

Questioning Beliefs: African Church Members

Surveyed | AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. ELIZABETH ROLE BY ALITA BYRD



Dr. Elizabeth Role

Dr. Elizabeth Role is conducting a huge poll of Adventists across the continent of Africa, as part of a worldwide survey asking church members about their beliefs. *Spectrum* asked her about the questions being asked, the answers coming in, and the reasons behind the research.

Question: You are leading a research team surveying the beliefs and attitudes of Adventist church members across the African continent. This research has been commissioned by the General Conference. Why does the General Conference want to examine the beliefs of church members in Africa?

Answer: The Future Plans Working Group (FPWG) of the General Conference (GC) needed to identify important issues in the church as a preliminary step to creating the next strategic plan. The director of Archives and Statistics at the GC, who is a member of the FPWG, believes that these issues can only be identified through research.

The study is not only for the three divisions in Africa, but also for the other ten divisions in the world. The same questionnaire is used, although different methodologies are employed in different parts of the world. Some divisions are doing an online survey. Ours is a paper survey.

Question: What is your background and qualifications for heading up this research?

Answer: I hold a doctor of philosophy degree in science education with a concentration in mathematics. I am a data analyst and have a great interest in research.

I was the director of research at Adventist University of the Philippines [where I spent more than twenty years in different roles] and at Asia-Pacific International University in Thailand.



University of Eastern Africa, in Baraton, Kenya

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The research team from University of Eastern Africa.



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At present, I am the director of graduate studies and research at University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, in Kenya, where I have been since 2006.

Question: *A random sample of 18,500 church members from forty-eight countries has been chosen for the survey. How will the data from the research be used?*

Answer: We designed the research so that a random sample of church members from a range of churches in each conference/mission/field in the forty-eight countries of the African continent will participate in the survey. We used a stratified sampling method (based on church size in terms of membership and church location—urban or rural) to identify the churches that will be involved in the study.

It is hoped that the data gathered from this research will provide valuable solid information to the FPWG in their strategic planning for the progress of the church work in Africa.

Question: *The survey includes questions about belief in God and Jesus, how salvation works, creation, the second coming, Sabbath, the state of the dead, witchcraft, polygamy, divine inspiration, and Ellen White. Are you testing the church members to see if their beliefs tally with official fundamental Seventh-day Adventist beliefs?*

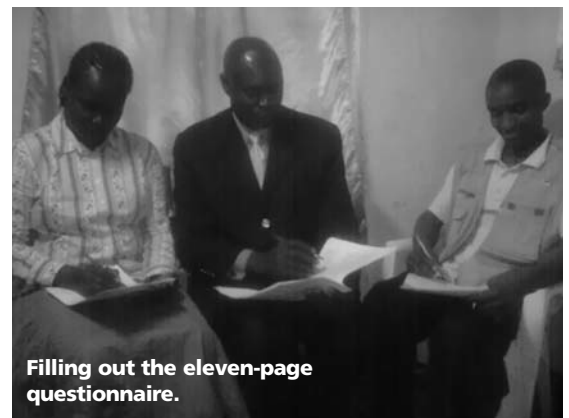
Answer: Yes. It is a reality that an individual can get baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church with his previous religious beliefs still impressed in his heart. An objective understanding of the church climate in terms of what the church members believe is an asset for a church leadership to effectively lead and manage change.

Question: *Have you found anything surprising in the data so far? Do church members in Africa have the same attitudes and beliefs as church members in other parts of the world?*

Answer: In our questionnaire we intentionally included the issues of witchcraft and polygamy, as these are some concerns in our church in the African continent. Partial results from the data gathered from five countries reveal that on average, 25 percent of our church members believe in the reality of witchcraft and that Christians can go to witchdoctors for protection. Around 20 percent of the respondents believe that God approves polygamy.

I still cannot make any comparison between the beliefs of the African SDA church members and of those in other parts of the world at this stage of the study.

Question: *The data collection is not yet complete, I understand. Can you tell me how far along you are in the survey, and what you still have to do? What is the time frame for the research?*



Filling out the eleven-page questionnaire.

Answer: I began communicating with the division/union/administrative field secretaries to provide me with needed information on the last week of August 2012. As of [March 20, 2013], 35 out of 128 (27 percent) administrative fields in the three divisions of Africa have completed data collection.

Data gathering is ongoing in forty-six administrative fields (36 percent). I am still waiting for church information from forty-seven administrative fields (37 percent) so I can randomly sample the churches and data collection can begin.

We are expected to submit the research results before the end of June 2013. There is still a long way to go and I am praying that by God's grace, we will meet the deadline.

Question: *How many researchers are surveying church members? Do you have trained researchers doing the work, or is it local people?*

Answer: In Kenya, two of my team members spearheaded the survey with the assistance of some district pastors, church elders, and church members.

In other countries, the executive secretaries of the unions and administrative fields facilitated/are facilitating the gathering of data with the help of district and church pastors. Since data is gathered using questionnaires, not much training is required to administer them. I really appreciate the support of the church leadership to this research.

Question: *What difficulties and challenges do you face in getting the surveys filled out?*

Answer: One challenge is communication. I communicate with the division/union/administrative field executive secretaries through email. It was difficult even to get the email addresses of and to communicate with the executive secretaries in some countries, as there is a problem with Internet connection in some areas. This is partly the reason why

forty-seven administrative field executive secretaries have not sent the information I requested. This is a major challenge. Without the list of all churches in each district, the membership, and location, I cannot sample the churches that will participate in the study and data gathering cannot commence.

We administer an eleven-page questionnaire, with 189 items to respond to. On average, a respondent completes the questionnaire



in thirty minutes. It really requires a lot of commitment for church members to participate in the survey.

In Kenya, we were able to sample churches located in remote areas. One of my research team members had to walk some distance from the main road to reach a church. In these areas, church members are not very conversant in the English language, and it is not possible to translate the questionnaire to the many local dialects being spoken. (We have translated the questionnaire into major languages such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, Luganda, Kirundi, Kiswahili, and Kinyarwanda.) In one church, it took the church members more than one hour to finish filling the questionnaire, as

Around 20 percent of the respondents believe that God approves polygamy [based on partial results from the data gathered from five African countries].

it was necessary for someone to read the questions in the local dialect.

In most cases, the questionnaires are administered on Sabbath. In some churches, it was a challenge to find members who were willing to fill in the questionnaire, since many believe that doing so is transgressing the holy hours of the Sabbath.

On the other hand, this research offered some opportunities, as we were able to reach some churches in isolated areas that have not been visited by district pastors in years. There was one church whose members willingly went to church on a Sunday to fill in the questionnaires, and requested one of my team members (who is a pastor) to preach before they began filling out the questionnaire.

Question: *Has similar research been carried out before among church members in Africa?*

Answer: Some years back, a survey was done on beliefs about salvation, particularly on the doctrine of justification/sanctification by faith.



Group photo outside a church in Kenya.

Question: *Over the last several decades, Adventist church members have occasionally been linked to atrocities and criminal actions, including a warlord in Sierra Leone and a pastor convicted of genocide in Rwanda. There have been accusations that some people calling themselves Adventists have not been taught Adventist beliefs or been truly converted. Does this research seek to address this accusation?*



The survey raised questions on witchcraft and polygamy.

Answer: As we analyze the beliefs of the church members and compare them with what Seventh-day Adventists believe, we can partly address this issue. From the partial results, I have found that there are regular churchgoers claiming to be members of the SDA church, but are not baptized. This implies that they have not gone through the baptismal class and may not have fully understood Adventist beliefs.

Question: *What have you learned so far in your research? Do you enjoy your work? Does this research complement your day job?*

Answer: On a personal note, I have learned patience and the art of communication. I have also learned to appreciate the wonderful virtues of my African brothers and sisters. The support I have received from the majority of the church leaders and the willingness of the church members to participate in this research project has been overwhelming.

From childhood, I wanted to be a pastor-evangelist—so much so that I trained as a ministerial student during my first year in college. However, God led me to a different path in

my career. This research allowed me to be in contact with the pastors in Africa and I enjoy this wonderful opportunity. I am very happy that I can use the talents God has given me to contribute to the progress of his work through this research project.

Being the team leader for this research had been very enriching. I have discovered new things that have helped me to be more effective in my work as director of research. We are doing this research on top of our full-time work; thus, my team members and I have had to learn proper time management!

On the whole, this engagement has been very satisfying both professionally and spiritually. ■



The research offered an opportunity to reach isolated congregations.

Elizabeth Role is the director of graduate studies and research at University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya, and is originally from the Philippines. She holds a bachelor's degree in secondary education (mathematics) from Philippine Union College (Adventist University of the Philippines), as well as a master of arts in teaching (mathematics) and a doctorate in science education (mathematics), both from the University of the Philippines. Role's husband is chair of the department of technology at the University of Eastern Africa. She has two children and three grandchildren, all in the United States. Her son is a critical care nurse at Loma Linda University Medical Center and her daughter is studying for a master's degree in biology at Andrews University.



Alita Byrd is the editor of *Spectrum's* online Interviews column. She lives with her husband and three children in Atlanta, Georgia.



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