At first retention summit, leaders look at reality of church exodus

The first global summit focusing on Seventh-day Adventist Church membership retention is revealing the rate and reasons members slip out the back door. It's the first time the matter has been spotlighted in such a major way, prompting church leaders to renew their emphasis on making fruitful and growing disciples of Christ.

The Adventist world church, now with nearly 18 million members, has lost at least 1 in 3 Seventh-day Adventist members in the last 50 years, according to summit organizers. Also, in this century, the ratio of people lost versus new converts is 43 per 100.

“These figures are too high,” said David Trim, director of the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research. “There’s a theological point to this and it’s that God’s mission is to seek the lost.”

For three days this week, 100 attendees from six continents have gathered at the denomination’s world headquarters for the Summit on Nurture and Retention to examine data, which is offering a clearer picture of trends beyond long-held assumptions gained from anecdotal evidence.

Veteran Adventist Church researcher Monte Sahlin said the reasons people drop out of church often have less to do with what the church does and its doctrines than with problems people experience in their personal lives—marital conflict or unemployment, for example. What the church does that contributes to the problem, he said, is not helping people through their tough life experiences.
“The notion of people dropping out because of something the church does or a doctrinal disagreement is not apparent in the data,” Sahlin said. “It’s been shown that a member of a church board is just as likely to disagree with one of the church’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs as someone who’s been disfellowshiped.”

Several presentations showed that the Adventist Church has learned how to better conduct more realistic outreach by learning from past examples. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many Adventist groups sponsored extravagant evangelism events—complete with mass choirs and large, multi-screen presentations. But while many sponsoring organizations were eager for the once-in-a-generation chance, many newly baptized converts joined the church thinking it was their ticket to gaining their own wealth. The church there lacked a long-term strategy and denominational infrastructure, and most of those new converts soon stopped attending church.

One presentation revealed that in South Africa, the rate of accession of new members had slowed, but membership had significantly increased due to retention. That fact prompted Harald Wollan, an associate executive secretary of the Adventist world church, to suggest to the group that future evangelism efforts should focus on nurturing members.

“What if the church used some evangelism funds for our own members’ care? We might see a similar increase in numbers,” Wollan said.

“We will have to do that,” responded Adventist world church Vice President Armando Miranda, who was chairing the afternoon session.

One delegate, Jimmy V. Adil, from the Philippines, asked why conferences feel pressure to increase membership, often from the parent unions, whom he said feel pressure from the divisions. He asked if the world headquarters was exerting pressure for growth.

Adventist Church Executive Secretary G. T. Ng replied, “There’s no pressure for growth. Do we pressure a papaya tree to produce? … If so, we may stunt its growth.”

Trim, the research director, said the problem, though, is common in some regions. On Tuesday, he revealed that 30 percent of church clerks in one particular division had been pressured to inflate baptismal numbers. “It’s a sin to lie about anything in the Adventist Church, but for some reason, too many people think it’s OK to lie about membership numbers,” Trim said.

Increasing membership audits by divisions are combating incidences of membership inflation in some regions. Trim said several regions have made the audits a priority, including South America, Southeast Asia and West Africa.

“Accurate membership records: that’s a secretary’s contribution to [the church’s current focus on] Revival and Reformation,” said Onalapo Ajibade, secretary for the West-Central Africa Division, based in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. “We must have accuracy. God cannot bless a lie.”

On the meeting sidelines, the youngest attendee, Cheryl Simpson, said she was encouraged by the summit because she said it showed church leaders wanted to encourage young adults like her.

Simpson, who is a senior psychology student at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States, said she was glad that church leaders were willing to look at reality.
“For me, this is essential because it’s showing me that theologians aren’t afraid to face the facts,” Simpson said.

U.S. federal judge strikes down law giving clergy tax-free housing allowance

A United States federal judge last week ruled that the clergy exemption for paying taxes on income designated for housing is unconstitutional, a ruling that if upheld could affect the compensation package of tens of thousands of clergy in the country.

In her decision, U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Crabb said the law, known as the “parsonage exemption,” benefits “religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise.”

The exemption for clergy, she wrote, violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from making a law “respecting an establishment of religion.”

Crabb said her ruling would not be enforced pending appeal.

Her decision is the result of a suit brought by the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation, which advocates for the separation of church and state. The foundation sued the U.S. Treasury secretary and Internal Revenue Service commissioner over the exemption, which was passed by Congress in 1954. Section 107 of the Internal Revenue Code permits a “minister of the gospel” to designate some compensation as a housing allowance and exempt it from income tax.

“This ruling is a huge deal because it would have a dramatic impact in how the church compensates its ministers,” said Tom Wetmore, associate general counsel for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “We have long depended on this tax benefit for the compensation package for our clergy in North America.”

The after-tax benefit to Adventist ministers is estimated between 5 and 10 percent of their total compensation package, he said.

Wetmore said the ruling also raises questions about other aspects of the tax status of ministers and other unique tax rules for churches, such as exemptions from reporting revenue activities and church benefit plans.

The case is expected to be appealed to the 7th U.S Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago. If so, Wetmore said the Adventist Church would likely file an amicus brief (friend of the court) or join an amicus brief brought by other groups.
New documentary explores holistic “blueprint” of Adventist education

Isai Bautista couldn’t read a word—“nada,” he says—when he transferred to the Bronx-Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist School in the third grade. Now he’s graduating from eighth grade with honors, thanks, in part, to a dedicated teacher who worked with him every day after school.

“She’s like a second mom to me,” Bautista says.

The Bronx-Manhattan Adventist School is one of eight Adventist schools across North America that independent filmmaker Martin Doblmeier profiles in his latest documentary, “The Blueprint: The Story of Adventist Education,” now available on DVD.

“The blueprint” can be traced back to Adventist Church co-founder Ellen G. White, who, in the mid-19th century, introduced the concept of holistic education—mental, physical, social and spiritual health coupled with intellectual growth and service to humanity.

Today, the Adventist Church operates the second largest faith-based school system in the world.

On location in Holbrook, Arizona, Doblmeier explores how the Holbrook Indian School—an Adventist boarding school on the nearby Navaho Indian reservation—teaches students to find value and self worth in their identity as Native Americans and children of God. Many of the students come from abusive, broken homes in a community fraught with unemployment, drug abuse and gangs.

“I want to help them figure out that they are not less than everybody else,” says Vice Principle Jovanna Poor Bear-Adams, who herself grew up on the reservation and battled feelings of inadequacy.

At schools from Holbrook to the Columbine Christian School in Durango, Colorado, students share certain characteristics that correlate with high achievement, the documentary reveals—these traits include reading for pleasure, having positive relationships and getting good nutrition and adequate sleep. Students also identify themselves as spiritual.

Still, a decline in enrollment at some Adventist church schools has led some parents to question whether Adventist education can still deliver quality academics, says Elissa Kido, who directed CognitiveGenesis, a survey of more than 50,000 students at 800 Adventist schools across the U.S., Canada and Bermuda.

At the nine-student Pinon Hills School in Farmington, New Mexico, Doblmeier addresses the challenge of multi-grade classrooms.

“There’s been a cultural change in the Adventist Church. Forty years ago, if you were an Adventist family, it was almost a scandal if you didn’t send your children to the local Adventist school,” says Blake Jones, pastor of the Pinon Hills Adventist Church.
“That’s not the case today,” he adds. Half of Pinon Hills’ operating budget goes to supporting the school.

At Spencerville Adventist Academy in Maryland, students score in the 80 to 90th percentile. “The Blueprint” makes the case that Spencerville is the rule, not the exception. CognitiveGenesis revealed that Adventist students outperform the national average in all grades, all subjects and regardless of class size.

“There’s no academic advantage in going to a large school,” says Lisa Beardley-Hardy, Education director for the Adventist world church.

At Loma Linda Academy in California, Doblmeier reports that students at Adventist schools score “considerably” above the national average in science, despite critics who have questioned whether good science can be taught in the context of creationism.

“We have found that we’re able to develop our students into critical thinkers—good scientists with good scientific method—who also understand the paradigm of how you can be a good scientist and be a believer in God,” says Robert Skoretz, principal of Loma Linda Academy.

Doblmeier explores another hallmark of Adventist education at Oakwood Adventist Academy in Alabama. One of the school’s core values is community service. The school holds regular community service days, during which students distribute food, clothes and other supplies.

“Students begin building habits early in life, and if we want to prepare them for a lifetime of service and involvement in their communities, we have to start early. It’s part of our curriculum,” says Sharon Lewis, principal of Oakwood Academy.

Back at the Bronx-Manhattan Adventist School, teachers say that the key to successful education is the home, school and church working together.

“Not many people from my neighborhood make it successfully,” Bautista says, “but I really think I’m going to make it.”

“The Blueprint” is the latest of Doblmeier’s more than 25 award-winning films on religion, faith and spirituality, which include “Bonhoeffer,” a documentary on Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and “Albert Schweitzer: Called to Africa,” a film recounting the Nobel Prize-winning humanitarian’s life.

Doblmeier first profiled Adventists in a 2010 documentary tracing the roots of the denomination’s health message and ministry in North America. In May, he released “The Adventists 2,” exploring the philosophy and legacy of the church’s international health and humanitarian outreach.
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