

Survey of Former & Inactive Adventist Church Members

Conducted for the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

By the Center for Creative Ministry

2013

Introduction

A survey of people who have ended their regular participation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, whether or not their membership has been dropped from church records, was conducted from late 2011 through early 2013. The completed sample included 925 personal interviews in a number of languages in Africa, South America, Europe and North America.

A standard interview guide was used. The interviewers were either Center for Creative Ministry senior consultants or Doctor of Ministry graduates of Andrews University who took the class Field Research for Ministry (GSEM 730) from Monte Sahlin and have participated in research projects both as graduate students and as post-doctoral research associates.

The sample represents a significant international slice of the people leaving the Adventist Church and includes interviews from the major world regions, except Asia and the Pacific. It should be kept in mind that the standard allowance for sampling error in a sample of this size is three percentage points, plus or minus.

The survey was conducted under a contract with the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research (ASTR) by the Center for Creative Ministry, a research organization affiliated with the North American Division church resources network which has conducted many other survey research projects for the NAD and other Seventh-day Adventist Church organizations over the last two decades.

The project team included Paul Richardson, Monte Sahlin, Petr Cincala, Curtis Rittenour, and Melissa Sahlin Bruno. Research associates included Ugochukwu Elems, Eugene Gerasimov, Valeri Gulita, Thomas N. Masimba, Fenades Obinchu, Paulo Pinheiro and Leabaneng P. Simankane.

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Center for Creative Ministry

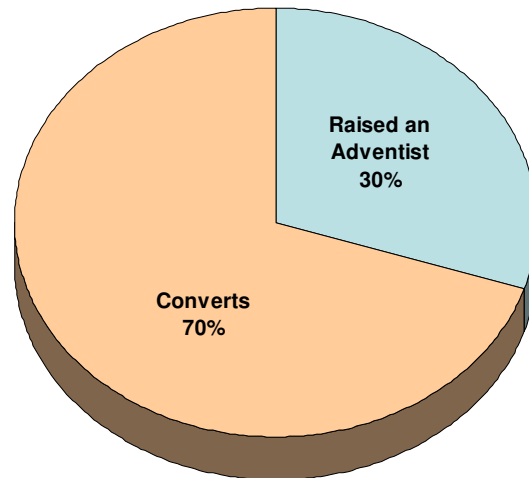
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How their Relationship with the Adventist Church Began



Of the inactive and former Adventists interviewed, 30 percent stated that they were raised in an Adventist family as a child, while 70 percent converted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as adolescents or adults. Previous research in North America found a much higher percentage of second-generation Adventists among church dropouts. There is also a major demographic difference between this international survey and the previous research in North America which may be related to the data on this page; there may be a different set of dynamics in terms of retention issues in developing nations than in North America.

First Contact with the Seventh-day Adventist Church

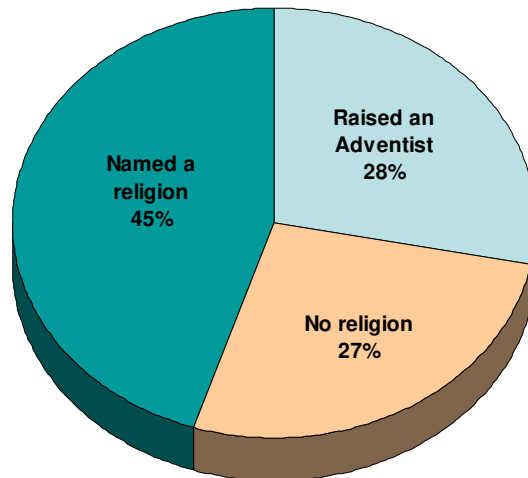
- 30% Raised as an Adventist
- 28% Through a friend, relative, neighbor or coworker
- 23% Through public evangelism
- 8% Someone going door to door
- 4% Through an Adventist school
- 4% From literature
- 2% Humanitarian and health ministries
- 2% Through an Adventist institution
- 1% From a music group
- 1% From the Internet
- >0% From a radio or television ministry
- 4% Other things

Although the largest number of inactive and former members were raised as an Adventist, almost as many told the interviewers that the first came into contact with the Seventh-day Adventist Church through a friend, relative, spouse or other acquaintance. Together these two avenues account for the majority of these cases, demonstrating how important relationships are to church growth and retention.

Less than a quarter of the individuals interviewed indicated that their first contact with the Adventist message was through public evangelism. This undercuts the common view of many church members that retention issues are largely rooted in the inability of public evangelism to adequately prepare new members for baptism or allow for sufficient bonding with the congregation. More than three out of four of the inactive and former members in this study did not come into the church by first hearing of it and then immediately being baptized in an evangelism campaign.

Small percentages of the converts in this sample report first hearing about the Adventist Church through a number of different types of methods and ministries, none of which accounts for significant numbers. Less than one half of one percent said that they first heard about Adventists through one of the radio or television ministries. Some research among various samples of members have found similar single-digit levels of response, so the small percentages reported here do not indicate that these various avenues of recruiting new members are without retention problems.

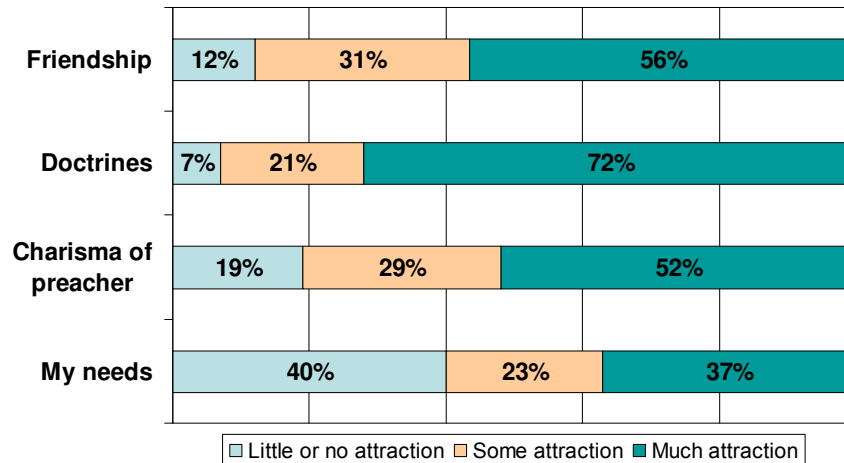
Religion Before Joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church



The majority of the inactive and former Adventists interviewed were either raised as an Adventist or had no religious affiliation before they joined the Adventist Church. Only 45 percent of the individuals interviewed named some other religion they belonged to prior to becoming an Adventist. The largest numbers—nine percent in each case—were Roman Catholics or Pentecostals. Seven percent names one of the mainline Protestant denominations (see below) and six percent named one of a number of newer Evangelical denominations. Four percent named denominations that belong to the Anglican communion. One percent or less in each case mentioned Orthodox Christian faiths, nondenominational Christian churches, and Jehovah's Witnesses. One percent mentioned non-Christian religions, including Islam and Eastern religions. Two percent of the religious organization mentioned by interviewees could not be identified.

The percentage of Adventist converts from no religion is significantly greater than that reported by a number of Christian research projects and it is greater than the percentage found in surveys of new members in the North American Division. This fact suggests that these converts may be more likely to drop out after a period of time. Retention issues may be related to Adventists who converted from a non-religious or secular background.

What most attracted you when you decided to join the Adventist Church?

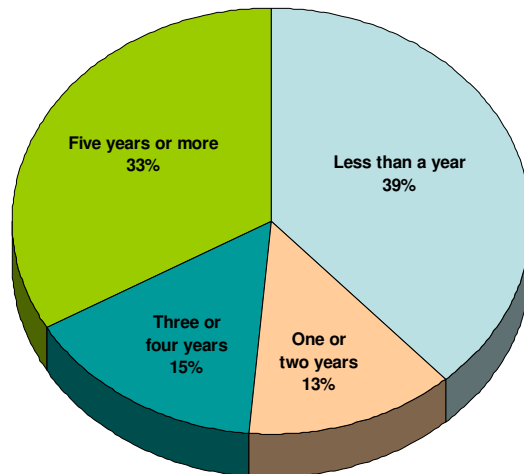


Those who leave the Adventist Church are most likely to identify the “truth and beauty of Church teachings” as the strongest motivation for them to join the Church. The “warmth and friendship of church members” and the “charisma of the evangelist or pastor” are also remembered as strong motivations at the time they joined the Church. Former and inactive members are less likely to recall that their own “needs and personal situation” at the time may have made the Adventist Church attractive to them, although only 40 percent say that this factor provided little or no attraction. Only eight percent of the individuals interviewed suggested other factors in addition to the four listed.

These data are concurrent with other research which shows that religious conversion is the result of a complex mix of factors. It cannot be correlated with just one element or one activity and it cannot honestly be assigned to one factor in the outreach, message and ministry of the church.

These data also yield no evidence that Adventist dropouts are largely related to a lack of close relationships or that they did not embrace the teachings of the Church. Surveys of new converts and long-term church members show a similar pattern to these data. Church dropouts do not appear to have joined the church on any different basis than do those who stay with the Church.

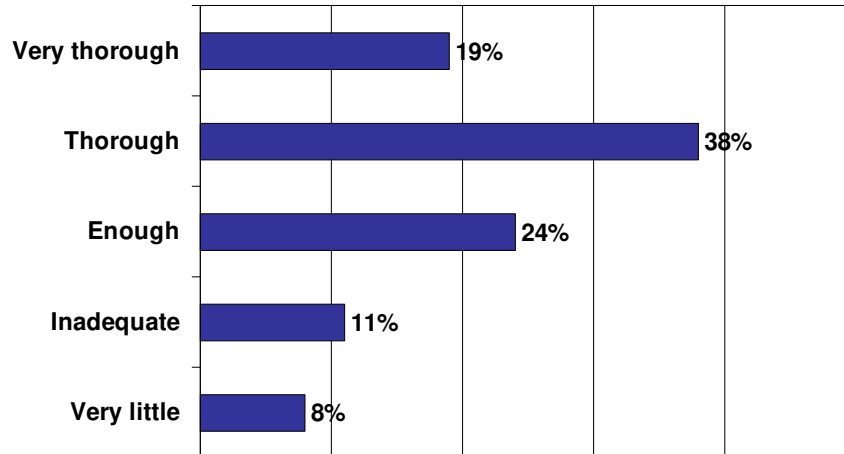
Time from First Contact to Baptism



These interviews do provide some evidence that baptizing a person “too soon” may have something to do with why large numbers become inactive or leave the church. A slim majority told the interviewers that the time from their first contact with the Adventist Church to their baptism was two years or less. The largest number of these (29 percent of the total sample) said that it was six months or less.

At the same time a third of the former and inactive members interviewed said it was five years or more from their first contact to their baptism. The largest share of these (22 percent of the total sample) said that it was ten years or more. Dropouts seem to be clustered at both ends of this range; either they joined the church after a short-term acquaintance or they have a long-term relationship with the church. Mid ranges are less likely to be among the sample. Does that suggest that there are two kinds of dropouts? Those who have left the church after many years and those who have had a relatively short tenure?

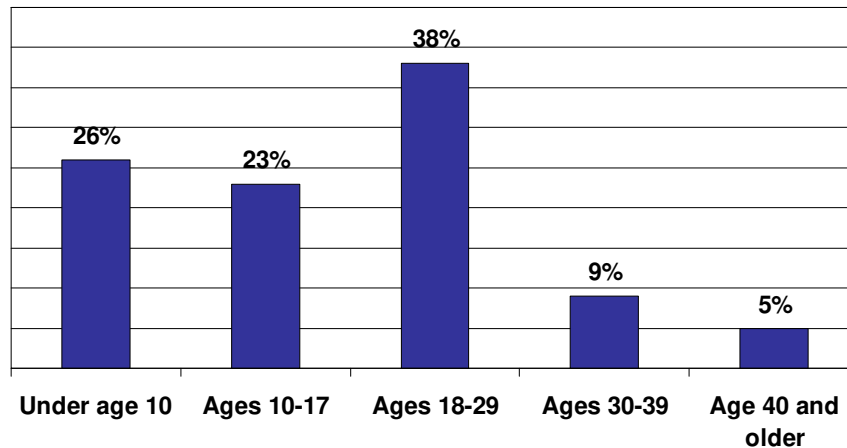
How would you describe the instruction given when you joined the church?



There is little evidence that the former and inactive members interviewed had insufficient baptismal preparation and new-member orientation, at least in their estimation. The majority said that the instruction they were given before and immediately after joining the Adventist Church was “very thorough (more than I had expected)” or “thorough enough that I had no surprises after becoming a member.” One in four reported that the instruction was “enough to answer my questions, but not overwhelming.” Less than one in five stated that it was “inadequate (I felt rushed and there were surprises later on)” or “very little.”

A long-standing myth is that church dropouts are related to pastors and evangelists who do not adequately prepare candidates for baptism. Previous research has shown that this is largely untrue. The evidence on this page supports that previous research.

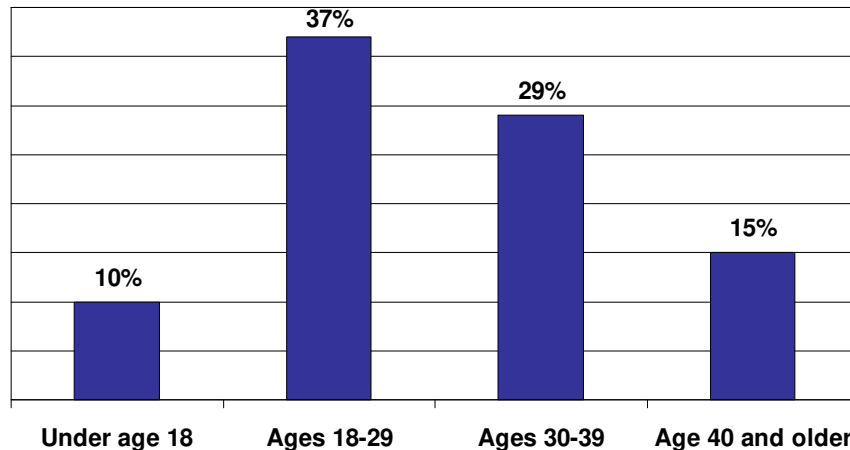
Age When First Started Attending the Adventist Church



The 26 percent of those interviewed who indicated that they started attending an Adventist church when they were under 10 years of age overlaps with the 30 percent who responded to an earlier question by reporting that they were raised as an Adventist. The majority of the inactive and former members were teens and young adults when they joined the Adventist Church. Only 14 percent were 30 years of age or older when they stated attending an Adventist church.

One explanation for these data is that people are converted to the Adventist Church when they are quite young and then face a number of normal transitions in life which cause them to lose connection with the Church. A similar—and perhaps mingled—explanation is that a large share of these converts do not make a mature commitment to the Adventist Church and leave as their spiritual needs mature and their thinking changes.

Age When Stopped Attending the Adventist Church

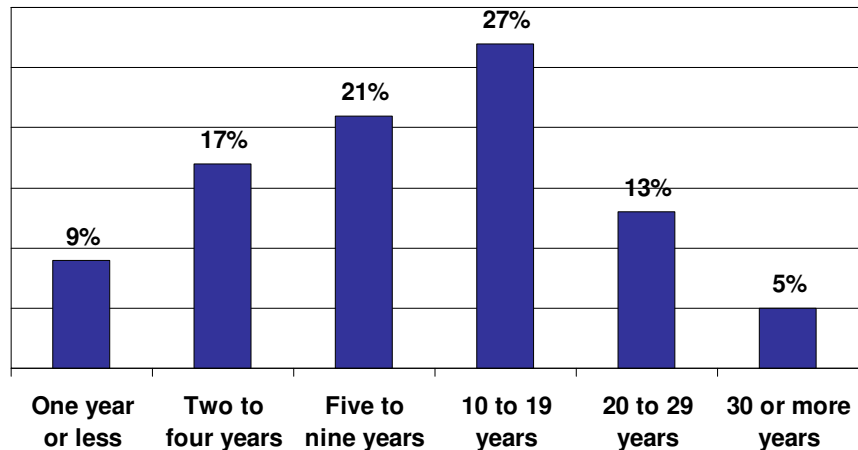


About half of the inactive and former members interviewed stop attending the Adventist Church before they turned 30 and almost an equal number did so after turning 30. This means that the sample is split between two groups each related to one of the two explanations of the data which are described on the previous page.

The half of the church dropouts who left the church while still in their teen and young adult years could be understood to have lost contact because of the transitions that characterize this age group. These include leaving home to attend school or find employment, discovering new ideas and perceptions in the process of education, joining the military or a similar experience, engaging in travel, and starting a family or entering into relationships that may cause shame (even privately) at church. In many parts of the world there is significant migration among young people from rural villages and small towns to large cities and this transition has been documented in previous research as a key factor in young Adventists losing contact with the Church.

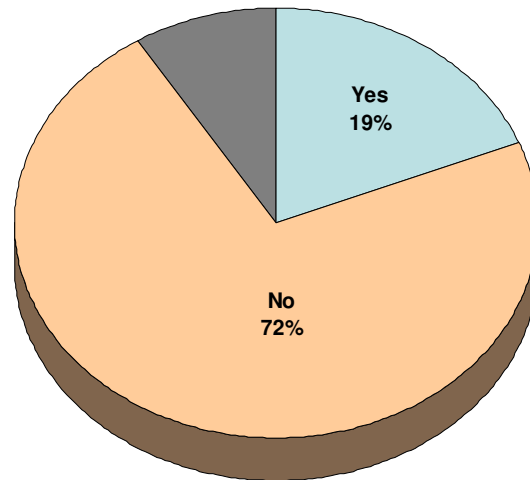
The half of the church dropouts who left the church after they turned 30 could be understood to have done so as their thinking, relationships and spiritual needs matured. Although, clearly the Adventist message and mission do provide a sustaining faith for many people, the numbers leaving the church demonstrate that it does not do so for all. Previous research has shown that the Adventist Church seems to be more effective at presenting an attractive faith than a durable faith.

Number of Years Regularly Attended an Adventist Church



Only nine percent of the inactive and former members interviewed had attended an Adventist church for a year or less. Two thirds had attended an Adventist church for five years or longer before they dropped out. Only about one in four reported attending less than five years. These data clearly indicate that the retention issues among Seventh-day Adventists have little to do with the common theory that the methods of evangelism used do not provide for sufficient time for instruction and bonding with the congregation. Clearly the issues related to retention occur for most people after they have had sufficient time to become fully a part of the Adventist Church.

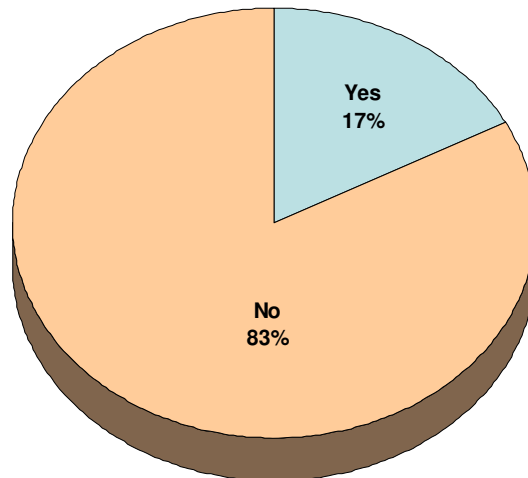
Held a Volunteer Leadership Role in the Adventist Church



About eight percent of the interviewees could not remember.

Less than one in five former and inactive members have ever served as a local church officer or held some other volunteer position in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A number of surveys in North America and other world divisions have resulted in a significantly higher percentage among active members. This suggests that there may be some correlation between involving members in volunteer work for the church and retention. Further research will be necessary to confirm this possibility and qualitative research will be necessary to understand the dynamics involved. Correlation, if it exists, is not proof of causation.

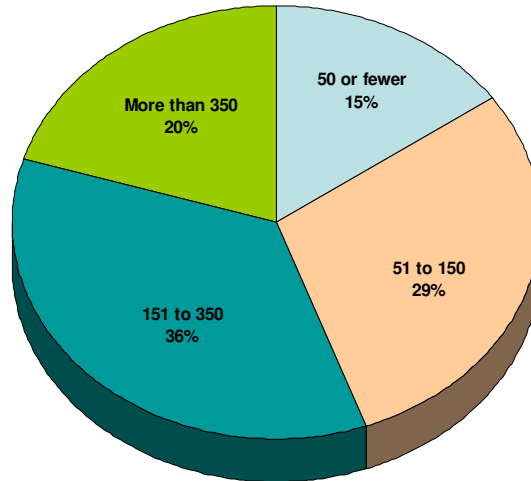
Attended an Adventist School



Only one in six of the inactive and former members interviewed reported that they had ever attended an Adventist school. About six percent had attended an Adventist primary or elementary school at some point in their life. About seven percent had attended an Adventist secondary school and eight percent had attended an Adventist college or university.

Clearly, attendance at an Adventist school is not strongly associated with dropouts. Previous research has often shown that attendance at Adventist schools is correlated with retention, while some studies show otherwise at least for certain levels of education. Much of this research included samples only from parts of the world. Further research is needed to determine precisely how Adventist education relates to membership retention.

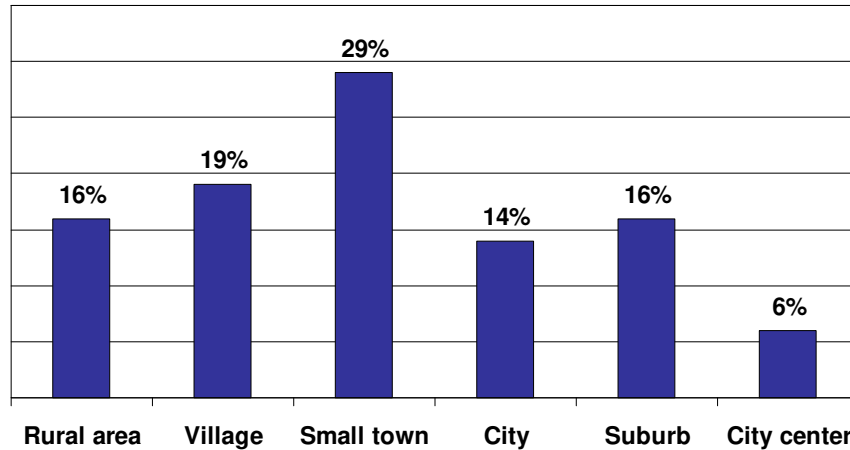
Typical Attendance of the Local Church Last Attended



The majority of the former and inactive members interviewed stated that the local church they last attended had a typical congregation on Sabbaths that was more than 150 individuals. It is unclear if this is significantly different from the active membership because of the lack of attendance data from much of the world. In the North American Division, where attendance data has been regularly collected from church clerks since 1988, the data displayed above would not be significantly different from the active membership. That would indicate that the size of the local congregation may not be a factor in poor retention.

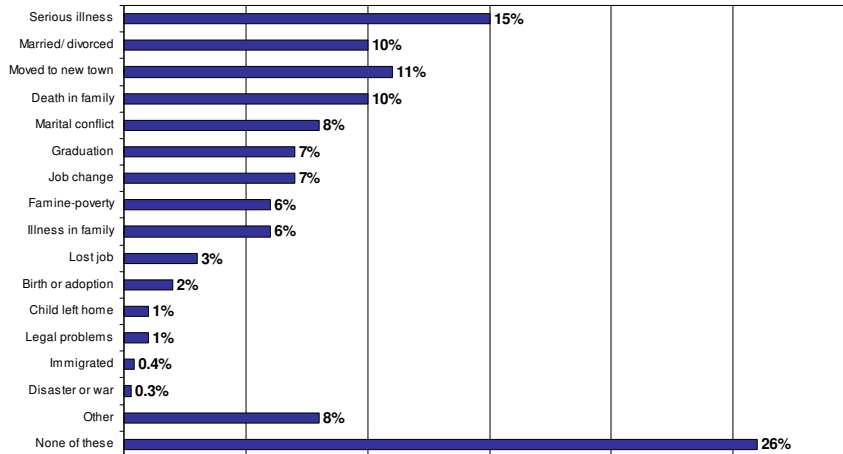
In Latin America, the majority of the inactive and former members were from small congregations with a typical attendance of less than 150, while in Africa the majority of the individuals interviewed were from larger congregations with a typical attendance of more than 150. The same was true for those interviewed in North America and Europe.

Community Context of the Local Church they Last Attended



More than a third of the inactive and former members interviewed (36 percent) indicated that the Adventist Church they last attended was located in an urban area; a city of more than 50,000 population or the suburbs of a city or in the “downtown” or central area of a large city. This means that nearly two thirds of these people dropped out of a church located outside of a metropolitan area. Because the majority of the world’s population now live in urban areas, this may be a significant indicator. Are retention problems related to people moving from small towns, villages and rural areas to the cities? Do we have sufficient congregations and pastoral personnel in the cities to reach out to members as they make this transition and keep them connected with the Church? Are there procedures in place to communicate the fact that members are moving?

Life Events in the Year Leading Up to Decision to Stop Attending



Three out of four of the inactive and former members interviewed (74 percent) reported at least one of these stressful life events as having occurred in the year before they decided to quit attending the Adventist Church. The majority reported more than one event. These data track with previous research in North America that correlates church dropout behavior with a two-part dynamics; a cluster of stressful life events that destabilizes a church member's relationship with the church and then the congregation's failure to respond with adequate understanding and care for the stress being experienced by the member. This is a dynamic that may be the most important factor in member retention, but even pastors and lay leaders, furthermore the people in the pews, are widely ignorant of this reality.

What Happened When They Stopped Attending Church

- 40% No one contacted me
- 19% A church member came to visit me
- 17% A local elder came to visit me
- 15% A local church member contacted me by phone
- 10% An Adventist relative made contact
- 9% The pastor came to visit me
- 6% The pastor contacted me by phone or Email
- 3% An Adventist, not a local member contacted me
- 2% I received a letter in the mail
- 0.3% Printed material was mailed to me

The largest number of the inactive and former members interviewed stated that when they stopped going to church no one from the church contacted them. Previous research in North America has reported that most church dropouts are uncontested. Pastors and congregations most often simply let the non-attending members slip away.

About one in five said that a church member came to visit them and almost as many indicated that a local elder visited them. There is some overlap with these two responses. Smaller numbers said that a church member contacted them by telephone instead of visiting or that an Adventist relative talked with them, which in some cases was someone not part of the same local church. Less than ten percent of these inactive and former members reported that their pastor visited them after they stopped attending church, while a smaller percentage said that their pastor contacted them by telephone or Email.

Very few reported getting a letter or other materials in the mail. A number of projects over the years have been developed around the idea of mailings to former and inactive Adventists. None of these have had significant positive results and the data displayed on this page suggest that this is not a good approach.

Most Important Reasons Why Decided to Stop Attending

- 28% No big issue; I just drifted away
- 25% Lack of compassion for the hurting
- 19% Moral failure on my part
- 18% I did not fit in
- 14% Too much focus on minor issues
- 13% Conflict in the congregation
- 12% Moral failures of members
- 11% Moral failures of leaders
- 11% Pressure from family or friends
- 10% Race, ethnic or tribal issues

- 8% Few members of my age group
- 7% Legalistic attitudes
- 6% Pastor was dictatorial
- 6% Church did not do much to help the poor
- 5% I did not believe some doctrines
- 5% Unrealistic demands on members
- 4% Low standards
- 3% The worship was not very spiritual
- 3% Too much asking for money
- 2% Church voted to drop me from membership
- 1% Apostate ideas were promoted

The inactive and former members interviewed were asked, What were the most important reasons why you decided to stop attending the Adventist Church? More than one in four indicated that there was no specific reason, they simply drifted away. In these cases lack of attention to the retention of members and the fact that non-attendance is ignored by church leaders has contributed to the loss of members.

The largest number who gave a specific reason for leaving the church cited lack of compassion for the hurting. This is consistent with previous research in the United States which demonstrated that the key dynamic is stressful events in the life of a member combined with the congregation's failure to respond with the support needed by the member. It points to a need both to help Adventists know how to best respond to members at risk of leaving the church and a more general need to encourage compassion as a stronger element in the Adventist ethos.

Moral failures are destructive of church fellowship. Nearly one in five of the individuals interviewed admitted a moral failure on their part, while one in eight mentioned the moral failures of other members and more than one in ten pointed out the moral failures of leaders. It is unclear from the data what kind of moral failure is involved—it undoubtedly includes many kinds—but previous research in North America has shown a correlation with marital breakdown.

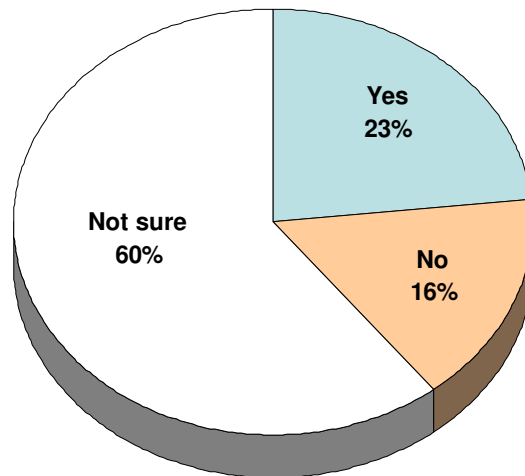
Various kinds of relationship issues also contribute to the loss of church members. Nearly one in five said they did not fit in and one in six felt there was too much focus on minor issues in the church. Almost as many reported conflict in the congregation. One in ten said that racial, ethnic or tribal differences led to their decision to leave the church. More than one in ten experienced pressure from family or friends.

Only five percent of the individuals interviewed indicated that disagreement with one or more doctrines of the Church was a reason why they decided to leave. It may surprise many that this is such a small factor, ranking below the number who left because they feel the church does not do much to meet the needs of the poor, those who were put off by a dictatorial pastor, those who complained of legalistic attitudes, those who did not like how few members there were from their own age group, and the items noted above.

Another five percent said that a reason why they decided to leave the church is unrealistic demands on members. It is unclear whether these demands were those officially mandated by the denomination or additional elements introduced in a particular local situation. It is likely that both are included in the total response to this item.

Small percentages of the individuals interviewed cited low standards in the church, worship that was not very spiritual (in their estimation), too much concern about giving money and the promotion of what they deemed apostate ideas as reasons why they left the church. Two percent simply reported that the church voted to drop them from membership and some may not have known why.

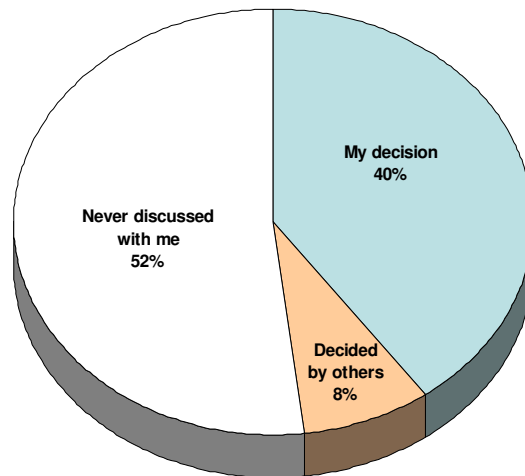
Is your name still on the membership list?



The majority of the inactive and former members interviewed do not know if their names are still on the membership rolls of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Only 16 percent are clear that their names have been dropped, while a larger number know that they are still members even though they have decided to withdraw from active participation. This is clear evidence of a breakdown in communication.

These data seem to indicate that a significant number of local churches around the world are not communicating clearly with those individuals who stop attending. It leads to the observation that congregations and possibly pastors and lay leaders focus primarily on those who come to church, while giving inadequate attention to those who quit attending and the wider community around the church. This could be seen as a serious missional failure on the part of the church.

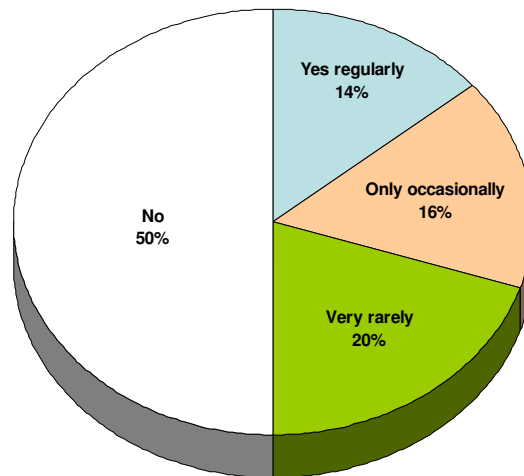
Did you decide to withdraw or were you expelled from the church?



Half of those who answered the previous question also answered a follow-up question. Did you decide to withdraw from the Adventist Church or were you informed that your membership was being dropped? The majority said that it was never discussed with them, which is further evidence of breakdown in communication.

Some 40 percent of the half of the person interviewed who were asked this questions stated that they made the decision to leave the church. Only eight percent attributed the decision to the congregation or church leaders. This indicates that relatively few members are kicked out and a far larger number are simply disconnected due to lack of maintaining communication. Eventually these disconnected members are very likely dropped from membership as “lost” because the local church no longer has contact information.

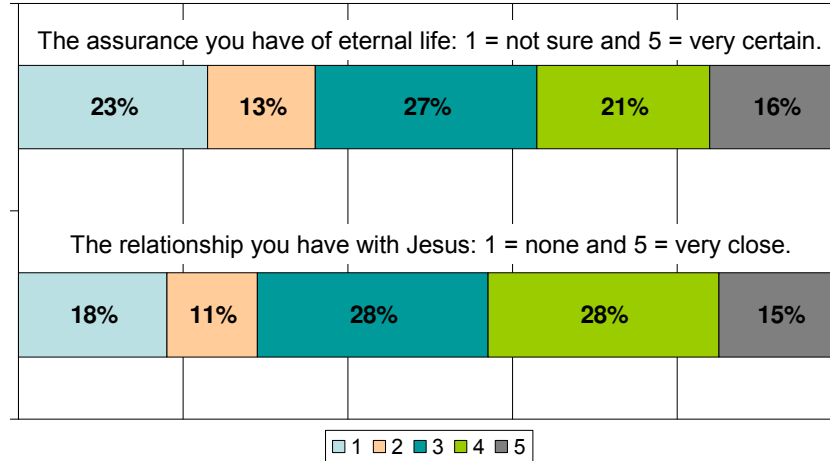
Do you now attend a different religious group?



Half of the inactive and former members interviewed report that they have not started attending a church of a different denomination or religious group. Only one in seven is regularly attending a congregation of a different faith, while larger numbers participate in another religion only occasionally or very rarely. People who leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church usually become “unchurched,” participants in no religion.

After many centuries in which religion was largely embedded in local cultures and large majorities of people participated regularly, the contemporary world has seen the emergence—initially in the West, but more recently in many other cultures—of believers who do not participate and “religious nones,” people who prefer or identify with no specific religion. This “unchurched” element has become the focus of much research in recent decades. It appears that the problems of retention of members in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are related to this larger trend. The vast majority of the inactive and former members of the Adventist Church are not rejecting the message and mission of the Church, but are moving with strong dynamics in contemporary society away from established forms of religious activity and the fabric of most Adventist local churches is not sufficient to stem this tide.

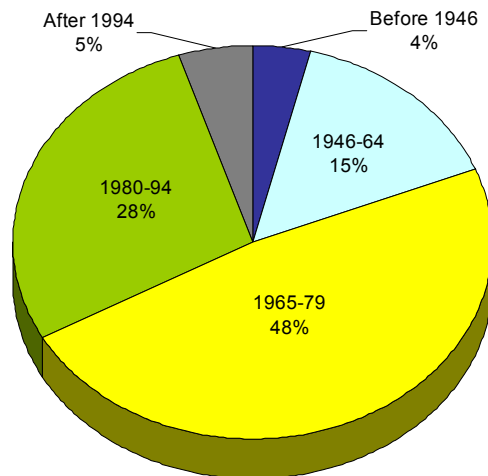
Spiritual Condition of Inactive and Former Members



A total of 43 percent of the inactive and former members interviewed indicated that they have a relationship with Christ that is strong and 37 percent their assurance of salvation is certain or very certain. Clearly the spiritual condition of everyone who stops attending church does not become weak, although about a third of these church dropouts do report a weak relationship with Christ and little assurance of salvation.

These data indicate some kind of disconnect between church participation and the inner spiritual life of significant numbers of people, even in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The redefinition of religious faith as a private aspect of life not dependent on being part of an organization is another major trend in the contemporary world that clearly is related to the membership retention issues of the Church.

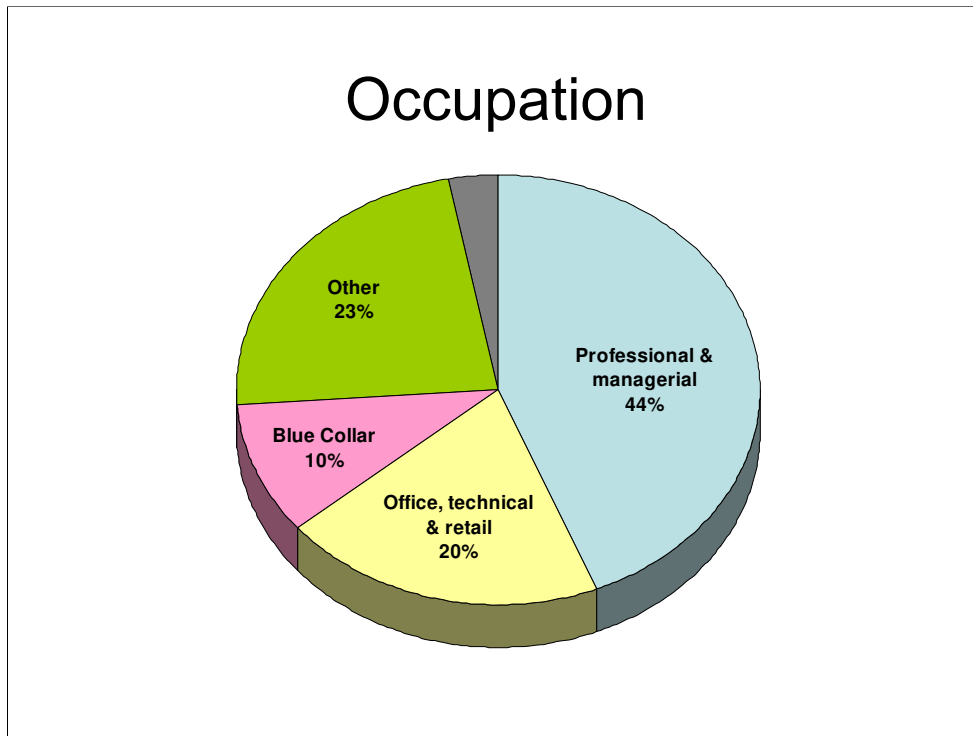
Age by Generations



Nearly half of the inactive and former Adventists interviewed are from what demographers in North America call the Baby Bust generation and is popularly known as “Generation X.” They are 34 through 48 years of age in 2013, well into the post-young adult stage of life. As data on previous pages has shown, many of these people either grew up in Adventist families or were converted as young people. As they move into their middle adult years significant numbers have stopped attending a church.

A third of the people interviewed are young adults and teens, most of them in what demographers have labeled the Millennial generation, 18 through 33 years of age in 2013. This the first generation to come of age in the 21st century. Surveys of the general population in the United States have shown that this generation has a large increase in the number of unchurched people over previous generations, but that may not be true in other places around the world.

Less than one in five of the individuals interviewed in this study were from the generations born before 1965. This is in large part true because many of the interviews were conducted in developing nations where the general population is much younger than in Europe and North America. It may also indicate that retention issues in the Adventist Church are largely about how the church relates to young adults.

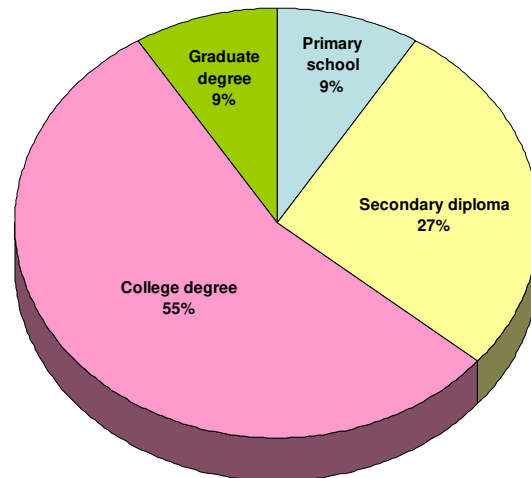


The majority of the inactive and former Adventists identified their occupation among what can be generally labeled White Collar jobs. This includes 32 percent who are professionals and managers; 12 percent who are proprietors of small businesses; six percent each who work in technical roles, office and retail jobs, and service occupations; and two percent who are government employees.

Just ten percent of the individuals interviewed mentioned Blue Collar occupations, including six percent who work in factories, construction, driving trucks, etc., and four percent who work in farming, forestry or fishing. Nearly a quarter are not regularly employed. Seven percent are full-time students, two percent are homemakers, four percent are retired or disabled, and ten percent were currently unemployed at the time of the interview.

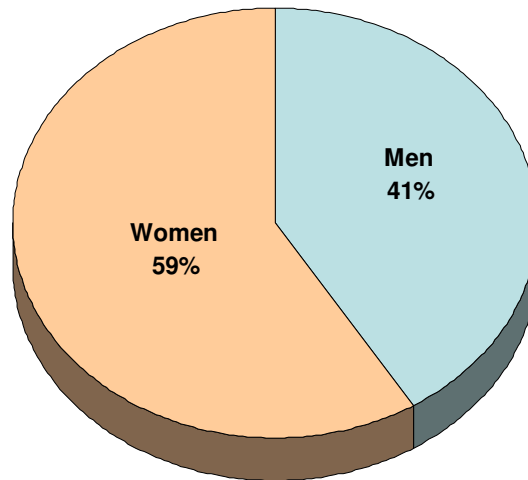
These data suggest that perhaps retention issues in the Adventist Church have something to do with younger adults rising into the middle class. Previous research has pointed out that Adventist church growth in many cities around the world correlates with young adults migrating to urban areas from rural homes in which they were raised. The data displayed above suggest the possibility that urban migration of young adults may be both an opportunity for evangelism and a “back door” for the loss of members. The elements related to urbanization and migration to the cities—obtaining education, finding career advancement and upward mobility—may cause younger adults to rapidly “out grow” the church. Further research is necessary to confirm or deny this theory.

Education Completed



Nearly two thirds of the inactive and former Adventists interviewed are college or university graduates. Very few have little education, as is true of the majority of the population in the nation where they are located. This is consistent with the data on the previous page about occupation. The data displayed above add further evidence to the theory that retention issues for the Adventist Church are related to younger adults rising into the middle class. Evidently many of the individuals interviewed joined the church when they were younger and had less education, and as their education progressed and they matured, they quit attending regularly and eventually left the church. Is the Adventist Church having difficulty in holding onto its better educated members because it somehow does not meet the needs of the educated, or is it simply true that in the process of obtaining education and starting careers people become distracted which leads to disconnecting from the church?

Gender



There were more women than men among the inactive and former members interviewed. The percentages are quite similar to those believed to be true for the general membership in various published comments by the Women's Ministries Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These data may be surprising to those who believe that men are more likely to drop out of church participation than are women. That is another idea widely believed to be true although it lacks actual proof.