

Discussed: apostasy, making disciples, nurture, leaving through the back door, hurting members, church of the margins, attractive and sustaining faith

Dropouts: Missional Challenge for a Maturing Church

By Monte Sahlin

Concern about apostasy, people leaving the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was at an all-time high during the Fifty-Eighth General Conference Session in Saint Louis. It came up in printed materials and in conversations, especially in reference to high dropout rates among young people.

One handout distributed at one of the many booths stated "70 percent of young people in developing nations drop out of the church." During the "Let's Talk" forum that General Conference president Jan Paulsen held with young adults at the session, which was broadcast live on the Hope Channel, one of the young people stated, "60 to 70 percent of young adults are leaving the church." Paulsen said "we really don't know the number," and went on to express serious concern.¹

One missionary told me about the

large numbers joining the church where he serves. "A third are dropped from the membership rolls, another third are on the rolls but no longer attend, and only a third are active members."

Official Statistics

The Session's statistical report included for the first time an analysis of the numbers dropped from membership. Over the last five years, the Church grew from 10.9 million members to 13.9 million and "received

into membership over five million new believers, ... however, more than 1.4 million left... For every 100 accessions, more than 35 others decided to leave"—a rate "considerably more than the 24 subtracted for every 100 added"—in the previous five years (1995-99). In fact, the drop rate has increased by almost half.²

Table 1 (page 33) shows that the highest apostasy rates are in the Southern-Asia Pacific Division (SSD), the Euro-Asia Division, and the East-Central Africa Division. In fact, the SSD (principally the Philippines and Indonesia) lost many more members than it recruited in 2003 and 2004. There were less than 60,000 baptisms each of those years in the SSD, despite the work of many public evangelism teams from North America in recent years, with 136,741 members dropped in 2003 and an astounding 148,017 in 2004.³

The Euro-Asia Division consists of nations that emerged from the former Soviet Union. It, too, has been the focus of many evangelistic projects from North America over the last decade. In this division, losses have equaled two-thirds of accessions over the last five years, and in the two most recent years they have equaled 85 percent of baptisms. Accessions have declined each year from 17,798 in 2000 to 8,756 in 2004.

Three-quarters of the Adventists in the East-Central Africa Division (ESD) live in five nations clustered around Lake Victoria: Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Congo, and Uganda. Membership losses in these countries have averaged 62 percent of the number of baptisms and professions of faith over the last five-year period, and 88 percent during the last three years. In 2002, 2003, and 2004, the ESD made major statistical "adjustments," averaging almost 100,000 each year, and dropped many actual names from membership rolls.

The decision to adjust lists and drop names reflects efforts by administrators to clean lists in the aftermath of more than a decade of armed conflicts, civil unrest, and the emergence of large numbers of internal refugees in several nations of the region. Also important is the fact that rapid church growth has made it almost impossible for the denomination to keep pace with the record keeping.

In Europe and North America, losses have averaged just under 40 percent of the number of new members coming in. In the North American Division (NAD), where the Seventh-day Adventist Church has the longest tenure and is faced with an industrialized, urban, secular (postmodern) missionary context, the rate has jumped from 32 percent in 2001 to 48 percent in 2004.

In Latin America, fewer than one-third of the members

added are lost, and the proportion has actually declined over the most recent five-year period. Southern and Western Africa have even lower rates of loss, but the lowest is in continental Asia. In the Northern Asia-Pacific Division—Korea, China, and Japan—only 10 percent of the number of new members is lost, and in India only 5 percent.

Why Do People Leave?

Apostasy was the topic on the afternoon of Tuesday, July 5, which focused on mission challenges. Mark Finley, a new General Conference vice president, introduced the subject. He pointed out that the Great Commission of the Bible is not to get baptisms, but to "make disciples" (Matt. 28:18-20), perhaps a surprising admission from a man who has spent his career in public evangelism.

"When the Church fails to nurture its members, it really fails in accomplishing the Great Commission," he said. Finley's words set a decidedly different tone from that of ten years ago, when another General Conference officer told attendees at a college church that *nurture* was a bad word.

Finley listed for the delegates six reasons why people leave the Church: (1) conflict with the pastor or a church member; (2) discouragement over personal problems; (3) lack of friends in the congregation; (4) weak biblical faith; (5) feeling that the Church is irrelevant to real needs; and (6) lack of church buildings.

However, research gives a somewhat different picture, at least in the United States.

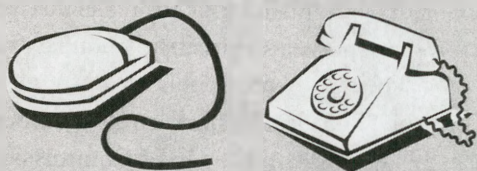
A summary of eight studies by Adventist researchers, published by the Center for Creative Ministry in 1998, indicates that personal problems and lack of friends are by far the most common reasons why members stop attending church. Conflict ranks much lower and doctrinal differences are virtually off the charts. Lack of church buildings is never mentioned in these studies.⁴

A more recent study conducted for the Pennsylvania Conference involved interviews with every new member added over the course of an entire year. These interviews were conducted twelve to twenty-four months after the converts had been baptized. About 28 percent had already quit attending. Of these, almost half indicated that they had stopped going to church because of personal problems, including the break-up of their marriages.



What Can You Do?

Reconnecting Ministries is a modest program that the North American Division (NAD) has funded for several years to help local churches reach out to nonattending and former members. The Center for Creative Ministry operates the official NAD resource center for this specialty and has a full menu of information, research, training, and consultants available on the Web at www.creativeministry.org or available via phone by dialing (800) 272-4664.



One-quarter said that they had never connected with the congregation or felt that they did not fit in or were never accepted. Another 18 percent said the Church was not meeting their needs in some other way. Only 10 percent mentioned problems with other members, and only 7 percent said that they disagreed with church doctrine.⁵

Patricia Gustin, director of the Institute for World Mission at Andrews University, also spoke briefly at the General Conference Session. "There is probably no part of what we do that is as neglected and as important as dealing with this question," she began. "We have to constantly remember that evangelism is not an event but a process.... There must be ongoing nurture.... and we must never give the impression that once one has entered into our fellowship the process is over."

Open Discussion

During the ensuing discussion, fourteen delegates spoke at the microphones. The General Conference, divisions, and unions "cannot do very much about...apostasy," said Jochen Howlitschek of the Euro-Africa Division. It is a local problem. "Local pastors have to be involved in this," echoed Jesus Uriate of the North American Division.

Uriate suggested creation of "a department...to follow up on new disciples," and a "curriculum [to] involve new members in active participation in the

Church." Denis Hankinson of the South Pacific Division reported that in his conference weekly attendance counts provide a key indicator of "health or disease in [the division's] churches."

Artur Stele of the Euro-Asia Division presides over a division with some of the largest losses, and he focused on worship style and fellowship. "People must experience something that is real, that the Lord is present, that people are worshipping in a very lively manner. Often our worships remind me of funeral ceremonies." He also emphasized the need for small group ministries "that can help people to feel that they are loved, that somebody cares."

Basil Hall, of the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, challenged denominational leaders to hold onto "influential pastors leaving [and] going independent." "Sister White tell us that when Lucifer decided to become Satan, God spent a lot of time trying to woo him back," Hall said. "I don't see the same spirit from the leadership of the Church."

Two of the three North American Division delegates who spoke addressed the issue of finances. It "is just as important to save the children in our families as to save new converts," stated Daniel Chaij. Chaij lamented a decline in the percentage of Adventist families that enroll their children in church schools and suggested that the Church sell its costly boarding academies.

"[P]arents don't want to send their children to boarding school," said Chaij. Instead, funds from their sale should be invested in an endowment that would help more children go to day schools. "We would lose less of them in later life," he asserted.

Robert Paulsen, who has accompanied public evangelism teams to India, saw a need for church buildings and appealed for the General Conference to put up one million dollars in a challenge grant and seek donors to match it as a fund for new construction.

Violeto Bocala, a member of the General Conference Executive Committee from the Philippines, picked up on the need for church construction and also stressed the need for pastors. "I would suggest to local missions or conferences that when they penetrate a new area, they should see to it that they have a pastor...in that newly established congregation [and] include in their budget funds for a church building."

Paul Tompkins, a delegate from the Trans-European Division, expressed concern for the "many young people who leave the church in their late teens or early twenties." "We just carry on [and] forget to maintain contact.... I would like us to develop a strategic plan over the next

five years to reach out to [these young adults]. I believe there are many who will come back to the church. They never left Jesus.”

Research does not support these solutions, despite their creativity. Nor does it support Finley’s analysis, especially his listing of “weak biblical faith,” which is commonly assumed to be a major cause of apostasy. Indeed, the related concept of *backslider* places blame on inactive members when it should be focused instead on what other members have neglected.⁶

A Real Problem

The number of people who leave through the “back door” presents a real challenge to the Adventist Church. These departures are becoming more and more of an issue as Adventism matures. People born into the faith have different spiritual needs than those who join as adult converts.

In the past, most members of the Adventist Church joined as adult converts, but this pattern is changing as the Baby Boom generation matures and the dropout rate among new converts remains high. Currently, the

majority of Adventists in North America were born into the Church. This middle-aged segment of Adventists by birth currently dominates most congregations.

According to one follow-up study of more than five thousand individuals baptized into the Adventist Church in Pennsylvania during the NET 95 satellite-linked evangelism campaign, only 10 percent had dropped out after a year or more.⁷ However, the dropout rate for the same category of converts rose to 28 percent five years later.

Other figures show discrepancies between active and official church figures. Double counting and confusion account partly for these differences, but they also point to shrinkage in local church life.


In 1990, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) claimed that 668,000 Americans identified themselves as Seventh-day Adventists. This figure was 5 percent smaller than the official membership tally for the United States at that time, which stood at 701,657.

When ARIS restudied the subject in 2001, the gap increased by a factor of four. At that time, ARIS claimed that 724,000 Americans said they were Adventists—20 percent fewer than the 900,985 listed in official records.⁸

Another study, the Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS), prepared an inter-faith census of religion in 2000 that relied on conference directories to identify membership at the local level. The results reported 86,191 fewer than General Conference totals. Evidently, the General Conference figure included members who cannot be identified with any particular local church.

There is little evidence that the decision to drop out among such large numbers of Adventists is, in fact, related to apostasy, a word that literally means “to turn against the faith.” Instead, research shows that most people dropped from official

Table 1: Adventist Church Membership Loss Ratios 2000–2004 by World Divisions



Southern Asia-Pacific Division	104.75
Euro-Asia Division*	65.02
East-Central Africa Division	61.79
Trans-European Division**	39.24
North American Division	39.17
Euro-Africa Division***	38.84
South Pacific Division	32.96
South American Division	31.02
Inter-American Division	29.51
Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division	19.34
West-Central Africa Division	12.65
Northern Asia-Pacific Division	10.38
Southern Asia Division	5.37

*The former USSR

**The official report includes a calculation error, which has been corrected here.

***This division currently includes very few members outside Europe.

Statistics taken from the General Conference Report from the Office of Archives and Statistics.



Church records still believe in key tenants of faith and see themselves as essentially Adventist.

The single most important factors that lead Adventists in North America to quit attending church are adverse life events and lack of caring responses from the congregation. When a church member goes through a divorce, becomes unemployed, or experiences some other personal crisis, the pastor and church often fail to respond helpfully. The hurting member feels rejected and begins to withdraw. Ignored by the pastor and most church members, the member continues to withdraw until entirely outside the church fold.¹⁰

After quitting, the offended member typically watches the reactions of the church for a while. Most in this category report that no one contacts them on behalf of the church. Often they eventually reinvest time and energy previously devoted to the church to other activities related to emotional and spiritual needs. For example, common or former and inactive members often spend Sabbaths enjoying nature or engaging in other peaceful activities that “bring [them] close to God.” Still, they continue to keep the Sabbath.

The Church of the Margins

Adventists have grown a large church of the margins, perhaps one million or more inactive and former members in North America. Those on the margins gather informally in small groups and may tell you, “I have church with my family.”

Members of this church of the margins can be found in the most surprising places! A pastor once told me to go to a certain coffee shop at 9:30 Sabbath morning. I followed his advice, and there I found a table full of men eating vegetarian omelettes and discussing the Bible. They told me they didn’t feel comfortable in church.

Recently, a friend of mine spent a week volunteering as a nurse for an Adventist summer camp. There she discovered some fifty families who drove up each Friday in their recreational vehicles to join the children around the campfire Friday night and Sabbath morning.

“We can’t find a church that we feel comfortable in; this is our church,” they told my friend.

Has the Adventist Church become too large to provide the quality of care that individuals and families need? Is a corporate focus on mass production eroding the quality of life for the people in the pews? Could our massive success plant the seeds of failure? The

Adventist Church is clearly an attractive faith—it is one of the fastest growing denominations in the world. But is it a sustaining faith?

Can it mature gracefully and meaningfully into the second and subsequent generations? Can it provide the same clear answers and sense of assurance for those born into Adventism that it does for adult converts?

These questions are core issues for the Adventist Church today. Clearly, we need to become more inclusive and compassionate. In his sermon on the last Sabbath of the General Conference Session, President Jan Paulsen pled for such qualities. “Do not post guardians at the door to test the genuineness of people before you let them in,” he said. “God loves all people globally.”

Paulsen pointed to the growing inclusion of women in positions of church leadership. Reminding the delegates of the women elected for the first time to vice presidential and secretariat offices at the General Conference, he asked, “Do you not see this as a sign? It is a door that our Lord has opened.”

Paulsen returned to the subject of youth participation in the church. “Please, for Christ’s sake, involve our youth.... Actively engage them as partners in our future.... Trust them and empower them.”

“It is important to understand [that] God is not owned by any one people,” said Paulsen. “I want Adventist churches to be known as houses of prayer for all people.... God has set before us an open door, which it is not our privilege to close and keep others out.”

Throughout his sermon, Paulsen frequently referred to the need for us to “open the door,” and he clearly he wants to open a way so that the church of the margins can come home.

Notes and References

1. The best research available on this specific item comes from the ten-year longitudinal study conducted by Roger Dudley, director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University. Depending on how his raw numbers are parsed, 45 to 55 percent of children raised in Adventist families leave the church by their early twenties. See Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories from a 10-year Study* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000).

2. Bert Haloviak, “Celebrating a Half-Century of Mission,” *Adventist Review* online, www.adventistreview.org/2005bulletin/bulletin8-4.html.

3. Ibid.

4. Paul Richardson, Monte Sahlin, and Norman Yergen, *Why Do Adventists Quit Coming to Church?* (Lincoln, Nebr.:

Center for Creative Ministry, 1998), 4–7.

5. Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *People Joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Pennsylvania and Their Experience with the Church* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Center for Creative Ministry, 2002), 17–18.

6. Richardson, Sahlin, and Yergen, *Why Do Adventists Quit Coming to Church?* 4–5.

7. Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson, *NET Evangelism Initiatives of the Adventist Church in North America: A Survey of Participating Churches* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Center for Creative Ministry, 1999).

8. Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey—2001* (New York: Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2002), 12; General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, *128th Annual Statistical Report—*

1990 (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, 1991), 16, 18; General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, *139th Annual Statistical Report—2001* (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, 2002), 20, 22.

9. Richardson, Sahlin, and Yergen, *Why Do Adventists Quit Coming to Church?* 4.

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Mark Finley on Apostasy

This section is called “Challenges to Mission,” and we are focusing particularly today on a major challenge facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church and all Christian churches that experience growth.

In the past five years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has exploded in growth, and we can praise God that 5,049,157 accessions to the church through baptism and profession of faith have taken place. But at the same time we lament the fact that in this same five-year period 1,397,608 people have been dropped from church membership.

That becomes a serious problem. Is it possible to reverse the church’s high apostasy rate? And do we have any examples on a divisionwide basis in which there has been an intentional approach on the part of conferences and unions and divisions to reduce apostasy, and can we measure it statistically?

I would like to look at one division in particular. The South American Division has become a positive example of apostasy rate reversal. The secretary’s report for the South American Division in the year 2000 indicated that the apostasy rate in South America in 2000 was approximately what the apostasy rate is all over the world today. It was 33 percent in 2000. The South American Division took a look at that.

Recent discussions with Elder Roy Nagel indicate that the apostasy rate in South America is now running at 18 percent. Now, that is a dramatic reversal, so the question becomes, How was it achieved? The South American Division leadership

reports that they have implemented a strategy of small groups throughout that division that in their minds have made a dramatic difference in reversing those apostasy rates. That may be something for other divisions in the world to take a look at.

Church growth thinkers list the following reasons that people leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church and churches in general.

1. Conflict with a pastor or another church member.
2. Discouragement over personal problems.
3. Lack of friends. Church growth studies indicate that if you do not establish a set of new friends within the church within the first year after you are baptized, your likelihood of leaving increases.
4. A weak biblical faith. A number of studies indicate that when people have a weak biblical faith, when they do not understand what they are doing in joining a religious community of Seventh-day Adventists, they are likely to leave more quickly.
5. The perception on the part of some that have joined a church, a fellowship of believers, that it is not relevant to their needs.
6. Lack of a house of worship. In many places where there are mass baptisms, studies indicate that if a house of worship is not provided for those new believers, the likelihood for them to leave rises exponentially.

Source: *Adventist Review* online, www.adventistreview.org/2005bulletin/bulletin7-actions.html.