somewhat higher than a normal distribution. In such a distribution the average score would be 24, but here the middle of the range falls between 28 and 29. Only one person had the minimum possible score of 8 while five received the maximum score of 40. About 76% were above the expected middle score of 24, about 22% were above 32 (average of all 4s), and 5% scored above 36. By contrast, it required scores from 8 to 18 to encompass 4.4% of the group at the lower end of the range.

This, then, is the snapshot of this representative group of Adventist young adults eight years through this journey. The researchers at ICM are deeply appreciative of these men and women who have so faithfully filled out surveys and shared their honest feelings and perceptions



over so many years. The church and the future of youth ministry are in their debt. We look forward to the rich information that the final completion of this project will bring.

## PUBLICATIONS DRAWING ON TEN-YEAR YOUTH STUDY

Authored by Roger L. Dudley

### BOOKS:

*The World of the Adventist Teenager* (with Janet Leigh Kangas). Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1990.

*Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*. LaSierra University Press, 1992.

### ARTICLES:

"Teenagers Speak to the Church" (with Janet Leigh Kangas). *Adventist Review* 165 (December 15, 1988): 12-16.

"Adventist Standards: The Hinge of Youth Retention" (with Janet Leigh Kangas). *Spectrum* 19 (February 1989): 35-41.

"How Adventist Teenagers Perceive Their Church" (with Janet Leigh Kangas). *Ministry* 62 (October 1989): 4-7.

"How Does Adventist Education Affect Youth Attitudes? Initial Report of an NAD Study" (with Janet Leigh Kangas). *Journal of Adventist Education* 52 (April-May 1990): 24-29, 45-46.

"Survey Reveals Struggles of Church's Youth." *Adventist Review* 168 (July 18, 1991): 21-22.

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"Adventist Youth Cry Out" (with Gan-Theow Ng). *Journal of Adventist Youth Ministry* 2 (Fall 1992): 50-57.

"The Lost Generation: Why Did 86 Adventist Young People Drop Out of the Church?" *Adventist Review* 169 (December 3, 1992): 18-20.

"Indicators of Commitment to the Church: A Longitudinal Study of Church-affiliated Youth." *Adolescence* 28 (Spring 1993): 21-28.

"Faith Maturity and Social Concern in College-age Youth: Does Christian Education Make a Difference?" *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 3, 1 (Spring 1994): 35-49.

"How Mature? How Involved?" *Ministry* 67, 9 (September 1994): 16-19.

"Religious Attitudes and Behaviors of College Students: Does Adventist Education Make a Difference?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 57, 1 (October-November 1994): 40-45.

"Grace, Relevancy, and Confidence in the Future: Why Adventist Young Adults Commit to the Church." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, in press.

#### PAPERS PRESENTED AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

"The Lost Generation: A Study of Young People Who Have Left the Seventh-day Adventist Church." A paper presented to the Association of Adventist Family Life Professionals, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, July 12, 1992.

"Indicators of Commitment to the Church in a Longitudinal Study of Church-affiliated Youth." A paper presented to the Annual Joint Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association, Arlington, VA, November 6-8, 1992.

"Grace, Relevancy, and Confidence in the Future: Why Young Adults Commit to the Church." A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Religious Research Association, Albuquerque, NM, November 4, 1994.

