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# Adventist Standards: The Hinge of Youth Retention

by Roger L. Dudley and Janet Leigh Kangas

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“I believe in God, but some things get blown away—like earrings, make-up, rock, movies, sex before you’re married, dances. You haven’t really lived. My religion sometimes makes me feel trapped from all the above.”

Just another rebellious teenager? Maybe. But there’s an odd twist. This young woman added: “Though I won’t follow all the rules, I just love sitting in the church.” And lest you conclude that all adolescents are up on experience and down on standards, one male wrote: “The life-styles and standards of the church should be lifted up.” Our mail has run the gamut from reaffirmation to revolt as we have read the comments of more than 1,500 middle adolescents during the past year.

We found that roughly half of Adventist teenagers consider the standards and rules of the church to be quite reasonable, but on specific issues the percentages vary greatly. For example, about three-fourths agree on temperance issues, less than two-thirds on unclean meats and premarital sex, and only minorities on jewelry, dancing, rock music, and movie theaters. Those attending Adventist academies tend to be more positive toward standards than those in public high schools, but in some areas the differences are small. Perhaps of most importance to the church, those youth who are most supportive of the standards are those most likely to affirm their inten-

tions to remain Adventists when they are finally out on their own. How did we acquire all this information?

## *The Exploration of Teenage Thinking*

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The church understandably has a deep concern for the future of its youth. How many of our young people are leaving the faith? Why are they leaving? These are questions frequently posed. Several years back members of what was then the General Conference youth department conceived of a study that would interview a sample of those who had graduated from academies 10 years earlier to find out how they now related to the church. When the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University was asked for input, the institute suggested an alternative approach. Because many graduates—especially those who had left the church—would be difficult to locate after such a lapse of time and because the proposed design would allow no comparison for the effects of Adventist versus public education, a longitudinal study of a broad-based church sample was proposed.

After several years of planning and negotiating for funding had taken place, the North American Division commissioned the Institute of Church Ministries to begin a 10-year study of youth retention. The plan called for the institute to survey a large representative sample of teenagers who

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Roger L. Dudley, Ed.D., is director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University. Janet Leigh Kangas, Ph.D., is the mission editor for the church ministries department of the General Conference.

were already members of the church. Comprehensive information would be gathered that would serve as a base with which to compare later events. Then each year, for the next nine years, smaller sets of information would be collected. We assumed that the continuing relationship developed with each subject would encourage him/her to respond to the yearly questionnaire. And, of course, it would be easier to secure forwarding addresses with only one-year gaps between contacts. We reasoned that by the time the young adults reached their mid-twenties, most would have established patterns of church loyalty and attendance. It would then be possible to compare their present situations with the information gathered through the years to determine what factors predict retention, disaffiliation, denominational service, et cetera.

The first year of the study would be the most difficult since it would involve building the address list of sample youth and collecting all the base data. Janet Kangas joined the Institute of Church Ministries to direct this project for her Ph.D. dissertation in Religious Education. We began by selecting sample churches. From lists of the churches in each conference we selected one church for each 1,000 members in the conference, using a computer random-selection program. This yielded 695 churches. We wrote to the clerk of each one requesting names and addresses of all youth on the membership records who were either 15 or 16 years old. After six months, three letters, and scores of phone calls, we received lists from 659 clerks—a 95 percent response rate.

In the meantime we were designing the questionnaire. This was a lengthy process with critiques from division leaders, youth-ministry workers, and measurement professionals, and a pilot test with target-age youth. The final instrument was six pages long and collected approximately 150 separate items of information. Over a seven-month period three mailings were sent to the teenagers on the clerks' lists. Each mailing included not only a questionnaire but also a letter of entreaty and a stamped return envelope.

The lists from the clerks generated 2,639 good

addresses (plus 111 undeliverables). After seven months we had responses from 1,676 teenagers (63.5 percent), but 165 proved to be either not church members or in the wrong age group. So the final group on which the study was conducted totaled 1,511 Adventist youth of 15 or 16 years old. Some of the material was humorous; some heartbreaking. All of it will be useful to the church in planning youth ministry. While the full benefits of this research will not be realized for some years, the first phase has now been completed and has supplied rich material for our understanding of the Adventist teenager. To report on all the information gathered would fill a book. For this article we have chosen to limit ourselves to one crucial area—teenage attitudes toward the standards of the church and the implications of these attitudes for long-term retention.

## *Teenagers Face Off With the Standards*

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A few facts about our sample may be interesting. The youth were all either 15 or 16 years of age and baptized members of the Adventist church. They were 43 percent male and 57 percent female. About half were attending an Adventist academy (30 percent day and 21 percent boarding) at the time of the survey, with the others mostly in public high. Only 68 percent could report that their biological parents were still married and living together, 27 percent had parents who were separated or divorced, and in 5 percent of the cases one or both parents had died. Of our sample 68 percent had fathers who were presently Adventists, and 91 percent had mothers in the church. At this point we did not ask about ethnicity.

We asked our subjects to respond to the statement, "Adventist standards/rules are quite reasonable," on a five-point Likert scale with the following results: strongly disagree — 5 percent, somewhat disagree — 17 percent, neutral — 27 percent, somewhat agree — 29 percent, strongly

agree — 22 percent. So we have roughly half in agreement, a fourth in disagreement, and the other fourth ambiguous—not a major rebellion to be sure, but not a sign that all is well either.

But the statement is couched in general terms. Next we asked them to respond on the same scale to nine specific areas. We have arranged these answers in Table 1 according to descending order of agreement. In every case but that of jewelry/makeup the working of the table is identical to that of the questionnaire. In the one exception the questionnaire read “decorative jewelry or excessive makeup.” For ease of comparison we have combined the two disagree and the two agree categories.

firmed by modern science.

We also find it alarming that only 62 percent agree with the Adventist position on premarital sex. This would seem to reflect the inroads of societal changes, often called the sexual revolution. While we have no comparable data for a generation ago, we suspect that these figures represent a radical erosion in what is morally acceptable. Five years before, Dudley and Dudley surveyed 247 teenagers along with their parents in an Intergenerational Value Survey.<sup>1</sup> In the earlier study 62 percent also agreed with the Adventist position on premarital sex, but at that time 19 percent were neutral and 19 percent disagreed. The present study represents a shift of 6 percent from neutral

to disagree. This is especially noteworthy in that the previous study qualified the statement by saying that “premarital sexual intercourse is not wrong *if two people really love each other.*” The present study did not contain the qualifier, yet still represented a shift in the permissive direction.

In spite of major defections,

however, a majority continue to agree with the first five items. On the last four items, to the contrary, a majority are not in agreement, two-fifths or more disagree, and there are significant neutral blocks. Movies, rock music, dancing, and jewelry, in that order, seem to be the “big four” areas where consensus with the stated church position is lacking. Some will no doubt say that these are not character issues and should not be a part of our church standards in the first place. While it is not our purpose to either defend or

**TABLE 1  
ATTITUDES TOWARD SPECIFIC ADVENTIST STANDARDS**

| Standard              | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
|-----------------------|-------|---------|----------|
| <u>More agreement</u> |       |         |          |
| Recreational drugs    | 74%   | 4%      | 22%      |
| Tobacco               | 74%   | 3%      | 23%      |
| Alcohol               | 71%   | 5%      | 24%      |
| “Unclean” meats       | 63%   | 12%     | 25%      |
| Premarital sex        | 62%   | 13%     | 25%      |
| <u>Less agreement</u> |       |         |          |
| Jewelry/makeup        | 40%   | 20%     | 40%      |
| Dancing/discos        | 35%   | 22%     | 43%      |
| Rock music            | 32%   | 20%     | 48%      |
| Movie theaters        | 25%   | 20%     | 55%      |

The health and temperance workers among us will be pleased to note that the most agreement comes on these issues. The majority of Adventist youth still recognize the reasonableness of our position on various chemical substances. Whether their behavior will match their beliefs cannot be determined from the present data. Still, the church must be concerned to discover that about a fourth of its teenagers either disagree or are uncertain about its traditional health teachings even though these have been so strongly con-

attack our traditional guidelines in these areas, they are well-known and long-standing as part of what it means to be an Adventist. Therefore, opposition to them may be symbolic of a psychological separation from the church—the hinge upon which swings the future status of the young person as to church retention or dropout. This will become more apparent as we examine some correlations a bit later.

Of particular interest is the attitude toward the standard of movie theaters. Here only a fourth agreed with the Adventist position, and, for the first time, a majority disagreed. In the 1983 survey this was also true, but, in addition, only about 44 percent of the parents agreed, with about 46 percent in disagreement.<sup>2</sup> In the face of cable TV, videos, and campus-approved films, the traditional Adventist stand on movies appears to be a lost cause.

Are those attending Adventist academies more likely to be favorable to the standards than are those in public high schools? We compared the responses of the 773 academy students with those of the 634 public high attenders. To the statement, “Adventist standards/rules are quite reasonable,” 52 percent of the academy students agreed as compared to 49 percent of those in high school.

Very little difference between the two groups arises in response to this general statement. But what about the specific standards? The comparison is shown in Table 2.

There *are* differences, and in every case the academy students express more agreement. Differences on the health and temperance issues average around 10 percentage points, as does dancing/discos. Largest of all is the difference on premarital sex. Even movie theaters shows a moderate difference. But the groups are quite close on jewelry/makeup and virtually the same on rock music. These data may provide challenges and directions for Adventist educators.

We asked the teenagers to respond to this open-ended statement: “The first thing I would like to change about my religion is \_\_\_\_.” Although the most common reply (27 percent) was “nothing,” 12 percent indicated “relax strictness,” and another 10 percent indicated “standards.” In coding these categories we used “standards” to designate the principle involved and “strictness” to denote the degree to which the standards are enforced. On the other hand, 8 percent called for “more commitment.” One young man wrote: “My religion has high standards, and I’m for high standards.”

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF ATTITUDES TOWARD STANDARDS BETWEEN ACADEMY AND PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

| Standard           | Agree Academy <sup>1</sup> | Agree Public High <sup>2</sup> |
|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Recreational drugs | 77%                        | 68%                            |
| Tobacco            | 79%                        | 68%                            |
| Alcohol            | 76%                        | 66%                            |
| “Unclean” meats    | 66%                        | 59%                            |
| Premarital sex     | 68%                        | 54%                            |
| Jewelry/makeup     | 41%                        | 37%                            |
| Dancing/discos     | 39%                        | 30%                            |
| Rock music         | 32%                        | 31%                            |
| Movie theaters     | 27%                        | 21%                            |

<sup>1</sup>773 teenagers attending Adventist academies (451-day and 322-boarding)

<sup>2</sup>634 teenagers attending public high school

## *Standards and Retention*

Given the chief purpose of this 10-year study, perhaps the most important question was “I intend to remain an active Adventist when I am on my own.”

To this item 76 percent agreed (56 percent of them strongly), 17 percent were uncertain, and only 8 percent disagreed. Of course, it may not turn out that way 10 years from now, but it is the first indication of the thinking of these youth. It will be interesting to compare the actual destiny of these young people with their present aspirations. In the meantime we can compare their intentions with other variables to see what might best predict such future projections.

We correlated several dozen variables with the future-intentions statement using both zero-order correlations and multiple regression analysis. The highest correlation (.52) was with the item on agreement with Adventist standards. Those teenagers who agree that Adventist standards and rules are quite reasonable are more likely to affirm their intentions to remain Adventist when they are on their own than those who disagree with the standards and find them unreasonable.

Of course, a strong relationship between these two variables does not determine the direction of influence or even prove causation. But logic would suggest that those who find the standards to their liking would naturally decide to “stay with the ship” while those who are unsatisfied might well be thinking of “going overboard.” This likelihood challenges the church to discover fresh methods of presenting its standards to the next generation so that these standards will be perceived as reasonable and beneficial. If we find no way to do that, perhaps we need to reexamine them to see if they really reflect what is essential in Adventist theology.

Two other significant correlations with standards are worth noting, although they are not nearly as strong as the one just mentioned. Those adolescents who perceive that they have experienced stricter enforcement in the growing-up process from parents and teachers are slightly more likely to agree with the standards than those reporting lenient enforcement. This surprised us. We expected to find the opposite, given the adolescent struggles for emancipation and the consequent tendency to rebel. Perhaps the modeling influence of strict but sincere homes has some-

what offset the rejection tendency.

On the second correlation, those teenagers who perceive that adult Adventists live up to what they believe are slightly more likely to agree with church standards than do those teenagers who see the adults as largely hypocritical. This supports much previous research that the example of religious authority figures impacts positively or negatively on youth religiosity.<sup>3</sup>

Previously, we compared attitudes toward church standards between those attending Adventist and public schools. This had to do with *present location*. We also correlated years of attendance at Adventist schools with agreement with church standards to see if *time spent* at these institutions made a difference. We did find that those who attended longer were more likely to affirm the standards, but the relationship was slight. Present attendance seems to be more influential than number of years.

## *Our Suggestions for Presenting Adventist Standards*

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Since how teenagers feel about the standards is so intertwined with their future intentions for remaining in or leaving the church, this area should challenge our best thinking. Teenagers are also interested in standards and ready to discuss them at the drop of a hat (much more so than to discuss abstract doctrines). We have the readiness factor going for us.

Therefore, at this point we would like to switch styles. Up to now we have been objective reporters of research. But here we would like to offer a few suggestions that arise out of our personal experiences. We offer these with considerable humility, for we know how difficult and sticky this task is. We recognize that it is much easier to write about this subject from behind the safety of our computers than to actually face and convince the youth on the “front lines.” Still, with these *caveats* we would like to venture forth and, hopefully, to stimulate some thinking.

Adults can begin by actualizing the instruction methods that teenagers prefer. It is a long-established fact that adolescents do not enjoy sermons and lectures—with the possible exception of those presented by a rare youth pastor with more-than-usual interest-holding qualities (charisma, humor, etcetera.). Bible teachers need not feel pressured to spend long class periods providing religious entertainment when teenagers are really asking for discussion and involvement. Family worship might be a discussion of spiritual applications to the problems of the day, not just the reading of a passage from a religious book.

A disarming approach might be to assure the young people that God *does* believe in jewelry,

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dancing, and movies. God-approved jewelry was worn by the high priests (gold wires worked into the linen, onyx stones on the ephod, 12 precious stones on the breastplate with pure gold chains, gold bells between the pomegranates around the robe's hem, and a holy crown of pure gold). Many crowns will be worn by Christ when he comes; he will place star-studded crowns on the redeemed; and heaven's gates, mansions, and streets will glow with jewels. These instances might be compared with the examples of offensive jewelry in the Bible to discover the principles behind the difference with the discussion culminating in the biblical acceptance of jewelry that denotes a state of supreme holiness—the only state worthy of drawing attention.

A discussion of dancing might begin by acknowledging the God-approved dancing performed by David, comparing his state of holy joy with the dancing which meets with biblical disapproval—the Israelites around the golden calf and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel with their drunkenness and orgies. The teenagers could

discuss whether today's dancing with today's music is expressing holy joy to the Lord or self-indulgence and lust.

As for movies, God himself will show a movie to the universe at the third coming of Jesus, a panoramic replay in the sky of the fall of Lucifer in heaven, the disobedience in Eden, and the outworking of sin in history that led to the death of Christ on the cross, the glorious second coming, and the present moment of the destruction of the wicked. He also showed Moses, Paul, and Ellen White pre-runs of heaven and Moses and Elijah a cinema of the crucifixion as they visited Jesus at the transfiguration. Again, the issue is decided by the *quality* of the experience involved. Discussion questions might be whether one can avoid “bad” movies like bad novels while at the same time not rejecting all films and all books; how different types of films affect one physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually; and the criteria a Christian would use in selecting entertainment.

In all discussion it is important not to simply fall back on codes of behavior as if these were sacred and unchangeable but to search for principles by which the youth can make their own mature decisions. The above standards afford the opportunity to get into deep spiritual truths such as holiness (justification and sanctification), the state of holy joy, and character building through inner purity. The discussions may also lead into the effect our behavior has on others—one of the highest levels of morality.

We should realize, however, that such an approach has its dangers. We might discover that we have been inconsistent in our application of principles. We might find that we can formulate no good reason for some of our rules. The youth may back us into a corner from which we cannot extricate ourselves without appealing to tradition. We may be compelled to join the youth in rethinking why we do what we do. It is not as comfortable to be a searcher as to be an authority.

And, as a church, we will need to be aware of our own failure to do what we ask of the young people. Although adults criticize the music,

movies, and dress of teenagers, they often make exceptions for themselves. These inconsistencies are apparent to adolescents who in turn can rationalize their own behavior, citing adult hypocrisy. Many of the young people in our study reflected confusion rather than conflict as they reacted to the standards. Why is a certain practice condemned while another that seems quite similar is OK? We dare not expect more from our youth than we are willing to give.

Adults and teenagers might discuss together the need for standards. One approach might be to pretend that no standards presently exist and ask the youth to begin from zero with a list they would formulate for their own future offspring. Such discussions must be handled skillfully—asking the young people for both the positive and negative sides for each standard discussed in a nonthreatening and unhurried atmosphere characterized by mutual good will. The pluses and minuses could be listed on a chalkboard as the teenagers themselves mention them. Adults should not attempt to manipulate the discussion

toward predetermined ends—a technique of which adolescents are extremely wary.

Perhaps most important, adults can develop a one-to-one relationship with a teenager—remembering that given the chance, a teenager likes to talk, discuss, confide, and communicate with a person who is really caring and interested. Taking one teenager out alone for french fries and a soft drink, allowing the opportunity for opening up the heart without peers around, is probably more productive than taking a carload to the baseball stadium.

Yes, this approach is risky. But if the attitudes of the teenagers toward the standards of the church really determine how likely they are to remain in its fellowship as they reach adulthood, then it is even more risky *not* to make ourselves vulnerable and open to continuing dialogue. We cannot continue with “business as usual,” standing by the ancient and unmovable codes, if we wish to have a future for our church. Even if the historical standards turn out to be best after all, they will have to be re-created by this generation.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Roger and Peggy Dudley, “Adventist Values: Flying High?” *Ministry* (April 1985), pp. 4-7.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

3. See Roger L. Dudley, *Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to Do About It* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1978), chapter 3.