

Religious Attitudes and Behaviors of College Students

Does Adventist Education Make a Difference?

BY ROGER L. DUDLEY

“The Adventist college I attended last year was extremely rigid, with a lack of caring for the students and their problems. The required worship services made me resentful, with a negative attitude toward the church overall. At least one of my friends has even left the church for good because of this and others are very unsure and upset.”

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“My experience with this Adventist college has been very positive, especially because I wasn’t forced to go to worships. I did choose to attend regularly and find them much more of a blessing without being forced.”

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“I had an awful year at this Adventist college. People are confusing Christianity with religion, and there’s a difference. There was far too much focus on rules rather than on people as people with a basic need for Christ.”

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“This year I went back to an Adventist college after a year in public college. I was glad to be back. I was also surprised and pleased at the kindness, helpfulness, and ease with which the college personnel accepted me back. They were extremely helpful.”

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The above comments show the wide range of responses by young adults to the

Does enrollment in an Adventist college make a difference in religious commitment?

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North American Youth Retention Study,¹ a 10-year study of Adventist youth retention and dropout throughout the North American Division. This study helps us answer a variety of questions such as these: Does enrollment in an Adventist college make a difference in religious commitment? Do Adventist young people attending our colleges hold different views about salvation than their peers in other schools? Do the two groups of students perceive their local congregations differently?

The Study

In 1987, the Adventist Church in North America selected youth in their mid-teens who were already members of the church, and set up a mechanism to survey them each year for 10 years to determine what factors related to their church loyalty.

First, using stratified random sampling, we selected 695 churches that were geographically representative of all congregations in the North American Division. The clerks of these churches were then requested to provide the names and addresses of all their members who were 15 or 16 years of age. Clerks of 659 churches responded (95 percent), and a six-page base questionnaire was mailed to each teenager. Usable instruments were received from 1,523 (a 64 percent response rate), and each year follow-up surveys have been mailed.

Details on the beginning of this project along with findings related to Adventist education were reported in THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION.² Fortunately, for comparison purposes, the original sample was divided quite evenly between academy students and those attending public schools (773 in academies, 634 in public high schools). The academy students were more positive than those in public education on a wide array of attitudes toward the church, religion, Christian standards, and their future as Adventists.³

Of course, some attrition from the original sample has occurred, although efforts are being made to find correct addresses and to encourage subjects to continue, including four or five mailings each year. Some respondents will skip a year or two and then start again. Many have moved and left no forwarding addresses. Surveys were completed by 1,263 youth in the second year, 1,083 in the third year, 894 in the fourth year, 887 in the fifth year, and 834 in the sixth year.

The major purpose of the longitudinal study—predicting the factors associated with retention or dropping out—will not be realized until the conclusion of the study. This article has more limited objectives: (1) assessing the relationship between a grace orientation to salvation, a fear of “final” events in the world’s history, and perceived relevance of the local congregation and various measures of religious commitment, and (2) assessing the differences between students in Adventist colleges and those in other schools on these measures. To address these objectives, data from the sixth year of the study will be analyzed. These data were collected in 1992-1993 from 834 subjects who were then 20 to 22 years old. The sample consists of 319 males and 515 females (about the same ratio as the membership of NAD).

About 78 percent had not yet married and had no definite plans, 11 percent were engaged to be married, and 10 percent had already married. Slightly over 1 percent were divorced. In terms of ethnicity, 7 percent were Asian/Oriental, 15 percent were black/African-American, 10 percent were Hispanic, 64 percent were white, and 4 percent claimed some other category. Because of its geographical spread and demographic diversity, the sample may be considered quite representative of Adventist young adults in NAD.

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In responding to a question on the sixth-year survey concerning their present relationship to the church, slightly over a fourth claimed to be enthusiastic members while a nearly equal percentage had left the church either officially or de facto. The remaining

47 percent declared themselves “so-so members.” By the sixth year, those subjects who were still in school (593 out of the 834) were now in college. They were still quite evenly divided between those in Adventist colleges (311) and those in other

Reliability of Data

To what extent does the attrition affect the reliability of the data in this study? Have most dropouts been non-committed, leaving behind the “cream of the crop”? We do not know the religious status of those who disappeared from or dropped out of the sample, and it is certainly reasonable to infer that the uncommitted may be disproportionately represented in this group. However, ample variance remains to explore the relationships sought in this article.

This report does not attempt to draw conclusions on the degree of commitment or alienation among Adventist young adults, only to compare students in the two educational systems on religious commitment and certain religious views. If one assumes that the sample is biased toward greater commitment, differences between the two groups will be underestimated so the findings of this survey may be considered conservative.

schools (282). The other 241 were not in higher education, and will not be considered in the comparison analyses.

Measurements

Religious commitment might be measured in a number of ways. For this study, three scales were constructed. Various items that seemed to measure the particular concept were written (face validity) and combined into a scale. Each scale was submitted to a reliability analysis.⁴

Commitment to the Church

Eight items comprise this scale:

1. Present relationship to the Seventh-day Adventist Church (four choices, from “have dropped out” to “enthusiastic member”).

2. Chances of being active in the Adventist Church at 40 years of age (five choices, from “no chance” to “excellent chance”).

3. Importance of religious faith in the respondent’s life (five choices, from “not an important influence” to “the most important influence”).

4. Commitment to Jesus Christ (three choices, from “have never made a commitment” to “presently committed”).

5. Frequency of attendance at worship services (four choices, from “never” to “nearly every week”).

6. Frequency of attendance at Sabbath school (same choices as number 5).

7. Frequency of encouraging someone to join the Adventist Church (five choices, from “never” to “daily”), and

8. Tithing practices (four choices, from “never” to “always”).⁵

Personal Religious Commitment

This scale is composed of four items, each measured on a five-point scale from

Do Adventist young people attending our colleges hold different views about salvation than their peers in other schools?

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“never” to “daily”: (1) pray other than at church or before meals, (2) read the Bible on my own, (3) try to encourage someone to believe in Jesus, and (4) tell someone about the work of God in my life.⁶

Agreement With Seventh-day Adventist Standards

Agreement with the reasonableness of church standards was the strongest predictor of intention to remain in the church during adult life, according to the first year’s study results.⁷

Internalization of prescribed life-style standards is an important aspect of commit-

ment to a faith community. Therefore, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with nine behavioral standards that represent traditional church positions. Choices were made on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The standards were: (1) not use tobacco, (2) not drink alcoholic beverages, (3) not wear cosmetic jewelry, (4) not listen to rock music, (5) not attend movie theaters, (6) not dance, (7) sex should occur only in marriage, (8) keep the Sabbath day, and (9) dress modestly.⁸ An item on not using illegal drugs was deleted from the scale because it did not correlate well with

the total—no doubt because of the very high degree of agreement.

In addition to these commitment variables, three additional scales were developed:

Grace Orientation

The first scale dealt with how salvation occurs. If the respondent believes that salvation is entirely the work of God and that human effort can contribute no merit toward it, this may be labeled a “grace orientation.” In contrast, one who believes that good deeds, to some extent, make salvation

more likely may be said to have a “works orientation.” How do these young adults understand salvation in terms of God’s free gift versus obedience to God’s will and good works? Four items were selected to measure grace orientation. Each was scored on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The statements were:

1. “Salvation is based upon what Jesus Christ has done, not upon what I do.”

2. “The way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to lead a good life” [reversed scoring].

3. “The main emphasis of the gospel is on God’s rules for right living” [reversed

scoring].

4. "There is nothing I can do to earn salvation."⁹

Fear of the Future

This second set of questions concerned the respondent's view of the future, especially end-time events and Christ's second advent. When denominations teach that the coming of Christ is a time when He will judge the nations and punish the wicked, young people may have a sense of fear and dread, suspecting that their lives will not measure up and that they will be among the "lost." Only two items were selected here and measured by the same scale used above: (1) "World events cause me to be afraid of the future." (2) "I am worried about being ready for Christ's return."¹⁰

Relevancy of Local Congregation

The final measure had to do with the perceived relevancy of the church to personal living. Motivation theory indicates that people engage in only those behaviors that they believe will satisfy some need in their lives.¹¹ They will not continue to do things that do not "pay off." Three items were chosen to measure this construct using the above Likert scale: (1) "Sabbath sermons in my church are interesting," (2) "My church meets my spiritual needs," (3) "My church meets my social needs."

Comparisons

As might be suspected, the three measures of commitment are strongly related to each other. *Commitment to the Church* is correlated with *Personal Religious Commitment* and with *Agreement With Adventist Standards*.¹²

The latter two also correlated with each other. Thus, a common construct of commitment runs through all three measures. However, since the correlations are not perfect, there is room for individual shades of difference. With this in mind, comparisons were made on the three measures separately as well as on the other three scales.¹³ The table reveals the results.

Significant differences exist between the students in Adventist colleges and those in other colleges on all six measures. Those in Adventist schools are significantly higher on all three measures of commitment: *Commitment to the Church*, *Personal Religious Commitment*, and *Agreement With*

Adventist Standards. They are also considerably higher on *Grace Orientation* and somewhat higher on perceived *Relevancy of the Local Congregation*. While the students in non-Adventist colleges are higher on *Fear of the Future*, that, of course, is a negative finding.

Thus, students attending Adventist colleges appear to be more committed to the church, to have a richer devotional life, to find themselves more in harmony with Adventist life-style standards, to have a more grace-centered approach to salvation, to feel more confident about the Second Advent and the endtime events that surround it, and to perceive their local congregations as more relevant. Of course, this does not prove that attending an Adventist school *caused* all these positive traits. It may be that the more committed, the more involved, and those who know their Bibles better are more likely to choose an Adventist college. But the package certainly goes together, and Adventist education seems to foster these positive attributes.

Why Does It Matter?

Commitment to the church is obviously an important factor in retaining these young adults within its membership. But the other variables are important because they tend to predict the various measures of commitment.

For example, perceived relevancy of the

local congregation proved to be an important positive predictor of commitment to the church, personal religious commitment, and agreement with Adventist standards.¹⁴ In this study that means that commitment is associated with sermons that speak to the interests of the youth and congregations that meet their spiritual and social needs. Young adults are withdrawing from the church formally or disengaging from it in practice because they no longer find it meaningful. It often doesn't address the concerns of their lives. If churches are to retain this new generation and utilize its talents fully, they will need to learn to speak its language. Relevant and interesting religious programming will help foster commitment. Resources must be provided to meet the spiritual and social needs of young adults. Like any other age group, "twentysomethings" who feel that they are not merely tolerated in their local congregations but that they are an integral and vital part of the body of Christ are likely to "buy in."

This task will not be easy for churches. Can they speak the language of the younger generation without compromising the faith? How can a denomination retain the distinctive principles that make it a viable faith community and yet package its mes-

t-TEST FOR DIFFERENCE OF MEANS ON RELIGIOUS SCALES

Group 1 - 311 students in Seventh-day Adventist colleges

Group 2 - 282 students in non-Adventist colleges

Scale	Group 1 Mean	Group 2 Mean	t-Value
Commitment to the Church	25.229	22.131	6.94**
Personal Religious Commitment	12.585	11.238	4.71**
Agreement With Adventist Standards	34.029	31.478	4.23**
Relevancy of the Congregation	8.752	8.082	2.62*
Grace Orientation	15.264	11.443	11.37**
Fear of the Future	6.412	7.050	-3.67**

*Probability of chance finding less than .01 (one in a hundred)

**Probability of chance finding less than .001 (one in a thousand)

sage and ministry to appeal to the modern mind? These concerns are not likely to be solved by administrative fiat. The answer may lie in more intergenerational dialogue. A series of discussion groups involving all segments of a congregation might help us separate timeless principles from cultural applications and discover relevant applications for the essential core of historic doctrines.

When the above correlations are calculated separately for students in the two systems, the results are the same, but the magnitude of the correlations is greater for those in the non-Adventist colleges. This may be because they do not experience the superior programming present in most college churches but face a wider span of quality in their local congregations. So while the implications of this area are important for college churches, they are particularly crucial for non-college-related congregations with young adults.

Another important area relating to sustained commitment is grace orientation. Holding this view of salvation predicted commitment to the church, personal religious commitment, and agreement with Adventist standards.¹⁵ If the groups are treated separately, a grace orientation continues to predict all three measures for students in Adventist colleges but predicts only personal religious commitment for those in other institutions.¹⁶ Thus, it is especially crucial to help students in our colleges to grasp experientially the concept of *sola gracia*—by grace alone. (See Jon Dybdahl's article in the Summer 1994 issue of the JOURNAL.)

Those respondents who said they believed that salvation is based upon the work of Jesus Christ, that they can do nothing to earn it, that God does not accept them on the basis of their good living, and that the gospel is not about rules were more likely to be committed to the church, to agree with its behavioral standards, to have

a richer devotional life, and to share their religious experience with others. While the reason for this connection is not revealed by the present data, it seems likely that young people who try to earn salvation sooner or later real-

Adventist colleges. People best learn and accept grace through warm, supportive, interpersonal relationships with graceful human beings. A church or a college might explore ways to help parents, teachers, administrators, and congregational leaders become that kind of people.

Closely related to this understanding is one of confidence in the future. Anxiety about the end of time was a significant negative predictor of commitment to the church and personal religious commitment. Those who worried about not being ready for Christ's return and felt afraid of the future were less likely to be committed to the church or to have a personal commitment to religion. Those religions whose eschatology pictures a fiery end of all things at the imminent advent of Christ, and warn of eternal loss for all those unprepared can be very frightening to developing youth. They may seek meaning systems elsewhere that offer a greater comfort level.

Fear is a powerful motivator, but it often causes people to avoid whatever makes them afraid. This may take place through the process of classical conditioning as explained by Meier et al.:

"Many parents respond to restless children [in church] by punishing them, a pain-producing reaction that is soon associated with attending church. Likewise, fear-filled messages about the end times are likely to produce the same sort of conditioning."¹⁸ The findings of our study suggest that one way to increase commitment among our young adults is to build confidence and assurance about the future by emphasizing God's love, grace, and saving intentions.

Adventist colleges may take some satisfaction in that they are doing a better job of fostering commitment among young adults than are the other institutions of higher learning. But they cannot rest on their laurels, for the picture is far from perfect. As indicated in several of the quotes at the beginning of this article, they need

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ize that they cannot measure up to the behavioral demands. They become discouraged and quit trying. It is only natural to avoid that which is painful. On the other hand, those with a grace orientation have reason for courage and hope because they can look to a perfect example (Christ) as their substitute. People are more likely to continue in involvements that prove satisfying.

How might our schools and congregations encourage a grace orientation? Valuegenesis studied more than 10,000 Adventist young people in grades 6 to 12.¹⁷ This survey revealed that leaders and parents most effectively transmit a grace orientation to the youth by providing a climate of warmth and acceptance in homes and local congregations and by choosing caring adults to do religious training. The same would, no doubt, be true of

to keep exploring better ways to demonstrate grace, foster assurance, and provide relevancy. At the same time, the church needs to consider how to make these benefits more available to the Adventist youth who are in other colleges (most of them secular) or who are not in school at all. The loss of young adults to our fellowship is one of the most serious problems in Adventism (as well as many other faith communities). If the church is to have a future, it must help its young people remain committed to the faith as they enter the stresses and perplexities of adulthood. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Further statistical information on the methods and results of the survey are available from the author of the article.

2. Roger Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas, "How Does Adventist Education Affect Youth Attitudes?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 52:4 (April-May 1990), pp. 24-29, 45, 46.

3. Much of the material in the *Journal* article is available in chapter 8 of Roger L. Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1990) pp. 76-87.

4. Reliability analysis was done using the SPSS PC program. In most cases all items were retained, but in a few instances items that did not correlate well with their respective scales were deleted to improve reliability.

5. These items were combined into a scale with a reliability index alpha of .88 and item/total scale correlations ranging from .41 to .79.

6. These items were combined into a scale with an alpha of .81 and item/total scale correlations ranging from .58 to .68.

7. Dudley and Kangas, chapter 6, "Skewed on Standards."

8. These items formed a scale with an alpha of .89 and item/total scale correlations ranging from .54 to .73.

9. The scale had an alpha of .72 with item/total scale correlations ranging from .42 to .57.

10. As might be expected, with only two items, the alpha is lower than that of the other scales (.51), and the items are correlated with each other at .34.

11. Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

12. Commitment to the Church (hereafter known as CC) correlated with Personal Religious Commitment (hereafter known as PRC) with $r=.72$ and with Agreement With Adventist Standards (hereafter known as AAS) with $r=.62$. Correlation of the latter two was $r=.49$. In each case $p<.0001$.

Slightly over a fourth of the respondents claimed to be enthusiastic members, while a nearly equal percentage had left the church either officially or de facto. The remaining 47 percent declared themselves "so-so members."

13. The t -test was used to calculate the difference of means.

14. Perceived Relevance of the Local Congregation (hereafter known as RLC) positively predicted CC at $r=.51$; PRC at $r=.41$; and AAS at $r=.38$. All of these correlations were significant beyond the .001 level.

15. A grace orientation positively predicted CC ($r=.24$), PRC ($r=.21$), and AAS ($r=.13$). All three correlations were statistically significant beyond the .01

level.

16. $r=.12$, $p<.05$.

17. Roger L. Dudley, with V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992).

18. Paul Meier, Frank Minirth, Frank Wichern, and Donald Ratcliff, *Introduction to Psychology and Counseling: Christian Perspectives and Applications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 106.