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# Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church

*by Roger L. Dudley*

**“I** am frustrated with the Church. . . . I have lost my faith in the Adventist organization.” “The members in my church were so cold. . . . I had stopped attending for two years.” “The Adventist Church tends to be the opposite of Christ.” “I feel that the Church is a farce.”

Whatever theological, cultural, or lifestyle differences Adventists have, they pretty much agree on one thing: they want their children to commit to the religious values that they themselves have embraced and found important. Although many youth do follow in their parents' footsteps and remain in the Church—even though



# ALIENATION

"I would rather spend Sabbath on my own than try to carve out a place in ice." "The people were very cold and aloof, not just toward other members but toward some guests as well."

Table 1  
**Regression of First Year Variables  
on Remaining a Member**

Step	Variable	Beta*
1	Intend to remain an active Adventist when out on own	.159
2	Mother attends church frequently	.152
3	More years in an Adventist day academy	.106
4	Father attends church frequently	.091
5	Pray personally more frequently	.077
6	Agree with Adventist standards on dancing/discos	.074
7	Worship with family more frequently	.062
8	Years in Pathfinders (like Scouts)	.054

\*First six betas significant beyond .01 level; 7 and 8 significant beyond .05 level

their religion may be expressed somewhat differently than that of the older generation—an increasing number appear to be abandoning parental values and leaving the Church.

Concerned with this attrition, denominational leaders commissioned the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University to study the extent of the problem and the reasons why young people either leave the Church or remain in it.

## The Project

Thus began a project that followed a large division-wide sample of teenagers for ten years. Given time for organizing the study, arranging for funding, doing a thorough literature review, collecting the data, analyzing the results, and writing the book, the task has occupied much of my attention for sixteen years, though I have had many helpers in this project. This research has special significance in that we have not been able to find any other denominational study that followed a large, representative, binational sample of teenagers every year for ten years.

The data-collecting phase of this project began in 1987 under the authorization of the North American Division (NAD) of Seventh-day Adventists, which financed the entire study. Using a stratified-random method, the project selected 695 churches in order to represent proportionately the Adventist membership in the NAD. Then the clerk of each church was asked to send the names and addresses of all young people who were either fifteen or sixteen years old and who were members of that congregation. After five months of follow-up, clerks of 659 churches (95 percent)

responded. The teenagers on these lists were sent a base questionnaire and invited by letter to participate in a long-term relationship. After weeding out those who were not actually members or who were not in the target age group, the project received 1,523 usable surveys.

Each year, members of this group were mailed a questionnaire, which included recurrent and new items. Over time, some participants moved, and current addresses were not always available. Others chose to discontinue participation in the project. Each year every effort was made to locate as many participants as possible, the project sending up to five mailings per year to nonrespondents and telephoning churches and families in an attempt to find current addresses.

The number of respondents for which we have data varied from year to year. However, at the cutoff of data collection in the autumn of 1997, 783 young adults had returned the tenth-year questionnaire. These 783 "survivors" represent about 51 percent of the original sample (1,523) that began in 1987—quite remarkable after ten years. However, if we delete from



# IRRELEVANCE

"I feel I get more out of religious discussions with my friends than I do out of church." "I felt the church offered nothing to me personally."

the pool those for whom no valid addresses are known and those who requested to be dropped from the sample—a total of 311—because they never received the tenth survey and, therefore, could not fill it out, 1,212 *potential* respondents are left, making a return rate of about 65 percent.

slightly over half the original sample, it was necessary to estimate the loss from the information we did have. We used several projection methods and concluded that between 40 and 50 percent of those teenagers who were baptized members of Adventist churches in North America have either officially dropped off the

## The Report

This project has yielded data on hundreds of variables, as well as scores of personal letters. No one report could begin to deal with the total picture. However, my recent book is an attempt to distill the information that would seem most crucial for youth ministry.<sup>1</sup> The book is composed of three main types of information: (1) analyses of questionnaire data in an attempt to discover what factors in adolescence predict relationships to the Church in mid-twenties adults; (2) analyses of comments written by the young adults to discover themes for dropping out, staying in, or returning, as well as those things most positive and most disturbing about the Church and suggestions for designing the ideal church; and (3) case studies in which a young person typical of a certain type of experience is followed through the entire ten-year period to observe changes and what influences him or her.

## Variables Included

In this brief paper we can look at only a few relationships drawn from the first type of analysis described above. One purpose was to discover the extent of the Church's loss of its young adults. Because status vis-à-vis the Church in the tenth year was available for only

membership roles or become completely inactive by their mid-twenties.

More importantly, we wished to discover what influences during the teenage years predict which young people will continue in the Church and which ones will not. We had collected many variables on the first survey. These independent, or predictor, variables can be grouped under several categories: home influences, parochial versus public education, congregational involvement, lifestyle standards, and devotional practices.

In order to predict what may happen in the lives of teenagers, we also needed to decide on our outcome measures. There were a number of measures we could have used, but we chose three that seem central to our research: (1) whether or not the young



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# INTOLERANCE

The idea of church being a place for sinners to come is a fantasy. Judgment is passed on you if you are perceived to be a sinner."

adult is still a member of the Church at the time of his/her last report, (2) whether or not the young adult attends worship services regularly, and (3) whether or not the young adult has ever dropped out of church membership or stopped attending for a time. Taken together, these three measures give us a fair basis to predict retention or dropout. We will begin with membership status.

whatever, and the subject claimed to be a member still, we cannot tell if that person dropped out before the end of the tenth year. Therefore, this method probably overestimates the number of members and thus reduces the probabilities of significant findings. The opposite may also be true. Some who last reported themselves out of the Church may have returned without letting us know, an unlikely possibility. So it is likely that these findings are conservative, but still we found twenty-five significant predictors for determining whether or not someone remains a member.

Obviously, much overlapping variance occurred among these items, so we submitted these predictors to a stepwise multiple regression analysis in order to determine the predictive value of each when controlled for all the other independent variables. The analysis selected eight predictors with a multiple *R* of approximately .40, which ex-

plained around 16 percent of the variance in membership status and was significant beyond the .001 level.<sup>2</sup> In each table the beta weights<sup>3</sup> are for the final step of the analysis.

In Table 1, we note that the teenagers' statement that they intend to remain in the Church when out on their own is the best predictor in our set of who will actually still be in the Church ten years later. We also notice the powerful influence of the religious family as shown in items 2, 4, and 7. The example of mother and father and the sharing of family faith together constitute the most important environment in affecting the future of those who come from such homes.

Parochial education, especially in the crucial decision-making period of adolescence, is also an important shaper of adulthood, as also shown in Table 1. Personal devotions help develop character in teenagers that will result in future faithfulness. I take

Table 2  
**Regression of First Year Variables  
on Regular Church Attendance**

Step	Variable	Beta*
1	Intend to remain an active Adventist when out on own	.136
2	Mother attends church frequently	.112
3	Agree that Adventist standards/rules are reasonable	.094
4	Worship with family more frequently	.084

\*All betas significant beyond .01 level

## Remaining a Member

It was no problem to determine if the 783 subjects who completed the tenth-year questionnaire were still members because we asked them that question. However, what about the 740 who did not fill out the last survey? Because we asked the membership question each year, we decided to take their answer for the last year in which they completed a questionnaire. Doing so gave us 1,351 subjects who stated whether or not they were still members. We could not use the 172 who never replied after the opening year and who were, by definition, members at the beginning of the study.

It will be obvious that this method has a weakness. If the last year was the third, sixth, ninth, or



# CONVENIENCE

"I stopped coming to church because I have to get up early on weekends. Why can't there be an afternoon service?"

item 6 to represent agreement with Adventist lifestyle standards in general. That is, so much overlap occurs in agreement on movies, music, jewelry, and dancing that only one of those could be included in the predictive package. I also take Pathfinder membership to represent all the items on congregational involvement.

## Regular Church Attendance

The second outcome measure is the response to the question of how frequently the young adult attends worship services at church. Because the question was asked almost every year, we followed the same practice as above in using the answer from the last survey returned. We found eighteen significant predictors for regular attendance in middle adulthood. When these were submitted to multiple regression, four variables were selected with a multiple *R* of .28, which explain 8 percent of the variance, significant beyond the .001 level (Table 2).

Three out of the four selections also appeared in the list of predictors for remaining a member, which emphasizes how closely these two outcome measures (membership and attendance) are related. The fourth step, reasonableness of Adventist lifestyle standards, may cover the same ground as agreement with the standard on dancing found in the previous list.

## Dropping Out

The third outcome measure is based on responses to the question: "Did you ever, at some time in the past, drop out of church membership or stop attending services?" This query is, in some ways, the reverse of

the question on whether or not the respondent belongs to the Church. But it refers to a past action, not a present status. Some may have dropped out and later returned. Others may have essentially left the Church but officially remained as members. Furthermore, because the question was asked in this form only in years eight and ten, we have information on only 862 subjects. Although fifteen variables were significant in bivariate relationships, only three steps were selected in the regression analysis (Table 3). These three have a multiple *R* of .33 and explain 11

Table 3  
**Regression of First Year Variables  
on Dropping out of Church**

Step	Variable	Beta*
1	Biological parents married and together	.195
2	Worship with family more frequently	.172
3	Intend to remain an active Adventist when out on own	.131
*All betas significant beyond .01 level		

percent of the variance in dropping out, significant beyond the .001 level.

In Table 3, the second and third items were also predictors both of remaining a member of the Church and continuing to attend worship services regularly. They deserve primary emphasis in the total picture. However, another item is the strongest predictor of dropping out when the other variables are controlled. Having parents who are still together is the best insurance that a young person will not drop out of the faith fellowship. When this is combined with family worship, we can see that strong families are key to retention of the youth. Building and maintaining such families should be a major task of religious communities.



"THE REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT OF CHURCH SEEM TO BE HIGHLY INTERRELATED. THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO DISCONNECT PERCEIVE THE CHURCH AS IRRELEVANT BECAUSE THEY SENSE THEY ARE UNACCEPTED AND THEIR NEEDS ARE NEGLECTED. THEY ALSO FEEL UNACCEPTED BECAUSE THEY DON'T DISCERN THEIR CHURCH AS ATTEMPTING TO PROVIDE THEM WITH RELEVANT AND TARGETED PROGRAMMING. THE INCONVENIENCE OF WAKING UP EARLY ON SABBATH MORNING IS ANOTHER INDICATOR THAT THE CHURCH IS OBLIVIOUS TO THE REALITY OF THEIR LIVES. THIS COMBINED WITH VARIOUS PERSONAL ISSUES AND A HIGH DISTASTE AND DISAPPOINTMENT WITH PERCEIVED INTOLERANCE, HYPOCRISY AND CONDEMNATION HAVE ESTRANGED YOUNG ADULTS FROM THEIR CHURCH."

- ROGER L. DUDLEY

## Some Positive Directions

How then can churches or other religious bodies slow the rate of dropout? Several areas stand out clearly:

1. Encourage solid religious homes where parents set a good example and families worship together. Adolescents whose biological families remain intact, whose father and mother both attend church frequently, and who participate in family worship are more likely to remain committed to the family faith when they reach adulthood.

2. Provide a solid program of religious education, especially in the first ten grades. Data taken from the study but not shown in this paper reveal that Adventist education predicts church retention.\*

3. Get young people involved in the life and activities of their congregations. Many of the written comments centered on this theme. Attachment theory is consistent with the finding that young people who are drawn early into congregational life, given significant responsibilities, and experience warm relationships with the adult members tend to remain active in their own adult years.

4. Decide which lifestyle standards are crucial to the faith community and present them in ways that youth will see them as worthwhile and can be supportive of them.

5. Foster a strong devotional life in young people, demonstrating how to make personal prayer and the study of Scripture rich and meaningful.

6. Encourage families to worship together in ways that are satisfying and meaningful.

7. Do everything possible to help youth gain a positive view of the congregation and the larger

denomination while still in their early teens. Cognitive consistency theory helps to explain why those who as teenagers stated their plans to remain Adventists when they reached adulthood were actually more likely to do so—one of the strongest findings in the research. Young people who early make a declaration of purpose reduce dissonance by resisting distractions and honoring those commitments.

Making this picture a reality everywhere in homes, schools, and congregations presents the best hope for a future Seventh-day Adventist Church that includes the new generation.

## Notes and References

1. Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-Year Study* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000).

2. Just as  $r$  is used in statistics to indicate the coefficient of correlation between two variables (which range from -1 to +1), so  $R$  represents the correlation between a single variable and a linear combination of a group of variables.

3. Beta weights can be interpreted as revealing the relative strength of any one predictor when included in the equation with the other predictors.

4. See my article, "Christian Education and Youth Retention in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 62, no. 3 (Feb./Mar. 2000), 8-13.

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