Mission and Retention

Statistics and research data on retention and loss

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Retention and non-retention are vital issues for mission and for church growth—unless we do much better at keeping church members, we will never reach the world
First a look at objective data — then at subjective data

1. What do church statistics tell us?

Starting in 1965 the church has categorized “accessions” and “losses”: 51 years of data!
World: Gains and Losses, 1965–2015

Net Losses

Accessions (Baptism+Profession of Faith)
Global accessions vs. lost, 2000–2015

Loss rate = 49 per hundred new converts
Global accessions vs. lost, 1965–2015

Loss rate = 42 per hundred new converts

Total accessions: 32,876,948
Total live losses: 13,737,025
In the last 50 years the total number of baptized Seventh-day Adventists = 34,385,004
Of these, 13,737,025 have left the Church

Net loss rate = 39.95%
Global lost: dropped vs. missing, 1965–2015

Global dropped: 6,500,914
Global missing and unknown: 7,236,111

Are 111.31% of the dropped
TED: Dropped 2001–15
TED: Cumulative Losses, 2001–15
2. The departed

Research findings from two global surveys of Seventh-day Adventists
Two Studies of lapsed Adventists

In 2011, Seventh-day Adventist church leaders, concerned about evidence that a large proportion of its members were leaving the church, decided to carry out worldwide research into the factors that may be involved. Because of the nature of this research, two studies were carried out: one qualitative, one quantitative—both were global.

1. The General Conference strategic planning group contracted the Center for Creative Ministry, an American Adventist research group, to carry out qualitative research, consisting of in-depth interviews, but with results to be summarized in quantitative form.
Two Studies of lapsed Adventists

2. Under the leadership of the General Conference Nurture and Retention Committee, a detailed survey was developed by the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR) with the purpose of it being administered to members who were no longer attending worship services (“left”), along with a companion (and parallel) survey to be administered to members who had previously left the church for a period of time, but had “returned” to active church membership.

Many of the findings of the studies complement each other, which adds confidence to the conclusions. This presentation includes data from both research projects.
1. Strategic planning-related study

A total of 925 interviews were conducted in many parts of the world during 2012. The interviews used a standard interview guide approved by the GC office of Archives, Statistics, and Research. The interviewers were Doctor of Ministry graduates of Andrews University who have participated in research projects both as graduate students and since graduating, as well as experienced staff interviewers.
2. Nurture and Retention Committee Study

Year conducted: 2012
Respondents: 785
First survey: Members who no longer attended worship services ("left")
Second survey: Members who had previously left the church for a period of time, but began attending church again, or returned to active church membership ("returned")
Nurture and Retention Study
Survey Details (cont.)

> Basic demographic information
> Attendance of SDA/Non-SDA schools
> Five most important causes for initially becoming SDA
> Reason for leaving SDA church
> Length of time as practicing members and od regular church attendance
> 20 possible factors that triggered decision to leave
> Free-form section on why people decide to leave
> Length of time since last attended SDA church
> If returned, length of absence from SDA church
Nurture and Retention Study
Areas Survey Explored

> Possible connections between Adventist education leaving the church
> Frequency of involvement in community service and spiritual activities
> Opinions of organized religion
> Exploration of personal beliefs, including authority of Scripture, gift of prophecy manifested in Ellen White, etc.
> Degree to which belief in God continued after leaving
> Nature of current ties to Adventism
> How they felt about the church when they left
> Rate of openness to reconnect with SDA church
> If attending SDA church again, reason for reconnection
Two Studies of lapsed Adventists: global variations?

✧ Demographic data varies between all divisions
✧ Data on reasons why people joined the Church varies, sometimes significantly, between divisions
✧ However, data relating to why people stopped attending church and left the church is essentially the same in each division
✧ Human needs and expectations seem to be the same around the globe
✧ On reflection, this should not be surprising:
✧ Sin and its consequences—hurting people—are the same everywhere
Demographics and conversion routes

- Gender and age
- Marital status
- Religious background
Demographics: Gender

Women: 59%
Men: 41%

Global church membership: Women 57% Men 43%
Demographics: Age (now)

- 60-65: 3.2%
- 66-72: 2.2%
- 73+: 2.4%
- 53-59: 9.2%
- 47-52: 11.7%
- 40-46: 18.4%
- 33-39: 20.1%
- 25-32: 17.2%
- 18-24: 15.5%
World Church, current members: age distribution

- Under 40 = Ex-members 53%
- Current membership 59%

- 29.40% 16-25
- 5.47% 22.85%
- 32.07% 26-40
- 10.22% Over 60
- 22.85% 15 and under
Lapsed/ex-members: Age When First Started Attending the Adventist Church

- Under age 10: 26%
- Ages 10-17: 23%
- Ages 18-29: 38%
- Ages 30-39: 9%
- Age 40 and older: 5%
Stage of Life at Departure

- Young Adult: 62.55%
- Middle Aged: 34.52%
- Child (never baptized): 1.27%
- Old Age: 0.13%
Demographic Information (Marital Status) Former Members

- Single: 25.6%
- Married: 53.1%
- Living with partner: 6.9%
- Separated: 4.6%
- Divorced: 7.2%
- Remarried: 2.6%
Demographic Information (Marital Status) Returned Members

- Single: 40.8%
- Married: 42.0%
- Living with partner: 6.1%
- Separated: 4.4%
- Divorced: 5.5%
- Remarried: 1.2%
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
- >% From a radio or television ministry
- 4% Other things
Religion Before Joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church

- Named a religion: 45%
- No religion: 27%
- Raised an Adventist: 28%
How **ADVENTIST** were they?

Were they *well grounded* in our faith?

Were they spiritually *active*?
What most attracted you when you decided to join the Adventist Church?

All interviewees were asked to rank all four of these:

- **Friendship**: 12% Little or no attraction, 31% Some attraction, 56% Much attraction
- **Doctrines**: 7% Little or no attraction, 21% Some attraction, 72% Much attraction
- **Charisma of preacher**: 19% Little or no attraction, 29% Some attraction, 52% Much attraction
- **My needs**: 40% Little or no attraction, 23% Some attraction, 37% Much attraction

Each = 100%
Time from First Contact to Baptism

- Five years or more: 33%
- Three or four years: 15%
- One or two years: 13%
- Less than a year: 39%
Number of Years Regularly Attended an Adventist Church

- One year or less: 9%
- Two to four years: 17%
- Five to nine years: 21%
- 10 to 19 years: 27%
- 20 to 29 years: 13%
- 30 or more years: 5%

But people who attended fewer years are less likely to have been surveyed.
How would you describe the instruction given when you joined the church?

- Very thorough: 19%
- Thorough: 38%
- Enough: 24%
- Inadequate: 11%
- Very little: 8%
All who left—Frequency of Spiritual Activities (before leaving):
Personal Bible Study

- Daily or more than once a day: 32%
- More than once a week: 39%
- About once a week: 17%
- Less than once a month: 10%
- Never: 2%

Multiple times per week = 71%
Current church members: personal Bible-study

- Daily or more than once a day: 42%
- More than once a week: 32%
- About once a week: 17%
- Less than once a month: 7%
- Never: 2%

Multiple times per week = 74%
How ADVENTIST are they now?

(Or, Why they didn’t leave)

Since many seem to have been active SDAs, the obvious that question arises is:

How sympathetic are these ex-Adventists to what we believe?
Do you still believe in the authority of Scripture, as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church? – Former Members

- Yes: 79%
- No: 6%
- I’m not sure: 8%
- I believe scripture has some authority, but less than Adventists teach: 7%
Do you still believe in the authority of Scripture, as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church? – Returned Members

- Yes: 89%
- No: 2%
- I believe scripture has some authority, but less than Adventists teach: 5%
- I’m not sure: 4%
Do you still believe in the gift of prophecy manifested in Ellen White? – Returned Members

Yes: 81%
No: 5%
I’m not sure: 14%
Do you still believe in the gift of prophesy manifested in Ellen White? – Former Members

- Yes: 58%
- I’m not sure: 28%
- No: 14%
View of Adventist Church: first 5 Years after Baptism

- Excited by everything: 27.64%
- Appreciated community: 9.68%
- Happy to have the special Bible truth: 29.04%
- Expected to find something I was missing: 8.54%
- Couldn’t live up to the lifestyle: 12.48%
- Couldn’t keep Sabbath regularly: 9.17%
Change in View of Adventist Church: 5 years before Departure?

- No: 43.31%
- Yes, questioning doctrine: 10.32%
- Yes, frustrated by the people: 20.00%
- Yes, losing connectedness: 20.89%
Timing of Change in Attitude Toward Doctrine

75% report no change in attitude to SDA doctrine!

- 5.99% in the first five years
- 4.33% between baptism and last five years
- 5.86% five years before leaving
- 8.66% last 12 months before leaving
I still considered myself a Christian and was eager to join a different denomination

I still considered myself a Christian but did not want to join a different denomination

I didn’t want anything more to do with any aspect of it

I had doubts about certain aspects of Christianity

I agreed with it in principle, but didn’t like my fellow Christians very much anymore

What did you think of Christianity at the time you left the Adventist church? (All Survey 2)
What did you think of the Adventist church at the time you left it? – Former Members

- It had just become irrelevant to my life: 17%
- I was angry over the way it treated me: 19%
- I felt that it was cold and inflexible: 16%
- I felt that it lacked integrity in its behavior or theology: 8%
- I thought highly of it, but I had lost touch: 16%
- I thought highly of it, but I felt I could not live up to its standards: 24%
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3. Stopping the haemorrhage, healing the wounded

Creating caring and welcoming church communities
Life Events in the Year Leading Up to Decision to Stop Attending

- 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%
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
Most Important Reasons Why Decided to Stop Attending

• 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
What event triggered your decision to leave? (weighted) (all survey 2)
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
Is your name still on the membership list?

- Yes: 23%
- No: 16%
- Not sure: 60%
Did you decide to withdraw or were you expelled from the church?

- Never discussed with me: 52%
- Decided by others: 8%
- My decision: 40%
Pastors need to be equipped and trained—and then they can train elders and church-members

In light of these statistics, which show pastors engage very little with members who stop attending church, it is not surprising to find that 53% of global pastors say they never received training in nurturing and retaining members in their first degrees; the same proportion (53%) say that they also received no training in these areas in postgraduate study.
Other factors affecting retention and loss

EDUCATION
Adventist Education a Factor in Departure?

- Yes: 76%
- No: 17%
- Don't know: 7%
Educational Influences to Stay

1 - early education more influential: 39.7%
2: 6.1%
3 - early and later education equally influential: 29.0%
4: 3.8%
5 - later education more influential: 21.4%
Type of Educational Institution Attended: Primary

- SDA: 12.36%
- Non-SDA: 60.89%
- Both: 5.73%
Type of Educational Institution Attended: Secondary

- SDA: 14.27%
- Non-SDA: 56.69%
- Both: 5.10%
Type of Educational Institution Attended: Tertiary

- SDA: 6.88%
- Non-SDA: 27.39%
- Both: 1.66%
Percentage of church members (worldwide) with different levels of Adventist education

- Elementary Schooling: 36.13%
- Secondary Schooling: 26.89%
- Higher Education: 36.99%
Adventist education helps to keep members in the Church

People who have left the church are proportionately less likely to have experienced Adventist education, at all levels, than the majority of church members.

To improve retention: prioritise Adventist education!
Factors affecting reconnection and reclamation

Might they comeback?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nominal Adventist, inactive</td>
<td>40.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>active in other Christian</td>
<td>8.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inactive in other Christian</td>
<td>2.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;not religious but spiritual&quot;</td>
<td>15.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>member of other religion</td>
<td>0.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don't know</td>
<td>7.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drifting</td>
<td>7.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>8.79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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? (Former Members)

- 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? (Former Members)

- Likely: 36%
- Somewhat likely: 21%
- Somewhat unlikely: 12%
- Very unlikely: 12%
- Depends on circumstances of approach: 19%
Table 37: Correlation between Visitations after leaving and openness to reconnect with the Church – Former Members

- Yes -- Likely: 62%
- Yes -- Unlikely: 22%
- No -- Likely: 9%
- No -- Unlikely: 7%
Table 38: Correlation between social relationships with Adventists and Openness to reconnect – Former Members
Guidance from the Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy
Luke 15:4–6

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he
calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”
Lessons from the Spirit of Prophecy

“The shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is missing, does not look ... on the flock that is safely housed, and say, “I have ninety and nine, and it will cost me too much trouble to go in search of the straying one. Let him come back and I will open the door ... and let him in.” No; no sooner does the sheep go astray than the shepherd is filled with grief
and anxiety. He counts and recounts the flock. When he is sure that one sheep is lost, he slumbers not. He leaves the ninety and nine ... and goes in search of the straying sheep. The darker ... the night, and the more perilous the way, the greater is the shepherd’s anxiety, and the more earnest his search. He makes every effort to find that one lost sheep.”

*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 187
Lesson to be learned

God’s desired retention rate? 100%!

We are missing many more than one sheep out of every hundred.

Are we unwilling to follow our Lord and Saviour’s example?
John 21:15–17

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”
John 21:15–17
He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”
Lesson to be learned

Meaning:

*If* you love Me, *then* you will feed my sheep.

How much do we love Our Lord?
Final lesson: the Good Shepherd

“In the parable the shepherd goes out to search for one sheep—the very least that can be numbered. So if there had been but one lost soul, Christ would have died for that one.”

Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 187
What should we do?

Recommendations
Strategies

- **Administrators** need to prioritize discipleship and let pastors know that is a priority.
- **Pastors** need to be encouraged/trained to work collaboratively with **elders** and church members.
- **Small groups** have a **vital** role to play.
- South Philippines Union: suffered terrible attrition and introduced a new measure: *every* new member, the moment after baptism, is introduced to a small group which will be their spiritual family.
1. Every union to have an active discipleship program: General Conference recommends “Growing Fruitful Disciples . . .
Discipleship is life.

http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/
Recommendations

1. Every union to have a discipleship program: GC recommends “Growing Fruitful Disciples” (adapted to local contexts).

2. Adopt attendance counts as standard, to highlight the issue of who is attending — and who is not

3. Adopt membership software for keeping records of members, to help pastors and elders be aware of who is slipping away
4. Specific training in nurture–retention–discipling to become part of ministerial education at Newbold and any other seminaries in TED

5. Implement comprehensive, practical training in conflict resolution and reconciliation at all levels: union and conference/mission employees and in local churches
Recommendations

6. Each division to organize conferences on nurture, retention, and discipling:

   One involving administrators and academics, then further conferences in territories, sharing data and good practice with pastors and elders
Recommendations

7. Every union to appoint a Nurture and Retention Coordinator; and to establish a Nurture and Retention Committee, chaired by one of the officers, with the Coordinator as secretary, and to include the following departmental directors:

Children’s Ministries, Education, Family Ministries, Ministerial, Sabbath School & Personal Ministries, Women’s Ministries, Youth Ministries
First global Summit on Nurture, Retention, and Discipling

All the presentations given at the 2013 World Summit on Nurture, Retention, and Discipling are available:

https://www.adventistarchives.org/summit-on-nurture-and-retention-2013 (along with audio recordings of discussion sessions that followed each presentation)
http://www.adventistresearch.org/research_reports: Full reports on both studies of former and inactive members summarised in this presentation

http://www.adventistresearch.org/astr_presentations

Copies of my reports to Annual Council in 2014 & 2015 which draw out key findings and statistics

https://www.adventistarchives.org/ay-connect.pdf:
Report on factors affecting retention and sense of connectedness among Adventist young people