

Student Attitudes toward Missions

BETTY STIRLING

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Missionary evangelism has been the primary purpose of the Seventh-day Adventist church, and the gospel commission, "Go ye into all the world," has been taken as a direct command. If the church is to fulfill this command, the youth of the church must be educated and motivated to take their place in the active mission program, for the future of the mission program rests on the college youth of today.

But how do these students feel about the program the church conducts? Do they want to enter mission service? To learn how they stand on these important questions, Loma Linda University Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the fall of 1966 began a study of student attitudes toward missions.

A probability (random) sample amounting to 15 percent of the students of each North American and Australian English-speaking Adventist college was chosen from student lists provided by the college registrars.

METHODS. Questionnaires were distributed to the chosen students by officers of the college or by direct mail. Over 50 percent of the questionnaires distributed were returned; in one college the return was almost 90 percent. A total of 1,011 usable questionnaires was returned in time for analysis — 947 from North America, 64 from Australia. The respondents appeared to be representative of the total student body in such characteristics as sex, age, class, and so forth.

A 27-question, multiple-choice type of questionnaire was used. It was developed from questions used in a small study done previously at Loma Linda and from the results of personal interviews conducted by the department at three schools. The printed questionnaires and explanatory

letters were put with return envelopes inside sealed envelopes addressed to the students in order to assure complete confidentiality of the responses.

FINDINGS. As the study was exploratory in nature, it attempted to answer certain broad questions. The analysis of student responses is summarized below with these guiding questions as headings. Analysis of the answers students made and the comments they wrote in seem to have some important implications for the future of the mission program.

1. *How do students feel about the mission program?*

Students are concerned about the mission program. The amount of response itself shows interest. Also, almost 50 percent of the students filling out the questionnaire were interested enough to write out thoughts on missions to amplify answers they checked.

The introductory question was: "Imagine the following situation: A group of acquaintances are having a *general* discussion about Seventh-day Adventist mission service. When you join the group would you (1) argue for mission service, (2) argue against mission service, (3) remain silent and listen?" In response almost none said they would argue against mission service. (Seventy-one percent would be "for," 2 percent "against," and 26 percent "silent.")

But they are not necessarily satisfied with the present mission program. In response to the question, "Do you feel that the mission program of the church is (1) progressive, adequate for the needs of the future, (2) meets the needs of the world today, (3) outdated?" 41 percent answered that the program is outdated, only 21 percent that it is progressive.

Almost half the respondents indicated that they felt that trained nationals should direct the mission program (in their countries). Many wrote strong comments on what they viewed as injustice in the relative pay and treatment of nationals and overseas workers. In response to a question on the "effect" of the mission program, almost half said the missions both "Christianize and Americanize" (or "Australianize").

Most of the students surveyed were not satisfied with the recruitment program, and advocated changes in terms of service. In all three countries they commented favorably on a program more like that of the Peace Corps.

2. *How accurate is student knowledge of the mission program?*

In general, they are uncertain of the facts on salaries, conditions, and availability of recruits to fill positions, and many, particularly the younger students, commented on their uncertainty.

Half of the American respondents thought that missionaries get less pay than homeland workers but that it is worth more, a fourth that missionaries get the same pay, slightly less than a fourth that they get less and that it is worth less. The Australian students have a very different picture: 70 percent thought that missionaries get the same pay as homeland workers, only a sixth thought that they get less pay and that it is worth more.

In comparing missionaries with national workers of similar training, half of the respondents thought that missionaries have higher wages and better living conditions, a fourth thought that the two groups are equal, and almost a sixth thought that missionaries are worse off than national workers. The correct answer is higher wages and better living conditions; so about half the respondents had a true view of the situation.

3. *Where do students get their information about missions, and how do they assess the value of their sources?*

Particularly from written-in comments, it would appear that students most value reports from direct sources such as returned missionaries, friends or relatives who have been in the mission field, and student missionaries. But the usual mission reports in Sabbath school or in church papers are another thing. Students criticized — in many cases emphatically — both the accuracy and the quality of mission reports, and overwhelmingly asked to be told of both success and failure in the mission fields. In answer to the question, “Do you think mission reports (1) paint a true picture, (2) exaggerate, (3) understate conditions of mission service?” only 40 percent answered “true picture,” and in the larger schools it was less than this percent. Concerning the question on quality of reports, only 27 percent felt that reports are both inspiring and informative. Eighty-four percent indicated that a college audience should be told of both success and failure.

4. *What kind of training do students feel is necessary for mission service?*

The five suggested possibilities were “a call” in lieu of training, college or professional training, education in cultural differences and customs, leadership training, and training in practical skills (plus a blank for write-ins). At least 50 percent of the students checked all possibilities, except “call,” which was checked by 48 percent. But there is an interesting variation by college: in those that emphasize the training of ministers, over half of the respondents checked “call.” Professional training rated uniformly high except in two colleges. For all except three colleges, “practical” train-

ing received the largest number of checks; in one college "leadership" received the most; and in the two schools with the most graduate students, "culture" received the most checks. (The write-in on a number of questionnaires: "a good wife!")

5. *Are students interested in serving as missionaries? For how long? Where? When did they first become interested? Do they feel needed and wanted?*

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Over two-thirds considered themselves candidates for mission service in some degree ("have been asked," would go "if asked," "might be interested"), whereas less than a third said that they are uninterested — because of not thinking about it, or having lost interest, or never having been interested. However, in assessing other students' interest in mission service, they saw only 6 percent considering themselves candidates, almost two-thirds interested in a general way in missions, but not for themselves, and 27 percent apathetic. There are several possible explanations for this discrepancy of response. If the question on other students is considered a "projective" type of question — that is, the student is reading his own real feelings into his interpretation of others' feelings — then possibly fewer students are really interested in mission service for themselves than say they are — or else classmates do not perceive their interest. Another explanation might be that the students seen as apathetic are the ones who did not return questionnaires. However, the number of unreturned questionnaires for a given college does not seem related to the amount of apathy for the college. Apathy does seem to be related to the total pattern of opinions at the college with more apathy being seen where the pattern of response is not too traditional (see last paragraph of section 6).

Well over half of the respondents viewed mission service as challenging for a lifetime career; a fourth saw it as challenging for a few years. Write-in comments, though, indicate that most look with favor on short terms (more frequent but possibly shorter furloughs). Latin America and the Pacific Islands seem to be the preferred fields of service, although almost a fifth of those interested were not sure which field they would like most.

The study shows the importance of high school and college years as times when interest in mission service is first aroused. Sixty percent, however, did not feel they had ever been "asked" to be missionaries by anyone in an official capacity; 29 percent indicated that they had been "asked," but only as a member of a group; only 10 percent felt that they had been personally asked. The percentages on this question vary widely by college.

6. *What factors affect student attitudes toward missions and toward mission service — personal characteristics, class standing, major, college attended, number of years spent in SDA schools?*

Students are not a homogeneous mass. The study shows that differences in age, grades, sex, and majors are related to attitudes toward missions and to knowledge of the mission program.

One problem in trying to relate these characteristics separately to attitudes is that the characteristics themselves are related. Class standing is related to age and, to a lesser degree, to years spent in SDA schools. But marital status is also related to age and class standing: older students are more likely to be married. To some extent, major is related to both sex and age (or class standing), since the graduate professional programs (medicine, theology, dentistry) are heavily male. This preponderance of the male is balanced to a degree by graduate education students, many of whom are female. But it would take a sample many times larger to separate out completely the effect of one variable by holding all others constant. However, a comparison of the results of cross-tabulations with each in turn gives some indication of which characteristics are related to which personal variable.

There is little difference in attitudes and knowledge between the sexes. Men are somewhat more critical of the mission program than women are, and also they show somewhat better knowledge. Women develop interest in mission service at younger ages than men do and they are more interested in lifetime service. Marriage, as a variable, seems to bring the attitudes of women closer to those of men.

The student's major is related to how he looks on the mission program and whether he is interested in mission service. However, these results must be considered as speculative, since the numbers of students in certain majors were small.

Of all the characteristics that were investigated, class standing (freshman, sophomore, etc.) is most clearly related to attitudes toward missions. Higher-level students are more critical of the program, have more suggestions for change, show better knowledge of conditions, and are more skeptical of the quality and accuracy of mission reports. Higher-level students are also more likely to have been asked to be missionaries and to have accepted, they are more likely to have lost interest in serving, and they seem to be more likely to see other students as apathetic.

Age is related to attitudes in much the same way as class standing, but with an interesting difference: the older the student, regardless of class standing, the more likely he is to remain silent in a discussion on missions.

The number of years spent in an SDA school is also related to attitudes, but to a lesser extent than either class standing or age. The pattern is similar. More time spent in SDA schools does not give him a greater desire for mission service, nor does it increase the accuracy of his knowledge of conditions.

There is a pattern of answers to questions by college, particularly if the questions on attitude or opinion are considered as a block. The general pattern in some colleges might be termed traditional, whereas in others it is more nontraditional. Some fall in between. But this pattern is apparently related in part to the class distribution and the age of students.

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7. How does students' degree of interest in serving relate to their views on the mission program?

The students who indicated that they had been asked to serve and that they intend to go as missionaries are not necessarily satisfied with the program. For example, they are likely to see the program as outdated rather than as progressive or adequate; they are in favor of giving qualified nationals the responsibility for direction of mission programs. They do not view mission service as much different from work in the homeland. They have more accurate views on salaries and living conditions. Although they are critical of mission reports, they are not so critical as some other groups.

In contrast with those students expecting to go, those who indicated that they would become missionaries if asked differ in many respects. They are much less critical of the present mission program. Their knowledge appears good in most respects. They are less critical of reports and are more likely to feel that reports understate conditions rather than exaggerate them. They are the only group in which significantly more than the population average believe other students are interested in missions for themselves.

Students who said that they might be interested in going differ from the population average only slightly on almost all questions. Where they do vary, they resemble the "if asked" group; however, their knowledge of conditions is less adequate.

Students who "haven't thought much about" mission service also differ little from the average; however, their pattern of answers definitely indicates less thought about missions. They, too, show somewhat less knowledge.

Students who were at one time interested but are no longer, resemble the "asked" group in many ways. These now-uninterested students, too, are critical of the program, and in much the same ways, but to a stronger degree.

Their knowledge is about the same. They are more critical of mission reports, but their assessment of the student mission program is about the same.

Students who said that they had never been interested in mission service differ from the "used to be interested" in several ways. They are less critical but more apathetic. They question the accuracy of mission reports less than they do the quality. They seem to know less about the mission program than the average.

8. *What are the components of students' attitudes on the mission program?*

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Cross-tabulations were made of several questions to determine possible components of certain attitudes. For example, what did a student mean when he said the program is "outdated?" His pattern of answers shows that he feels these changes should be made: turn direction over to the nationals; Christianize more and "Americanize" less; make service temporary rather than lifelong. But he also feels that mission service is not really a sacrifice and that reports exaggerate conditions and are not especially inspiring. He wants to hear about both success and failure. He wants prospective missionaries to be educated in cultural differences and also in practical skills; he wants classes for the study of missions. He is a little more likely than others to favor a Peace Corps type of program, but not scholarships. And although the number of students who said that the program is "outdated" are just under half of the total respondents, they are the majority of the higher-class-standing students.

When a student said that the mission program is "progressive," on the other hand, he has almost the opposite views on these subjects.

When a student said that he feels that mission service is a lifework, what does he mean in terms of other attitudes on missions? His response pattern shows that he views the present program as progressive. He also looks on mission service as a sacrifice. He does not view conditions as unhealthful, however, nor does he feel that missionaries should be paid more than homeland workers.

In what way do students see mission service as a sacrifice? For one, they feel that the missionary gets less pay than homeland workers, and they would like to see him receive more pay. For another, they regard conditions as unhealthful rather than as merely inconvenient.

How does the student mission program affect interest in missions? The student who sees the project as benefiting only the student missionary him-

self and the student who thinks his college has no program (whether or not it does) consider other students to be apathetic toward missions. The student who sees the project as benefiting the entire college is also more likely to be interested in missions himself, whereas the student who sees it as benefiting only the one who goes is not especially interested himself.

CONCLUSION. In many ways the study raises more questions than it answers, as is true of much exploratory research. But it also indicates which directions will be most fruitful for further inquiry. It tells much about student attitudes toward the mission program and toward service, but it also shows that in student knowledge there are certain gaps that may affect their attitudes.

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One area in which more study needs to be done is on the apparent decline of interest in mission service, which comes with advancing levels of schooling (or increase in age or more years in SDA schools). Is this realism on the part of the student? Is it recognition that he has talents and opportunities that do not fit with mission service? Is it a counting of costs that makes him believe he cannot afford mission service? Or is it disillusionment with the mission program? The survey indicates that it may be all of these.

There should be further probing into why students see themselves as personally interested in missions but see other students as not personally interested. Is this a realistic appraisal of other students or of themselves?

Further study should be given to mission reports, particularly the reports given in Sabbath schools. Indications from this study are that in the larger centers the students who would presumably have more firsthand reports are the least satisfied with quality and content. Is this a matter of higher expectations? Or are the reports less satisfactory? Caustic write-in comments indicate prevalent skepticism about what is told in public mission reports.

The student mission program appears from this research to be definitely related to interest, and certainly write-in comments are enthusiastic. What would a follow-up show about the succeeding activities of the student missionaries themselves? Do they return to mission service on completion of their schooling? How does one type of program differ in effect from another?

In conclusion, the research shows that students are interested in the mission program and in mission service, but their interest is critical and their knowledge does not always measure up to the information presumably transmitted to them. They ask for more dialogue that will allow them to ask sensitive questions and to receive straight answers about missions.