

What Saith the Bible Teachers?

A Survey of North American Division Academy Religion Teachers

“I’ve pastored before, but never taught Bible. I don’t even know where to begin!”

“I’m already so overwhelmed—and the school wants me to add another class!”

“I hardly ever see my family. It seems like I’m always at school!”

These are samples of comments that I have heard from Bible teachers in my eight years as an elementary and secondary teacher. These statements capture some of the frustrations that many of us feel when trying to be an effective teacher and still live a semi-balanced life.

In February 2003, I conducted a North American Division-wide survey of academy Bible teachers. At the time, I was teaching Bible at a boarding academy in the Midwest. The Mid-American Union Conference supplied me with the names of all the current Bible teachers from each union directory and the funds to cover supplies and postage.

Of 178 surveys mailed, 106 were returned—a very respectable 60 percent response. The survey contained 16 multiple-choice questions (respondents were asked to mark *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neutral*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree*), and six open-ended questions. The surveys were sent to the approximately 100 academies and junior academies in the United States,

The survey brought to light a number of fundamental issues that must be addressed.

Demographics of Bible Teachers Who Responded

- 76% Seventh-day Adventist certified
- 69% Bible teaching endorsement
- 25% Ordained ministers (seven were pastors)
- 11% Not certified, or ordained
- 8.1 Average years they had taught
- 53% Had taught for five years or less
- 28% Had taught for more than 10 years
- 34% Served as school chaplain
- 68% Taught only one or two Bible classes
- 54% Taught only Bible classes
- 75% Male (all recipients)

Canada, and Bermuda.

The survey dealt with two specific areas—Bible teachers themselves and curriculum/content issues. The responses to the surveys provide some insight into what is happening with Bible teachers and their classrooms. A number of fundamental issues have been raised by this survey, which will be discussed in this article. But first, let’s find out more about the Bible teachers who responded.

Qualifications and Experience

On paper, at least, Bible teachers in North America are quite well qualified. Sixty-nine percent said they were certified to teach Bible. The other 31 percent had various levels of qualification. Twelve percent were certified teachers but did not have a Bible endorsement. Nineteen percent were teaching without any teaching certification; however, almost a third of those were ordained pastors.

Years of experience was also significant. Although the average Bible teacher had taught for 8.1 years, most were quite new to teaching Bible. Most of those responding (53 percent) had taught Bible for five years or less. Only 28 percent had taught the subject for more than 10 years.

Teaching Load

It should come as no surprise that 34 percent of the

BY KEITH KERBS

Bible teachers also served as school chaplain. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of the respondents taught only one or two Bible classes, and only about half (54 percent) said Bible was the only subject they taught. Most were either part-time teachers or taught Bible in addition to their “primary” job—whether that was teaching one or more other subjects, or serving as a dean, vice principal, or guidance counselor. The Bible teachers also said they spent countless additional hours sponsoring classes or organizations, or doing coaching or supervision. Some mentioned as many as six such responsi-

academy for six years and now at a day school, I know that teaching can be quite stressful. The majority of Bible teachers agreed. Almost 60 percent said they often felt overwhelmed and stressed. That could account for the large number of new Bible teachers. Their families fared only a little better. Nearly half (44 percent) of the Bible teachers said that their families suffered because of their job. While this is less than half of the respondents, it is still a matter of concern since it represents a large number of spouses and children who are not getting the attention they need.

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ers and pastors are expected to have everything together spiritually. They, like all people, need a support system to stay strong.

The teachers also expressed a desire for more support from the conference, the administration, and other teachers. Some teachers said they needed more training or experience to do their job well. Other miscellaneous needs were smaller class size, more money for equipment and resources, and more outside class activities and field trips.

Curriculum/Content Issues

Another area explored by the survey was textbooks and curriculum. What materials are Bible teachers using in their classrooms? Are they using the new Bible textbooks? Eighty-

Expressed Needs of Bible Teachers

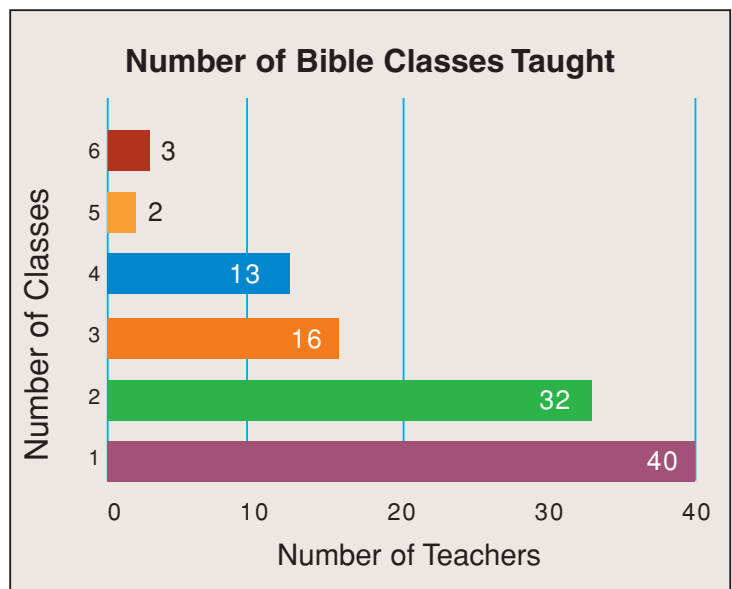
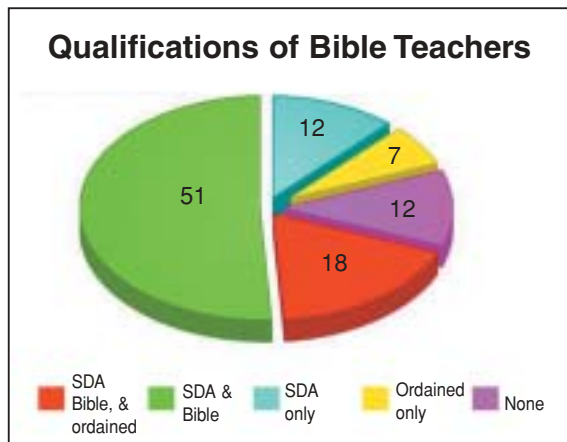
What did Bible teachers say would help them be more successful? The most common request was practical ideas—especially from other Bible teachers. Time was the second most mentioned challenge. They felt they had just too much to do and not enough time to do it. Multimedia and video resources were the third most mentioned need. Fourth was their

desire for a deeper spiritual/prayer life. Often, Bible teach-

bilities in addition to their teaching load.

Level of Stress and Effect on Family

Having worked at a boarding





One of the author's students and his Bible project—Peter walking on the water.

two percent said that they were consistently using the Crossroads Bible textbooks. Only 12.5 percent indicated that they did not use the series regularly.

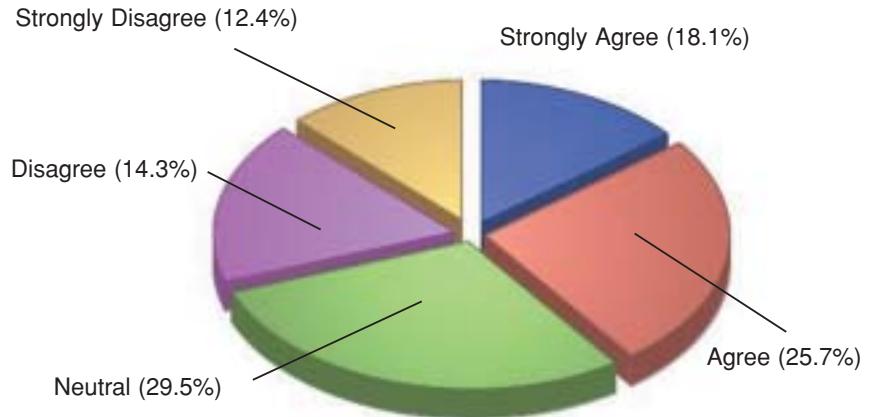
Another question inquired about how heavily teachers supplemented the textbooks. Three-fourths indicated that they supplemented heavily (50 percent strongly agreed). Since the majority of these teachers still used the textbooks regularly, it ap-

pears that they are personalizing their teaching to make it as practical as possible.

The survey also asked the Bible teachers' opinion of the new Crossroads Series curriculum. Sixty-three

percent of the teachers said they were satisfied with the Bible textbooks (22 percent strongly agreed; 41 percent agreed). Even though there were some complaints, overall, most Bible teachers appeared very satisfied and

My Family Often Suffers Due to My Job

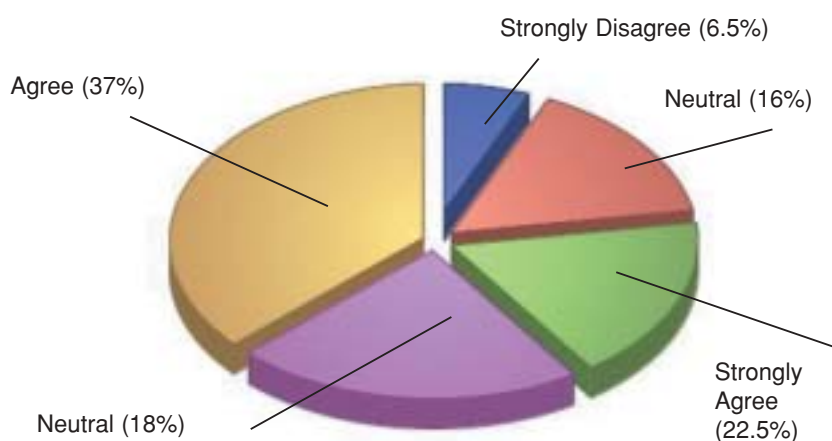


Teaching Methods	Hands-On Projects	Practical Ideas
Acting/skits	Career shadowing	Bible marking (chain referencing)
Cooperative learning	Clay statues/figures	Bios on people
Debates (Creation vs. evolution)	Conduct evangelistic series	Career report
Discussions	(with <i>New Beginnings</i> DVDs)	Catholic and Mormon guest presenters
Group projects	Dramatize Bible	Character toolbox
Illustrations	Drawing	Creative dates
Imagery	Experiential/interactive learning	Devotional/prayer journals
Mock trial	Fashion show for Daniel 2 statue	How to give Bible studies
Music in the classroom	Feeding the homeless	Journals/gratitude journals
Object lessons and stories	Quilts for AIDS babies	Mark promises in Bible
Oral presentations (PowerPoint)	Mechanical baby	Take a break from the media
Personal testimonies	Models of sanctuary or New Jerusalem	Peer counseling/mentoring
Posting assignments (on the Web)	Murals of chapters in Revelation	Personal devotional program
Reports	Paint themes on classroom walls	Philosophy of life paper
Role-play	Plan wedding and reception	Plan vespers
Scrapbooks	Posters	Prayer families (in school)
Sharing assignments	Treasure hunt	Prayer for an individual student
Simulations	Video and art projects	Reaction/position papers
Small groups	Video interviews	Spending time alone with God
Students teach class	Walk through Old Testament in life-size map	Student week of prayer
Writing KWLs (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned)		Students design spiritual theme bulletin board
		Students giving worship
		Visit a temple or synagogue
		Writing creeds
		30-day fast from secular music



A student from the author's Life and Teachings of Jesus class works on a mural.

I Often Feel Overwhelmed & Stressed



Other Ideas

1, 2 Kings project
 Church history project
 Discussions of current events
 Ethics project
 Good old-fashioned Bible study
 Ideas for conflict resolution
 Joshua video
 Last-day events portfolio
 Lots of games
 Marriage and family portfolio
 Training for peer ministry
 Presentations on the *Messiah* or *The Great Controversy*

Pro and con of issues in Christianity (oral presentation)
 Read *Steps to Christ*
 Research on desired topic
Seeds of Wisdom study guide
 Small group ministry training
 Spiritual journals
 "Twenty-One Independent Qualities of a Leader"
 Utilize *Story of Redemption*
 Video critique of *The Ten Commandments*

Weekly video day featuring victorious Christians
 World religion presentations or ceremonies
 Write a newspaper column
 Write commentary on a Bible text (as final test)
 Writing children's books
 Writing dramas/skits

grateful to have the new Bible textbooks.

Other Curriculum Materials

The teachers used a wide variety of materials in addition to the textbooks. Not surprisingly, the Bible was used heavily—including topical Bible studies and specific books of the Bible. Ellen White's books were also used—especially the *Messiah (The Desire of Ages)*, *Steps to Christ*, and the Conflict of the Ages series. This is good news, since few teenagers have ever read any significant amount of Ellen White's writings.

Other resources were mentioned as well:

- Videos/DVDs (Net '99, the ACTS set, and Focus on the Family).
- Books such as *God Cares 1 & 2*, *27 Fundamental Beliefs*, Philip Yancey books, commentaries, and even college material from their own teachers.
- Materials from Youth Specialties and Amazing Facts.

Practical Ideas

There were as many different ideas as people surveyed—and then some. In the sidebars on pages 42 and 43 are a sample of the ideas that Bible teachers said they were using in their classrooms across North America.

Obviously, a lot of wonderful things are happening in Bible classes across North America, but the survey

also revealed some problematic issues. Let's look at some of them.

Addressing Fundamental Issues

The majority of Bible teachers don't remain in the profession very long. Why is that? *Is teaching Bible their main focus, or is it something added to their "regular duties"?* It appears that many people teaching Bible either have too many other things to do, or the assignment is not their passion or priority.

Hiring practices may also be a factor, as it appears that many schools are not employing *full-time* Bible teachers. This situation of having few full-time Bible teachers is more serious than it might appear. Like people in other disciplines, Bible teachers need mentors and networks to help one another—especially those who are just starting out. For example, for three years while I was teaching in the Mid-America Union, I was the only Bible teacher in the entire union who was qualified or willing to work with a student teacher. No one else taught enough Bible classes, was certified and endorsed in Bible, or had had enough experience. It gave me a great opportunity to work with student teachers, but also raised concerns about who is teaching Bible to our young people.

How well are they trained to teach Bible? Some academies don't have the



Students in the author's Adventist History class create a mural of Adventist pioneers.

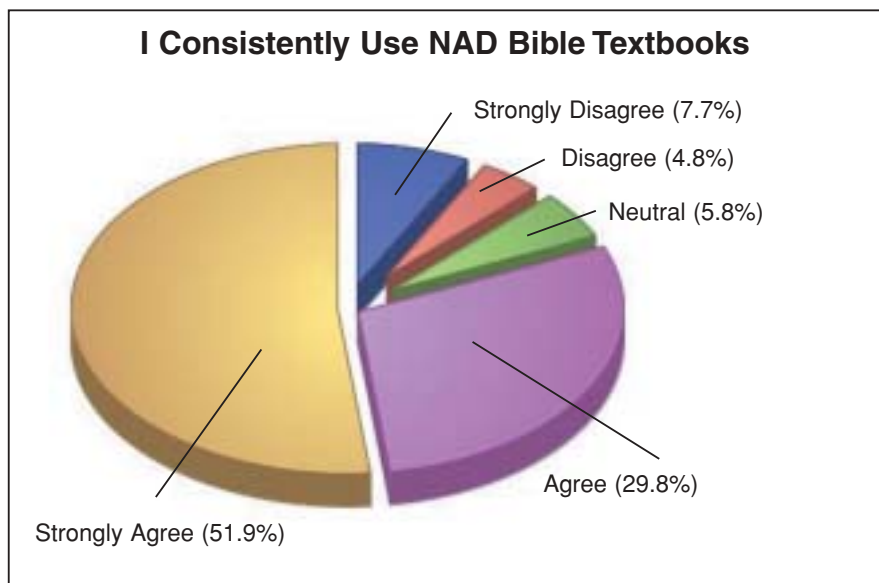
money to hire a full-time Bible teacher, so they assign the classes to anyone with a free period—whether or not the person has any training or aptitude for it. I'd like to challenge schools to be very careful in selecting Bible teachers—choose someone with a passion for the subject who will make the maximum positive impact on your students. Just because someone has completed a minor in Bible and taken a methods class does not make him or her an effective Bible teacher!

Why all the fuss about who teaches Bible? I agree with an experienced teacher who once told me that Bible class is different than any other class. The spiritual battle for students'

souls is fought more in Bible class than in any other class. In Bible class, we aren't talking about numbers, writing essays, how to hit a ball, or even how to (or not to) blow something up in the lab, as important as these things may be. We are talking about students' lives and eternal destiny—the issues that they struggle with, how they feel about God, the church, their parents, and what values they embrace. The Great Controversy is always going on in the minds of students—whether or not this is evident. If you're sending a teacher to such a battlefield, you'd better send the best you've got, or can get!

Is the stress too great? Are they getting burned out? Teaching, especially in a boarding school, takes a 110 percent commitment of time and energy. Small schools in particular tend to pile an unreasonable number of responsibilities on teachers and then wonder why they get burned out and school morale takes a nosedive. Overloading teachers with too much work is potentially self-destructive for both the school and the teacher.

Do they have anywhere to turn when they need help? Teachers of history, math, science, English, and music can join national organizations that hold yearly conventions and make lots of resources available on the Web and in catalogues, etc. There are very few resources that apply specifically to Seventh-day Adventist religion teachers,



with our unique beliefs and needs. Even if we can get some things, they often cost a lot of money. In some schools, teachers are given a budget of \$200 per year to teach four-plus classes—and discouraged from even spending that.

Some efforts have been made to provide resources. The CIRCLE Website (<http://circle.adventist.org>) offers valuable links to helpful materials, books, and videos. However, a lot of the materials must be purchased, so this will be a limiting factor for many. The Adventist Education Forum (<http://edforum.adventist.org>) is also a valuable resource where participants can ask questions and read discussions other people are having. Music and physical education have their own sections, but all the other disciplines are lumped together. It would be nice if religion had its own area, as well.

Another place to go for help is other teachers in your discipline. Conventions of various sizes are a great place to meet other Bible teachers and share ideas. I was very disappointed, though, at the 2000 NAD teacher convention in Dallas because no time was set aside for Bible teachers to discuss ideas and issues. Those who could, met during lunch and decided that a Website would be a great idea to share re-



Several of the author's students pose in front of their mural on the Great Controversy.

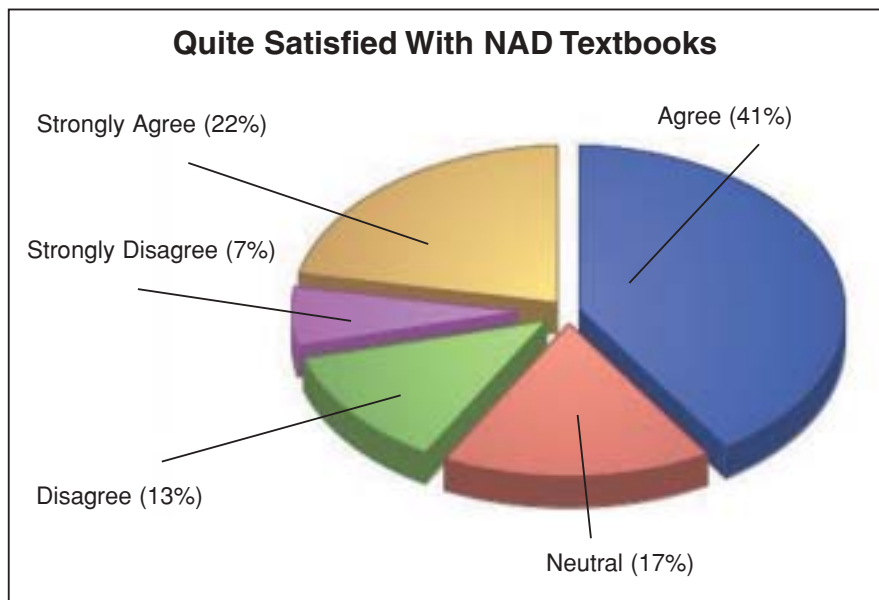
sources. Unfortunately, it hasn't happened—because no one really has enough “extra” time to invest into it while still teaching full-time.

In my survey, I asked about a Website to share ideas. Eighty-eight percent of the Bible teachers said they desired a Website, and more than 50 percent said they would submit ideas. What really needs to happen is for the North American Division Office of Education, an Adventist college, or some other third party to host and maintain a Website for Bible teachers—or for a group of teachers to do this. A committee could be designated to screen materials for suitability, academic quality, and theo-

logical soundness before they are posted on the site. There also needs to be an incentive to post ideas—maybe even an academic or monetary reward. This would be cheaper and much more effective than hiring outside people to create materials that may not prove useful. I imagine that most academies would be willing to pay a small yearly fee to access such a Website.

Conclusion

The survey results were interesting and informative. If the issues are indeed as I have portrayed them, then I hope that improvements will be made. All of us as the Body of Christ must work together to accomplish the specific tasks God has given us. We cannot function without God's power in our lives or without one another. Let us all seek to walk more closely with Christ and work together to more effectively share His love with our students! ✍️



Keith Kerbs has taught secondary-level Bible for seven years and is currently teaching at Columbia Adventist Academy in Battle Ground, Washington.

He is pursuing an M.A. degree in Religious Education at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.