It is difficult to see the cumulative effect of these transfers at first glance, but two years stand out as worthy of note: 1975, a year with 95 transfers in, and 1977 with 105 transfers out.

Figure 4 shows each year in terms of net transfer gain or loss. It is important to note that in only five of the last fourteen years has Stone Tower Church shown a net gain in transfers. It is also important that since 1977 the cumulative loss amounts to 177 members.

Fig. 4 Stone Tower net transfer gain/loss, 1970 - 1983
At the beginning of this project, Stone Tower members were placed in one of seven membership groups according to the information available at that time. A detailed explanation of this classification system appears in Chapter II (pp. 96, 97). Table 2 below shows the membership as it was on April 27, 1983.¹

**TABLE 2**  
STONE TOWER MEMBERSHIP ACCORDING TO CARING MINISTRY CATEGORIES  
APRIL 27, 1983

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Members</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A¹</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A²</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A³</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>271</strong></td>
<td><strong>55%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Active</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C¹</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C²</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C³</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>196</strong></td>
<td><strong>39%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>497</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stone Tower Church draws members from a wide geographic area. In his study of the inactive members of Calvary Baptist Church, O. G. Lawless postulated that distance from the church increases the dropout potential.

A person living three or more miles from the church community is more likely to drift away from the church than when he is a part

¹Table 2 does not include the 45 deaf members who function as a congregation within the larger church family, holding their own services with their own pastor.
of the community. It is also more difficult to return from that distance and establish a pattern of faithful attendance.

In order to examine this theory, I outlined an area on the Portland map with borders approximately 3 1/2 to 4 miles from Stone Tower Church, following the natural community divisions. The residences of active and inactive members were then noted as being inside or outside that area. Figure 5 shows the designated area.

---

A few simple calculations were applied to the number of members in the active ($A^1$) and in the less active ($B$) and inactive ($C^1$) categories. Of the total 390 members in these categories, 45 percent lived inside the circle and 55 percent outside. Active members ($A^1$) had about the same percentage—47 percent inside, 53 percent outside. The less active ($B$) and inactive ($C^1$) members had a slightly wider spread—42 percent inside and 58 percent outside—but not such that would really substantiate the theory that greater distance from the church increased inactivity. In fact, a similar comparison for the elders, deacons, and deaconesses showed that 43 percent live within the circle, and 57 percent lived outside—a ratio almost identical to that of the inactive members.

There is no question that many Stone Tower members drive long distances to attend church and that this has some impact on extracurricular and local evangelistic activities. But it does not appear that distance alone is a large factor in the inactivity of Stone Tower members.

One of the most important factors in the life of Stone Tower Church that pertains directly to this study is the number of members dropped for apostasy or because they were missing. Figure 6 shows the number dropped over the last fourteen years.

Statistics of members dropped for apostasy/missing show only those who, in a given year, requested to be dropped or whose names were removed as a result of action initiated by the church. No records are available that would show the number of members becoming inactive in attendance or involvement.
It is important to note in the above figure that 213 members were dropped in the years 1979 to 1981. One might expect that in a church where so many members had recently been dropped, there would be a low percentage of inactive members—yet an amazing 39 percent of Stone Tower members are inactive.

Dropping so many members in a three-year period was very traumatic for Stone Tower Church. Some members agreed that, though painful, this action was necessary to bring the membership into line with practice. Other members were very upset over the large number of people dropped and questioned whether everything had been done to draw the inactive members back to the faith and fellowship of the church family.
On becoming the pastor of Stone Tower church in 1982 and suggesting the "Caring Ministry" program to the Church Board, I immediately learned their sensitivity to anything that looked like a plan to drop more members. The Board needed assurance that this program would extend a loving ministry to inactive members with a goal of reincorporating them into the life of the church. When the Church Board understood this, they became enthusiastic and were quick to endorse the Caring Ministry.

Urgency for a Reclaiming Ministry

The information cited thus far reveals a need for more than the traditional emphasis on evangelism, on winning new people to Christ and the Church. It is not just that our growth is being diminished by those who leave via the back door, but the 30-35 percent inactive members are a loss, too—a loss to the vitality of their own spiritual experience and a loss to the growth and mission outreach of the church.

Looking beyond those who have actually dropped church membership, we see a large number of people who have become inactive as events in their personal lives or in their spiritual journeys have caused them to drift away from participation in the life and mission of the church.

Leaders within the Christian church at large as well as within the Seventh-day Adventist Church are calling for a reclaiming ministry. In the early pages of his book on discipling, Caslow says:
There is mounting concern regarding membership reversion. We cannot continue to give all attention merely to accessions to the church. Somehow the answer and solution to this long-time, persistent, and chronic evangelistic weakness must be found.¹

Waldo Werning calls the problem of the delinquent or lapsed members "one of the most important objects of evangelism in the church today" and coins the term "internal evangelism"² in his call for a ministry to inactive members.

Gerhard Knutson identifies a possible reason why more has not been done to help inactive members in the past.

It is this ministry of the church to the "inactive" that is its most difficult and embarrassing task. It is a task that we have not talked about, prayed about, and thought through with enough openness. It is imperative that we take a careful look at this ministry if we are to function as the people of God which the New Testament describes.³

Yes, it is embarrassing to admit that we have a loss/gain ratio of 40 percent and that one-third of the members are inactive in the life and mission of the church. But we cannot help these people if we fail to admit the seriousness of the problem and do not put forth concerted efforts to reclaim them for Christ.

Our efforts toward making and holding strong members need to have a three-fold front:

¹Caslow, p. 53.


1. Evangelistic strategy ought to be continually reevaluated in the light of current needs and values and in terms of which types of evangelism build strong, lasting relationships to Christ and the Church.¹

2. Church leaders should continue the emphasis on assimilation and nurture of new church members.²

3. The new frontier in the well-balanced strategy of church growth is the ministry to dropouts—to those who have actually left the church and to the inactive members who have dropped out in spirit.³ Ministry to dropouts is not an option. We cannot continue to emphasize only evangelism and nurture to the neglect of reclaiming those who have lost their "first love."⁴ Dudley and Cummings' studies have led them to conclude:

If significant church growth is to take place, we must find more effective methods—both preventative and remedial—of dealing with this problem. Controlling apostasy is absolutely essential to the mission of the church. A member who does not apostatize contributes as much to growth as a new convert.⁵

¹ For further study of this topic see Win Arn and Charles Arn, "Closing the Evangelistic Back Door," Leadership 5 (Spring 1984):25-31.

² An excellent reference in this area is Lyle E. Schaller, Assimilating New Members (Nashville: Abingden, 1978).

³ Three excellent references in this area are Knutson, Ministry to Inactives; Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member; and Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep.

⁴ Rev 2:4.

Ministry to inactive members is both difficult and rewarding. J. R. Spangler captioned his interview with John Savage for the Ministry magazine with these words:

The inactive church member is perhaps the most neglected aspect of the total church program, yet he symbolizes one of the greatest untapped resources for strengthening the local church.1

**Backsliding--The Member's Perspective**

In order to minister to the backsliding member, we must understand something of the experience through which he or she has gone. There are a number of questions that we should ask: What causes a person to backslide? Are there common factors that all dropouts experience? Is there anything unique about the Seventh-day Adventist dropout? Does the dropout want to return? How can the church be most helpful?

**Factors That Contribute to Backsliding**

It is not the purpose of this paper to thoroughly investigate the causes of inactivity or apostasy. Others have done that research already.2 It is helpful, however, to our overall understanding to summarize some of their findings.

The reasons for which people drop out or become inactive are as numerous as the people who experience them. Many researchers

---


2Three helpful studies of apostasy within the Seventh-day Adventist Church include Roger Dudley, Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What To Do About It (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1978); Lee, "Seeking the Lost Sheep"; and Nielsen, "Disassociation."
have developed intricate categories to classify the precipitants of dropping out. For the purposes of this paper, three general categories with a few subdivisions under each one suffice:

Factors in the personal life

Search for self-identity

This self-identity factor may be operative as a person experiences any of life's passages, but it is especially important during the adolescent years. Roy Zuck explains:

Young people . . . are trying to determine their own set of values apart from the family group. Sometimes they consider the church just an extension of the family control. So in their bid for complete freedom they often feel they must break with the church too.\(^1\)

Life transitions

People moving from one place to another or from one phase of life to another often leave the church or slip into inactivity. Interestingly, these same points of transition (moving, getting married, becoming a parent, etc.) can often stimulate reentry into the church life.\(^2\)

Life crises

A personal crisis may have no direct relation to the spiritual life, but it often spills over into one's religious experience. Jacob Lindenthal's studies showed that the greater the degree of

\(^1\) Roy B. Zuck, "Preventing Spiritual Dropouts," Christianity Today, 18 February 1966, p. 16.

psychological impairment, the more likely that the member's church attendance would decrease and he would isolate himself from organized activities at the time of the crisis.\footnote{Jacob J. Lindenthal et al., "Mental Status and Religious Behavior," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 9 (Summer 1970):143-149. See also Lucius Ferdinand Cervantes, The Dropout: Causes and Cures (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), pp. 193-195.} Again it should be noted that many studies have pointed out crisis as the prompter for spiritual renewal. Our conclusion: crisis causes persons to seek change; therefore the church should be sensitive to both the positive and negative effects of crisis on the spiritual life.

Pressure of time and other interests

Home, school, work, and social and recreational activities all compete with church and the personal spiritual life. "... the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful."\footnote{Matt 13:22 (NKJ).}

Other factors

Other factors in the personal life could include marriage and family problems, physical illness, boredom, work situation, secular values, and lifestyle.

Factors in the member's spiritual life

Commitment

Some members are committed to the beliefs but not to the local church.
They want the fruits of faith, but seem to dodge the responsibilities and obligations. Most Americans say they are Christians, but often without visible connection to a congregation of religious fellowship.

"Church participation is no longer a natural outgrowth of belief; it has become a matter of taste."\(^2\)

Neglect and complacency

Ellen White has written regarding complacency:

Today a large part of those who compose our congregations are dead in trespasses and sins. They come and go like the door upon its hinges. For years they have complacently listened to the most solemn, soul-stirring truths, but they have not put them in practice. Therefore they are less and less sensible of the preciousness of truth.\(^3\)

Louis Nielsen found a two-sided neglect to be a significant factor in drifting from the church.

Neglect may well be one of the main causes for drifting out of the church. The member neglects to communicate with Jesus Christ when prayer and reading of the Word are ignored; he neglects to rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to live a victorious life; he neglects to grow spiritually by the grace of Jesus; and he neglects to seek communion with other members of the Body of Christ. Likewise the church and the pastor may neglect to provide a climate for spiritual growth after the person becomes a member of the church; they may neglect to nurture and to guide, to encourage and to support, to instruct and to provide discipline; they may neglect to reach out to the fringe members to draw them into the heart of the church; and they may neglect to always show the forgiving spirit and love of Jesus Christ.\(^4\)


\(^3\)Ellen G. White, Testimonies to the Church, 10 vols. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948) 6:426.

\(^4\)Nielsen, p. 178.
Thus we see the importance of the counsel to the Hebrews:

"How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation . . . ?"¹

Factors related to the Church

Location, size, and composition of the local church

Gottfried Oosterwal has shown that . . . apostasy rates were the lowest in the town and small city churches, and the highest in urban and suburban congregations. Again, the lowest apostasy rate was found in the churches ranging between 150 and 350 members.²

This reveals an important factor in Stone Tower's high level of inactive members. It is a large congregation in a relatively large city.

Program and activity levels in the church

People with special needs such as singles, young adults, senior citizens, or new members may find that their needs are not being met in the local church.

Bored out or burned out

Most of the folks who drop out are either bored out or burned out. They either find nothing of challenge and significance or have nothing left to give in the frenzy of churchy activity.³

¹Heb 2:3.


Lack of love, fellowship, and involvement

Every study of apostasy mentions this common factor. People who drop out often feel that the other members do not care for them, hence they do not have many friends, are not involved, and feel like outsiders to the church family.

Other factors

Other factors in the local church may include loss of vision, meaning, and purpose in the mission, services, and activities of the local church; conflict in the church; the level of tolerance and acceptance in the church; and unfulfilled expectations.

When church boards and business meetings discuss the apparent apostasy of members, it is common to hear someone express doubt regarding the dropout's original conversion. The Scriptures and Spirit of Prophecy lend support to this concern.

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us, but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.1

It is not the fault of the gospel that apostasies occur. Those who apostatize are not truly converted. They have received the truth by halves. The light of truth has not been strengthened by practice, and it is soon quenched, leaving them in greater darkness than before.2

Presbyterians who have studied their dropouts report that only 21 percent "... had either a conversion experience or a

---

1 John 2:19 (NIV).

2 Ellen G. White, MS 13, 1898, pp. 1,2,5 (MS release No. 454) as quoted in Nielsen, p. 359.
course of instruction for new members, or both, at the time they
joined the Church."

There can be no question that many who drop out of the
curch were not converted, not grounded, not committed, or had only
a marginal association in the beginning. But this cannot be used
as a blanket assumption with which to casually cross off a member's
name and assume that nothing more can be done. Studies of former
and inactive members have demonstrated that many were thoroughly
converted and indoctrinated and were church leaders at one time.

... few become backsliders because they were poorly indoctri-
nated. This, however, is the charge I most often hear . . . .
But such is not the case. Only a small fraction give up because
of doctrinal misunderstandings or disagreements.2

Four of the respondents had served as elders at some point, and
five as deacons. 33% had been church school teachers at one
time or another; 47% had regularly attended church school as
adults and the same proportion had taken part in Bible study or
religious discussion groups. However, 29% of the respondents
had done none of these things. Even so, the findings already
tend to discount any simplistic explanation for people dropping
out of congregations in terms of their never really having been
involved.3

This study . . . reveals that the unchurched are
overwhelmingly "believers" and that it is not a loss of faith in
most cases that has caused people to become unchurched.4

So what conclusion can we draw from these various studies
and factors related to apostasy? Backsliding is a very complex
situation. Simplistic, one-size-fits-all answers will not help the

1Ian F. McIntosh, "Church Dropouts," Austin Seminary

2Detamore, Seeking the Lost Sheep, p. 10.

3McIntosh, p. 10.

4Religion in American: 1979-80 (Princeton, NJ: The
church learn from those who have dropped out, nor will such answers aid us in ministering to them. As is discussed later, the precipitants to dropping out usually come in clusters.

The Caring Ministry is interested in the reasons for inactivity, not because we feel it necessary to diagnose apostasy or force members to relive a painful experience, but because awareness of the multitude of factors in backsliding will help the Caring Ministry team be more sensitive to the needs and feelings of inactive or former members and will help the church correct things in its life or program that cause dropouts or that keep people away.

The Adventist Dropout

The characteristics noted above are common among all Christians who drop out of involvement and/or practice of their faith. However, since this study focuses on Adventist dropouts, we need to ask, is there anything unique about Seventh-day Adventists who backslide?

We believe that the answer is yes, the Adventist who drops out has a unique situation. First of all, becoming an Adventist is special. Many new members come from another background, led to accept the Adventist beliefs in their pursuit of truth. They became part of the "remnant church" with truth for the last days and hope in the soon coming of Christ. They may have experienced significant lifestyle changes as new truths affected their daily lives. Many new Adventists might echo the words of Peter who said, "Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee."¹ Perhaps we

¹Mark 10:28.
would agree with the writer in *Ministry* who was surprised that our apostasies were not higher.

When we consider our high standards, Sabbath difficulties regarding employment, the unpopular nature of our message, and the opposition and often persecution that so many of our members face, it is wonderful that our apostasies are not much greater.¹

The high demand of the standards for faith and practice in the Seventh-day Adventist Church work both to our advantage and disadvantage as far as apostasies are concerned. Kelly suggests that in this time when liberal churches are losing members, those churches that are serious about their faith, who do not confuse or compromise their principles and who make high demands of their members, will gain and hold new converts.

We may suppose that the higher the demand a movement makes on its followers, the fewer there will be who respond to it, but the greater the individual and aggregate impact of those who do respond.²

On the other hand, the studies already cited indicate that many Adventists leave the church feeling they cannot keep the rules or live up to the standards.

The fact remains that the majority of the people seem to leave the church because they do not feel at home, they are not good enough, they feel guilty and consider themselves hypocrites. They are in a predicament. They feel in their hearts that the Adventist church is made up of God's people, and yet they are strangers within the church because they are constantly confronted with the inability or unwillingness to change their present life style to completely conform to the teachings of the church.³

¹G. Burnside, "Can We Reduce Our Apostasies?" *Ministry*, February 1967, p. 17.


³Nielsen, p. 173.
This situation is what John Savage calls "moral anxiety," a feeling of failure to live up to the standards of the church or to their own beliefs and convictions.

Most Adventists assume that a new convert joins the church primarily because he or she has accepted "the truth." Therefore, leaving the church is considered leaving the truth.

The Adventists consider it a serious step to separate from the church. This can only be understood in the light of the Adventist unique self-concept which embraces the strong belief that they are not just another church but a world-wide movement, called by God to spread the Gospel and warn the world of the impending return of Jesus Christ. Consequently when a person leaves the church, he gives up the truth. In a sense to give up the truth is to give up Christ, and to separate oneself from Christ is to give up salvation.¹

However, "truth" is not the only reason people join the church. Alongside of truth, and sometimes even ahead of it, is the need for fellowship and belonging.

There are also strong indicators that people tend to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church more out of a sense of belonging than the appeal of doctrinal purity. Conversely, they also leave the church when they no longer feel loved and cared for by the community of faith.²

Implicit in membership withdrawal is a curious double standard. When people unite with a congregation, they resist suggesting personal need or social satisfactions as causes for joining. They consciously relate church membership with program participation and religious values [in other words, "truth."] When they leave, however, they are more likely to blame a breakdown in personal relationships.³

¹Ibid., pp. 104, 105.


Many Adventists would be surprised to learn how many members leave the church or become inactive, yet believe the Adventist teachings. Ila Zbaraschuk reported that among young Adventists who leave the church,

Not one person mentioned doctrine as a reason for leaving. . . A few even noted that they still practice at least some beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Sabbath was mentioned most frequently.¹

Elder Fordyce Detamore probably had more contact with former Adventists than has any other person, and he wrote these words about the faith experience of backsliders:

A person brought up as a Seventh-day Adventist never forgets his faith completely. Even though he doesn't live it, there is almost always a deep-seated respect for the truth. . . .²

Hosts of people are really backsliders but still consider themselves Seventh-day Adventists. They listen regularly to the Voice of Prophecy, Faith for Today, or It Is Written. They go to church occasionally, but they are unattached to the church. They wouldn't belong to a different church for anything, yet they are not united with us.³

Persons in the Caring Ministry should be aware that there may still be a deep-seated belief in Adventist teachings in the hearts of inactive members. These dropouts may well echo the words of David when he said, "I have strayed like a lost sheep; come, search for they servant, for I have not forgotten thy commandments."⁴

In my visitation with inactive or former members I have found that certain teachings or experiences may be especially

²Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep, p. 62.
³Ibid, p. 12.
⁴Ps 119:176 (NEB).
significant. Many inactive Adventists still believe the Sabbath. Though they may work on Sabbath and not outwardly attempt to keep it holy, they often feel guilty and long for the peace and joy they once experienced on Sabbath. Christian education may also hold a soft spot in their hearts. Often they have pleasant memories of their years in church school or Sabbath School and the teachers who cared for them and helped them.

The second coming of Christ and the prophecies of the last day events are usually retained with vivid memory. Inactive or former Adventists read the newspapers and watch television, too. They see the events taking place and remember that these are signs of the nearness of Christ's coming. Many of them fully believe in the soon coming of Christ and plan to return to the church before that time. Detamore described this situation:

An encouraging thought as we go out to work for backsliders is that the majority of them still believe this message, and most of them plan definitely (or vaguely) to return someday. Many backsliders are watching with deep concern the solemn developments of the signs of the times. What a challenge to be working to bring back those who were once with us but who are now out in the cold!1

Ellen White gives us encouragement that many will come back to the church in the last days before Christ returns.

... when the storm of persecution really breaks upon us, the true sheep will hear the true Shepherd's voice. Self-denying efforts will be put forth to save the lost, and many who have strayed from the fold will come back to follow the great Shepherd.2

1Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep, p. 29.

2White, Testimonies, 6:401.
Resistance and Receptivity

Some of the strongest statements in the Bible are made in reference to those who have once known God and then turned away in opposition:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.¹

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.²

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.³

Resistance is a serious matter in the spiritual life. Resistance closes the door to the heart and life and does not allow the Holy Spirit in to bring conviction, repentance, and commitment. Even God does not force His way into the resistant heart.

The Lord can do nothing toward the recovery of man until, convinced of his own weakness, and stripped of all self-sufficiency, he yields himself to the control of God. Then he can receive the gift that God is waiting to bestow. From the soul that feels his need, nothing is withhold.⁴

¹Heb 6:4-6 (NIV).
²Heb 10:26, 27 (NIV).
³2 Peter 2:20, 21.
Some who have once known Christ and been a part of the church family do not feel a need to return. It would seem that their experience has inoculated them against responding to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

As they opened the door to doubt, their hearts became so much the harder for having been momentarily softened. Satan was determined that blind eyes should not that day be opened, nor souls bound in slavery be set at liberty. With intense energy he worked to fasten them in unbelief.¹

So what prospect is there that former or inactive members will return? What chance of success is there for the Caring Ministry?

Douglas Walrath quotes David Roozen as saying that 46 percent of Americans drop out of active religious participation for at least two years sometime during their lifetime and that 80 percent of these dropouts return.² The statistics I have discovered vary widely, but none of them are that optimistic. One Gallup poll reported a 50 percent possibility of return: "... at least half of the presently unchurched could see a situation where they could become a "fairly active" member of a church. ..."³

Savage has kept some records of churches in which he has worked for inactive members.

¹Ibid., p. 238.


³George Gallup, Jr., "Four Groups Seen as Being Open to Renewed Church Involvement," PRRC Emerging Trends 4 (May 1982), pp. 1, 2. Also found in McKinney, p. 30.
There's one parish that we've tracked that had an 86 percent return rate of all the calls that were made. That's the highest we know. We also know that if the callers work hard over a period of one year, the minimum they can expect is a one-third return rate.¹

The study conducted by Perry reported two different figures, both of them very low.

Many of them [those whom Perry calls the "Estranged"] are "drop-outs," having once been active in a church, most likely a sect-type denomination. Most drifted away, mainly for contextual reasons. One in five might return to the church, under certain circumstances.²

This group [the "Nominals"] is likely to be difficult to reach. Only one in twenty of them could even imagine a circumstance when they might become active in a church.³

From the above studies, it is evident that there is no uniform rate of return. Where in this spectrum are Seventh-day Adventists? Do the positive ties to the beliefs and the expectations of the coming of Christ cause Adventists to return in greater numbers? Or do the negative influences of failure to keep the commandments and church standards or a lack of love and caring from the Adventist family prevail?

Nielsen reported that "the majority of the disassociates are not opposed to the church and that many contemplate returning to membership."⁴ But Lee's study found that only 7.14 percent felt

²Perry et al., p. 402.
³Ibid.
⁴Nielsen, pp. 234, 235.
that return was very likely, while 25 percent said they didn't know, and 42.86 percent said it was very unlikely.¹

There is an additional factor that few researchers take into consideration when discussing the probability of return, and that is the length of time the member has been inactive. Both Vangerid and Savage report considerably higher return rates for those who have recently dropped out of the church.

The people who had become inactive within the past year were the most accessible. This was true even though they were the most agitated, negative, and disagreeable. Emotions and feelings were close to the surface. As in other areas of symptomatic behavior, "early treatment" was indicated. Once the pattern of inactivity was established and the withdrawal completed, a certain chronic stability was discernible. This stability seemed very resistive to change and one which promised considerable stress if effectively altered.²

Savage's research has also revealed that there is a "limbo" period before people begin to reinvest their time and energy. If the church expresses its caring for these new inactives, the resistance factor drops considerably.

After a decision on their part to drop out has been made (it is not always a conscious decision), they will wait six to eight weeks before reengaging their time that had previously been spent in church activities. This period of "limbo" serves two functions: to get in control of the loss they have suffered and to see if anyone from the church will come and talk with them.³

Dudley states: "Former members appeared mainly undecided or pessimistic about the chances of their ever becoming Adventists again. Only 10 percent expressed any hope of joining once

¹Lee, p. 101.
²Vangerid, p. 17.
³Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 69.
more. ¹ In response we would ask: How long had these individuals been out of the church? Had the church ever endeavored to minister to them, or were they only surveyed for their opinions? Would it have made a difference if a caring ministry had been extended to them very shortly after they began dropping out?

It is true that "... no approach can win very resistant people while they are resistant."² But then we must raise the question Dr. Gottfried Oosterwal used to ask in his classes on church growth: Resistant to WHAT? Receptive to WHAT? Zbarschuck cited the case of a young lady named Janet: "... Janet believed strongly that she would one day return to Seventh-day Adventism—not the Adventism she had seen, but the Adventism she had been taught."³

Lurking in the hearts of many inactive or former Adventists is a haunting desire to return. Perhaps this is why so few join other churches. Nielsen reported that

Less than 5 percent of the respondents have joined another church. Repeatedly, in spite of criticism, the former members would make statements to the effect that they would never join another church other than the Adventist.⁴

Some inactives may appear to be resistant when in fact this is only an external protective device, a mask, that hides a longing heart.

¹Dudley and Cummings, p. 148.


³Zbarschuck, p. 16.

⁴Nielsen, p. 228.
Drop-outs cannot casually be assumed to be perfectly satisfied with their new status and position. And the sooner they receive pastoral care, the more likely it is to be of real value to them, even though superficially they may appear excessively hostile and cantankerous.¹

... some are now hostile, cynical, and suspicious; others are arrogant, docile, flippant, or indifferent. But the majority of the respondents are still searching, repentant, wounded, wondering, or longing to be back in the church.²

God has given a special command that we should regard the stranger, the outcast, and the poor souls who are weak in moral power. Many who appear wholly indifferent to religious things are in heart longing for rest and peace. Although they may have sunk to the very depths of sin, there is a possibility of saving them.³

Only a sensitivity to people and the prompting of the Holy Spirit will help us to know whether a dropout is lonely and longing to return, saying as did David, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation..."⁴ or is truly resistant, not ready to consider returning to active church life. For those who are truly resistant, we must follow the advice of Donald McGavran and others to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly with a ministry of presence.

Abandonment is not called for. Fields must be sown. Stony fields must be plowed before they are sown. No one should conclude that if receptivity is low, the Church should withdraw mission.⁵

... receptivity and resistance ebb and flow in persons and peoples. People who are receptive now may be resistant later,

¹McIntosh, p. 34.
²Nielsen, p. 109.
⁴Ps 51:12.
and vice versa. The grand strategy . . . is to reach out to 
receptive people while they are receptive—that is the supreme 
way forward in church growth. But for resistant people, the 
policy is to hang in there with them in a mission of "presence," 
serving them as they will let us, saying what we can, with the 
long-haul policy of building bridges, plowing and planting for a 
later harvest, and making sure we are present for them and 
credible to them when they do turn more receptive.¹ 

It would be a tragedy for the church to consider all 
inactives or former members as resistant and therefore place all 
our efforts in more productive fields of evangelism, bringing in 
new people to take their places. True, one person can occupy 
another's spot on an empty pew, but a new member never replaces the 
vacancy created in the church family by the one who leaves. 
Furthermore, neglecting ministry to inactives because the majority 
are resistant would prevent us from being aware of those who are 
becoming receptive. 

What opens the way to receptivity? What life circumstances 
help to open the doors that were closed through resistance? 

Hunter provides some answers: 

First, some events and circumstances in the life of a person 
. . . open doors that stimulate an openness to new life-
possibilities and permit the reception of previously screened-
out messages. Second, God's Holy Spirit works through the 
events and circumstances of some people's lives to create 
receptivity, to "warm the heart" for the gospel. This is the 
Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace. Our gracious God goes 
before us into the hearts and consciousness of people, preparing 
for an evangelical harvest, which then takes place as he makes 
his actual appeal through us, his ambassadors (2 Corinthians 
5:20).² 

Many writers have helped to create a list of factors that 
may help open the doors of receptivity: 

¹Hunter, p. 81. 
²Ibid., p. 106.