

Why Principals

STAY

Several years ago, I was the principal of a Seventh-day Adventist boarding academy that closed. Not only was this a terrible loss for the students, parents, faculty, and constituency, it was personally devastating for me. The problems were compounded by the fact that no policies were in place for the closure of such a school. Thus, all of the employees' termination settlements were done as if we were retiring from the organization. However, I was not retiring nor did I want to leave! I loved the school, the students, the faculty, and the church's educational ministry.

This tragic experience created a desire in me to support, mentor, and provide resources for Adventist principals. To do so, I enrolled in the leadership program at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and from the inception of my study, focused my program and research on school principals. When I was ready to write a dissertation, my research focused on telling the story of why the principals in the study have stayed in the Adventist system in North America for 10 or more

years. Rather than to focus on problems within the organization, my goal was to describe the experiences of those who have served for many years. This article describes the data from the study about why principals stay.¹

My 2011 research study revealed that Adventist principals in North America stay an average of 2.5 years at the elementary level, 3.6 years at day secondary schools, and 4.0 years at secondary boarding schools. Many studies have identified reasons why school principals leave their jobs.² However, few studies have been conducted to determine why principals stay. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of school principals who have remained in leadership at the same school building for at least 10 consecutive years in the Adventist system of education in North America and to discover why they have stayed.

Research Design

A qualitative, multiple-case-study design using narrative inquiry was chosen as the most appropriate method to probe the

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lived experiences of the principals in this study.³ The primary criteria used for the study were (1) the principal had served as an administrator for 10 consecutive years or more in one school building, (2) the principal was identified by his or her union education directors and approved to participate in this study by the local education superintendents, and (3) there was an attempt to ensure that the research study included a representative sampling in the areas of gender, ethnicity, service time, school size, and type of school. While the study sought to be representative of all nine unions in the Adventist K-12 educational system in North America, two unions did not have any principals who had stayed in one school for 10 or more years, and thus were not included in the research study.

Conceptually, this study was framed around spiritual leadership theory and resiliency theory. Fry defines spiritual leadership as “the values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership.”⁴ Two dimensions of spiritual leadership are described in the literature: (1) Creating a vision for the organization whereby leaders and group members experience a sense of calling, and (2) Establishing a social/organizational culture based on altruistic love whereby people develop a sense of membership, feel understood and appreciated, and express genuine care, concern, and appreciation for both self and others.⁵ Fry referred to these dimensions as the “calling” and “membership” of the spiritual leader.⁶

Resilience is defined as the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, other stressors, or buoyancy in the face of adversity.⁷ There is a direct relationship between the stress of the principal’s job and his or her capability to maintain resilience in the face of prolonged contact with severe stressors.⁸ I as-

About This Study

In 2011, the author of this article tracked principal longevity in the Seventh-day Adventist system of education in the North American Division (U.S., Canada, and Bermuda; hereafter referred to as NAD), and then studied the principals who had remained the longest at their current school.

The study revealed that the average stay for a K-12 principal in his or her current school between 2006 and 2011 was 4.0 years for boarding-academy principals, 3.6 years for day-academy principals, and 2.5 years for principals in elementary schools.

To identify the administrators who fit the criterion for this study, the author obtained permission from the NAD vice president for education to contact the education directors in the territory’s nine union conferences. The union directors of education were informed about the purpose of the study and the interview questions, and asked to identify principals in their region who fit the criteria for the study.

All of the principals identified by the union directors were contacted by e-mail in order to gather some initial data regarding administrator retention and to determine which ones were willing to participate in the study. The principals’ response to this request, “Please describe why you stay as an Adventist principal, and what you think could help the problem of principal retention?” helped indicate whether each would be a reflective and perceptive informant who could provide an in-depth description of his or her lived experiences.

Participants were selected based upon a balance of gender and race, their responses, and their overall willingness to participate in the study. The table below summarizes the types of schools represented by the participants in this study.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants in the Study

Demographic	Number	
Unions in North American Division	Number that qualified	7
	Number that did not qualify	2
School Type	Small Elementary	3
	Elementary	5
	Junior Academy	2
	Secondary School	4
Ethnicity	Hispanic	1
	Black	5
	Caucasian	8
Gender of Principal	Female	7
	Male	7

sumed resiliency theory would help provide a framework within which the staying power of the principals in this study could be explained.

Why Principals Stay

The research study revealed that Adventist principals stayed because of their (1) passion for the students, (2) commitment to God’s calling, (3) passion for ministry, and (4) passion to

serve others. Because of their strong relationship with God, they endured in spite of the difficulties and the demands of the job, which are most times undefined and quite complex. They were able to thrive even when coping with adversity because they relied on God's guidance and prayer to sustain them through hardship.

1. Passion for Students

The primary reason why the principals indicated they stayed in Adventist education for 10 or more consecutive years was because of their passion for and commitment to their students. When asked, "Why do you stay?" the principals referred to their students and the direct impact they believe they are making upon their lives. The principals' passion for their students was clearly revealed by their physical expressions during the interviews. Most responded with smiles, emphatic intonations, and excited body language when sharing their experiences, revealing their heartfelt commitment and passion for each student. One principal said, "I live by the motto which states, 'Jesus looks at us and discerns infinite possibilities.'"

For most of the principals interviewed, their passion for young people extended beyond the school building. They felt the same responsibility for students in the community as for local constituencies: "I stay to provide opportunities for all school-age students who wish to attend an Adventist school the benefit of enrolling," said one respondent. This principal shared the joy he feels each fall when classes begin and the students whom he has prayed about and recruited are now enrolled in his school. It was clear from their responses that the principals loved and were devoted to their students, demonstrating this through their unselfish service to the ministry year after year.

2. Commitment to Calling

The research study also revealed that Adventist principals stay because they feel directly called by God, accept His calling, and commit their lives to educational ministry. One principal said: "I have dedicated my life to this ministry because I believe the Lord called me to it. Because I could see the circumstances when I look back which have led me to this and I think no amount of grief will run me out of this, I'm here for the long haul."

The commitment to God's calling was so firm for these principals that their conviction to remain in educational ministry was unyielding. One of the respondents described it thus: "I stay because of my vow to God that I would remain in Adventist education until He indicated that it was time to leave." Another principal explained, "I'm not here because I want to be here; I'm here because God wants me to be here. If He wants me to go someplace else, He will show me the way, and He will provide the way for me."

This commitment to God's calling is demonstrated by the number of years these principals have served in their schools. One principal, who had been in the same building for 30 years, said, "God has chosen me to be at my school at this particular

time, place, environment, and in this particular area of the country."

Their commitment to Adventist education was so strong that most principals indicated that they modeled it in their personal lives. Several principals indicated that while they had choices as to where to enroll their children, they always choose Adventist education because they recognized its value and power to transform lives spiritually, mentally, and physically. One principal was so emphatic about her passion for Adventist education that not only have her children all been educated in Adventist schools, but her grandson is now enrolled at her school. The principal transports her grandson daily past two distinguished "A"-level school districts to the church school.

3. Passion for Ministry and Others

The principals interviewed in the study stay in Adventist education because of their need to serve others through educational ministry. Most of them spoke emphatically about the great joy in helping others develop a personal relationship with Jesus. To realize this goal, the principals have conducted Bible studies for students, parents, community members, and neighbors. One principal described the joy he and others felt in ministry in these words: "It's wonderful to be a part of a ministry that you know is 'kissed by God.'"

Several principals described helping others develop a personal relationship with Jesus as a part of their mission as school leaders. One said: "Baptism is the summation, the ultimate objective, and ultimate goal of Adventist education which is to lead students and parents to Christ in a way where they make that final commitment to say 'yes,' I want to follow the Lord and I'm going to consummate my experience through baptism." Several principals described the experience of witnessing the baptism of someone they had brought to the Lord as humbling and inspiring.

Most of the principals recognized that their passion for ministry also enhanced their own personal spiritual growth. One principal explained, "I stay because of the strong relationship that I am able to develop with my God." Another principal noted, "I stay because my job allows me to grow spiritually." Throughout the interviews, the principals shared stories of experiences that strengthened their faith through educational ministry. Whether it was through an answered prayer, God's protection, provision, intervention, or guidance, time after time they experienced unbelievable ways in which their faith increased because of His faithfulness.

The responses made it clear that Adventist principals stay because of their passion to serve others and their ability to teach and nurture the people they serve in the areas of life skills, professional development, and in parenting. One principal shared the experience of developing a team approach to leadership even though he was in a hostile environment.

The study revealed that Adventist principals are passionate about training adults as well as children. Whether in the area of

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best practices or parenting skills, their joy in teaching came through clearly. One principal explained that not only is she helping parents become better parents; when necessary, at times, she has become the parent. This principal has driven children to and from school, counseled with students, prepared lunch for them, and helped them with homework after school. None of the principals expressed any regrets about extending themselves beyond their call of duty in their passion to serve others.

Several principals described their devotion to mentoring others. One remarked, “I stay because of my opportunity to mentor people.” Whether mentoring a new teacher or an experienced one, parents, church members, or colleagues, the principals recognized the value of mentoring relationships. Several of the principals explained that, in fact, the reason they are now able to stay in Adventist education is because they themselves were mentored effectively.

A benefit of serving others is the building of lifetime relationships. One of the principals shared this sentiment: “I stay because of the lasting relationships that I have built with the people I serve.” Many of the principals said they maintained long-term relationships with people they have served long after they left the place in which the relationship began.

Summary

The findings in my study revealed that principals in the Adventist system of education in North America who have stayed in one place for 10 or more consecutive years are resilient spiritual leaders. They thrive in spite of the fact that the role and expectations associated with their jobs are often poorly defined and quite complex. The demands of the job, personnel issues, parent and student issues, board issues, financial issues, constituency and community issues all have the potential to contribute to overwork and imbalanced lives. Yet because of their strong relationship with God, these principals have been able to be resilient despite adversity. Most cited their reliance on prayer, which sustains them through many difficult and challenging times.

Why do Adventist principals stay? They stay because of their passion for the students, their commitment to God’s calling, their passion for ministry, and their passion to serve others. Paul’s words at the end of his life describe well their convictions:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7 NIV).⁹ ☞

For the complete study, please refer to the author’s Ph.D. dissertation: Janet Ledesma, *Narratives of Longevity From the Perspective of Seventh-day Adventist School Administrators in North America: A Multiple Case Study* (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2012): <http://udini.proquest.com/view/narratives-of-longevity-from-the-pqid:2436159261/>.



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9. See 2 Timothy 4:7. Texts credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.