

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SABBATH SCHOOL—A SUMMATIVE REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Sabbath School (SS) plays a very significant role in individual spiritual development and in building loyalty to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, its practices, and standards. This conclusion emerges from analysis of the surveys of more than 27,000 church members in nine divisions, from which most data is drawn and from five other studies: (a) 2010 study of church media, using focus groups; (b) 2013 world survey of more than 4,000 pastors in all divisions; (c) 2013 survey of recent (last 10 years) graduates of Adventist colleges in the USA; (d) 2014 survey of more than 18,000 Hope Channel viewers; (e) an overview of 35 years of research in NAD by the Institute for the Prevention of Addictions (IPA).

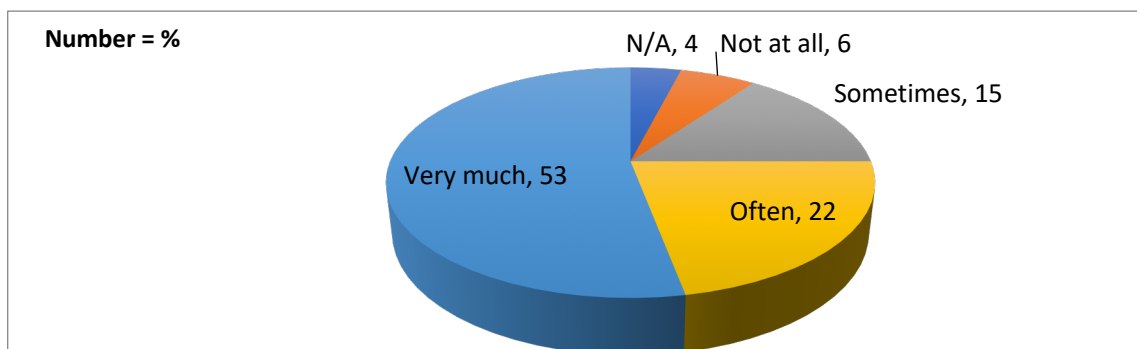
In assessing “Sabbath School”, questions probed attitudes to the SS lesson, to SS teachers, and to the SS experience in general. The SS lesson is widely appreciated, though with some major regional exceptions; SS teachers are well liked throughout the world; and in the world as a whole, and in all but one of the nine divisions surveyed in 2013, the wider SS experience is highly valued. Moreover, among pastors, personal appreciation of the SS lesson correlates to strong adherence to a range of important distinctive Adventist teachings. In the survey of church members, valuing either the SS lesson or the whole SS experience both correlate to a strong and sustained commitment to Christ. Finally, IPA’s data shows that regular attendance at SS is the strongest predictor of total abstinence from alcohol. Empirically, SS plays an underappreciated part in strengthening Adventist identity, spiritual growth, and retention.

Sabbath School is an area where *all* members could be actively involved in the life of the Church, regardless of spiritual gifts. The study and devotional activities of SS should be the foundation of individual revival and collective reformation. As small groups, the SS class could be a powerful base both for outreach and for nurture and retention. One of the most important steps the world Church could take to equip its members to reach up, reach in, and reach out, is to strengthen the Sabbath School, building on what is already a success, though not always recognized as such.

Sabbath School Lesson

In the church-member’s survey, the question was asked: “How much has the Adult Bible Study Guide helped you develop your religious life?”

Figure 1

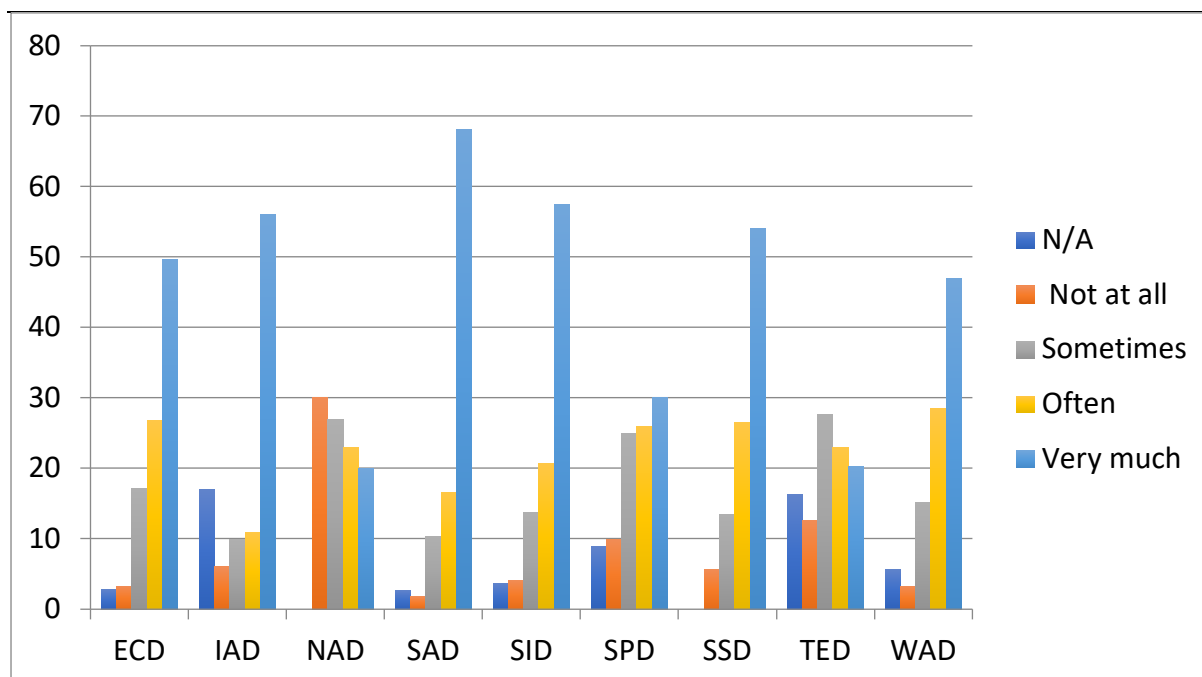


Globally more than half of respondents felt that the SS lesson had helped them “very much” with 75% responding that it had helped “very much” or “often”. Only one in ten responded either “not at all” or “not applicable” (see figure 1, previous page).

These data are consistent with findings of a 2010 study of 13 focus groups (one in each division). Participants in each focus group were asked: “Have you and your family been changed as a result of any of these resources the world church has prepared for you?”, and then asked to discuss a number of resources. The Adult Bible Study Guide was mentioned positively more often (41 times) than any other resources (compare with 12 times each for *Adventist World* and Hope Channel, which had the equal next largest number of mentions). In addition, it is notable that in ASTR’s evaluation of Hope Channel, 63% of respondents in a survey of more than 18,000 viewers were likely or most likely to watch Hope Sabbath School and one quarter of respondents wanted more programming like Hope Sabbath School.

However, the total response to the 2013 church-member survey (figure 1) obscures some regional variations (see figure 2). In seven of the nine divisions surveyed in 2013, “very much” responses were the largest single answer and in six of these divisions (ECD, IAD, SAD, SID, SSD, WAD), “very much” was the answer of half or more of the respondents. These are all from what would be considered the “Global South”. The three divisions surveyed from the “Global North” all had more ambivalent attitudes to the SS lesson. In SPD, “very much” was the largest response but at only 30%, while in TED, “sometimes” was the largest single response. The combined response for “sometimes/not at all/not applicable to me” was 44% in SPD and 57% in TED. Finally, in NAD, the largest single response was “not at all”, which with “sometimes” also totaled 57%.

Figure 2



The *Adult Bible Study Guide* is valued by the majority of members in the world Church, and in the Global South; but in North America members are unenthusiastic, while elsewhere in the Global North there is some ambivalence. The skepticism in North America is evident, too, in the fact that, in a 2013 survey of recent graduates of Adventist colleges in the United States, only 21% engaged

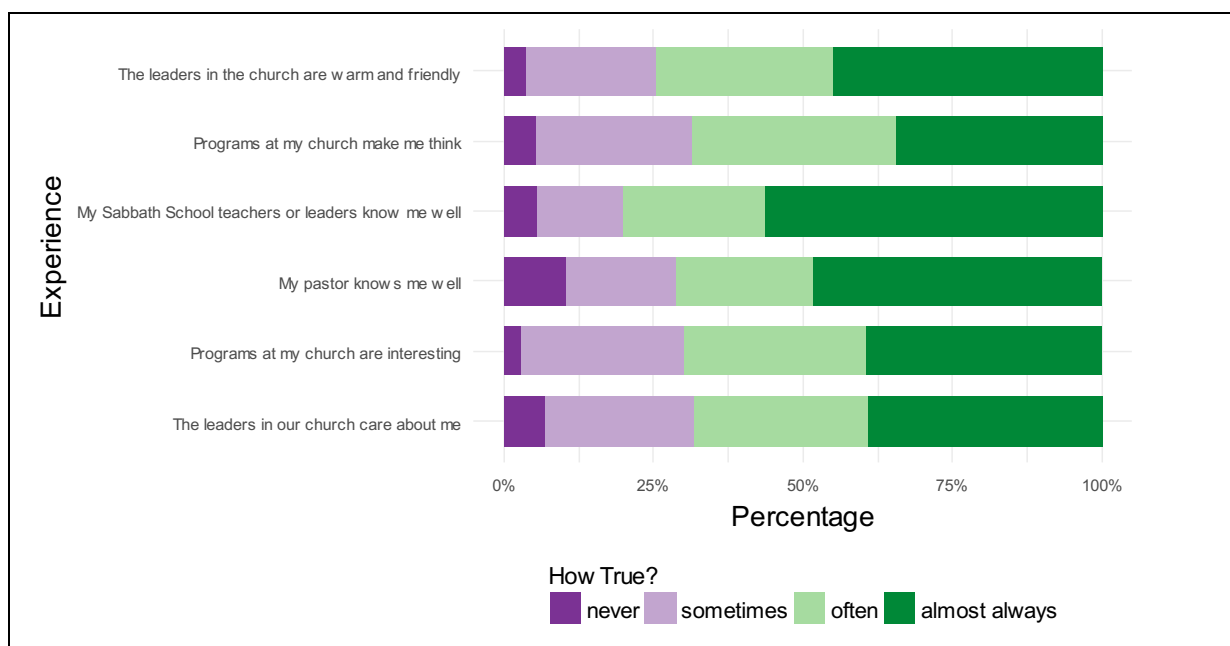
“often” or “very often” with the SS quarterly, in contrast to 57% who answered “never” or “hardly ever”. Nevertheless, the NAD is an outlier in terms of reaction to the SS lesson.

Evidence for the value of the lesson worldwide comes from pastors as well as church members. In the 2013 global survey of pastors, they were asked how significant or influential certain Adventist ministries were for their personal life: 89% of pastors stated that the *Adult Bible Study Guide* was “very influential” or “quite influential” to them. No other publication or media ministry came close to this. Furthermore, 97% owned a copy of the quarterly—an extraordinary reach. But this is not an end to its impact. There were statistically significant correlations between the importance pastors ascribed to the SS lesson and their acceptance of the Church’s call to “Revival and Reformation”; of Fundamental Belief 24 (the Sanctuary doctrine); and Church standards in dress, diet, and recreation. Thus, the evidence suggests that the SS lesson promotes faithfulness to Adventist teachings and practices.

Sabbath School Teachers

In contrast, church members everywhere greatly appreciate their teachers. In the church-members’ survey, respondents, having been asked to reflect on their experience in their local church were asked to rate their pastor, elders, SS teachers and other local leaders. The questions were phrased differently (as seen in figure 3) but in each case on a four-point scale. Globally, more than three-quarters of respondents stated that their SS teachers “almost always” or “often” knew them well, with over half stating “almost always”. Indeed “Sabbath School teachers or leaders know me well” is the only one of the six categories of leader or program for which, in every division, more than 50% answered “almost always”, and for which the combined “almost always/often” totals over 75%. “My SS teachers/leaders know me well” usually score better than “My pastor knows me well”, “Leaders in our church care about me”, or “Leaders in our church are warm and friendly”

Figure 3



Looking at division-by-division results, the only category to get 75% “almost always/often” in **every** division was “Sabbath School teachers know me well”. In each of the nine surveyed divisions, more

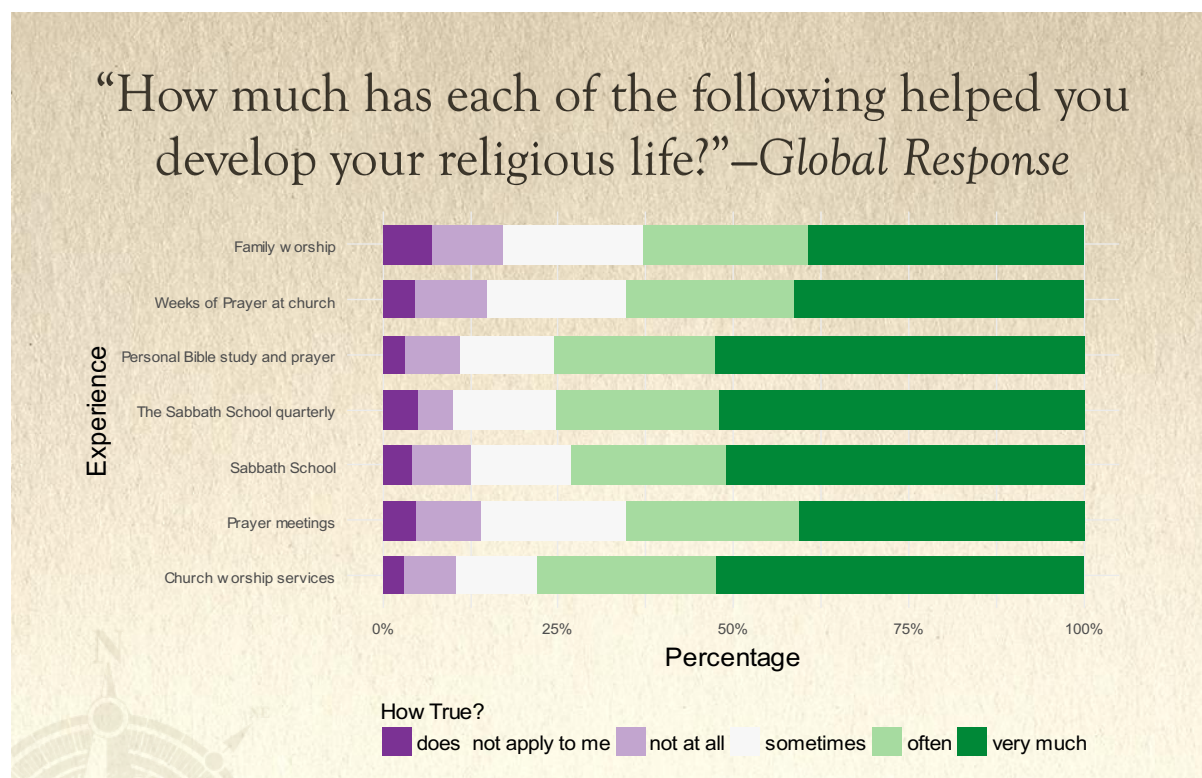
than half the respondents gave their SS teachers the highest ranking. In several divisions, SS teachers consistently received higher ratings than other local church leaders. In SSD, for example, while 49% gave the highest rating to their pastor, 54% gave the highest rating to SS teachers/leaders. In ECD, 55% gave the highest ranking to SS leaders, higher than the 46% to pastors. In TED, the trend was similar: 71% gave the highest ranking to SS leaders, and 63% to pastors. Members believe their SS leaders know them better than their pastors and this is true both in divisions where one pastor serves many churches and members (ECD, SSD) and in a division where pastors serve rather fewer parishioners (TED).

In NAD, moreover, where the SS lesson was not highly regarded, SS teachers were well regarded. Half the respondents stated their teachers “almost always” know me well and while this was a little less than the rating of pastors, in NAD there was a strong correlation between church members reporting that SS teachers “know me well” and the members being actively involved in their local church. This, too, speaks to the positive impact of the SS teacher.

The Sabbath School Experience as a Whole

The church-member survey asked 27 questions about what “helped to develop your religious life”, with answers on a five-point scale ranging from “Very much” to “Not at all” and “Does not apply to me”. In addition to being asked to assess the adult Bible study guide (results above, figures 1-2), they were asked to assess Sabbath School as a whole, the church worship service (divine service), family worship, personal prayer and Bible study, prayer meetings, and church-based Weeks of Prayer. (See Figure 4.)

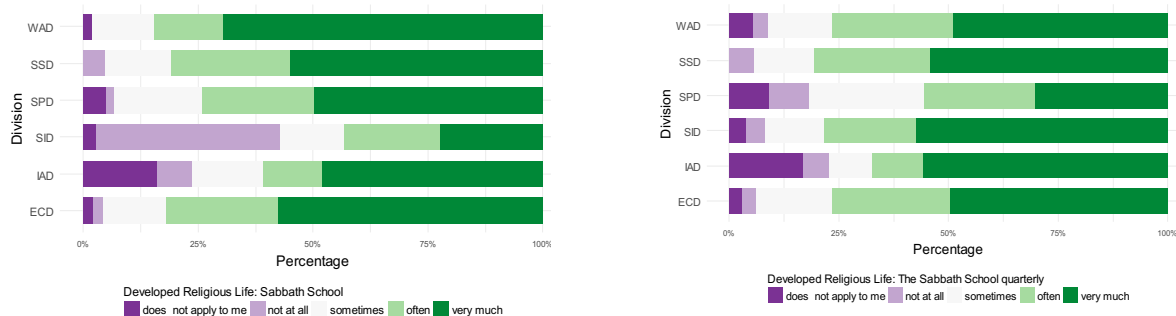
Figure 4



In 7 of 9 surveyed divisions, more than 50% gave Sabbath School the highest ranking of any of these: it helped “very much”. Only in SID was there a strong “not at all” response, but as figure 5 shows, in

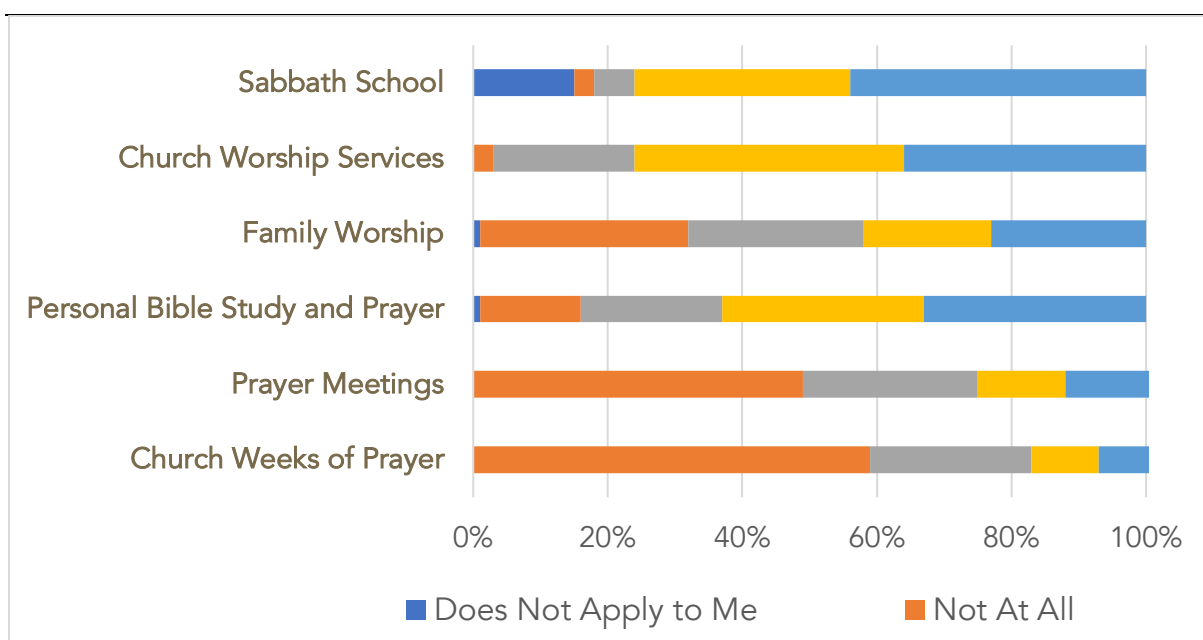
six of the seven categories, SID had very high “not at all” responses. This suggests a wider issue with spiritual growth, nurture, and discipling in SID, rather than that Sabbath School is a particular problem in that division though the response may be saying something about how it is practiced in SID. In any case, of the seven types of worship and devotional experience, there was only one for which the “not at all” response in SID was below 25%— the SS *lesson* (see figure 5). When this is taken with the positive response to the question about “knows me well” it suggests that in SID, notwithstanding the ambivalent response to the question about the SS’s value for spiritual-life development, SS is in general a success in SID.

Figure 5



The general pattern (other than in SID) of positive evaluation of the contribution made by SS in general is illustrated by trends in NAD and TED. Despite the largely negative reaction in NAD to the SS Lesson, SS as a whole gained the *highest* positive responses in NAD of *any* of the seven devotional experiences (or processes), for its role in developing church members’ religious life (see figure 6). But it is striking that it also had the highest response of “Does not apply to me” (15%)—this seems to confirm anecdotal evidence that there is an increasing trend for SS not to be held in many churches in North America. Among young people, however, SS is not, in practice, so popular. Among recent

Figure 6



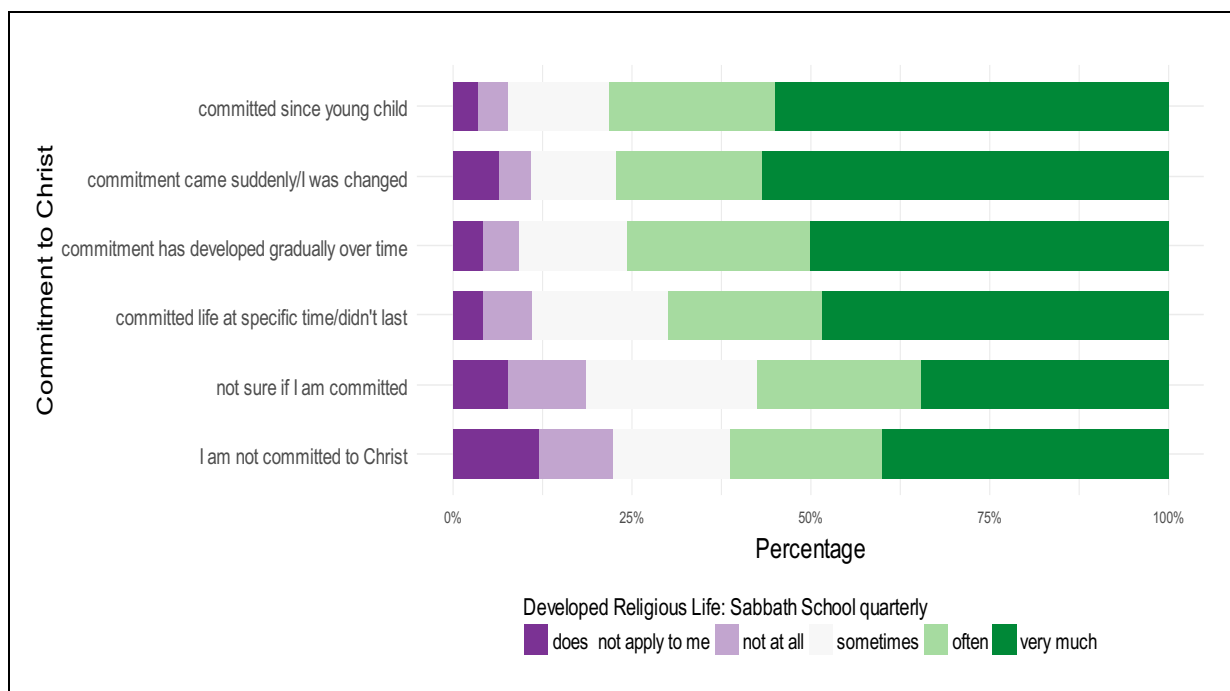
graduates of denominational colleges in the USA, only 38% participate often or very often, with another 38% rarely or sometimes, and 24% never. And yet, 79% stated that they plan to attend SS together with their children as a preferred method for passing on their own religious beliefs to your children.

The popularity of SS itself, despite ambivalence about the official SS lesson, is also a feature in TED, where 61% of respondents stated that SS “almost always/often” helped develop their religious life; but 13% answered “Does not apply to me”, suggesting that SS is increasingly not an option in local churches in the TED.

Sabbath School and Commitment to Christ

It is not only the case that church members around the world like their SS teachers, that many value the lesson, and that most greatly appreciate the experience of SS. It is also the case that a feeling of being blessed, whether by the SS lesson, or by the whole experience, strongly correlates to a long-term, sustained commitment to Christ. SS is a powerful factor in nurturing, retaining, and discipling church members (see figures 7-8).

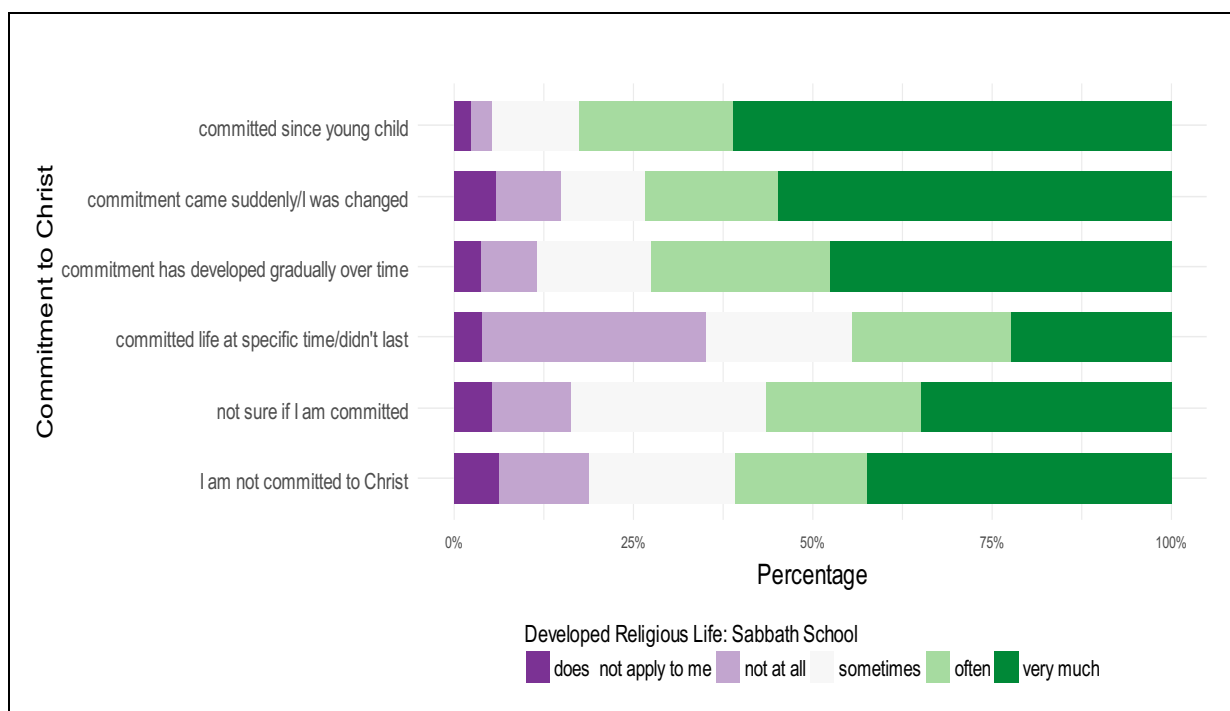
Figure 7



Church members for whom either the Sabbath School or SS Lesson helped “very much” or “often” in their religious life are more likely to have felt committed to Christ since childhood or had an ongoing commitment. They are less likely to be unsure if they are committed to Christ or state that they are *not* committed.

In addition, members for whom Sabbath School *as a whole* (in distinction to the lesson) has helped “very much” or “often” in developing their religious life are significantly less likely to experience only a temporary or transitory commitment to Christ (figure 8 overleaf). In sum, valuing SS, strikingly, correlates to a clear and ongoing commitment to Jesus Christ.

Figure 8



Sabbath School Attendance and Health Behaviors

A final point. It is striking that the data from the 2013 survey of church members is consistent with the results of 35 years of health risk behavior research carried out by the Institute for the Prevention of Addictions (IPA). These are not the data one would instinctively look at to judge the world field or to assess Sabbath School! However, in the 35 years IPA has conducted studies in SDA colleges in North America, SS attendance is more strongly inversely correlated with alcohol use in the preceding month than any other religious variable including church attendance and personal prayer. In other words, regular SS attendance is the best predictor of whether young people will or won't drink. The SS seems to promote adherence to Adventist health standards and behaviors.

Conclusions

An obvious question to ask is "Why?" Why does Sabbath School attendance correlate with personal commitment to Christ and loyalty to denominational health standards? The following factors seem to be present in the SS experience cross-culturally; they would help to explain why church members have positive attitudes to SS, and may help to explain why it correlates both to external compliance with behavioral norms and to a deep internal spirituality. They may, indeed, not only correlate with, but be causative of these trends.

- a. Attending SS requires one, generally, to get up earlier, which indicates a stronger religious commitment, but may also help build that commitment.
- b. Attending SS often means one participates rather than passively listens.
- c. Attending SS often means that one has prepared; at any rate, during the SS period, one is likely to think about the material, rather than passively to receive it.

- d. Frequency of SS attendance may thus reflect a stronger integration with the faith community and the internalization of beliefs that effect behavior relative to Church standards and practices.
- e. SS class members frequently choose their class and teacher; their relationship to the teacher, other class members, and to Bible study, is thus less likely to have negative associations, meaning greater openness to genuinely learning from the experience.
- f. Thus, within the framework of “believing, belonging and behaving,” which is widely-used in the sociology of religion, SS attendance may be a causative factor in believing, belonging and behaving. Data does not permit us to assert causative, but the results are suggestive.

In conclusion, we have powerful inspired evidence from the writings of Ellen White about the value of SS. We now also have strong empirical evidence that SS is one of the most potent factors in the world Church in promoting Adventist identity and standards. There is also, then, strong empirical evidence that Church leaders should find ways to strengthen SS and build on its successes.