

Leaving the Church: Facts and Figures about Retention

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**First a look at objective data —
then at subjective data**

What do church statistics tell us?

**Starting in 1965 the church has categorized
“accessions” and “losses”: 51 years of data!**

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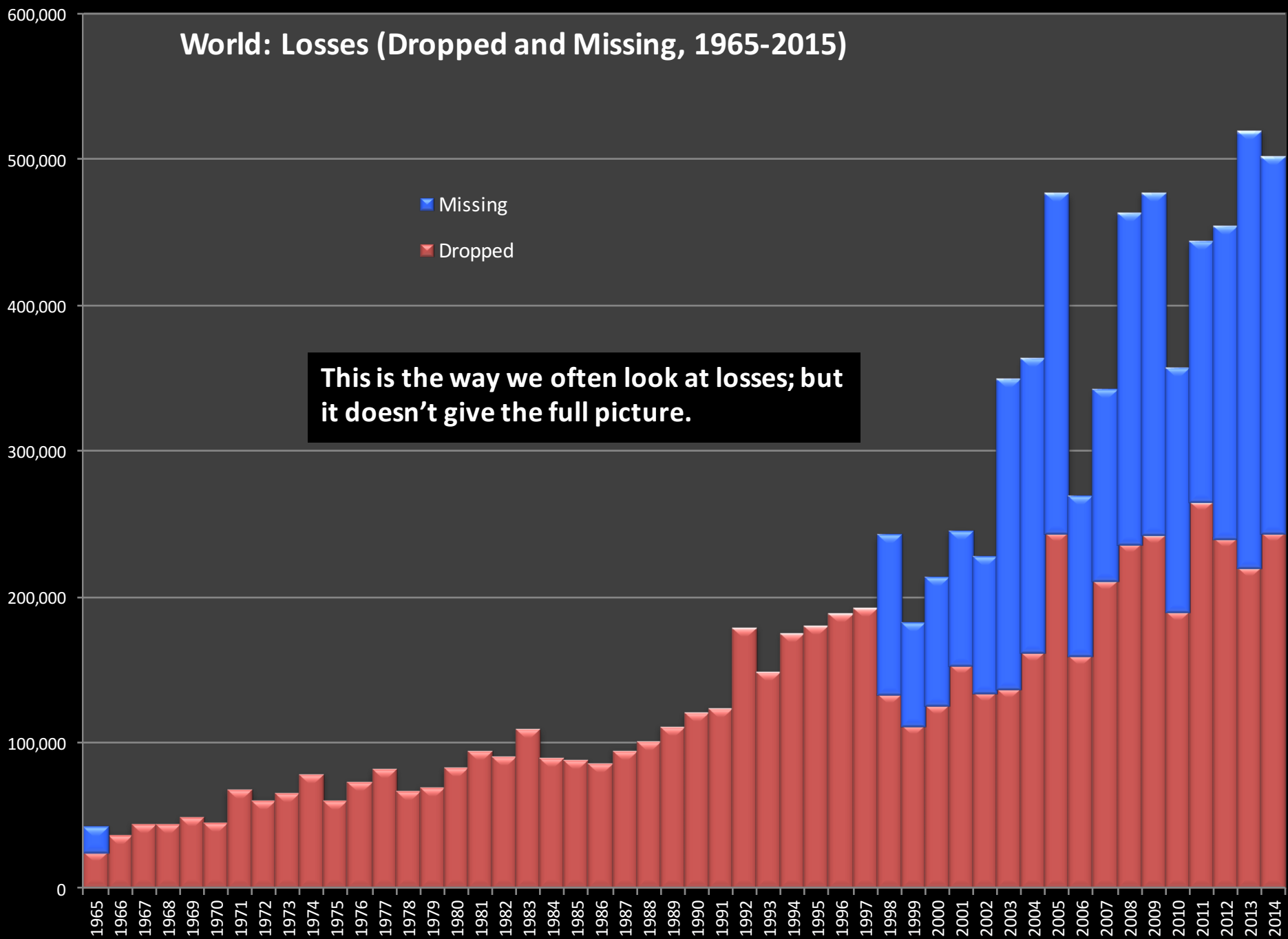


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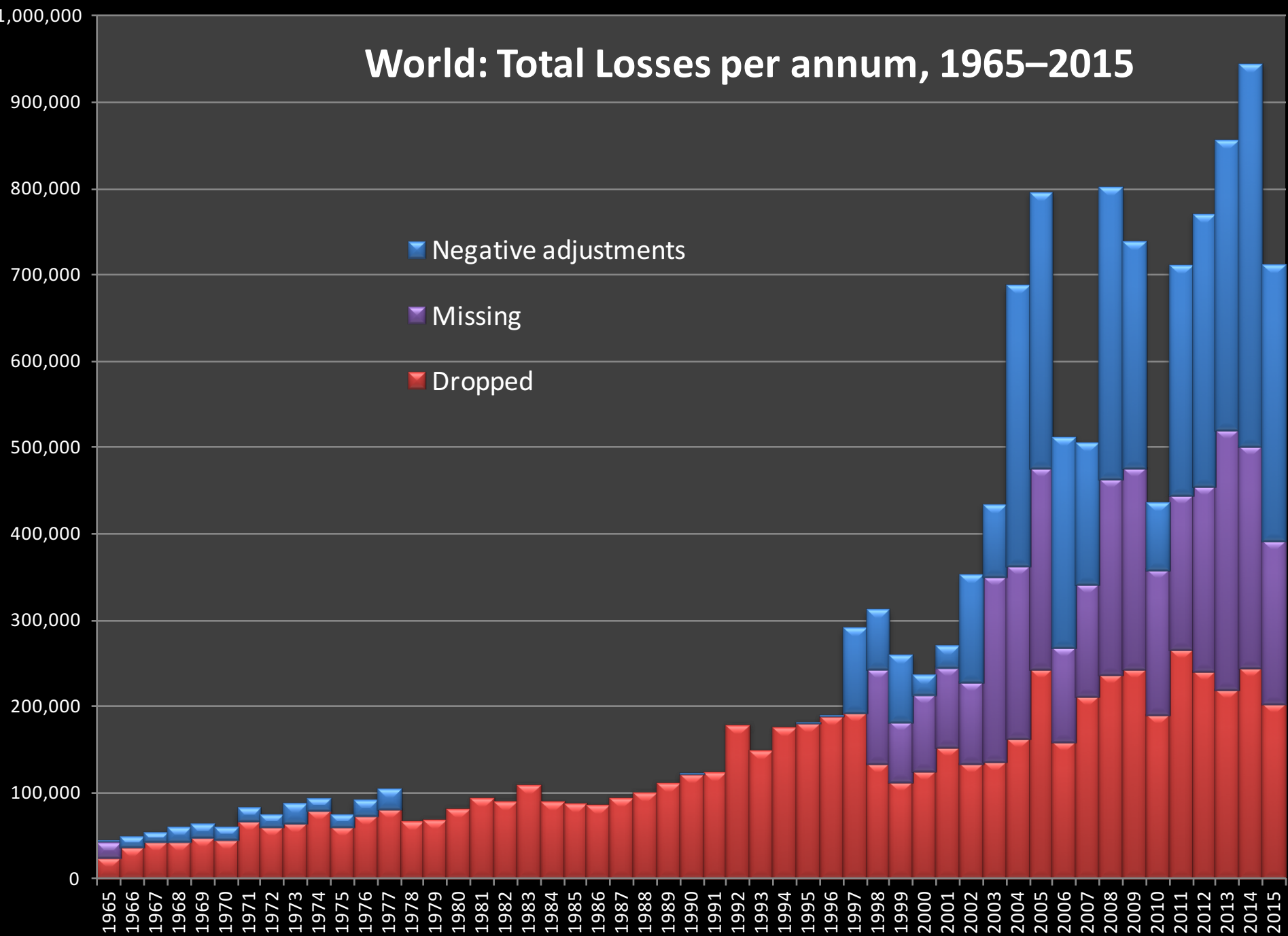
World: Losses (Dropped and Missing, 1965-2015)

Missing
Dropped

This is the way we often look at losses; but it doesn't give the full picture.

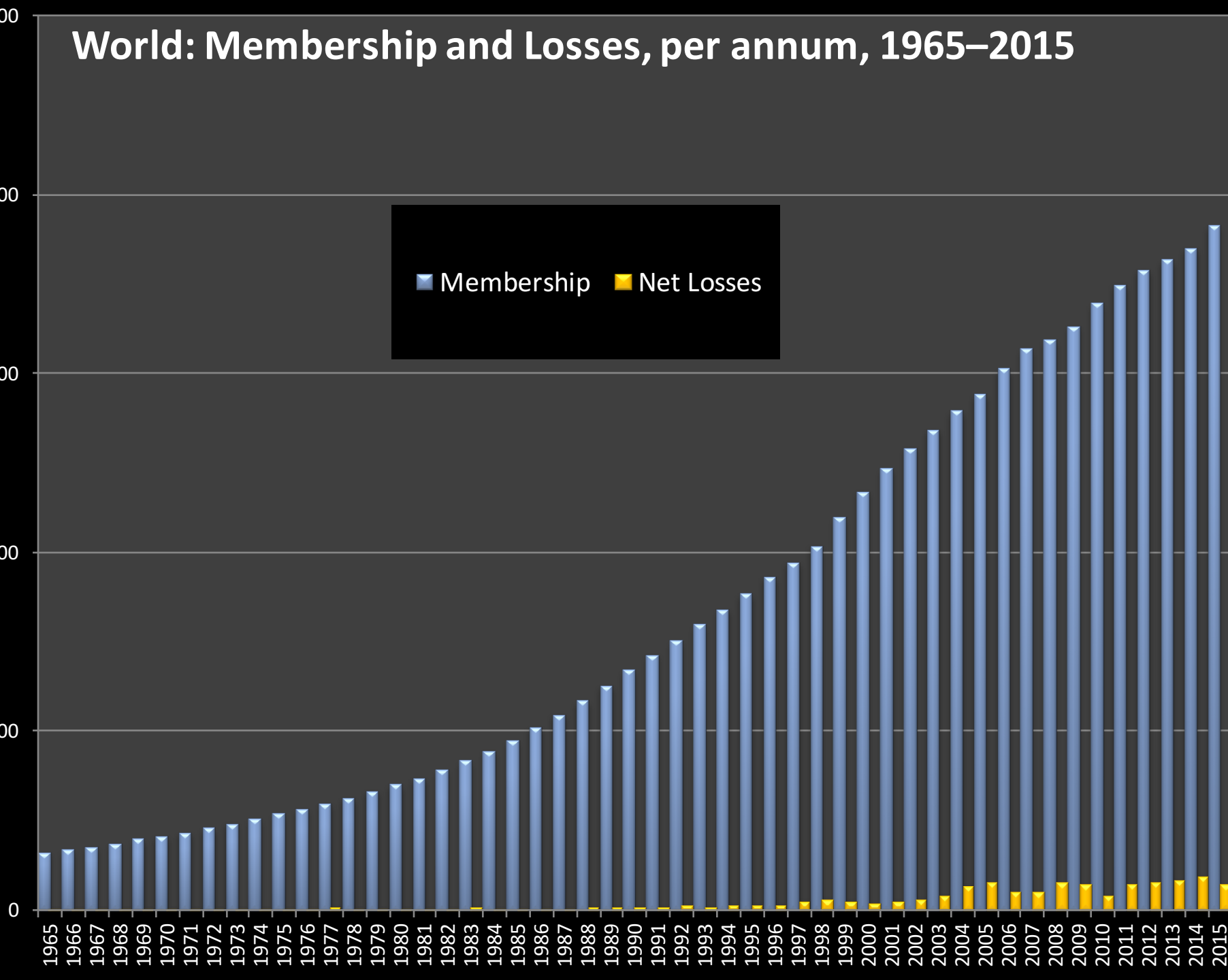


World: Total Losses per annum, 1965–2015

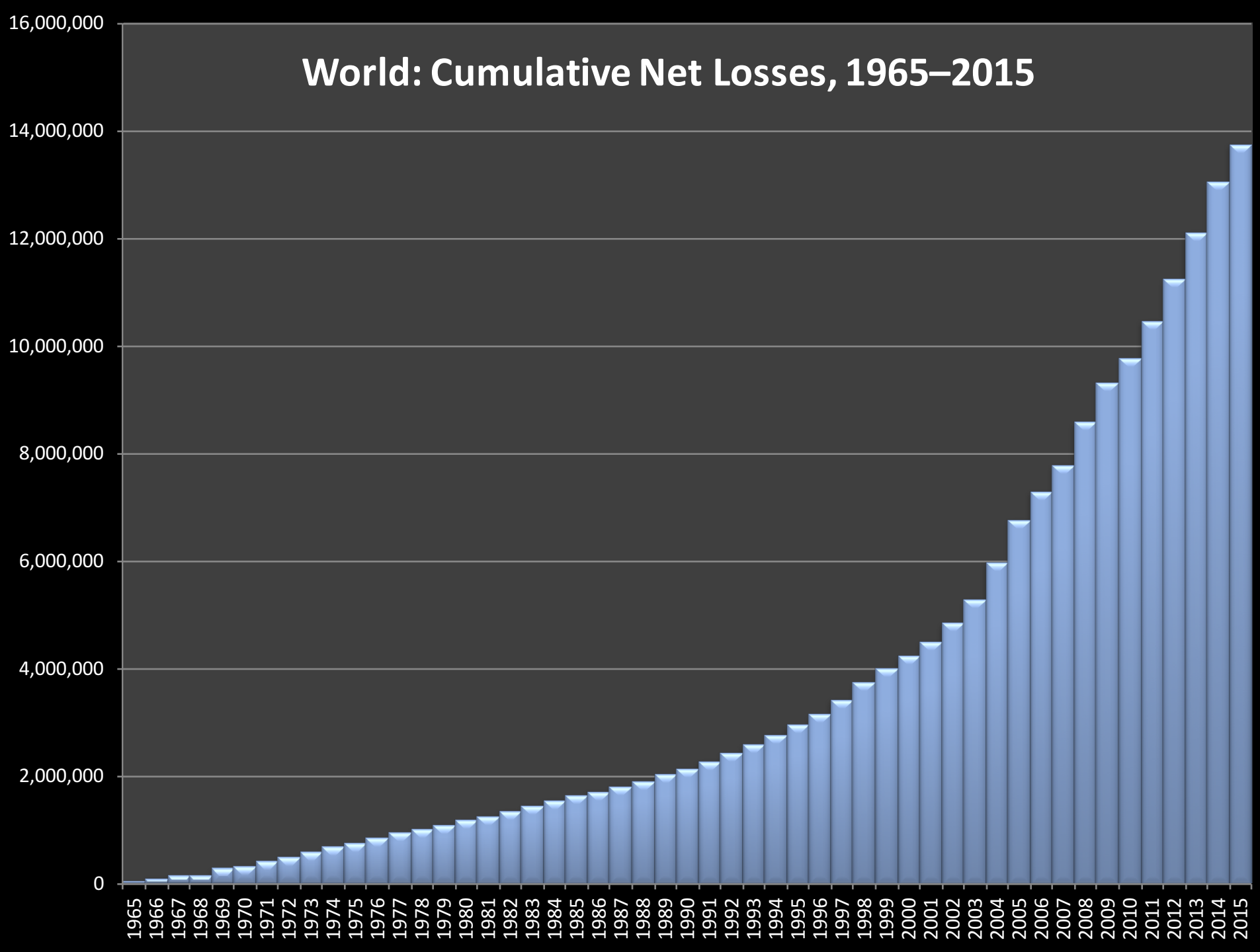


World: Membership and Losses, per annum, 1965–2015

Membership Net Losses



World: Cumulative Net Losses, 1965–2015

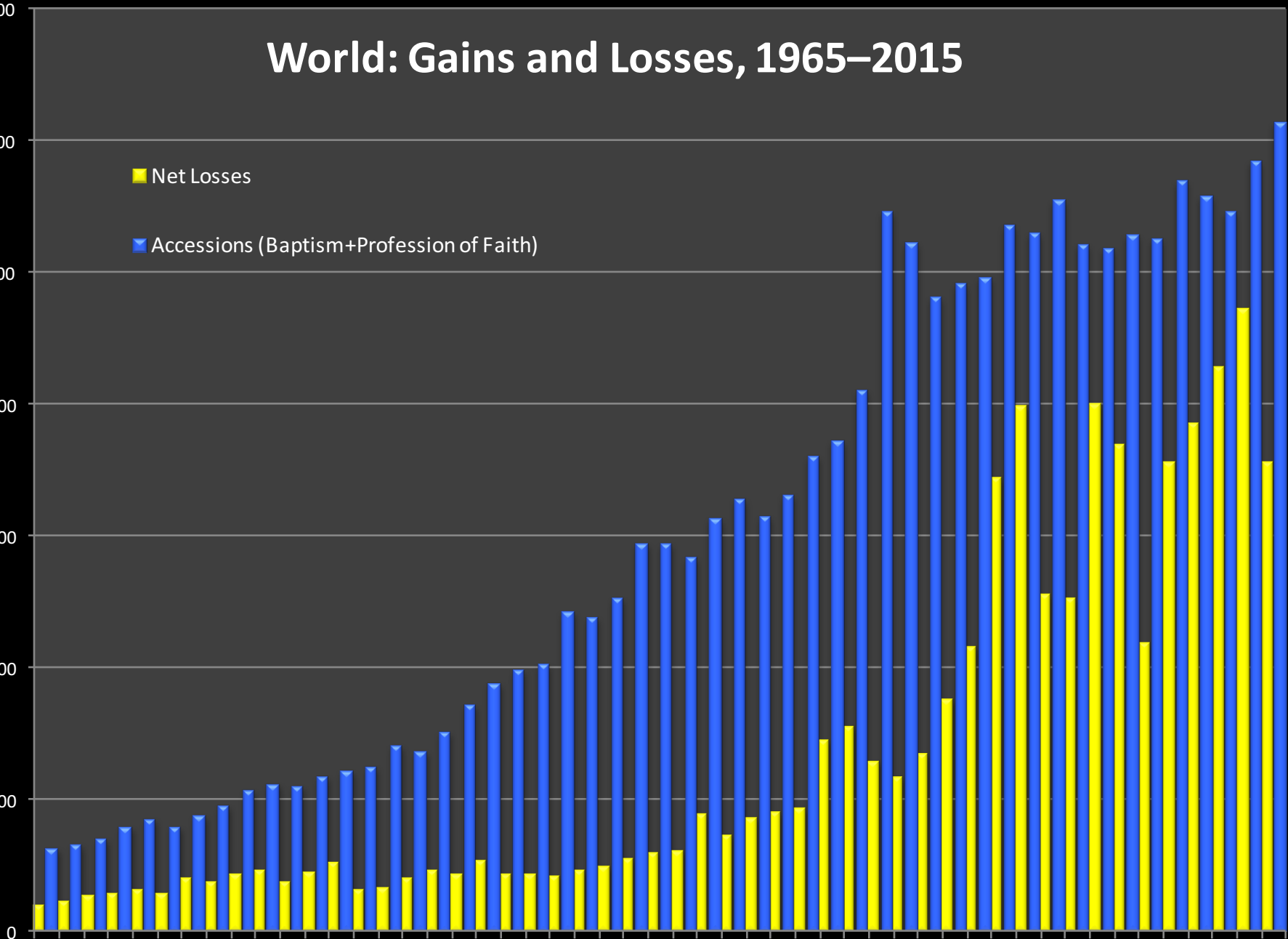


World: Gains and Losses, 1965–2015

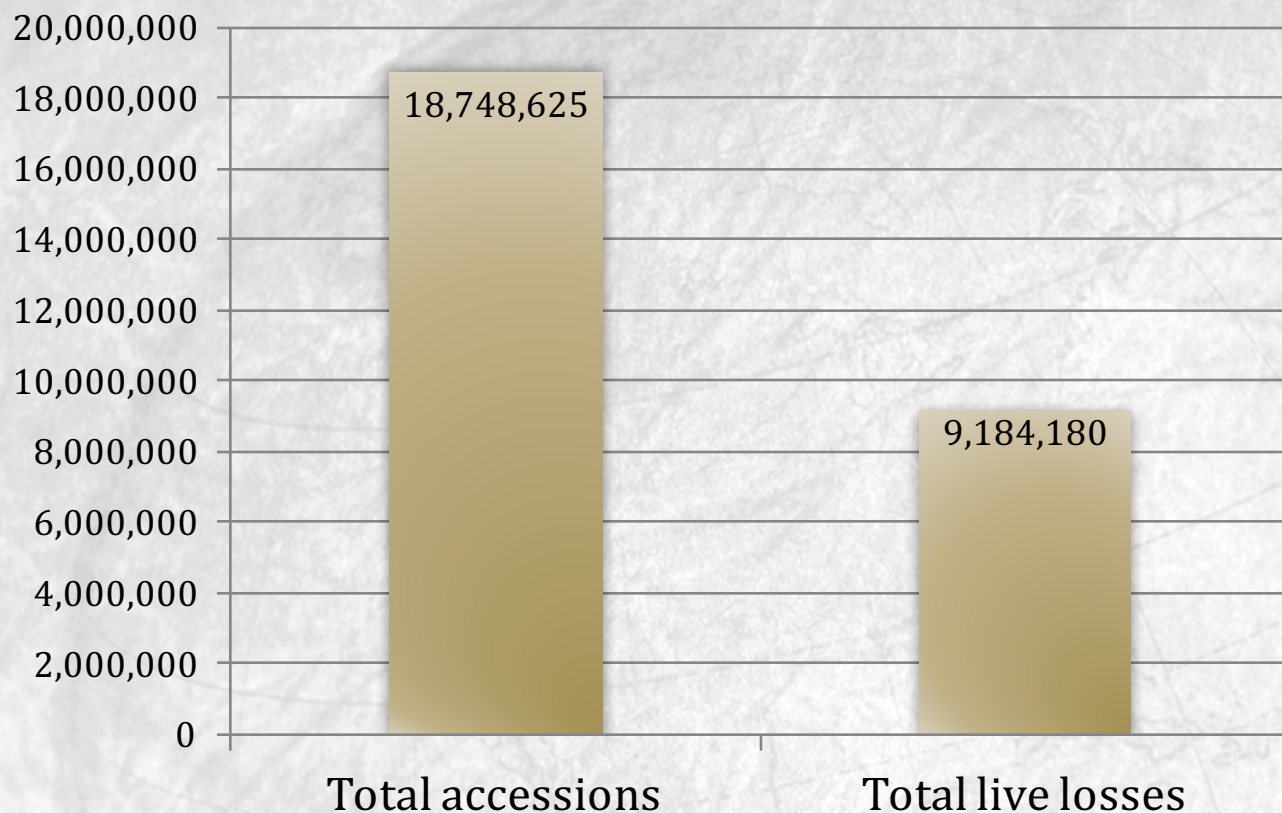
■ Net Losses

■ Accessions (Baptism+Profession of Faith)

1965 1966 1967 1968 1969 1970 1971 1972 1973 1974 1975 1976 1977 1978 1979 1980 1981 1982 1983 1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015



Global accessions vs. lost, 2000–2015



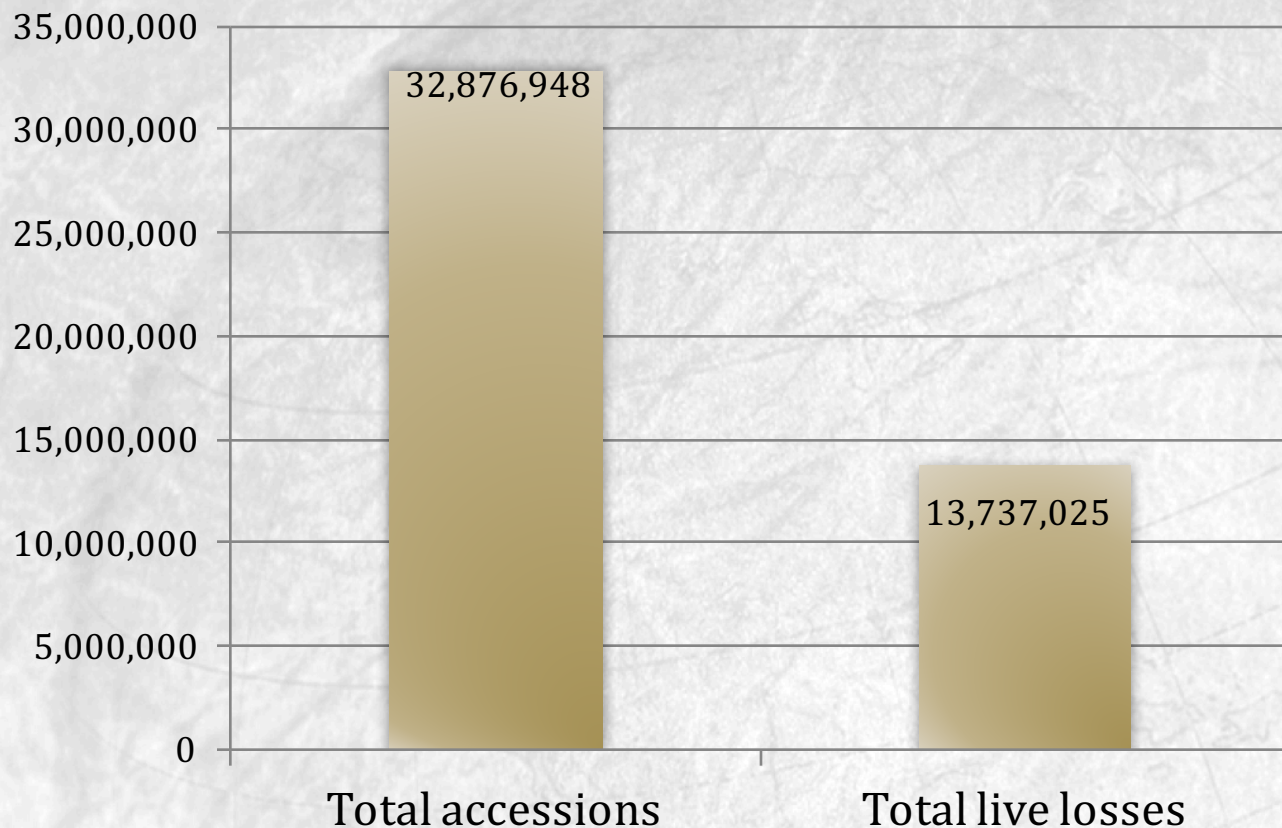
**Loss rate = 49
per hundred
new converts**

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Global accessions vs. lost, 1965–2015



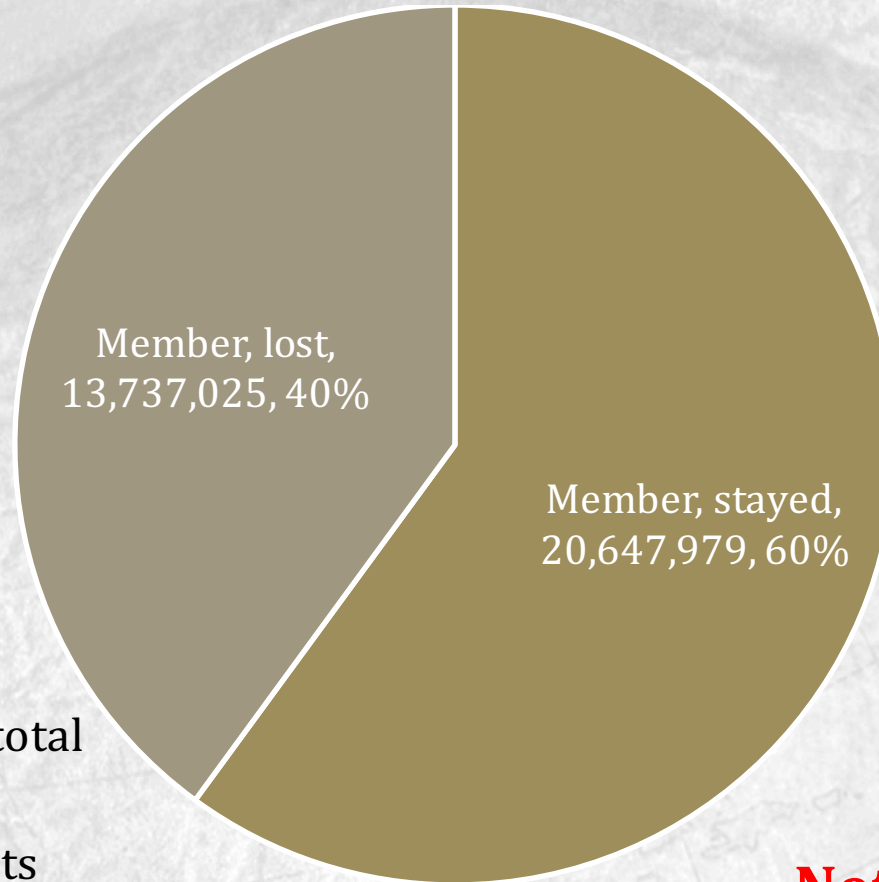
**Loss rate = 42
per hundred
new converts**

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Global membership and loss, fifty-one years, 1965–2015

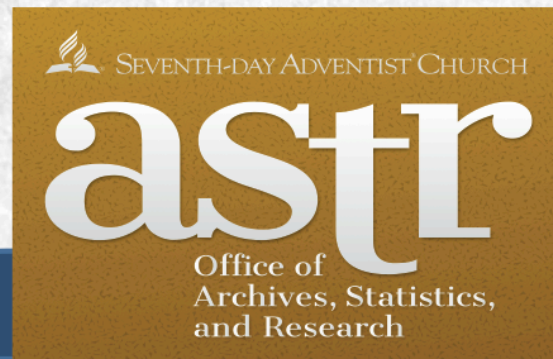


In the last 50 years the total
number of baptized
Seventh-day Adventists

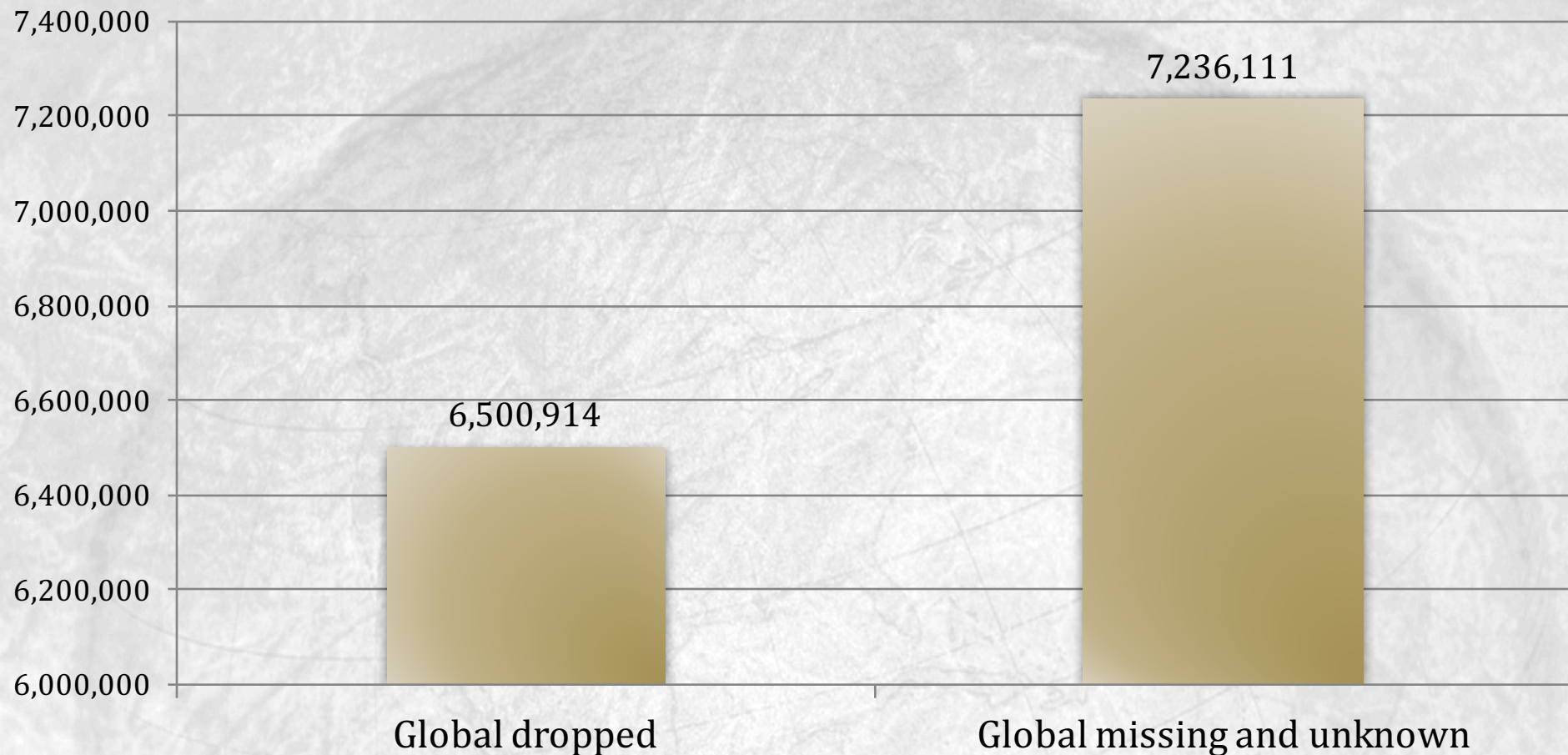
= 34,385,004

Of these, **13,737,025**
have left the Church

**Net loss rate =
39.95%**



Global lost: dropped vs. missing, 1965–2015



111.31% more than the
dropped

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2. Why did They Leave? Why Might They Come Back?

Research findings from two global surveys
of Seventh-day Adventists

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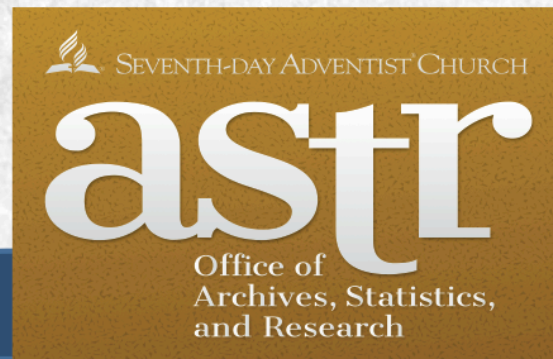
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Two Studies of lapsed Adventists

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.

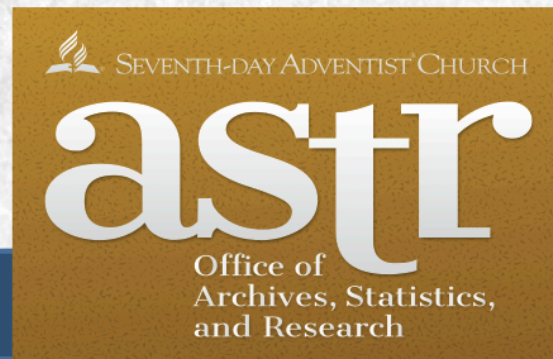
1. The General Conference strategic planning group contracted the Center for Creative Ministry, an American Adventist research group, to carry out qualitative research, consisting of in-depth interviews, but with results to be summarized in quantitative form.



Two Studies of lapsed Adventists

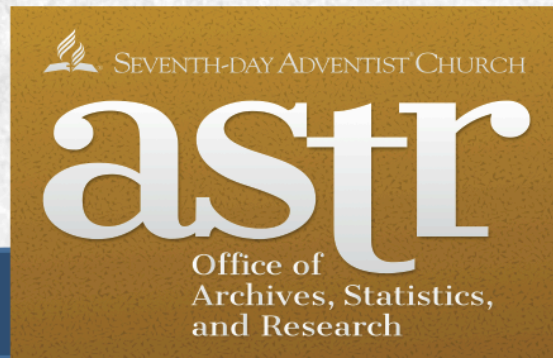
2. Under the leadership of the General Conference Nurture and Retention Committee, a detailed survey was developed by the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR) with the purpose of it being administered to members who were no longer attending worship services (“left”), along with a companion (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.



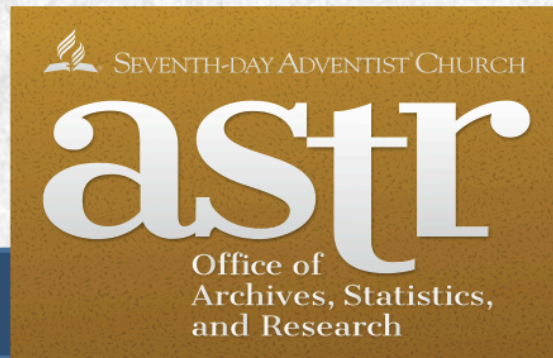
2. Nurture and Retention Committee Study

Year conducted: 2012

Respondents: 785

First survey: Members who no longer attended worship services (“left”)

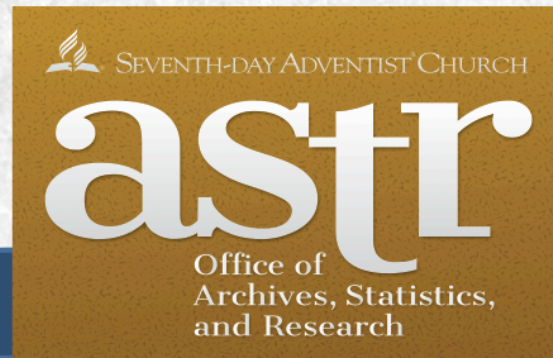
Second survey: Members who had previously left the church for a period of time, but began attending church again, or returned to active church membership (“returned”)



Nurture and Retention Study

Survey Details (cont.)

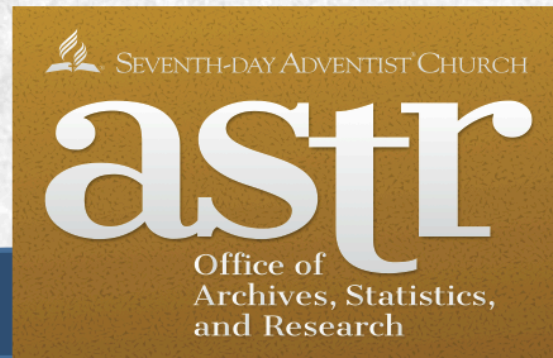
- > Basic demographic information
- > Attendance of SDA/Non-SDA schools
- > Five most important causes for initially becoming SDA
- > Reason for leaving SDA church
- > Length of time as practicing members and of regular church attendance



Nurture and Retention Study

Survey Details (cont.)

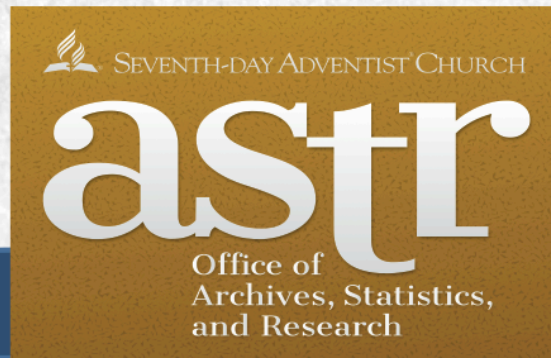
- > 20 possible factors that triggered decision to leave
- > Free-form section on why people decide to leave
- > Length of time since last attended SDA church
- > If returned, length of absence from SDA church



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.



Nurture and Retention Study

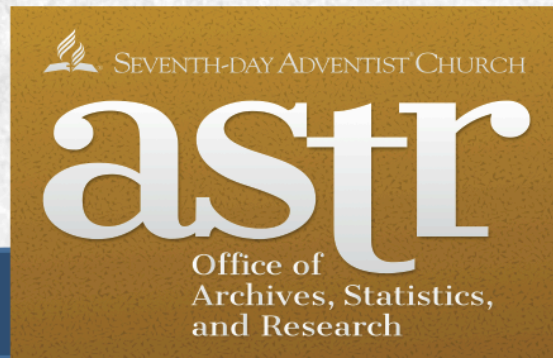
Areas Survey Explored

- > Degree to which belief in God continued after leaving
- > Nature of current ties to Adventism
- > How they felt about the church when they left
- > Extent of openness to reconnecting with SDA church
- > If attending SDA church again, reasons for reconnection



Two Studies of lapsed Adventists: global variations?

- ✧ Demographic data varies between divisions
- ✧ Data on reasons why people *joined* the Church varies, sometimes significantly, between divisions
- ✧ However, **data relating to *why* people stopped attending 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
- How they became Seventh-day Adventist

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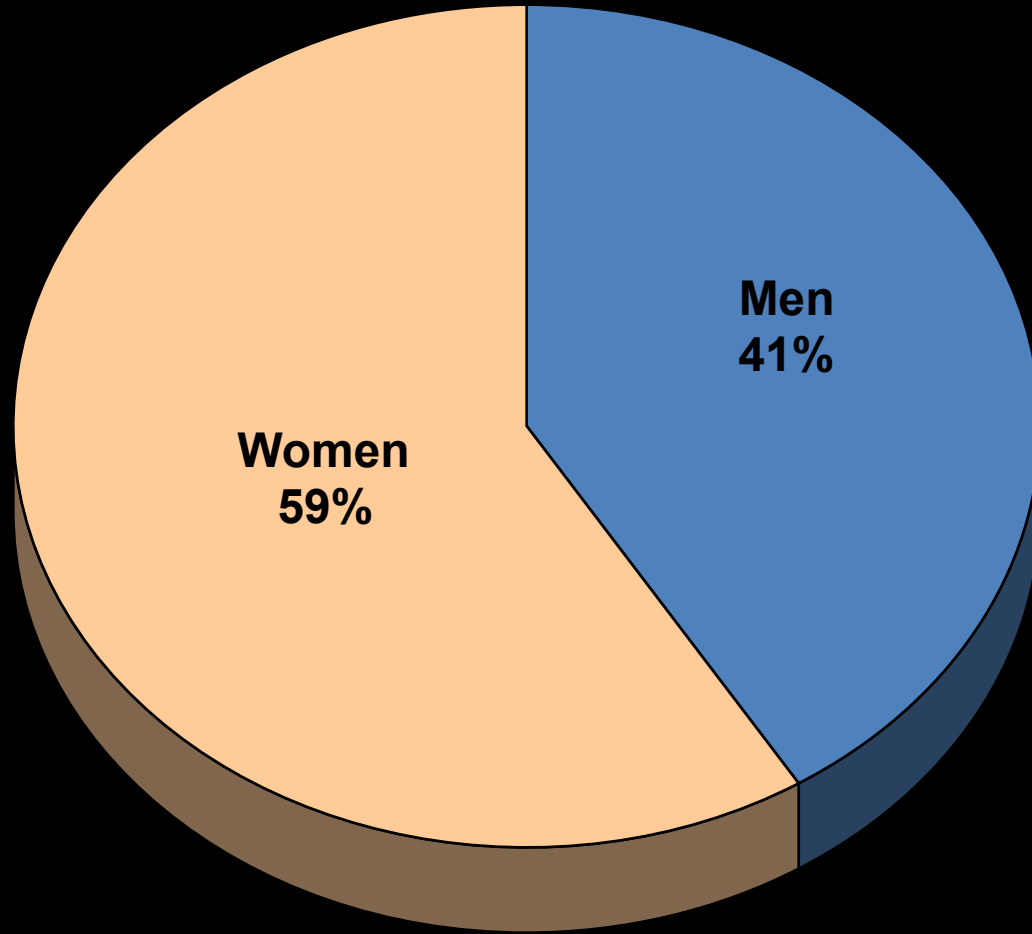
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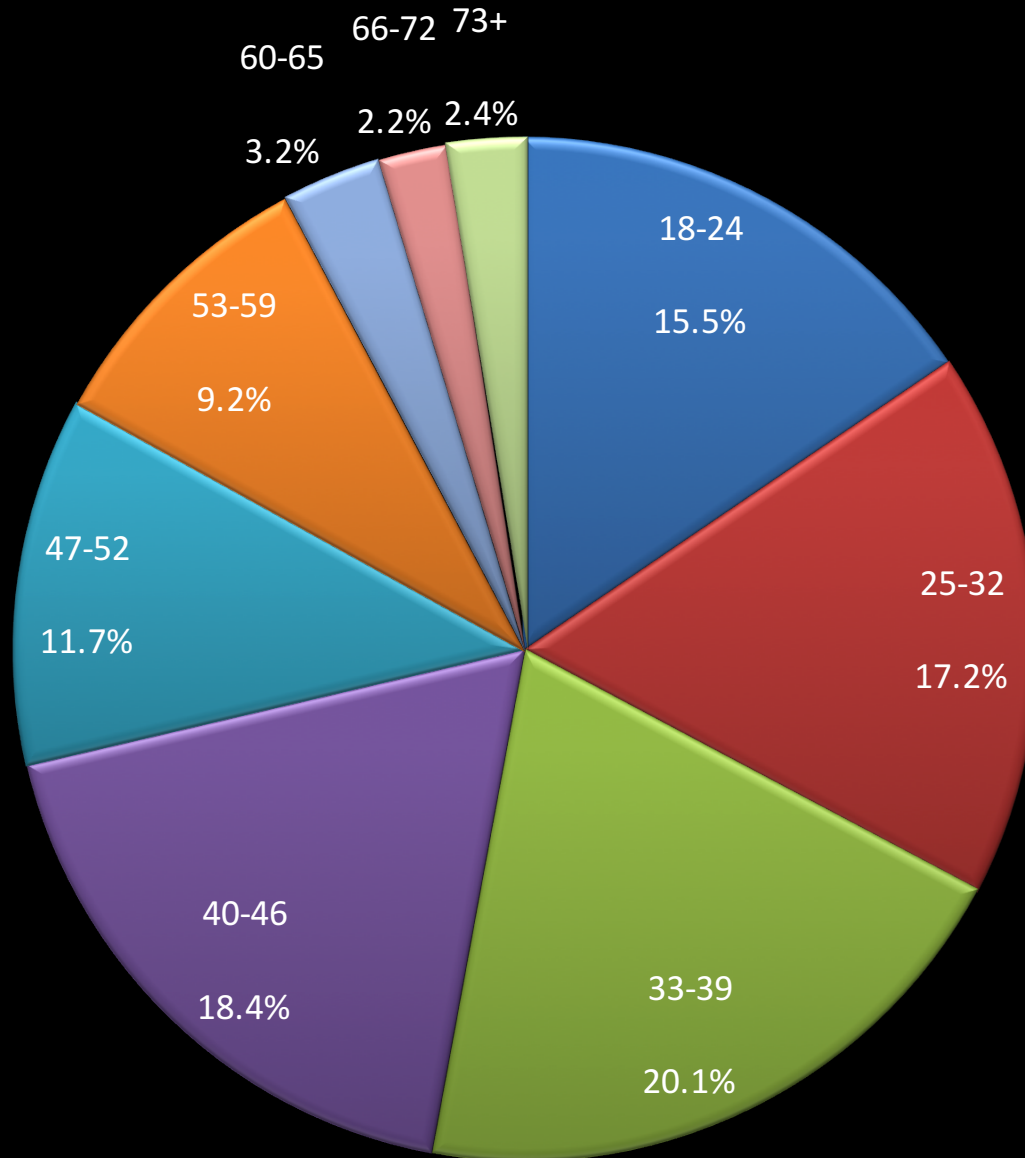
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Demographics: Gender

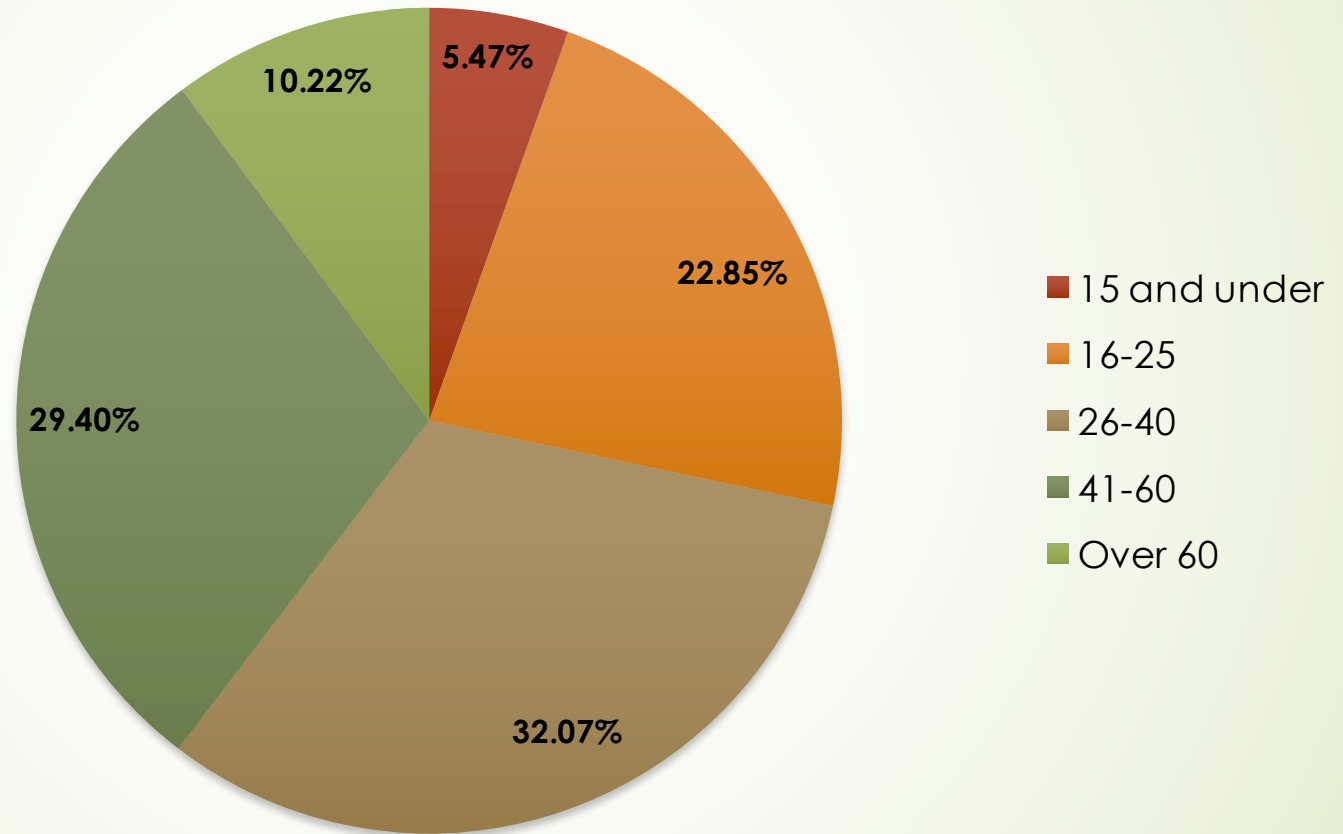


Global church membership: Women 57% Men 43%

Demographics: Age (now)

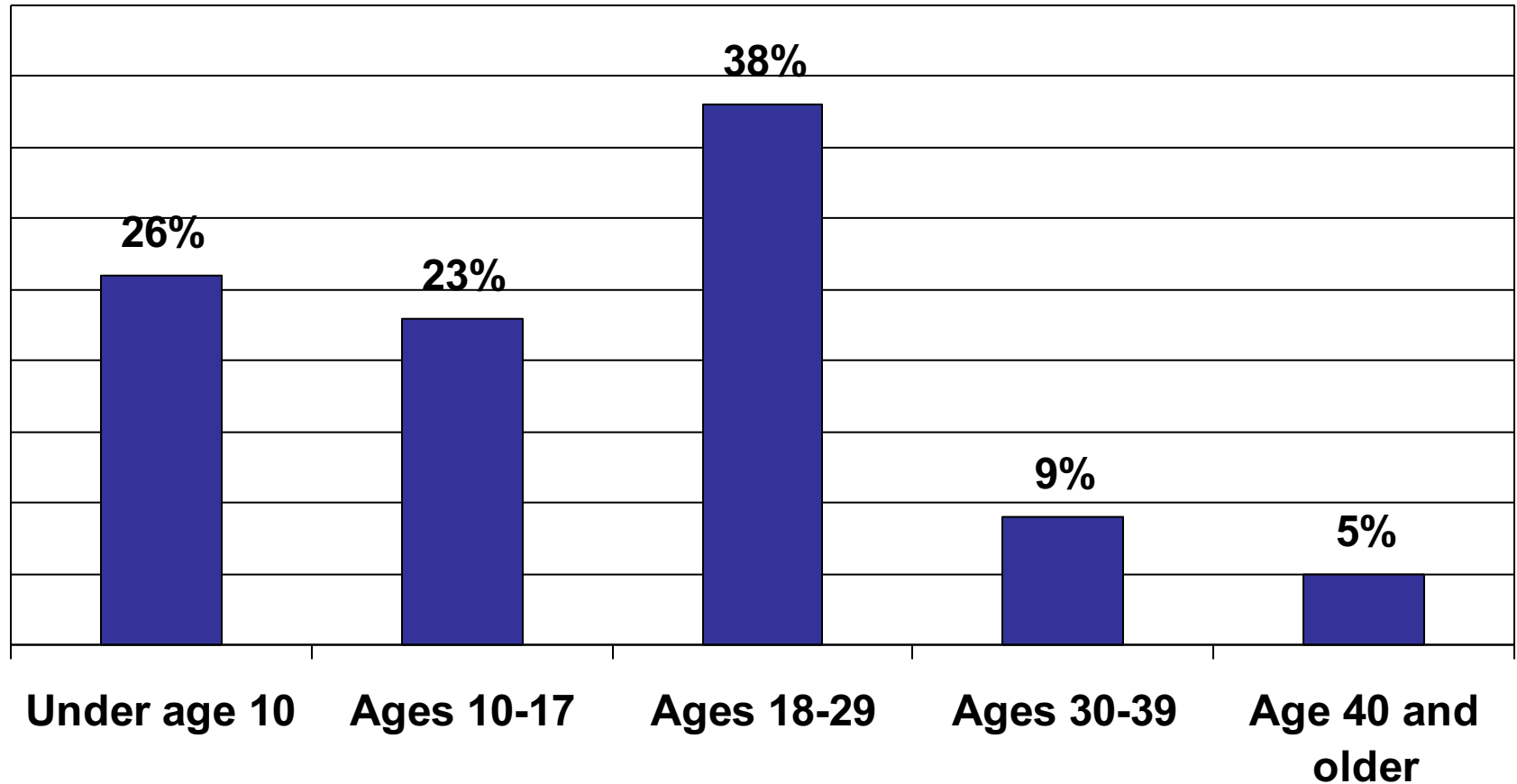


World Church, current members: age distribution

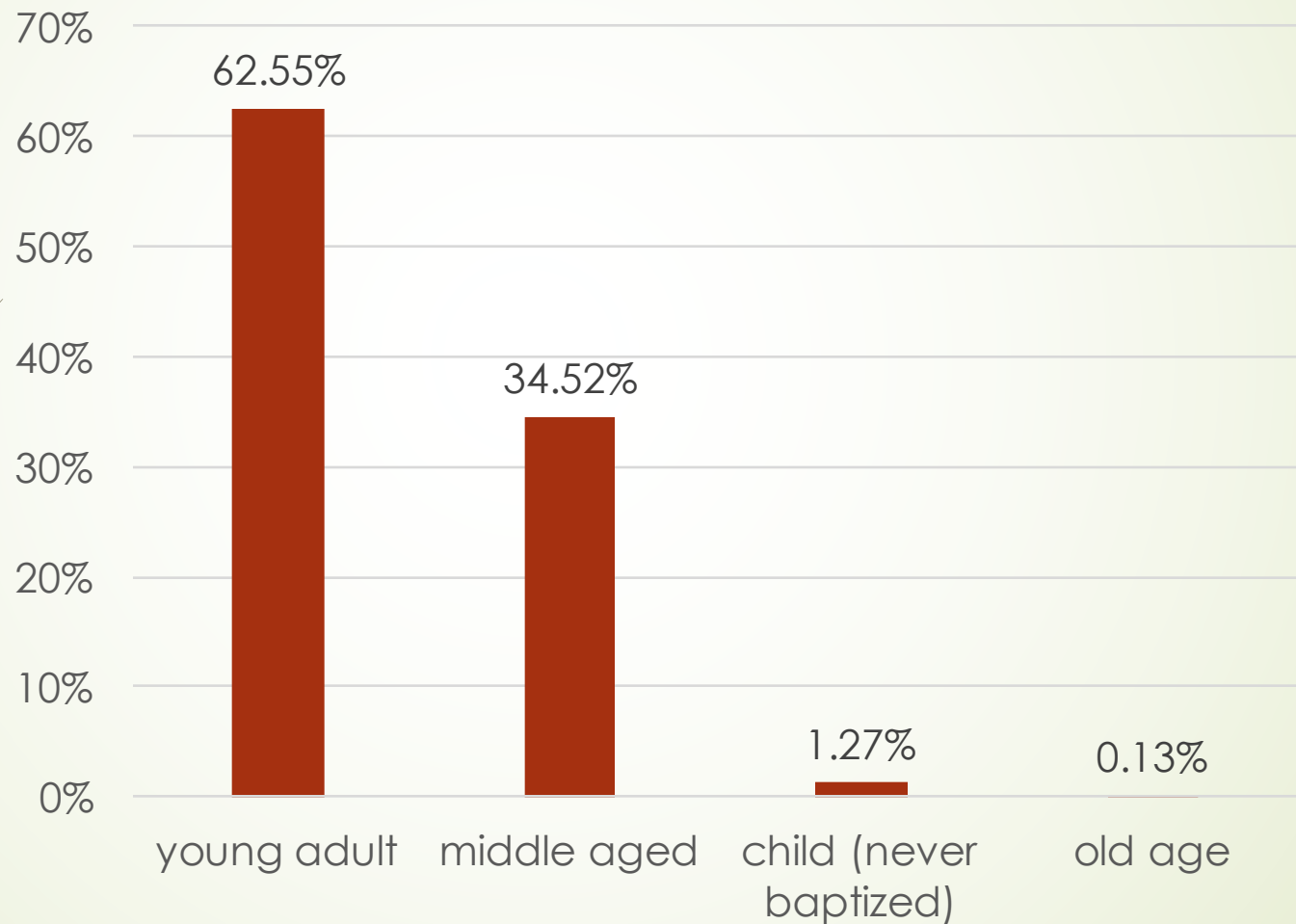


Under 40 = Ex-members 53% Current membership 59%

Lapsed/ex-members: Age When First Started Attending the Adventist Church

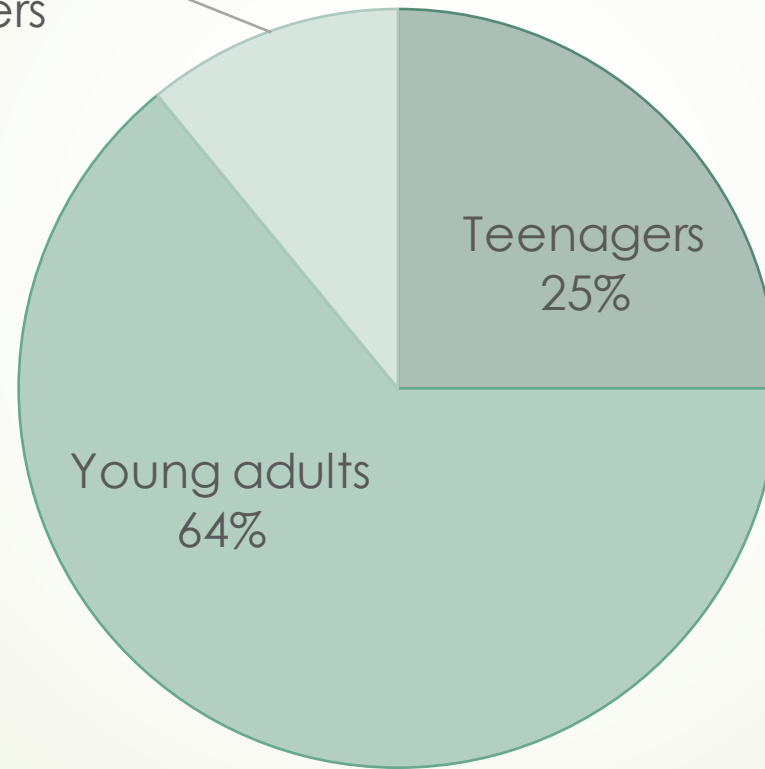


Stage of Life at Departure



Pastors' perception: What age groups are most likely to leave the Church?

Middle-aged
members
11%

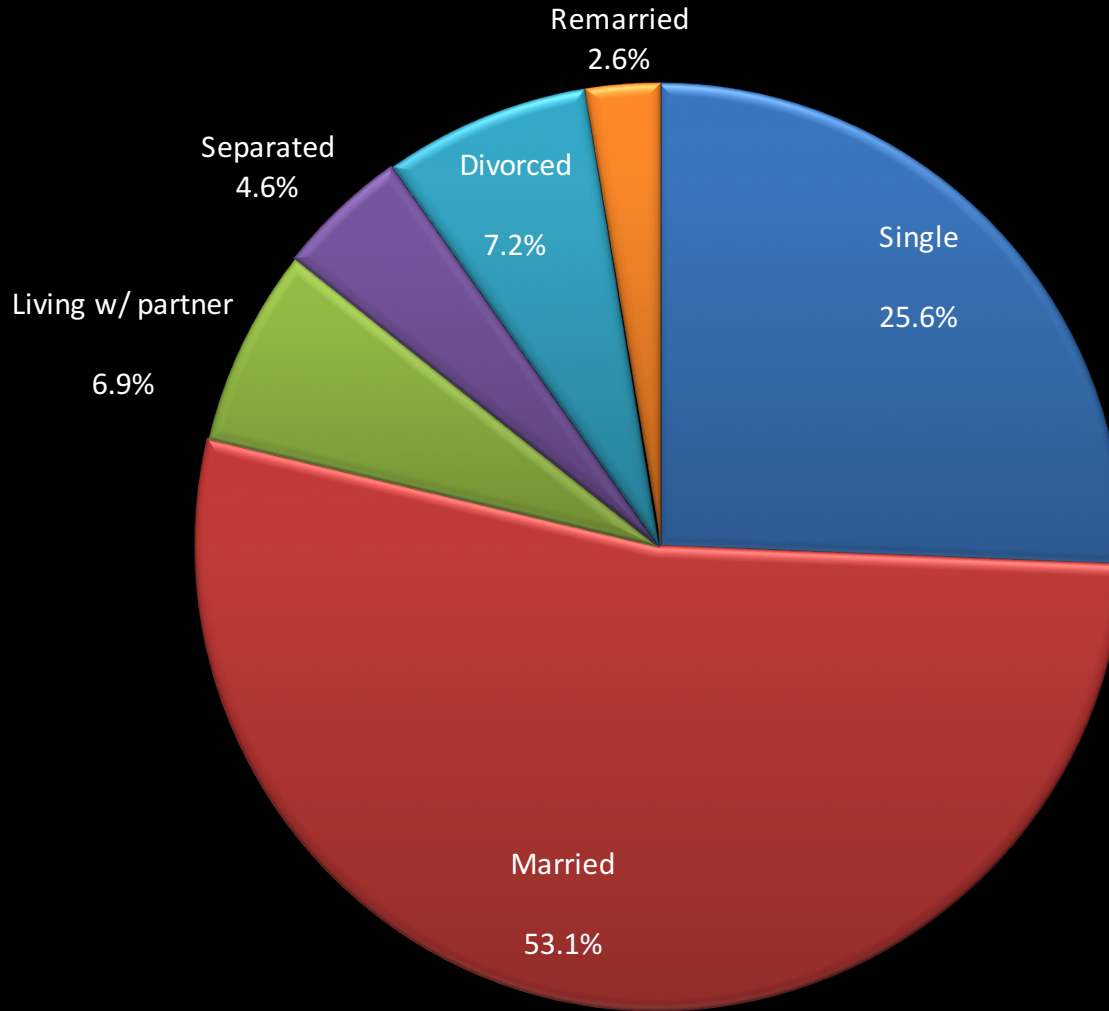


■ Teenagers

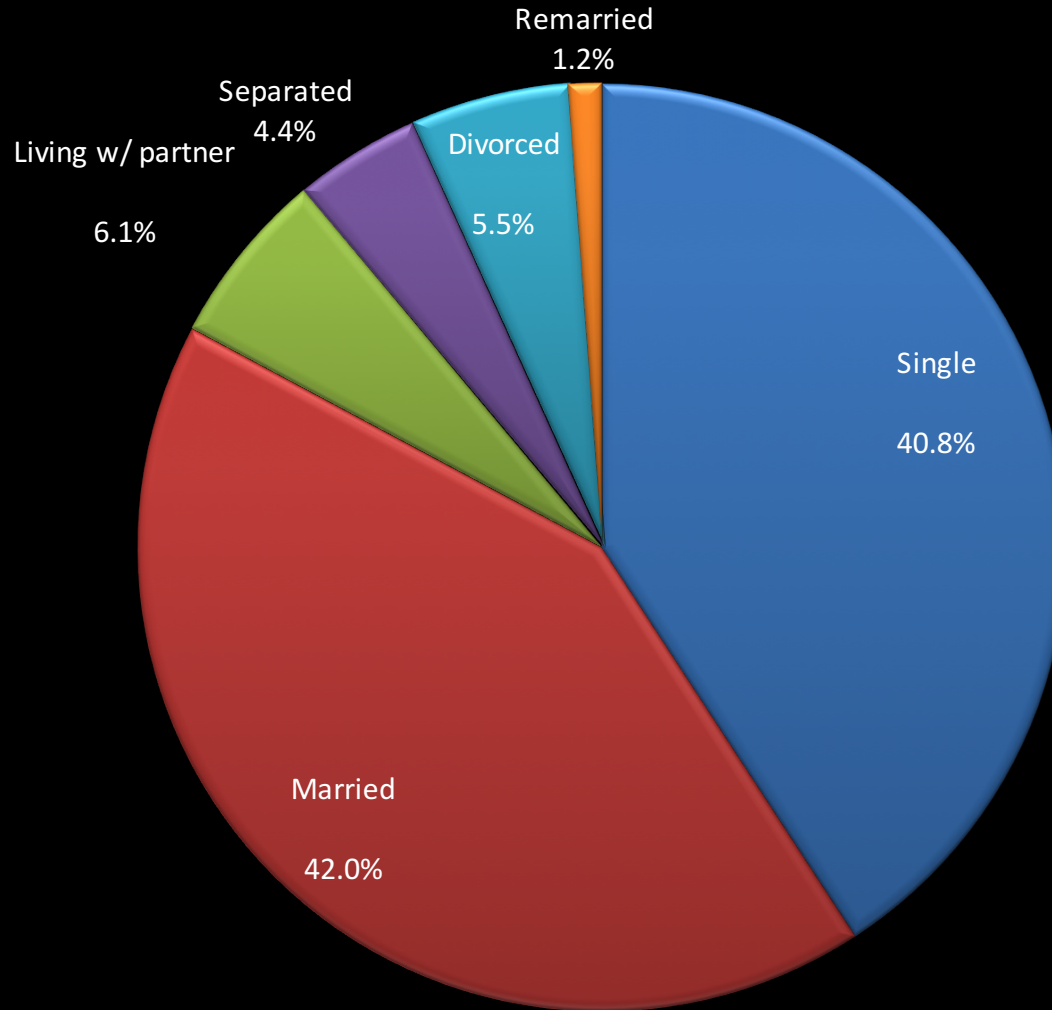
■ Young adults

■ Middle-aged members

Demographic Information (Marital Status) Former Members



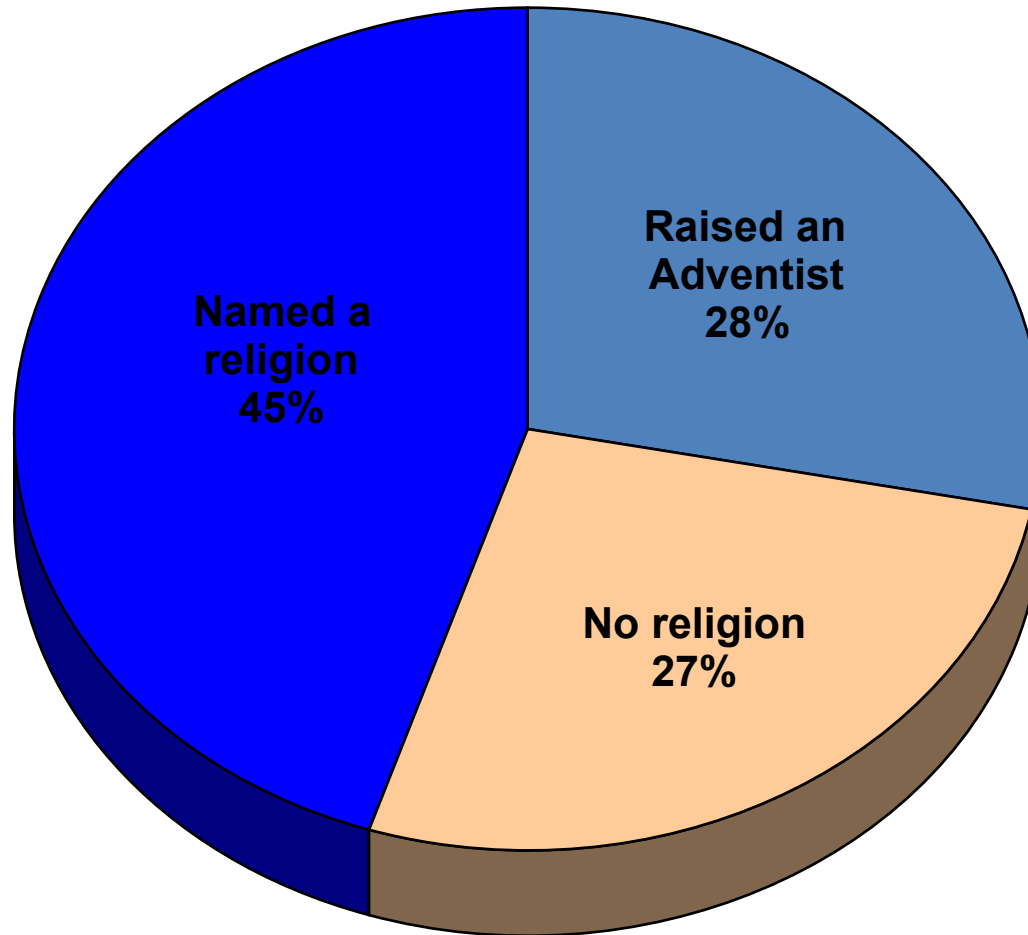
Demographic Information (Marital Status) Returned Members



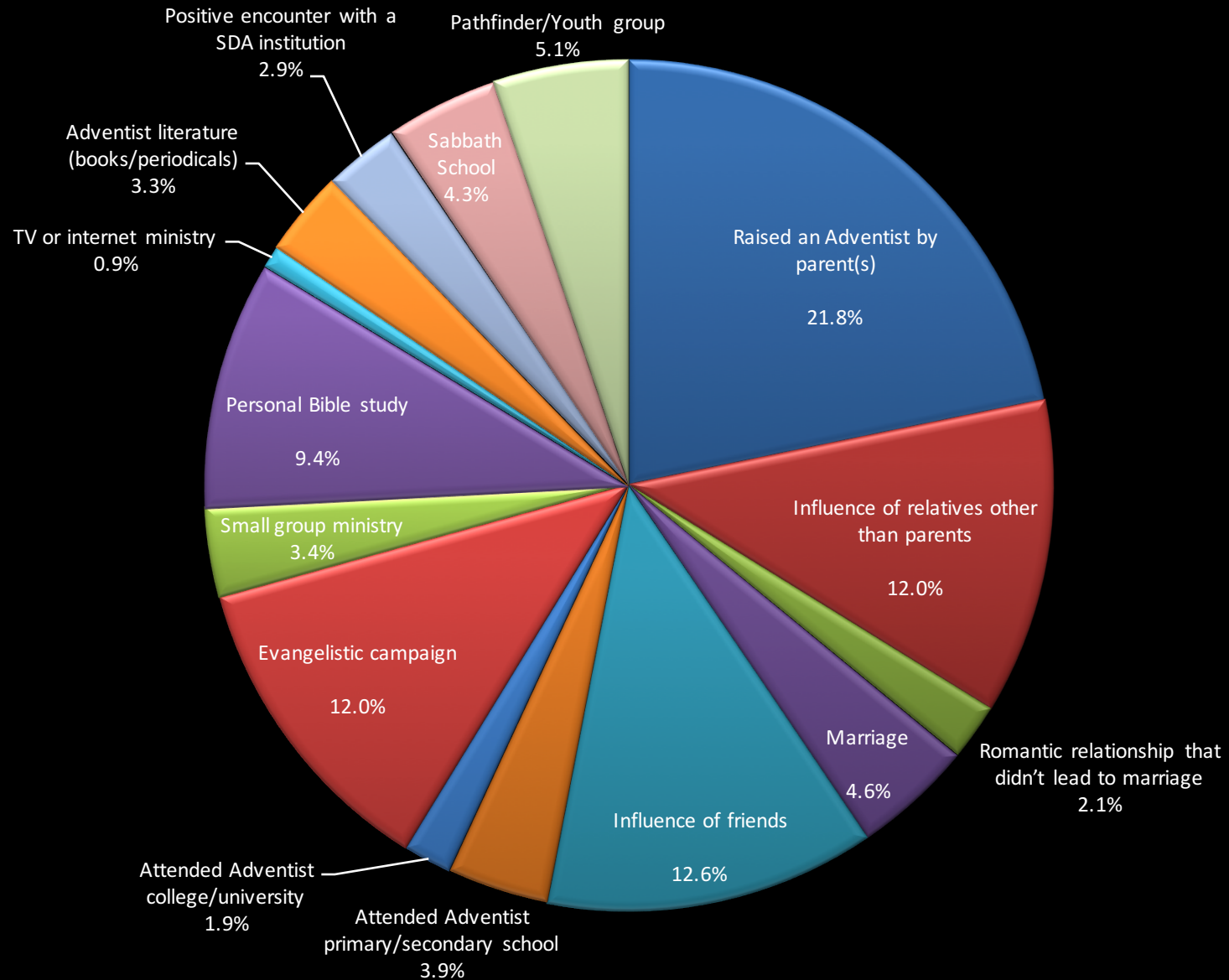
First Contact with the Seventh-day Adventist Church

- 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

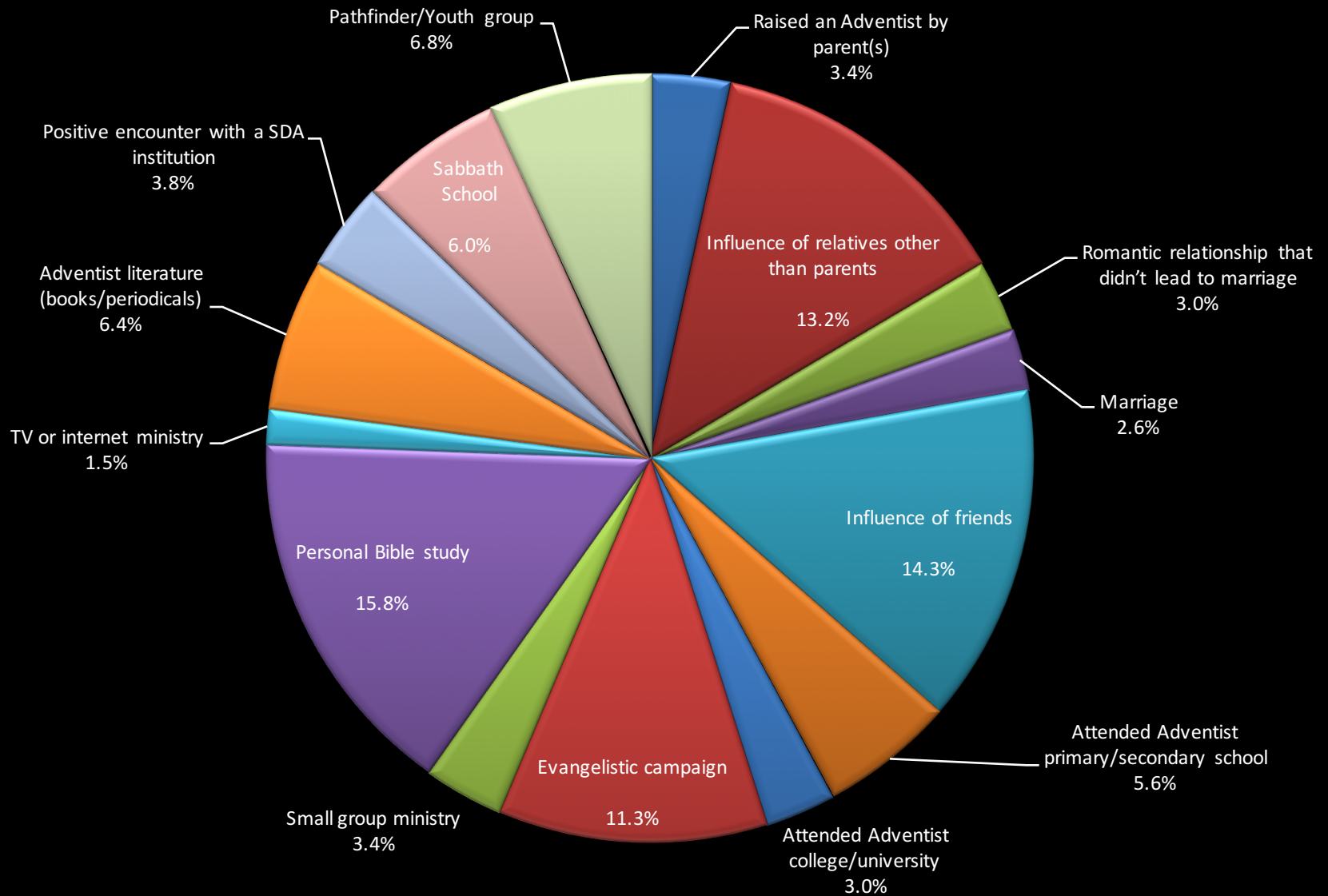
Religion Before Joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church



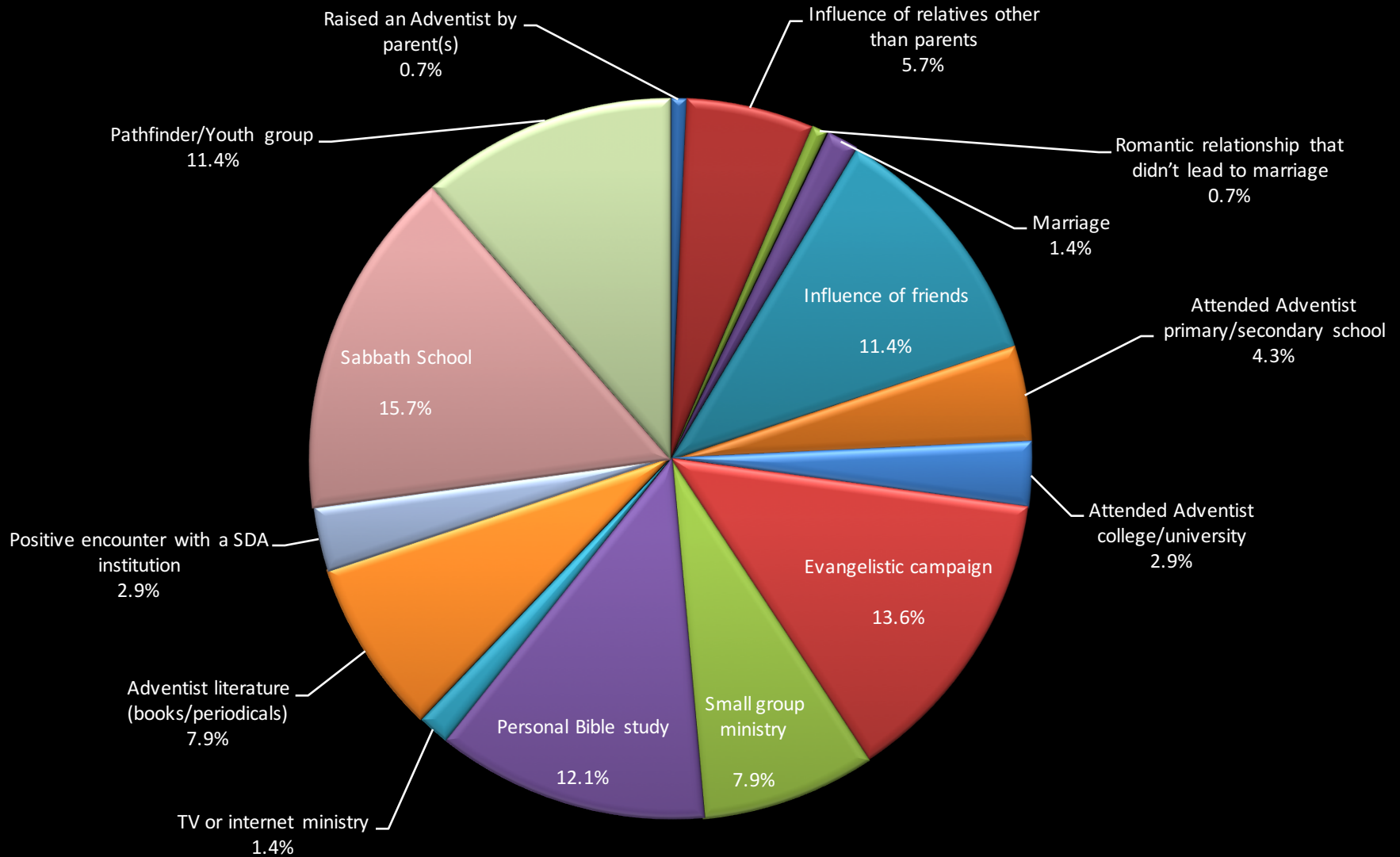
Most Important Avenues to becoming SDA (First ranking)



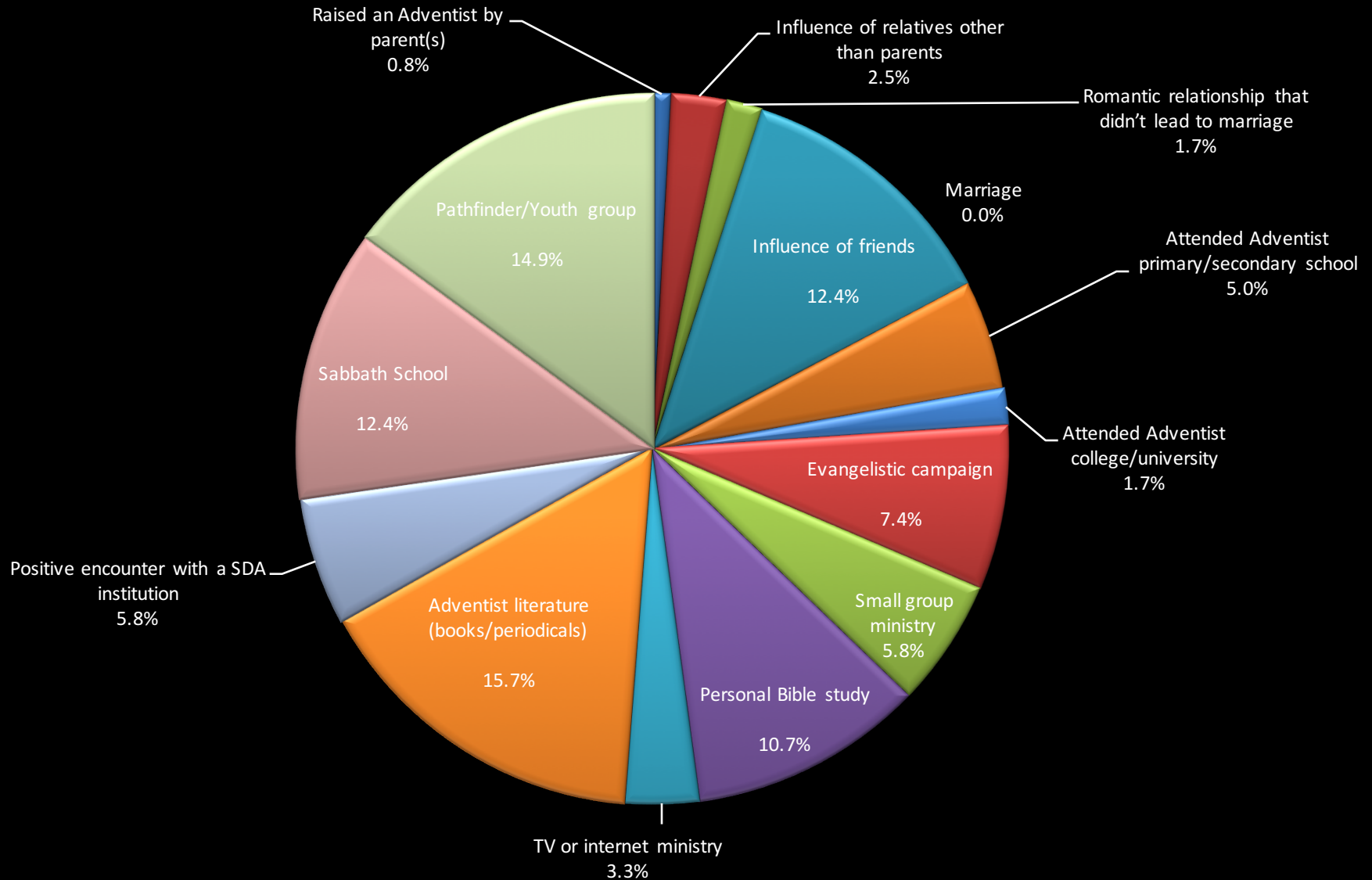
Most Important Avenues to becoming SDA (Second ranking)



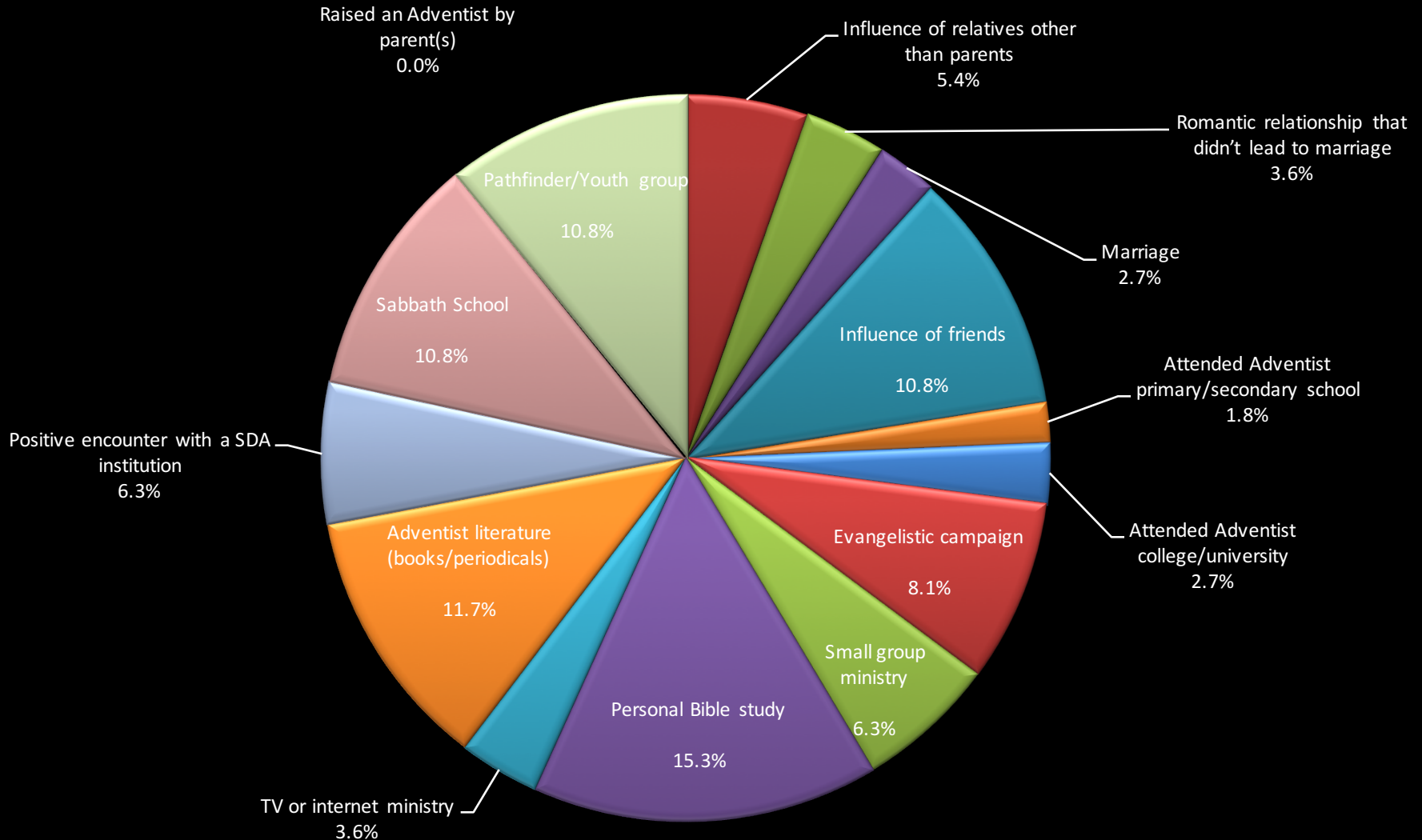
Most Important Avenues to becoming SDA (Third ranking)



Most Important Avenues to becoming SDA (Fourth ranking)



Most Important Avenues to becoming SDA (Fifth ranking)



How ADVENTIST *were* they?

Were they *well grounded* in our faith?

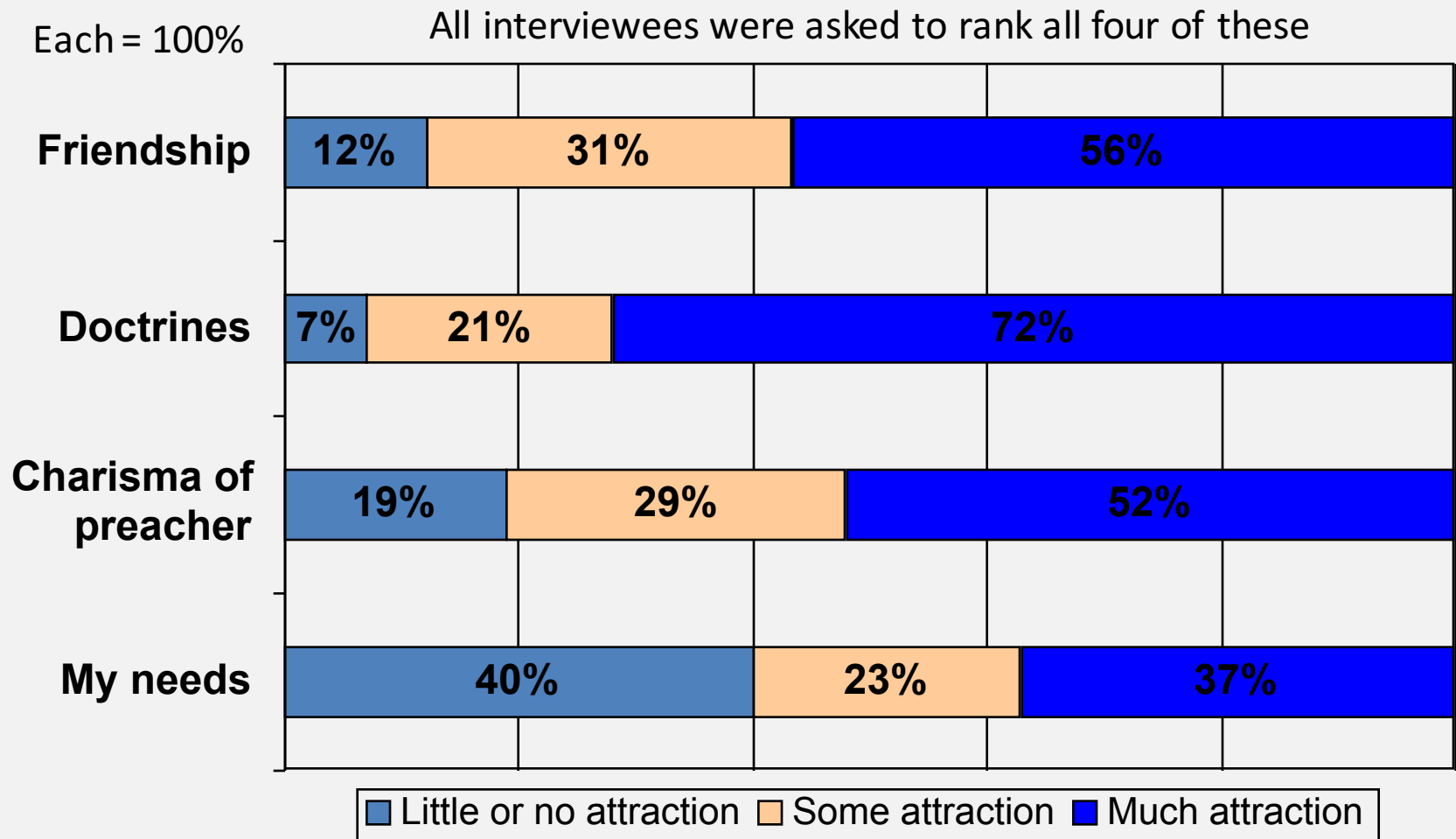
Were they *active* in their local churches?

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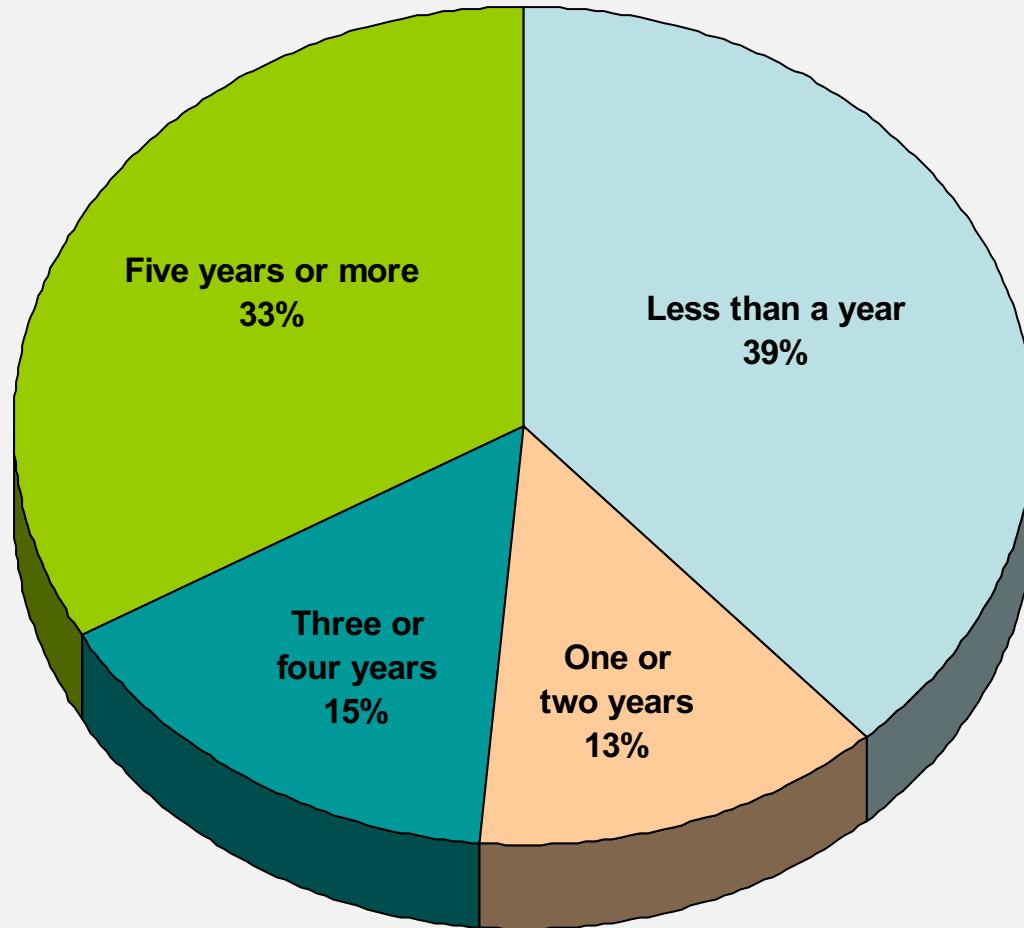
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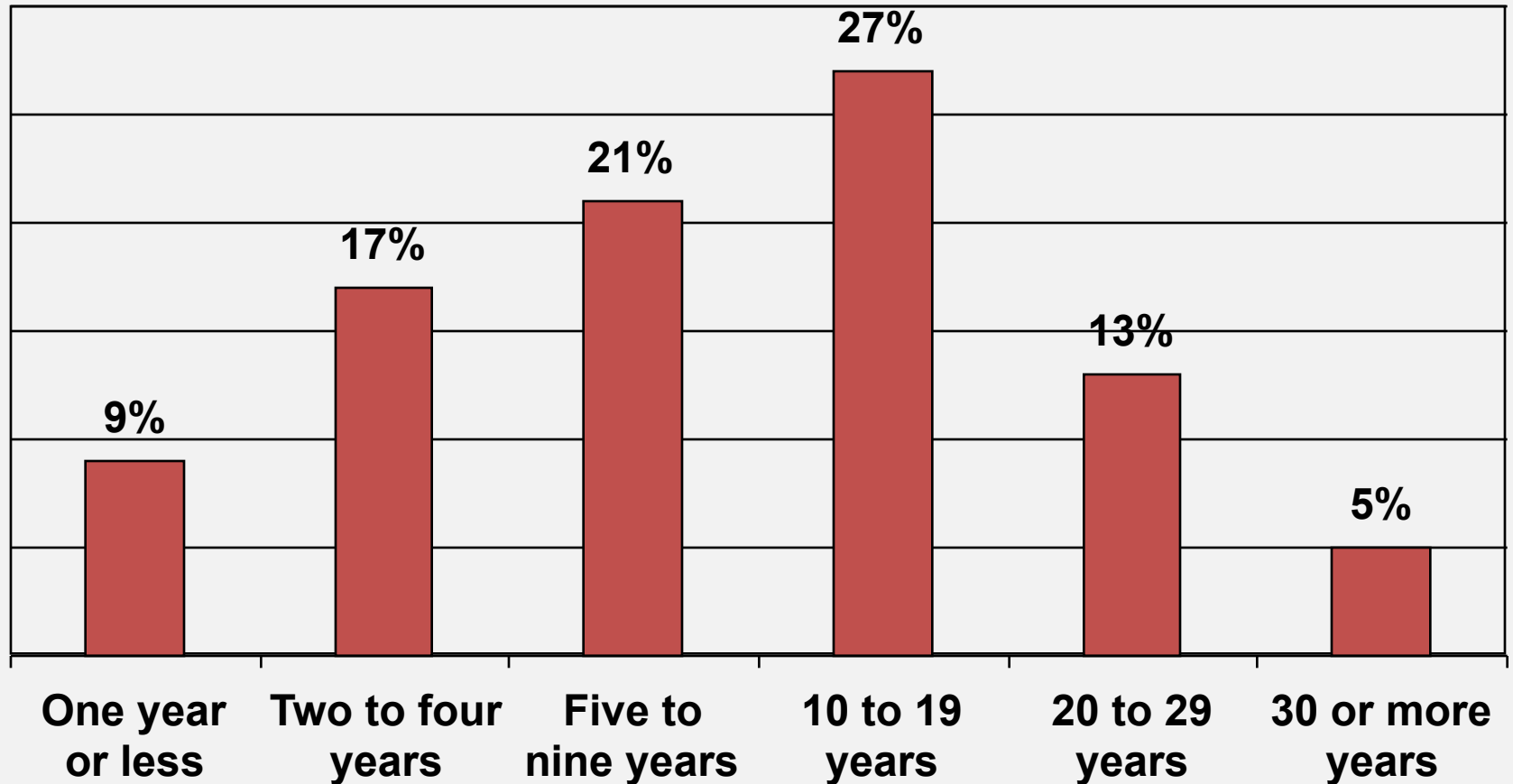
What most attracted you when you decided to join the Adventist Church?



Time from First Contact to Baptism

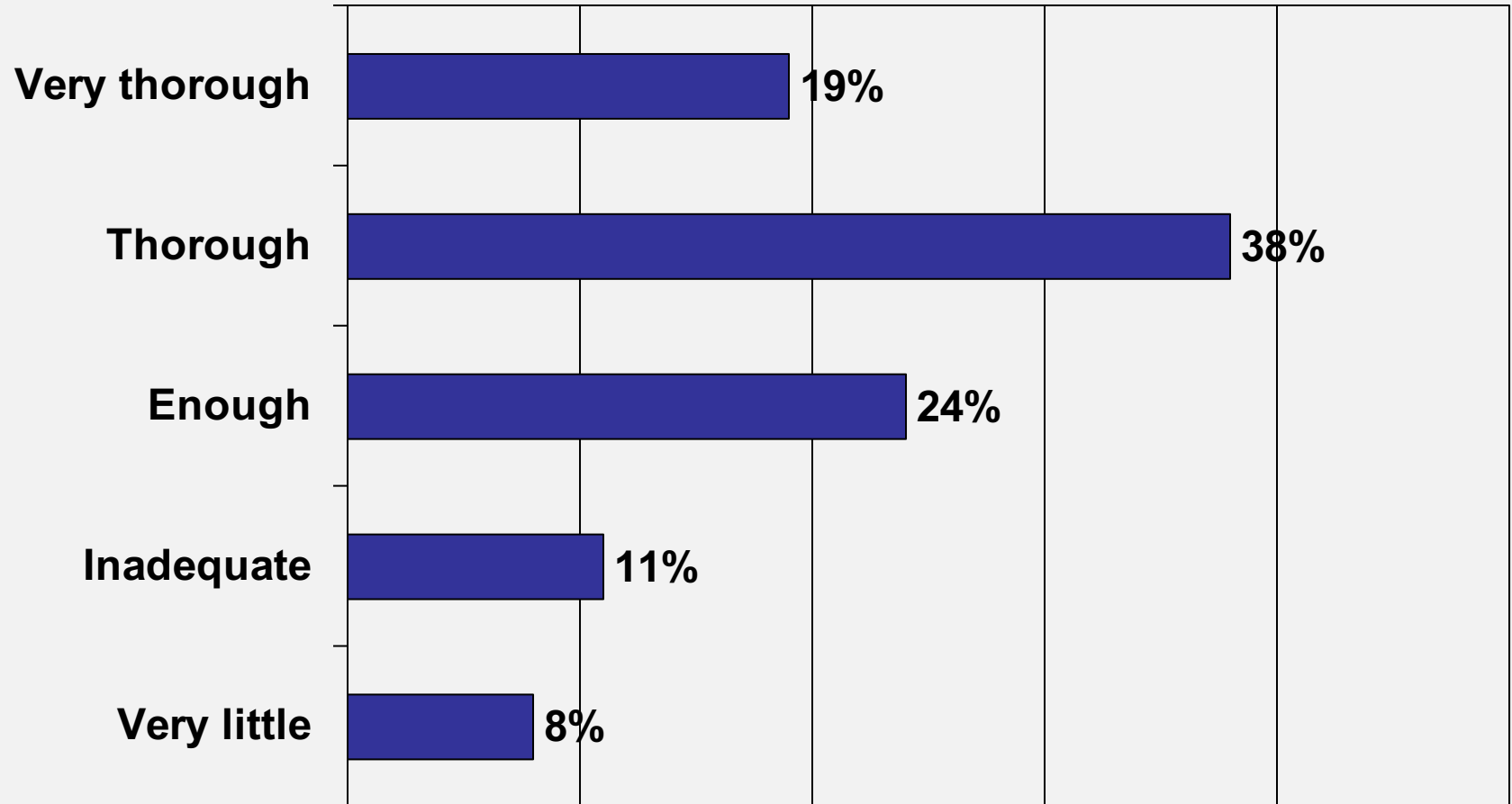


Number of Years Regularly Attended an Adventist Church

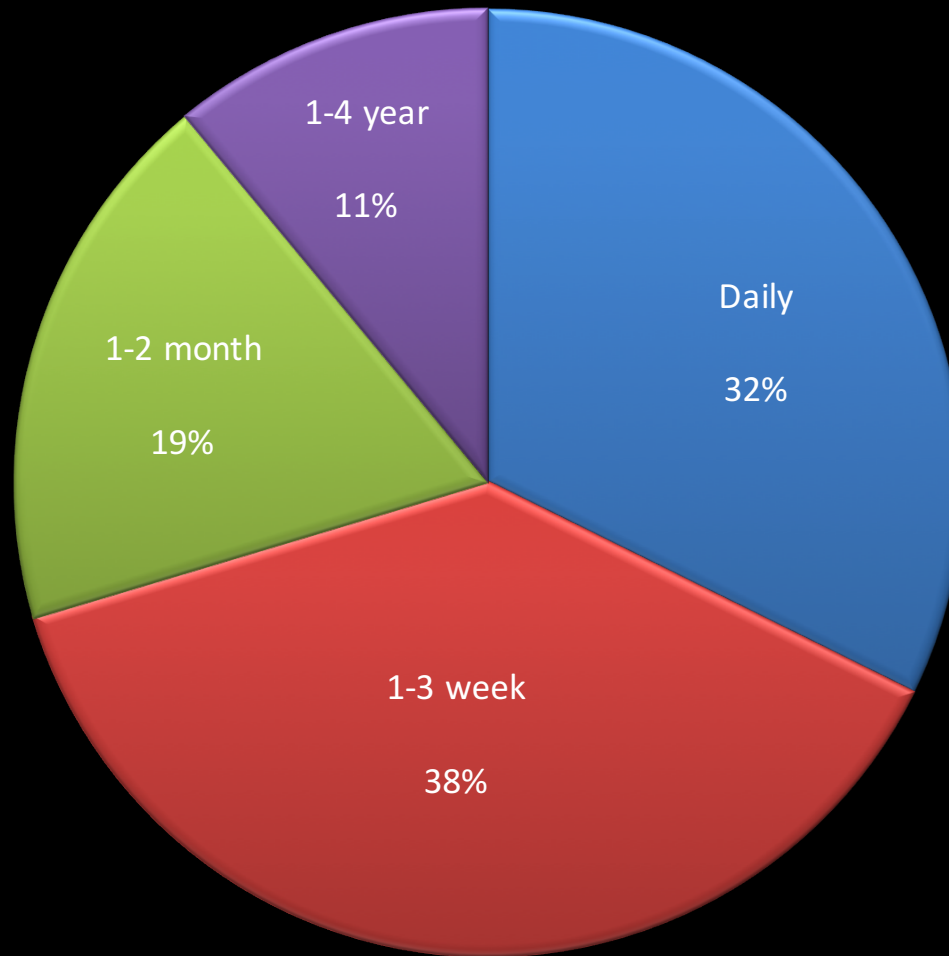


But people who attended fewer years are less likely to have been surveyed

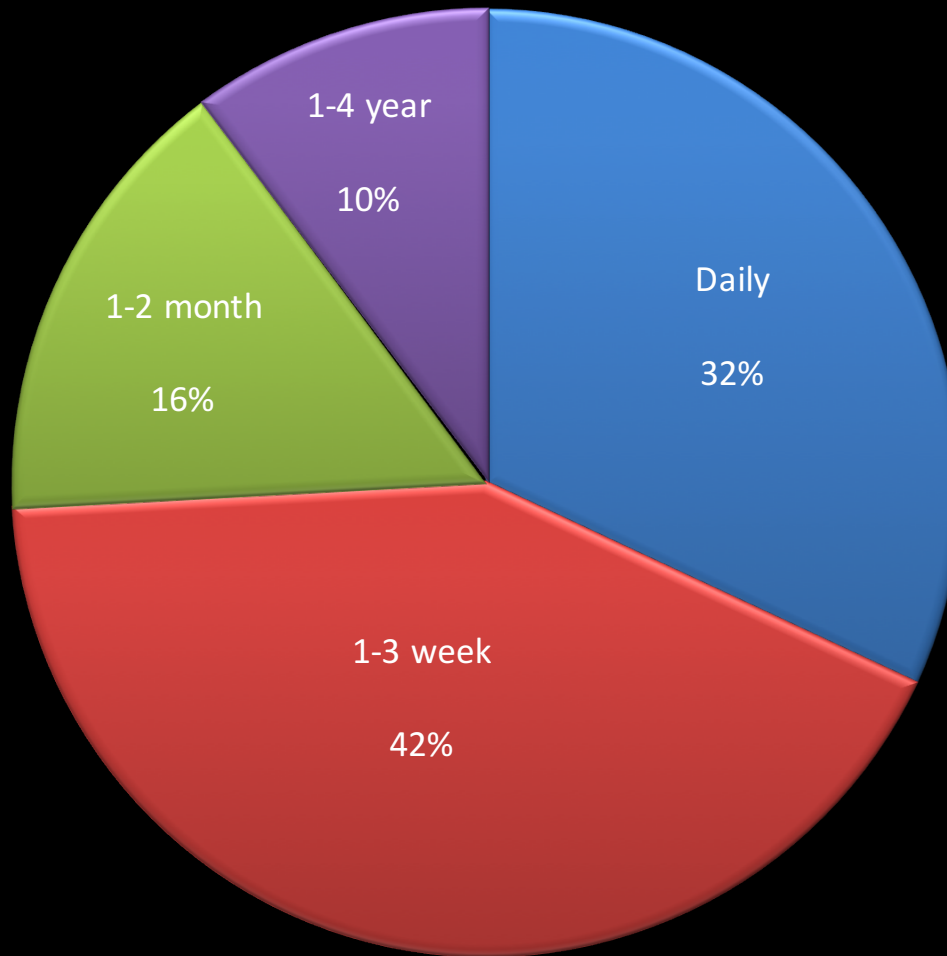
How would you describe the instruction given when you joined the church?



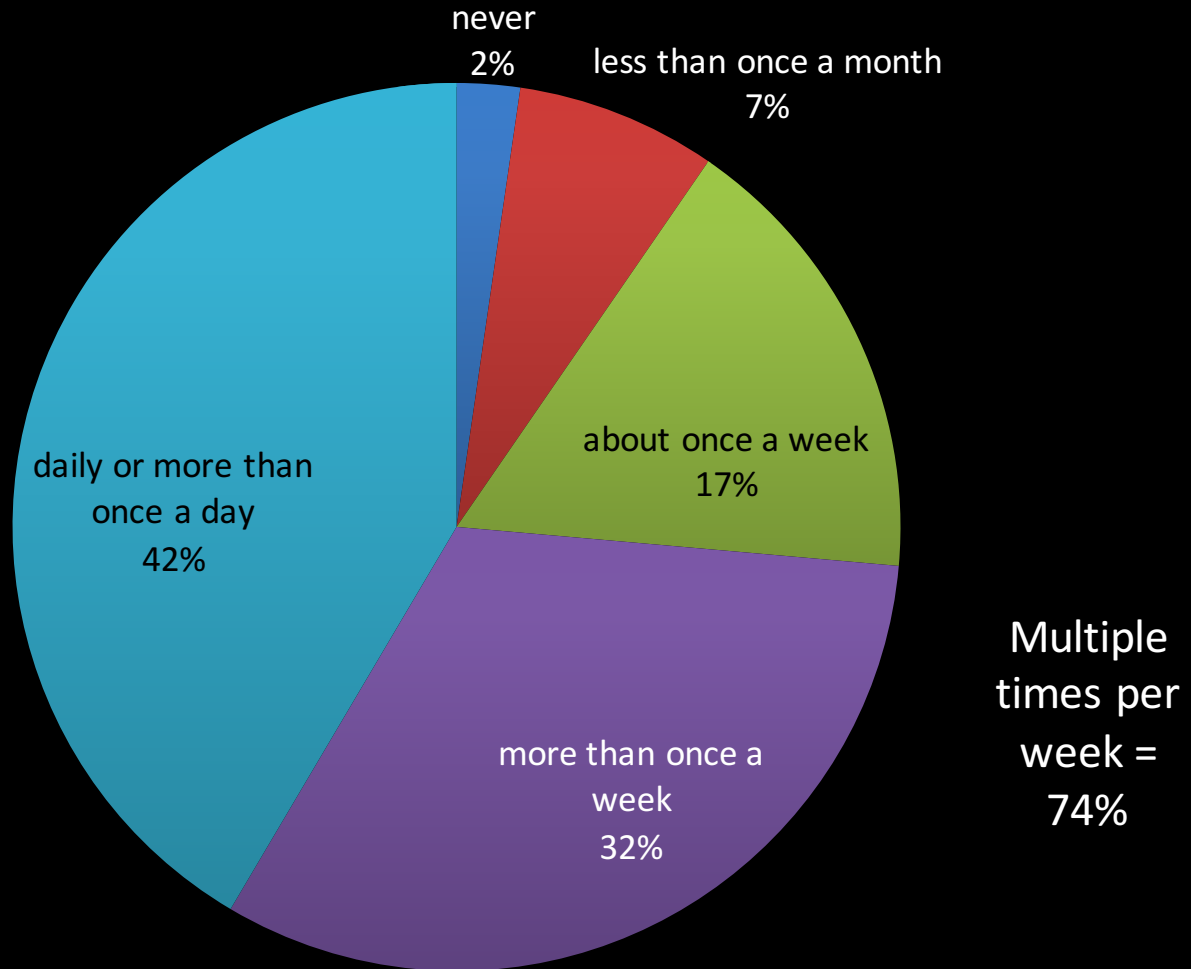
Frequency of engagement in spiritual activities while Adventist: Personal Bible study – Former Members



Frequency of engagement in spiritual activities while Adventist: Personal Bible study – Returned Members



Current church members: personal Bible-study



How ADVENTIST are they *now*?

Since many seem to have been active and faithful SDAs, the question arises:

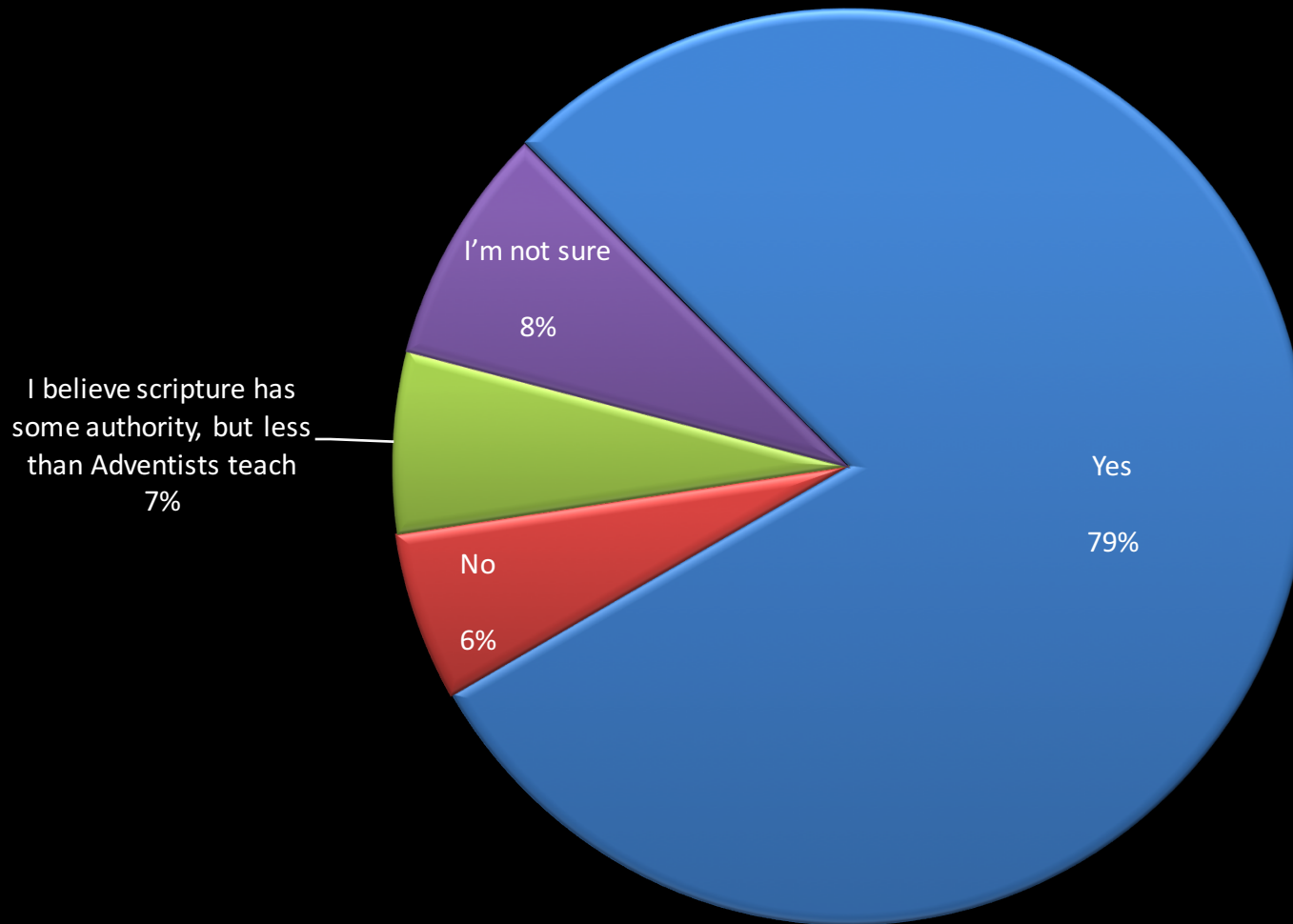
How sympathetic are these ex-Adventists
to what we believe?

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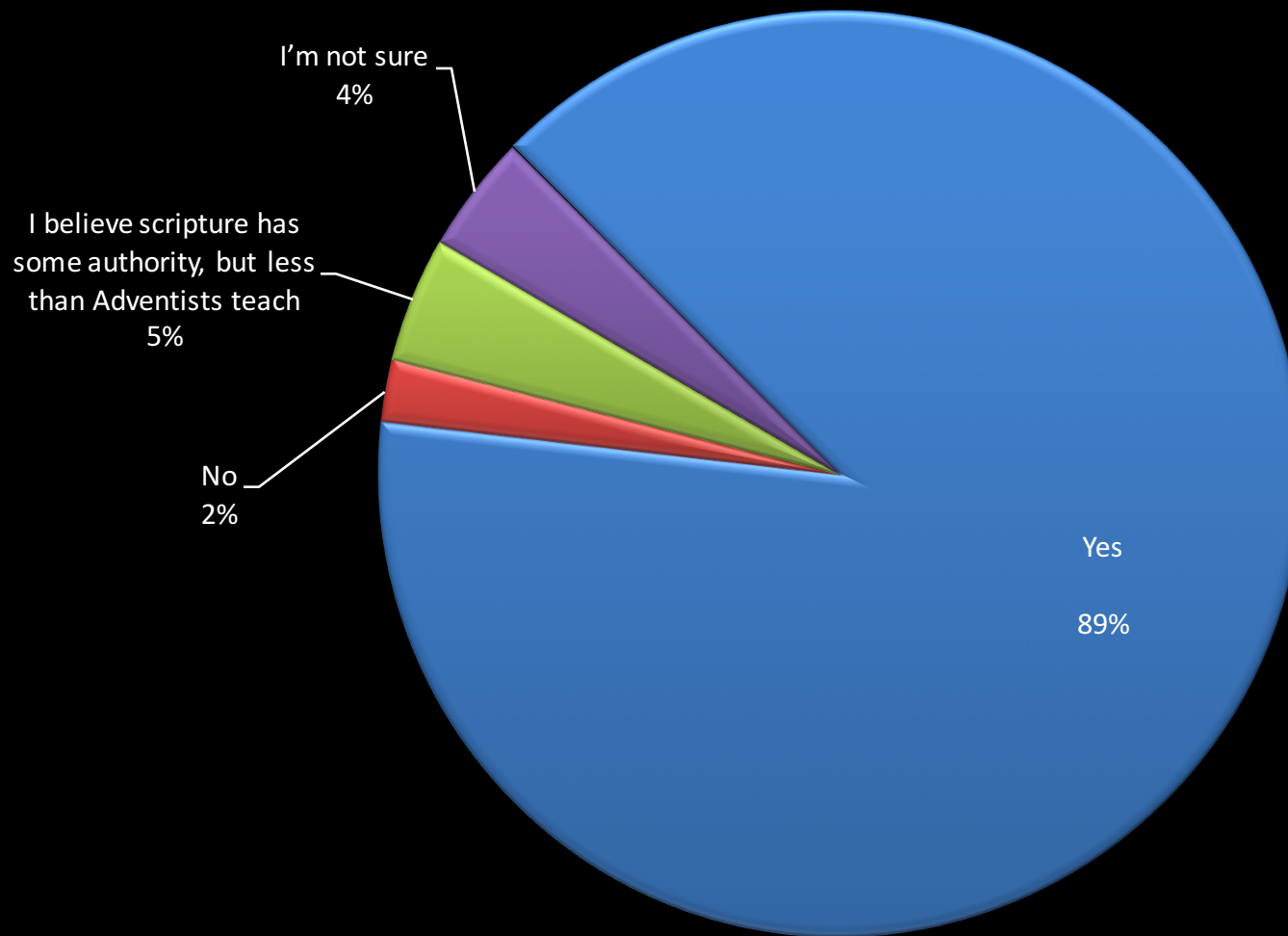
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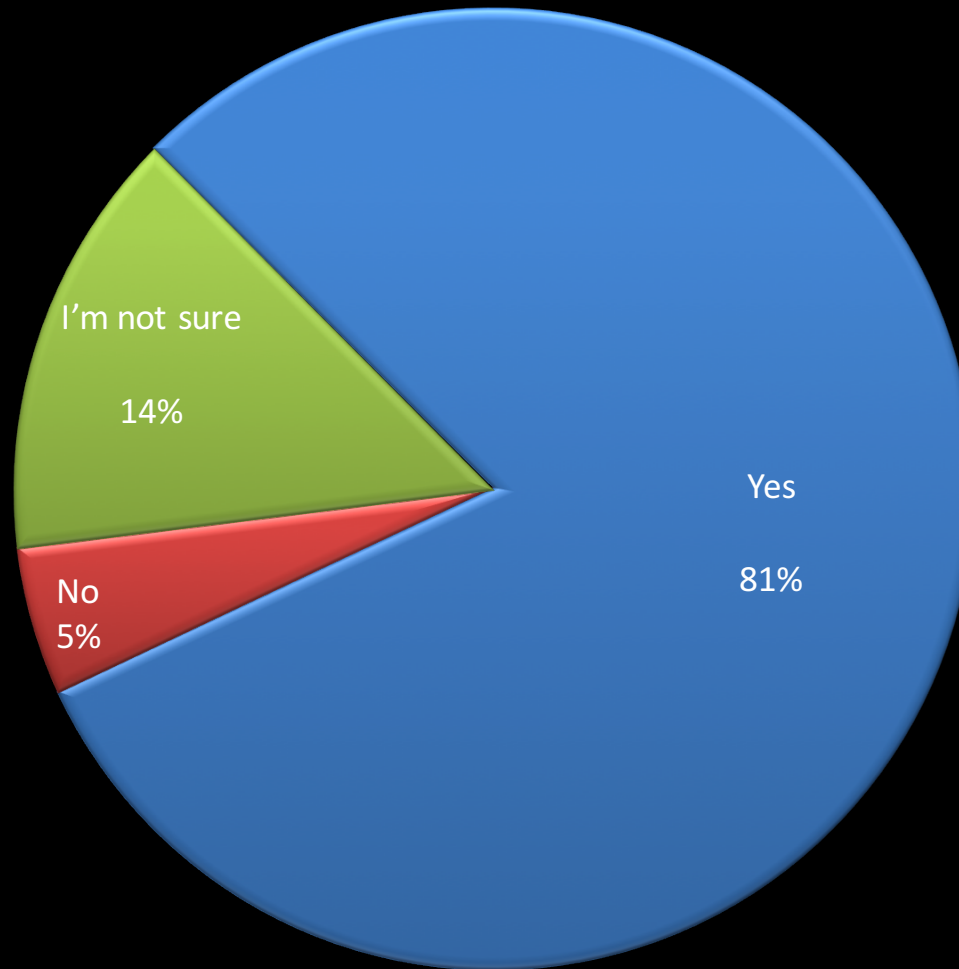
Do you still believe in the authority of Scripture, as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church? – Former Members



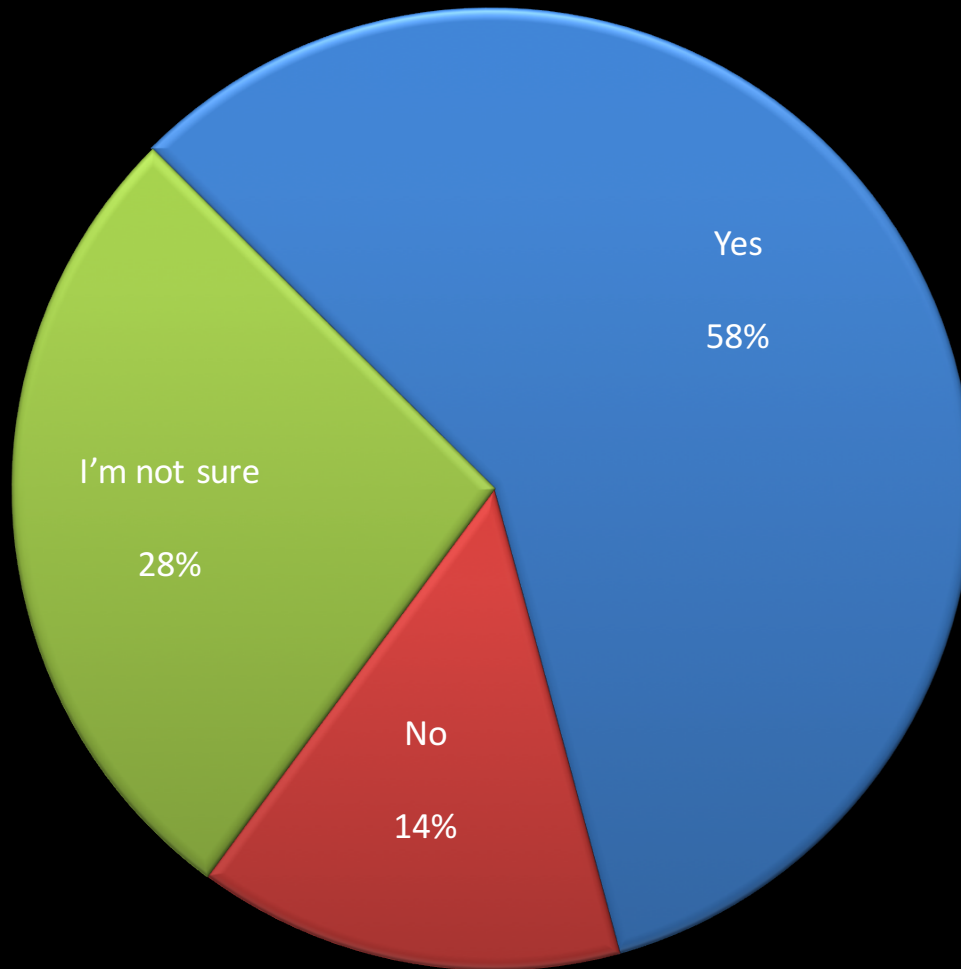
Do you still believe in the authority of Scripture, as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church? – Returned Members



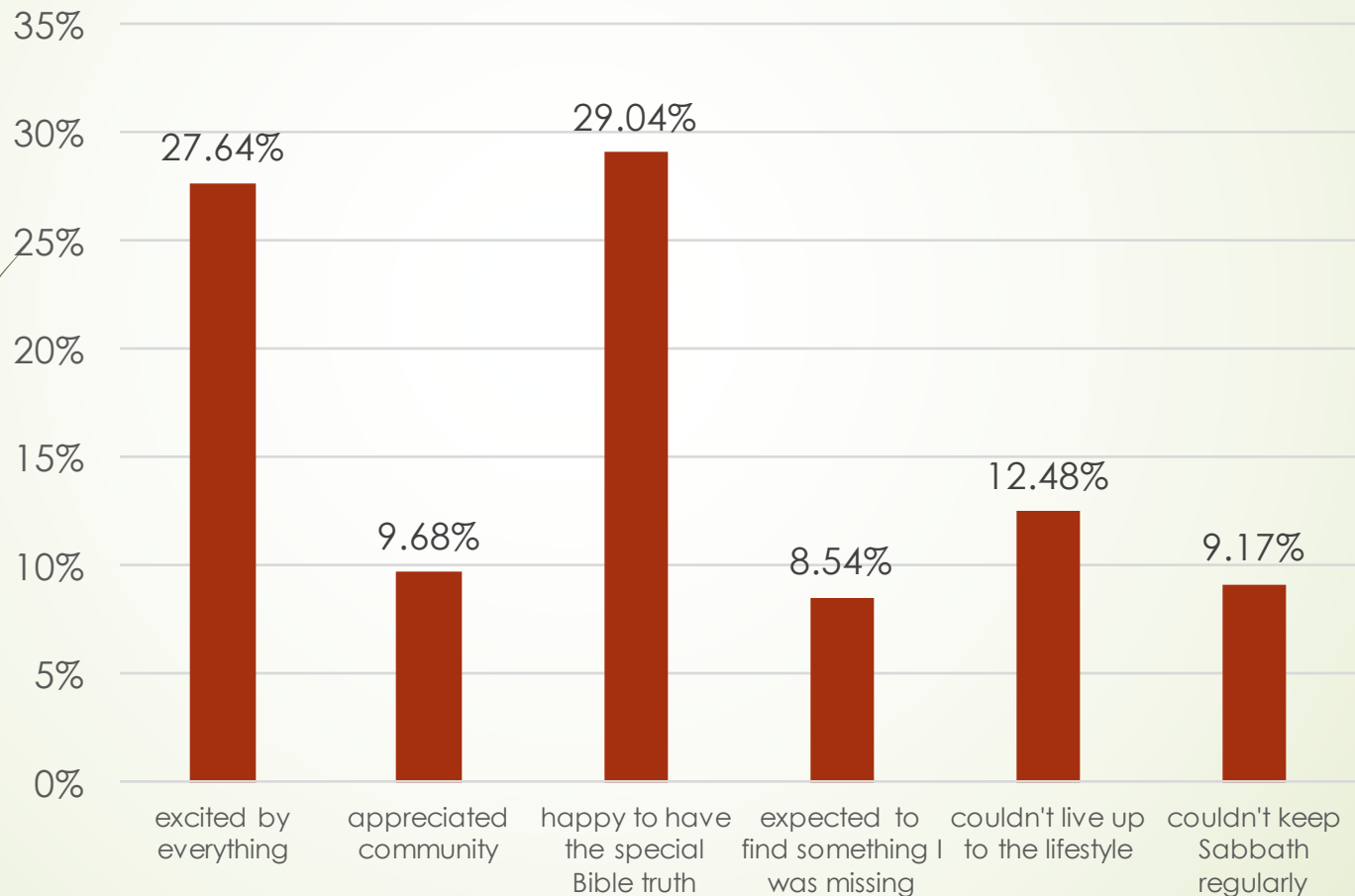
**Do you still believe in the gift of prophecy manifested in Ellen White? –
Returned Members**



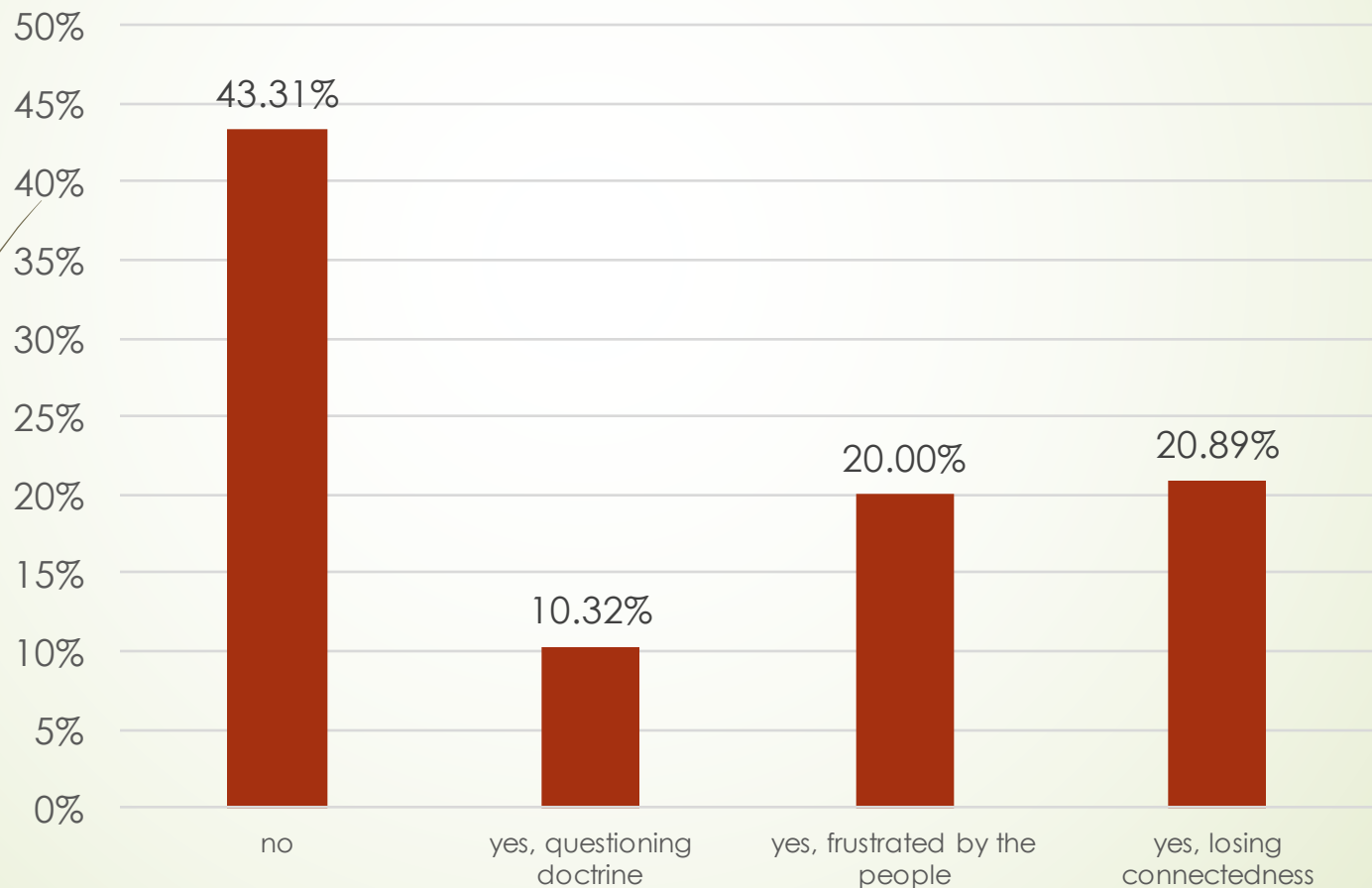
**Do you still believe in the gift of prophecy manifested in Ellen White? –
Former Members**



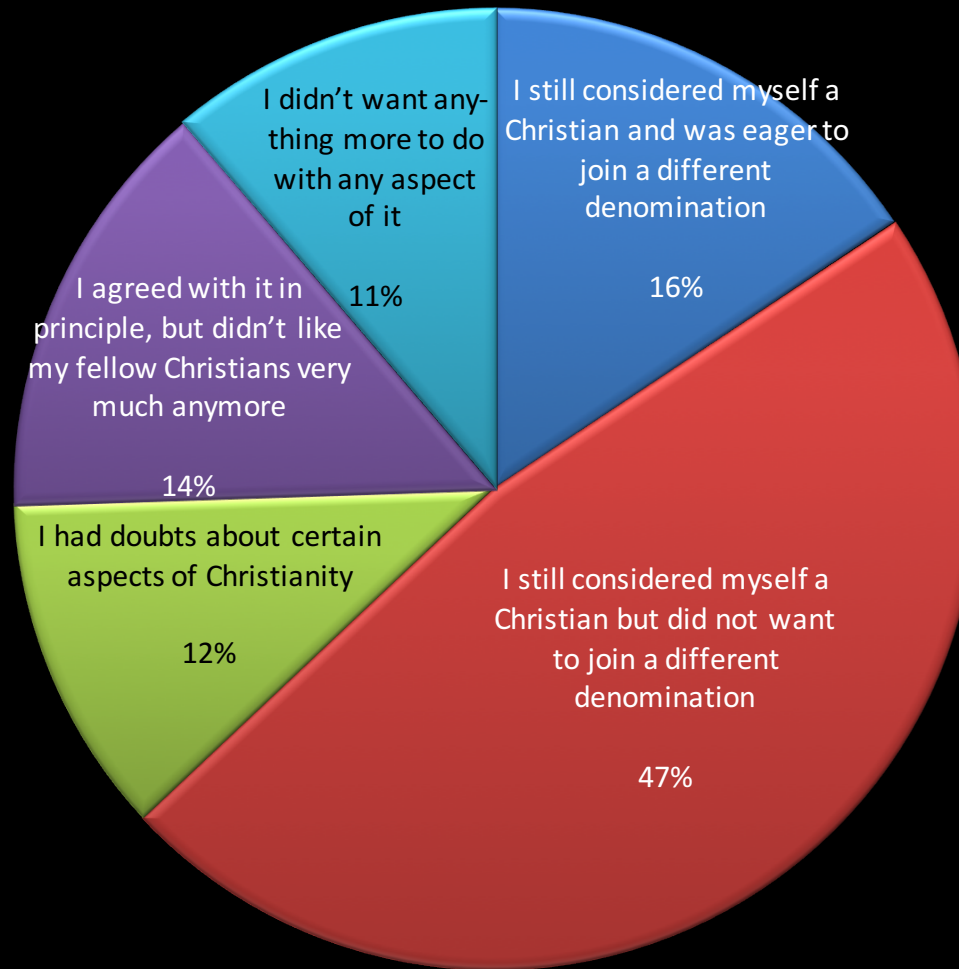
View of Adventist Church: first 5 Years after Baptism



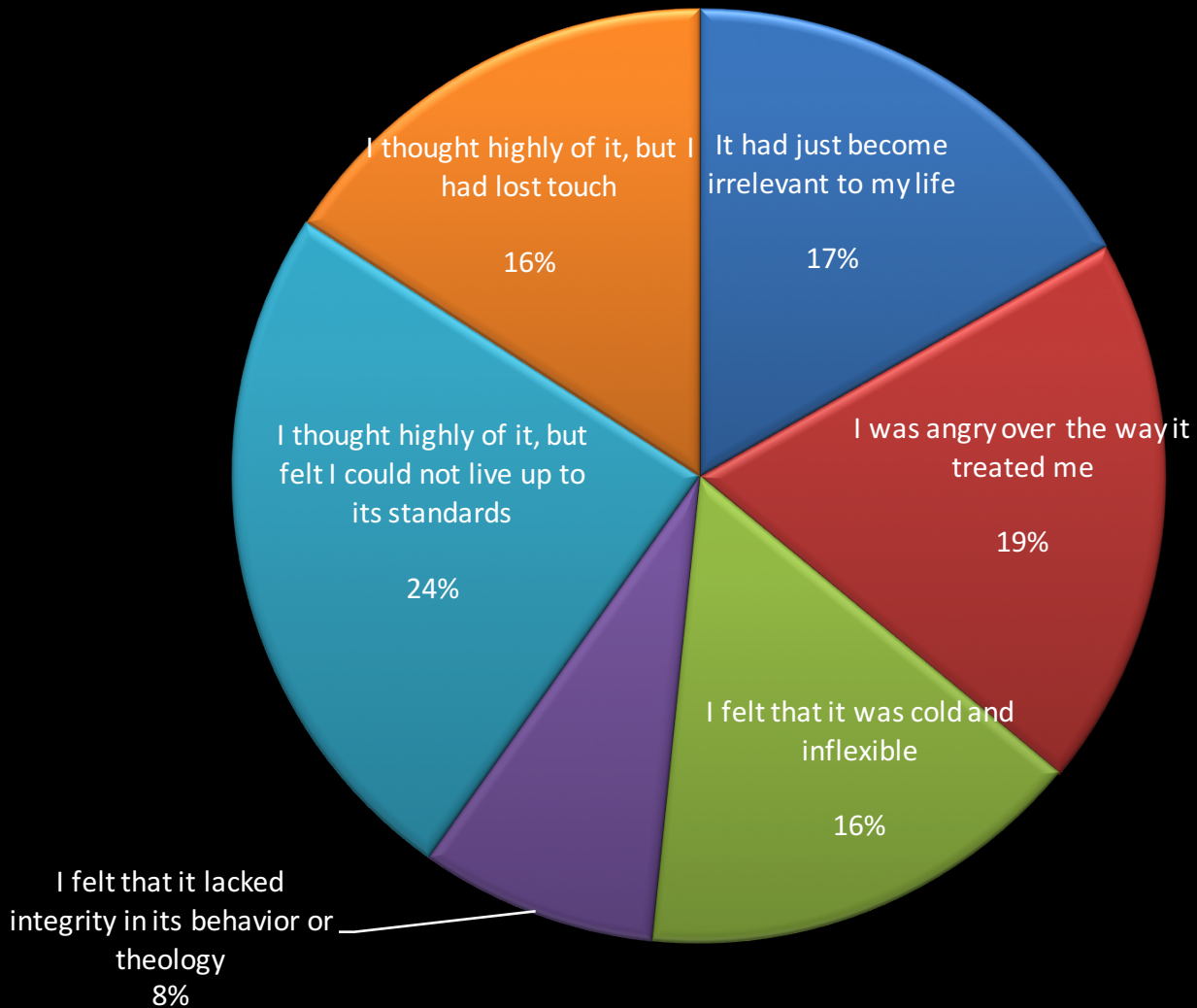
Change in View of Adventist Church: 5 years before Departure?



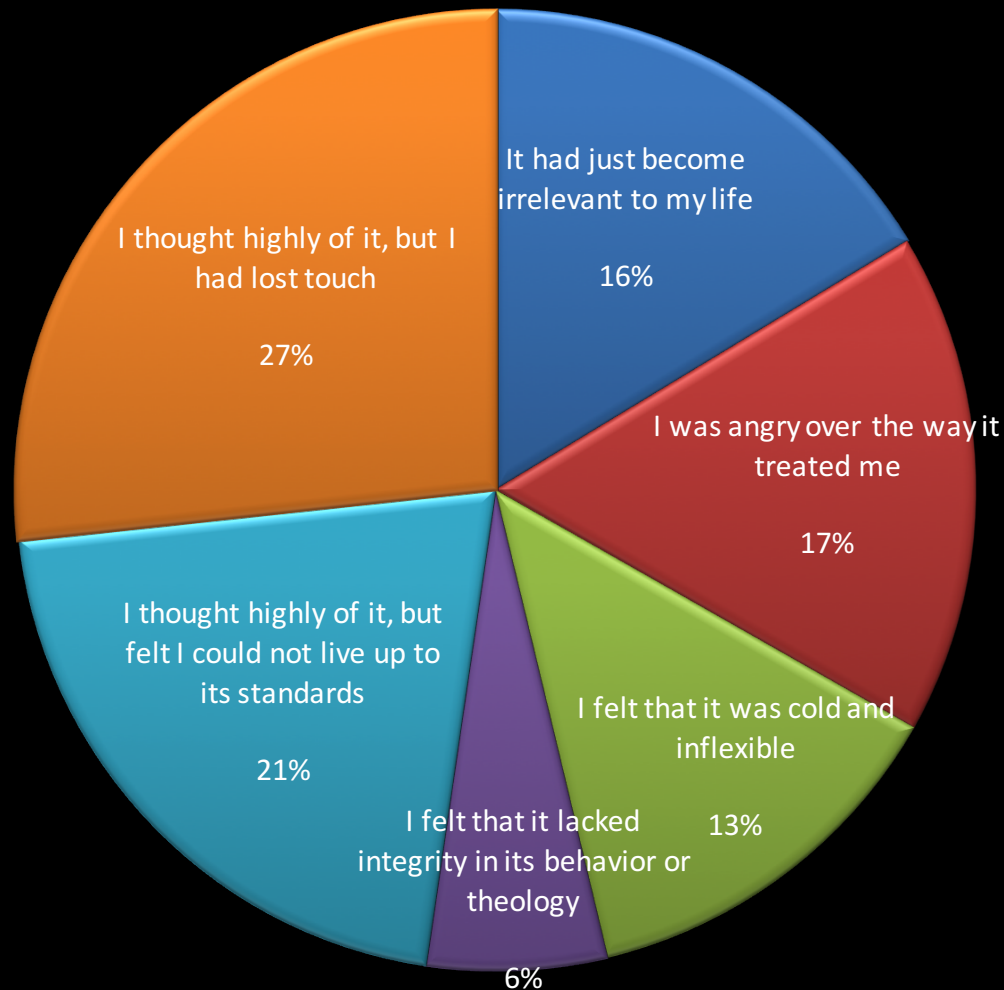
What did you think of *Christianity* at the time you left the Adventist church? (All Survey 2)



What did you think of the Adventist church at the time you left it? – Former Members



What did you think of the Adventist church at the time you left it? – Returned Members



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 the discussion sessions that followed each presentation)

Other Resources

Full reports on both studies of former and inactive members are available at:

www.adventistarchives.org/general-resources-on-nuture-discipling-and-retention

At the same URL is a copy of my reports to Annual Council in 2014 & 2015 which draw out key findings and statistics, for people who don't have time to go through the full reports