Leaving the Church

Why some Seventh-day Adventist members leave the church, and why some come back

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Thanks & Acknowledgements

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Survey Background

In 2011, Seventh-day Adventist church leaders, concerned about evidence that some of its members were leaving the church, decided to conduct a world-wide study of the factors that may be involved. Under the leadership of the General Conference Nurture and Retention Committee, the hope was to identify areas on which to focus the church’s nurture initiatives. A detailed survey was developed by the Nurture and Retention Committee (Adults) and 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.
Survey Details

- **Years conducted:** 2012
- **Number of surveys:** 2
- **Respondents:**
  - 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")
Survey Content

- 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 regular church attendance
- 20 possible reasons that triggered decision to leave SDA church
- Free-form section on why people decide to leave SDA church
- Length since last attended SDA church
- If returned, length of absence from SDA church
Survey Content

- Possible connection between Adventist education and decision to leave the church
- Frequency of involvement in community service and other 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
Chair of Nurture and Retention Committee briefed Division leaders on purpose of survey

Divisions invited to translate survey and arrange for distribution and collection (this responsibility usually given to Division Secretariat or Ministerial Association)

Divisions assign constituent Unions to survey five individuals in both categories (i.e., “left” and “remained”)

Divisions to submit surveys to GC ASTR for compiling and analysis
Survey Accomplishments

- **415** usable surveys received from former members who left Seventh-day Adventist Church
- **370** usable surveys from those previously separated from Seventh-day Adventist Church but subsequently reconnected
- Results provide insights into background, behavior, and thoughts of **785** members around the world who left the church at one point in their life, providing evidence why this occurred
Survey Results

FREQUENCY OF ENGAGEMENT IN SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES PRIOR TO DEPARTURE FROM CHURCH

[SEE HANDOUT SHEET]
Survey Results

WHY DO PEOPLE DECIDE TO LEAVE THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH?

[SEE HANDOUT SHEET]
Survey Results

CONFLICT IS A RE-OCCURRING THEME
Table 12: What event triggered your decision to leave? (Listed in weighted rank order – Members who left)

- Minor Factor
- Secondary Factor
- Primary Factor

- Perceived hypocrisy in other church members
- Marital difficulties
- Lack of friends in the church
- Personal conflict with local church
- Prolonged doubts about Adventist doctrines
- Moved to a new city/church
- Divorce
- Dislike of worship styles
- Decisions taken by higher leaders
- Personal conflict with pastor
- Prolonged doubts about the truth of Christianity
- Dislike of preaching (sermons)
- Prolonged doubts about the existence of God
- Local pastor was moved to another congregation
- Death of parent(s)
- Death of other family member(s)
- Other
Take Home Point Number 1

THE BIBLE STILL RETAINS AUTHORITY & SIGNIFICANCE
Table 22: Do you still believe in the authority of Scripture, as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church? -- Former Members

Yes 320 79%
No 24 6%
I believe scripture has some authority, but less than Adventists teach 26 7%
I'm not sure 34 8%
Table 23: Do you still believe there are benefits to Bible study? -- Former Members

- Yes: 361, 90%
- No: 11, 3%
- I'm not sure: 29, 7%
Take Home Point Number 2

With the appropriate approach 76% of former members are ‘open’ to reconnecting with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.
Table 35: How would you rate your openness to reconnect with the Seventh-day Adventist Church? -- Former Members

- Likely: 135 (36%)
- Somewhat likely: 79 (21%)
- Somewhat unlikely: 46 (12%)
- Very unlikely: 46 (12%)
- Depends on circumstances of approach: 70 (19%)
Conclusions

- Respondents who returned to the church appear to have left the church at a younger age and to have fewer children.

- The five most important ways by which respondents came to be Seventh-day Adventists are being raised an Adventist by parent(s), the influence of other relatives, the influence of friends, evangelistic campaign, and personal Bible study.

- The top six reasons for leaving are perceived hypocrisy in other members, marital difficulties, lack of friends in the church, other family conflicts, high level of conflict in the local church, and personal conflict with local church member(s).
Conclusions

- Participation in church-related activities does not appear to be an indicator of whether a person who leaves the church will return.
- Those who leave and still consider themselves to be nominal Adventist are more likely to return to the church.
- Those who leave but still remain in touch with Adventism, particularly through family and friends who make continued visitations to encourage reconnecting are more likely to return to the church.
The BIG Take Home Point

REASONS WHY THEY RETURNED
Reasons for reconnecting with the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Returned
Recommendations

- Comprehensive, widespread, practical and effective training in **conflict resolution** and **reconciliation** be implemented throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church
- **Mentoring discipleship** be incorporated into the DNA of the Seventh-day Adventist Church
- Initiate: ‘**Operation Reconnect**’
Questions? Comments?