Building healthy relationships with members and former members

David Trim
Director, Archives, Statistics, and Research
Data on membership loss

From official church statistics
Since 1965, 39,100,507 people have become members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
MEMBERS WHO LEAVE

Since 1965, **39,100,507** people have become members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Of those, **15,132,555** have chosen to leave.

Our net loss rate is **39%**.

In effect, **4 of every 10** new church members are slipping away.
Global Net Accessions and Net Losses, 1994–2018

Data for the last quarter century, with 5-year moving averages
If we had retained 80% of members, instead of 60%, then with the new members they would have helped to bring in, who would have been maintained, etc., less estimated deaths, church membership might have been 42.5 million (almost double the current reported 21.4 million)
Why did they leave?

Findings from two global studies, 2012 & 2013
View of Adventist Church at Departure

- irrelevant, 16.82%
- thought highly, lost touch, 21.15%
- angry at treatment, 18.34%
- cold and inflexible, 14.65%
- lacked integrity, 7.26%
- thought highly, couldn't measure up, 23.06%
Life Events in Year Leading Up to Decision to Stop Attending Church

- Serious illness: 15%
- Married/divorced: 10%
- Moved to new town: 11%
- Death in family: 10%
- Marital conflict: 8%
- Graduation: 7%
- Job change: 7%
- Famine-poverty: 6%
- Illness in family: 6%
- Lost job: 3%
- Birth or adoption: 2%
- Child left home: 1%
- Legal problems: 1%
- Immigrated: 0.4%
- Disaster or war: 0.3%
- Other: 8%
- None of these: 26%
Most Important Reasons for Deciding to Stop Attending Church

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
What event triggered your decision to leave?
(Listed in weighted rank order)

- Perceived hypocrisy in other...
- Marital difficulties
- Lack of friends in the church
- High level of conflict in local...
- Other family conflicts
- Prolonged doubts about...
- Moved to a new city/church
- Divorce
- Dislike of worship styles
- Personal conflict with local...
- Decisions taken by higher leaders
- Personal conflict with pastor
- Prolonged doubts about the...
- Dislike of preaching (sermons)
- Local pastor was moved to...
- Death of parent(s)
- Death of other family member(s)
- Other
From 2018 Church Member Survey

I have been hurt by leaders, people, or incidents in my church

- Strongly Disagree: 21%
- Disagree: 24%
- I Am Not Sure: 14%
- Agree: 29%
- Strongly Agree: 12%
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
What might help them to stay?

Findings from global research, 2012–2018
Pastors need to be equipped and trained — so then they can train elders and church-members

Pastors engage very little with members who stop attending church: but in a 2012 survey of global pastors, 53% stated that they never received training in nurturing and retaining in their Bachelors degree; of pastors with graduate degrees, again, 53% stated that they received no training in these areas in their graduate study.
Is training on nurture and discipling of church members offered through my local church?

- Strongly Disagree: 6%
- Disagree: 10%
- I Am Not Sure: 20%
- Agree: 46%
- Strongly Agree: 19%
Ex-Members: Attended Primary (Elementary) School

Current Members = 46% Attended an SDA Primary School
Ex-Members: Attended Secondary (High) School

Current Members = 35% Attended an SDA Secondary School
Ex-Members: Attended college or university (tertiary/further/higher)

Current Members = 13% Attended an SDA College/University
From 2018 Church Member Survey

In my local church, I feel loved and cared about...

- Not true at all: 5%
- Not true at all-somewhat true: 4%
- Somewhat true: 29%
- Somewhat true-very true: 13%
- Very true: 49%
Might they come back??
Religious Affiliation After Stopped Attending Church

- Nominal Adventist, inactive: 40.38%
- Active in other Christian denomination: 8.66%
- Inactive in other Christian denomination: 2.29%
- "Not religious but spiritual": 15.67%
- Member of other religion: 0.76%
- Don't know: 7.13%
- Drifting: 7.01%
- None: 8.79%
Awareness of Developments in Adventism

- **No knowledge**: 12.10%
- **Hear things occasionally**: 32.61%
- **Fairly knowledgeable**: 27.90%
- **Detailed knowledge**: 17.58%
How do you presently feel about Adventism?

- Happy memories, “but not for me anymore” 56%
- Bittersweet 18%
- Don’t care 17%
- Hostile 5%
- Actively opposed 4%
How would you rate your openness to reconnect?

- Likely: 36%
- Somewhat likely: 21%
- Somewhat unlikely: 12%
- Very unlikely: 12%
- Depends on circumstances of approach: 19%

Seventh-day Adventist Church
There are millions of lapsed and former Seventh-day Adventists worldwide who already believe much of what we believe — they are waiting for us to reach out to them and to love them, with the love of the shepherd and the father of Luke 15.