

# Chapter 7

## ASTR, AHSRA, and New Horizons for Adventist Human-Subject Research

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### BYLINE

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D. J. B. Trim (PhD, London, 2003) is Director of Archives, Statistics, and Research for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, having been elected to the position by the 2010 Annual Council, and, since 2014, adjunct Professor of Church History at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, Michigan. Recent publications include ‘War, soldiers, and high politics under Elizabeth I’, in R. Malcolm Smuts (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the age of Shakespeare* (OUP, 2016); ‘Attitudes to science and medicine among Adventist church leaders, c.1880–1936’, in Lynden J. Rogers (ed.), *Changing attitudes to science within Adventist health and medicine from 1865 to 2015* (Avondale Academic Press, 2015); and ‘Ellen G. White and Adventist mission’, in Alberto R. Timm and Dwain N. Esmond (eds.), *The gift of prophecy in scripture and history* (Review & Herald, 2015).

### EDITOR’S NOTE

Drs. Stele and Trim share in great detail the account of the most recent development of Adventist empirical research, the rise of AHSRA. In this chapter you can also learn about how Adventist denominational research is disseminated, and where you can find all research reports online in one place!

(HI)STORY



## STORY

Someone once said that if you see a note on a wall that reads: “Caution, wet paint,” you will touch it to check if it is true, but if you are told that there is a certain number of stars in the galaxy, you will believe it immediately and even remember that number. Numbers have amazing power over us—and so do the people who work with them!

In 2013, social science researchers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church created their own association and called it the Adventist Human Subject Researchers Association (AHSRA). It has annual meetings, a website, a Facebook page, official leadership, and a growing membership, but do the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Adventist researchers need it?

### **Why AHSRA?**

For many years, three well-known pioneers in Adventist human-subject research—Monte Sahlin, Roger L. Dudley, and Bailey Gillespie—were regarded as the only experts in church-related research. They responded to research requests from the church leaders, developed instruments, and did data analysis. Their contribution is invaluable, as they laid a solid foundation for Adventist empirical research, a field that, in time, attracted other researchers. However, being separated by continents, institutions, and areas of specialty, Adventist researchers were not necessarily aware of the projects that their colleagues were involved in around the world. Thus, knowledge of human-subject research, research methods, and results was not successfully accumulated, shared, and utilized by the global Seventh-day Adventist Church and Adventist researchers worldwide.

At the same time, church leadership recognized a need: to build church plans based on research. They clearly needed empirical data on church-member beliefs and practices, and on mission effectiveness of church ministries and entities. To that end, in October 2007, the General Conference (GC) Office of Assessment and Program Effectiveness was organized with Paul Brantley as its director. This resulted in several global qualitative studies assessing effectiveness of church ministries and programs.

In 2011, a new approach was taken. The Office of Assessment and Program Effectiveness was closed after Paul Brantley became a Vice-President for Strategy and Research in the North American Division (NAD) and the GC Office of Archives and Statistics was given responsibility for assessment (reconceptualized and renamed as “mission-effectiveness evaluation”) and also tasked with wider responsibility for research, especially in relationship to strategic planning. Due to this change, it was re-titled the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research

(ASTR), and it started supervising human-subject research, coordinating strategic planning research, and conducting mission-effectiveness evaluations of major church entities and programs. However, the church was still heavily reliant on just a handful of researchers. A global network of human-subject researchers was missing.

Creating such a network became one of the primary goals of ASTR director, David Trim. He began to identify a wider group of human-subject researchers from around the world. A deliberate decision was made to contract with Adventist higher education institutions, rather than individual researchers, in order to foster a research culture in the church's tertiary educational institutions. Researchers were contracted to develop instruments, conduct surveys, and analyze data, which would then be synthesized and summarized for church leaders by ASTR, where David Trim was joined, at the beginning of 2012, by Galina Stele. Initial research was undertaken as part of the process of strategic planning in 2012-2013 and included a global survey of church members (conducted by seven research teams managed by ASTR), a survey of pastors around the world (conducted by veteran social scientist, Roger Dudley), the "21st-Century Adventist Connection Study" (a survey of recent graduates of Adventist universities in the United States), and two other studies. In all, 42,000 Adventists from every continent completed surveys or were interviewed as part of research that was unprecedented in both breadth and depth. It fed directly into the world Church strategic plan for 2015-2020, *Reach the World*, the goals and KPIs of which were all founded on empirical research: a first in Adventist history.

At the end of 2011, ASTR created its formal research partnership with Andrews University and its Office of Research and Creative Scholarship headed by then Associate Dean for Research (now Dean of Graduate Studies), Gary Burdick. Over the next five years, formal partnerships were created with Oakwood University, Southern Adventist University, Loma Linda University, and Avondale College of Higher Education. Memorandum of understanding between these institutions and ASTR provided for opportunities for faculty to receive small research grants from ASTR; this model was so evidently beneficial that it was emulated by the North American Division.

By early 2012, it was obvious that the Adventist Church worldwide had a much larger pool of capable human-subject researchers than just the three pioneers: Dudley, Sahlin, and Gillespie. However, the new informal network of scholars identified and fostered by ASTR lacked means of communication. Most individual researchers in the network were entirely unaware of the others and many were the only empirical researchers at their institution and felt isolated. Trim and Stele recognized that the increased emphasis on research by the world Church and the increased cooperation that had resulted had, in turn, generated a need for regular meetings of social-science researchers which would open new opportunities for collaboration between church organization and teams of academic researchers and among the researchers themselves.

The first conference took place in November 12-13, 2012. It was sponsored by ASTR and hosted by Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan and had the rather symbolic title of: “Towards New Horizons in Adventist Research.” The conference goals included providing an opportunity for Adventist researchers from different parts of the world to meet each other, sharing findings from their research projects, and planning how to move forward with human-subject research. Research papers, diverse in focus and rich in data, included the preliminary results of the 2012-13 global church member survey in the African continent, the 21st-Century Adventist Connection Study (results of an initial qualitative study that helped shape the final quantitative instrument), papers on Valuegenesis Europe, tithing behavior of Adventists in Australia, focus-group research on young peoples’ attitudes to tithing, risky behavior among Adventist young adults, domestic violence, stressors in pastors’ families, pastors’ job satisfaction, contribution of church congregations to the quality of life of their neighborhoods, global leadership development, SDA alumni, value of research in reaching unreached, and the challenges of a world-wide web-based research.<sup>1</sup>

At this conference, quite symbolically, Roger L. Dudley, one of those who had devoted so many years to Adventist research, announced his retirement as director of the Institute of Church Ministry (ICM). He could see that church-related human-subject research, which had once been restricted to him and only a few others, had become a part of the professional life of many Adventist researchers around the globe. Dudley was to be replaced by Petr Činčala, a graduate of Andrews University, where he had been mentored by Dudley and two other Adventist human-subject researchers, René Drumm and Duane McBride. Činčala gave a paper at the first Adventist human-subject researchers’ conference in 2012, and the following year he was called to the ICM from pastoral ministry in the Czech Republic; however, while living there, he had for several years been involved in research projects led by Dudley or Sahlin. Činčala’s combination of experience in research and in pastoring thus made him an ideal successor to Dudley in leading the vital ministry of the Institute.

Meanwhile, at the conclusion of the 2012 conference, David Trim had shared his vision for creating strong research teams in each world division in order to build research capacity in the worldwide Church. He raised the possibility of founding a professional association for Adventist human-subject researchers involved in other than pedagogical or medical research. The association would unite professionals in this field and conduct similar conferences for human-subject researchers to discuss their projects, findings, methodologies, challenges, and concerns. Inspired by his strong faith in research, the conference participants discussed this issue and organized a working committee with Robert McIver, an academic from Avondale College of Higher Education in Australia as chair,

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<sup>1</sup> The conference program, some presentations, and audio recordings of the sessions, can be found at [http://www.adventistresearch.org/2012\\_conf\\_humansubject](http://www.adventistresearch.org/2012_conf_humansubject). See more information about other conferences on ASTR website [www.adventistresearch.org](http://www.adventistresearch.org).

and Petr Činčala, René Drumm, and Duane McBride as members. In this way, the Adventist Human-Subject Researchers Association came into existence and functioned during 2012-2013 in a rudimentary form. The committee was tasked with drawing up proposals for a permanent society and a draft constitution. It was fitting that Roger Dudley, who in some ways had initiated Adventist empirical human-subject research, took part in the founding of a new professional association dedicated to Adventist human-subject researchers.

The next year, on November 18-20, Adventist researchers came to the world Church Headquarters, in Silver Spring, Maryland, to participate in the first World Summit on Nurture and Retention: “Discipling, Retaining, and Reclaiming.” The summit was also the second meeting of Adventist human-subject researchers. The conference was organized by ASTR in conjunction with the GC Nurture and Retention Committee. Official representatives from all thirteen world divisions joined members of the world headquarters and Adventist researchers interested in church members’ retention at this conference.

The first-ever AHSRA business meeting took place on the evening of the first day of the summit. Members discussed a draft of constitution prepared by Robert McIver and elected AHSRA officers for the next period: Duane McBride as president, Petr Činčala as treasurer, and Sarah Burton as secretary. Thus, November 18, 2013 was the date when AHSRA was formally organized. The participants listed the following goals for the association:

- a) to provide a meeting ground where human-subject researchers studying matters relating to Seventh-day Adventists are able to confer concerning all matters of common interest;
- b) to provide assistance to the Church in accomplishing its mission in, for example, such human-subject research areas as spiritual needs of youth, impact of Adventist beliefs/practices on life quality/chances, strategies for discipline and retention, and strengthening Adventist families;
- (c) to organize regular meetings of the association;
- (d) to provide a body of peer reviewers for major research initiatives that involve human subjects;
- (e) to provide mentorship for less experienced researchers to become involved in well-planned publishable research endeavors;
- (f) to provide opportunities for new collaborations which combine interests of association members which would allow for larger scale research projects;
- (g) to provide professional development opportunities to its members.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the organization of AHSRA, that summit proved an important turning point for the global Seventh-day Adventist Church. For the first time, Adventist

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2 See AHSRA website at <http://ahsra.adventist.org>

researchers and church leaders from all over the world met as peers; they looked, together, at division reports on retention, at research findings from all around the world, and at ways to disciple and retain church members and reclaim former or nominal Adventists. Multiple papers and reports were presented, and the summit resulted in the following statement: “Recommitting, Reconnecting, Reconciling: Reviving Discipleship, Nurturing Believers, and Reuniting with the Missing,” which included a series of recommendations that were later adopted by the GC Executive Committee.<sup>3</sup>

### Other AHSRA Conferences and Developments

Since that first conference, AHSRA has held three more conferences for Adventist researchers. The association met in 2015 at Andrews University; in 2016 at Oakwood University, in Huntsville, Alabama; and in 2017 at Loma Linda University, in Loma Linda, California. Each of these conferences was an important step towards better collaboration among human-subject researchers from different parts of the world and church organizations.

On May 14-16, 2015, AHSRA and ASTR co-sponsored a conference at Andrews University devoted to early career researchers in the social sciences, which reflected one of the goals of AHSRA: to mentor young researchers. Presenters varied by the years of their experience in research and topics of their interests. Some had already worked for a number of years on different projects while others were taking the first steps in empirical research. Papers ranged widely from analysis of Big Data to the beliefs of Millennials, analysis of some approaches in art, church growth, and case studies in several countries. Duane McBride, Petr Činčala, and Sarah Burton were all reelected.

The conference at Oakwood University entitled “The Internalization of Faith” and held on May 9-11, 2016, included participants from different universities and countries alongside Oakwood University faculty. Participants were enriched by professional research presentations on the internalization of faith; some of them were devoted to qualitative research.<sup>4</sup> The organizers included pre-session training on qualitative research by René Drumm—a first for the AHSRA conference. During AHSRA’s business meeting, Duane McBride was reelected as president, while Mordekai Ongo was elected as secretary and René Drumm as treasurer.

For the 2017 annual meeting, Adventist researchers from around the world came to Loma Linda University. The conference, held May 17-20, 2017, had as its theme whole-person health and wellness of people in the public square and the shadow.<sup>5</sup> At the AHSRA board and constituency meeting, the leadership was reelected for another term.

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<sup>3</sup> See more material of the Summit at [http://www.adventistresearch.org/nurture\\_home](http://www.adventistresearch.org/nurture_home)

<sup>4</sup> See some presentations on AHSRA website at <http://ahsra.adventist.org>

<sup>5</sup> See some presentations on AHSRA website at <http://ahsra.adventist.org>

While each AHSRA conference represented a step forward from the previous meeting, this was especially true of the conference at Loma Linda. Over one hundred conference participants were registered, nineteen being from other countries. Attendance was high with over 70% present on the first day and over 40% for the last session on Friday afternoon. The conference was again preceded by a short training session lead by Rhonda Spencer-Hwang on writing a successful abstract. Keynote speaker, the distinguished medical researcher Vincet Felititi, made a wonderful presentation, showing results from his extensive research on the influence of certain factors during childhood that can determine a person's life and health in the future. Also, for the first time in AHSRA meetings, there was a poster session which gave a great opportunity to more than 20 researchers for presenting their projects. A variety of colorful posters designed by researchers from different countries and institutions added a special touch to that conference.

At Loma Linda conference, on Friday afternoon, David Trim conducted a meeting of division research team leaders supervising the 2017 Global Church Member Survey. This project was commissioned by the General Conference Future Plans Working Group, a strategic planning committee, and was a successor to the survey administered in 2012-2013 in nine divisions. This time, research teams were working in all thirteen of the Seventh-day Adventist world divisions. Deadlines, uniformity of data entry, platform for database, and so forth were discussed and agreed on. This conference showed that the work started by three pioneers in Adventist human-subject research has been growing from year to year, uniting researchers from all parts of the world into a powerful force, while also directly feeding into Adventist Church planning and decision-making.

The conference concluded with a worship experience on Friday evening and Sabbath morning which united the Adventist researchers even more in reflection on the One who directs the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### **Achievements**

The seven years of ASTR's involvement in human-subject research, including its partnerships with Adventist educational institutions; the NAD Office of Strategy, Research, and Assessment; and the ICM have turned out to be very fruitful. Now there are two websites ([www.adventistresearch.org](http://www.adventistresearch.org) and <http://ahsra.org>) devoted to promoting and sharing Adventist empirical research. The research funded and facilitated by ASTR does not remain secret (as with some past church-financed research projects). Instead, ASTR shares findings from global research projects, as well as information about research conferences and about the global Church strategic plan with church leaders, researchers, and church members. It disseminates research data through the ASTR Research e-Newsletter and blogs are available in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. The ICM team led by Činčala was instrumental in creating both websites, along with an online "storehouse" of human-subject research reports, papers, and dissertations from different

institutions; this digital storehouse can be accessed via a search window on the main ASTR website. Research data are also disseminated via ASTR's social media: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; and by the AHSRA Facebook page.

This mission-effectiveness evaluation of *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World* magazines, Hope Channel International, Sun Plus accounting software, and Adventist World Radio successfully undertaken by ASTR during this time would not have been possible without the involvement of external research teams. Focus group projects in the NAD as part of research on giving to mission in the NAD became possible because of the support of Paul Brantley and the Division administration. As well as more research, the quality of global strategic planning research has also improved. This year, the first time in Adventist Church history, a meta-analysis of Church Member Survey data from all thirteen divisions will be done by Andrews University-based researchers, led by Duane McBride and Karl Bailey. This will be an invaluable basis for strategic planning for the 2020–2025 quinquennium.

### **Future of Adventist Research**

Does empirical research have a future in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Do social researchers need their own association? The past five years of AHSRA—filled with these conferences, researchers' interactions, local and global projects—proved that we do, as researchers, but also that the Church needs it, too. Adventist researchers need a platform to share their expertise, research findings, methodologies, vision, and challenges. The Seventh-day Adventist Church needs them, perhaps even more now than ever before. In the era of technological progress, increasing diversity, and growing membership (a growing percentage of whom, on every continent, are well-educated, professional people), church plans should be founded on solid data. The network of social science researchers and their collaboration with the Church has become a necessity.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church needs the skills, talents, and the expertise of human-subject researchers; their contribution to the Church's mission is invaluable. Combined efforts from church leaders and researchers can have a positive impact on the Church and the world. We must emphasize the idea stressed in the theme of the coming 2018 AHSRA annual conference at Andrews University, which has the following title: "Our Research Data Makes a Difference: Transforming the Church and Community."

So, why an Adventist Human-Subject Researchers Association? How can human-subject researchers contribute to the Seventh-day Adventist Church? The first pages of this experience have been written, and there are many more to come. Adventist researchers are a mighty force in terms of their ability to generate vital data, and in terms of growing numbers, around the world; AHSRA is also a powerful tool for enhancing the quality and standards of Adventist research and advancing the Church's mission. Without this tool, we believe it is impossible for the Church to move forward, successfully, into the future.

Jesus said: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” (Luke 14:28, NIV) And this relates not only to the cost. The Church needs those who can assess projects, investigate reality, and help better understand human behavior.

May God bless the professionals whom AHSRA unites and may He lead them to new horizons in Adventist research!