

Are young people who attend Adventist schools more likely than those who attend other school systems to remain faithful? Are they more likely to be regular in worship attendance and involved in their congregations? Are they less likely to ever experience a period of inactivity in church attendance?

Under the authorization of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (NAD), the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University has completed a 10-year longitudinal study of youth retention in and dropout from the church in the United States and Canada. In 1987, using a stratified-random method, a proportional representation of 695 churches were selected. The clerk of each congregation was asked to send in the names and addresses of all 15- or 16-year-old members of the congregation. Clerks of 659 churches (95 percent) responded.

The teenagers were then invited by letter to participate, and 1,523 responded. The number of respondents for which we have data varies from year to year. However, at the cut-off of data collection in the autumn of 1997, 783 young adults (about 51 percent) had returned the 10th-year questionnaire.¹

Quite a remarkable response after 10 years. Deleting the 311 for whom we had no valid addresses or who asked to be dropped from the sample, since this group never received the 10th survey and therefore could not fill it out, would leave 1,212 *potential* respondents, making the return rate about 65 percent. As far as we can determine, no other religious group has ever followed such a widespread international sample of adolescents every year for 10 years.

Educational Implications²

One of the reasons we chose our original sample of more than 1,500 teenagers from congregational lists rather than school classrooms was so that we could compare the differences between those attending Adventist schools and those in other (usually pub-

lic) institutions. Of that original sample, 51 percent were attending Adventist academies, and 42 percent were in public high schools, while the others were in private schools, home schooling, or not enrolled. Thus, an excellent basis was laid for comparing the products of the two systems.³

The teenagers attending the Adventist academies were more positive toward their religion than those in public schools on a whole range of items, such as: the importance of religion in the life, being happy with their religion, intending to remain Adventist in adulthood, not being able to imagine joining another denomination, wanting to marry within the faith, and wanting to send their children to Adventist schools. The differences were not always large, but the

Christian Education and Youth Retention *in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*

*Findings From a 10-Year
Longitudinal Study*

pattern was consistent.

With 10 years of data in hand, we were interested in discovering what factors predicted who would remain in the church and who would leave. We selected three outcome measures:

1. "Member" or "non-member" of the church at the time of the last report;

2. Regular ("regulars") or non-regular ("absentees") attendee at worship services at the time of the last report, and

3. Whether or not the respondent had dropped out of the church or become inactive ("dropouts" versus "remainers") at any time during the 10-year study. Some of the dropouts had

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returned to the church by the end of the study.

We will use the terms in quotation marks to describe the status of respondents at the end of the study, when they were in their mid-20s.

Many variables correlated with these outcome measures, but for this article, we will look only at those involving education. We found that those who had attended more years of Adventist elementary school (grades 1-8) were more likely to remain members at the end of 10 years and less likely to have ever dropped out. The same was true for those who had attended one or two

years of Adventist *day* academies.

On the other hand, we found no differences between those who had attended Adventist *boarding* academies and those who had attended public high schools in terms of dropping out or becoming inactive members. Nor did the years spent in any type of Adventist school by the age of 15 or 16 predict regular church attendance in the middle 20s.

Year by Year

Let's now look at the year-by-year data to see how well they predict the three outcomes described above. All dif-

ferences reported below were significant.

Year 2: The question was "Where do you plan to attend school for the 1988-1989 school year?"

More than half (51 percent) of those who would still be members in 1997 planned to attend an Adventist academy, compared to 33 percent of those who would later be non-members. Nearly half (48 percent) of the future church dropouts opted for public high school, in contrast to 32 percent of those who would remain members.

Differences between those who would attend church regularly at the end of the survey and those who would not were not large enough to be significant, although they were in the expected direction. However, 60 percent of the remainers planned to attend an Adventist academy, compared with 49 percent of those who would drop out.

While these comparisons are favorable for Adventist education, they reflect only intentions, and not the actual effects of the education. That brings us to the next year.

Year 3: "Where did you attend school during the 1988-1989 school year?"

Of those who would remain mem-

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bers, 55 percent were in Adventist academies that year, while 29 percent were in public high school. This contrasted with those who would be non-members in 1997. Thirty-four percent of them were in Adventist schools, while 47 percent were in public institutions—a highly significant difference. The statistics on dropouts were similar, though not as strong. Only about half of the future dropouts attended Adventist schools that year, compared with 63 percent of those who would be remainers. Thirty-three percent of the future dropouts were in public institutions, in contrast with only 24 percent of those who would remain church members.

Year 4: “Where did you attend school during the 1989-1990 school year?”

This question produced another definite difference. Sixty percent of those surveyed who would still be members at the end of the 10 years were enrolled in an Adventist academy or college, compared to 31 percent of those who would not be. Only 19 percent of the “members” were in public high school, but 34 percent of the “non-members” were. Incidentally, 18 percent of the “non-members” were not in school at all, in contrast with only six percent of the “members.”

Comments on Adventist Education by Survey Respondents

- “My life changed drastically this past year. My love for God grew, thereby opening my eyes to what a wonderful church we have. The main reason for the change is my Adventist school and great teachers.”

- “I hate _____ College and all its rules. Why is there so much emphasis on the things one can’t do? It’s very frustrating and makes me reject religion more.”

- “My belief in religion and God is stronger today than it ever was. It is so because of the Adventist academy I attended and because of several people there.”

- “Even in Adventist schools, sometimes faculty come across the wrong way when they push rules. And since kids look to adults for their picture of God, they don’t want to be part of a God like that—if that is how He is. I only pray that they can come to know the true God.”

And now, for the first time, we found a significant difference in predicting regular church attendance at the end of the study. Of the regular attenders, 60 percent had attended either an Adventist academy or college during 1989-1990, while the comparable figure for the absentees was 46 percent. For those enrolled in public high schools and colleges, the difference was not as great, but still favored the Adventist system.

Differences also began to appear for those who dropped out of the church. About half (51 percent) of the eventual dropouts went to Adventist institutions that year, but 65 percent of the remainers did. Furthermore, only three percent of the remainers were not in school at all that year, compared to 12 percent of the future church dropouts.

Year 5: “Where did you attend school during the 1990-1991 school year?”

By this time, only about 20 percent of the youth were still in secondary school, while more than 62 percent were in higher education. The contrasts here were great: Sixty-one percent of those who would still be in the church at the end were in Adventist schools, in contrast to 24 percent of those who would not be. For those in public institutions, 24 percent would remain mem-

bers, and 51 percent would eventually leave the church.

The fifth year also predicted who would attend church regularly at the end of the study. More than half (52 percent) of the regulars were in Adventist institutions, while only 33 percent were in public high schools and colleges. Forty-three percent of the future absentees were in public schools, while 38 percent were in Adventist education.

Also, only 42 percent of future dropouts attended Adventist institutions that year, compared with 60 percent of remainers, while 39 percent of dropouts and 32 percent of remainers were in public education.

Year 6: "Where did you attend school during the 1991-1992 school year?"

By now, no survey respondents remained in secondary education, so we had an excellent opportunity to see how well the type of college attended would predict later relationship to the church. Nearly 44 percent of those who would stay in the church were in Adventist colleges that year, in contrast to 13 percent of those who would not be members in 1997. Forty-eight percent of future "non-members" versus 32 percent of "members" were in secular education.

The same trend held for worship attendance. Approximately 48 percent of the regulars had attended Adventist colleges, with 31 percent in other colleges. The comparable figures for absentees were 26 percent versus 40 percent. Type of college placement was also predictive of dropping out of the church. For the remainers, 52 percent attended Adventist colleges and only 32 percent other colleges. Of the future dropouts, on the other hand, 31 percent were in Adventist schools, and 39 percent were attending secular schools.

Year 8: No education question was asked on the seventh-year questionnaire, but on the eighth survey, a different formula was used: "How many years have you attended Seventh-day Adventist schools?"

Rather than comparing present enrollment between educational systems, this question looked at the totality of the Christian education experience. For

these analyses, we used a series of t-tests to explore the differences in mean scores.

For example, those who were still members had a mean (average) of 11.3 years of Adventist education, while the non-members had a mean of only 7.5 years. This is a highly significant difference.

Again, the regular worship attenders had a mean of 11.3 years of Christian education, while the absentees had 10.1 years. That difference, while not nearly as large as for membership status, is still significant beyond the .01 level.

Finally, dropouts averaged 9.8 years in Adventist schools, compared to 11.8 for remainers—another highly significant difference.

Year 9: The last education question appeared on the ninth survey: "Was your high school/academy or college education:

1. All or mostly in Adventist schools;
2. About equally divided between the two systems; or
3. All or mostly in non-Adventist schools?"

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Of those who were still members, 67 percent reported that their education had been all or mostly in Adventist schools, while only 19 percent had been educated all or mostly in non-Adventist schools. By contrast, 38 percent of the non-members were the product of Christian education, while 43 percent had attended all or mostly other schools.

The spread for regular church attendance was not nearly as great but still significant at the .03 level. Sixty-six percent of the regulars had mostly Adventist education and 20 percent mostly secular. Only 50 percent of the absentees had mostly Adventist education, with 26 percent mostly secular.

Lastly, 69 percent of the remainers had taken most of their schooling in Adventist institutions, compared with 58 percent of the dropouts. Only 17 percent of the remainers were all or mostly secular-educated; 27 percent of the church dropouts were.

What Does All of This Mean?

First, the information gathered over 10 years is a ringing testimony to the

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benefits of Christian education. Those who attended Adventist academies and colleges were, for the most part, much more likely to remain faithful Adventists than those enrolled in secular schools. This included:

1. Still being church members after 10 years;
2. Regular attendance at divine worship services; and
3. Having never dropped out or become inactive during the period of the study. They also had a higher percentage with mature faith as measured by their relationship to God.

Some of the differences between those who attended Adventist schools and their counterparts in secular education were great, some were small, but they all favored Christian education. Occasionally, no difference was found (boarding academies), but none of the differences favored public education. This is cause for celebration.

However, in the midst of justifiable rejoicing, we must exercise caution. The fact that those educated in Adventist schools are more likely to remain in the church does not prove that the education *caused* the retention. Behavioral scientists remind us that correlation does not prove causation. Other factors might be responsible. For example, perhaps deeply devout parents are more likely to sacrifice to send their children to Adventist schools, so the good outcomes may have depended more on home influences than school factors. So, while we rejoice over the role of Christian education, we should do so modestly.

We dare not rest on our laurels. While this study reveals that Christian education does a better job spiritually than public education, it also shows that it is far from perfect. Remember that of those who are no longer members of the Seventh-day Adventist

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Church, 38 percent took all or most of their education in our schools. Of those who at some time during the 10 years dropped out of the church or became inactive, 58 percent took all or most of their education in our schools. This is not the time to sit back and take it easy.

While our findings show that the influence of Adventist Christian education is mostly good, it can also be negative. I believe the difference lies in the human element. If teachers and educational administrators perceive their work as a ministry and concern themselves with reaching out to students and reflecting Jesus in all that they do rather than forcing adherence to a code of behavior, our schools will positively influence the Christian experiences of the students. In the end, students primarily remember the relationships they had with faculty members more than the information they gained from textbooks. To optimize the holding power of Christian education, we must seek to reflect the person of the living Christ. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The best estimate of the situation after 10 years looks like this: 1,523, total number who began in 1987; 783, situation known—completed questionnaires; 252, bad address—mail returned undelivered; 59, previously withdrew—no survey sent; 429, mail not returned undelivered but did not respond.

2. The information given below has been excerpted from a chapter in the forthcoming book, *Why Teenagers Leave the Church (and Why They Stay)* which is being published by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland, and will be released in the spring of 2000. Permission to incorporate the material in this article has been granted by the Review and Herald.

3. Comparisons between students in Adventist and public education for the initial survey in 1987-1988 were reported in detail in two sources: Roger L. Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager* (Hagerstown, Md.; Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1990), pp. 76-87; _____, "How Does Adventist Education Affect Youth Attitudes?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 52:4

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(April/May 1990), pp. 24-29, 45, 46. See also Roger L. Dudley, "Religious Attitudes and Behaviors of College Students: Does Adventist Education Make a Difference?" *The Journal of Adventist Education* 57:1 (October/November 1994), pages 40 to 45, for a comparison between these students, now in college, taken from sixth-year data collected in 1992-1993.

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