
Resolving Young Adult Attrition

Martin Weber, D.Min.

Communication Director

Mid-America Union of Seventh-day Adventists

Abstract

Many Seventh-day Adventist clergy suffer the loss of their adult children to denominational attrition, and their pain is shared throughout the general population of North American Adventist parents. To identify the causative factors and design remedies, I devoted a Doctor of Ministry project involving active and retired clergy couples in the Mid-America Union. A 111-point questionnaire was mailed to each of 222 active and retired clergy who have adult children. Data requested was based on the research question: What influences from Seventh-day Adventist clergy parents in Mid-America may affect whether their children experience attrition from that denomination upon becoming adults?

Data collected from the 113 questionnaires returned by clergy parents identified 40 attrition factors, yielding the following summary of conclusions: The most significant factors in avoiding attrition are 1) being able to discuss church problems in the parsonage while also 2) managing to sustain joy and togetherness in the family circle and 3) giving teens freedom to develop their own faith experience without the expectation of being super saints.

What shall it profit pastors to baptize the whole city but lose their own children to the fellowship of the faith? And what good does it do for Seventh-day Adventist lay members to invest two decades of prayer intercession and thousands of dollars in parochial tuition expense only to see many of their children drop out of church into the world from which they were supposed to be sanctified?

It is difficult to exaggerate the pain of Adventist parents regarding their adult children in attrition. This is the core concern at most prayer meetings that I've led as a pastor. This suffering I also feel personally, as a parent of adult children outside the fellowship of the Adventist church.

Many sincere prayer warriors insist that God will inevitably, sooner or later, bring prodigals home in answer to parental intercession. And the harder people pray, the sooner it will happen, supposedly. Inevitably, Proverbs 22:6 gets quoted: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."¹ Believe this and God is guaranteed to keep His promise, purportedly.

Confidence in God's saving power is commendable, but such simplistic faith violates hermeneutics, theology,

and the character of God. First, what that proverb describes has already failed to happen—prodigals by definition have departed from their childhood religious training, otherwise parents wouldn't be praying for them to come back.

Has God then failed His word? No, because Proverbs 22:6 is not a promise but a proverb. The difference is that a proverb posits a principle that is generally true but not a universal, absolute law.

Turning several pages backward reveals the following in the same book of Proverbs: "When a man's ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (16:7). But tell this to the apostle Paul as enemies pursue him from city to city. Tell it to Stephen as enemies stone him. Tell it to our Lord as enemies nail Him to a cross while He prays for their forgiveness—yet they resist His grace.

Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:31). Yet it did fail, spectacularly. Did this mean the Father didn't hear the intercession of His Son for the denying disciple? Or is it that God will not rob anyone of free choice regarding matters of the soul, no matter how hard or long anyone fasts and prays?

So why pray for spiritually wayward sons and daughters? Because Christ will seek to open the eyes of those blinded by the god of this world so they can see their situation (2 Cor. 4:4). He will hedge up the way of the transgressor with thorns (Hosea 2:6). He will let the prodigal suffer hunger in the pigpen. He will push a sinner off his horse en route to Damascus. But at the end of the day, people we pray for still have their own choices to make, even the children entrusted to our spiritual care.

Attrition Factors

To identify the causes of attrition among Adventist parents and design remedies, I devoted a Doctor of Ministry project involving active and retired clergy couples in the Mid-America Union. Forty attrition factors emerged from data collected in a 111-point questionnaire completed by 113 clergy parents. Among them:

- Parental conservatism regarding lifestyle standards is not statistically significant in attrition.
- Legalism regarding gospel doctrine (soteriology) is a moderately significant cause of attrition.
- Legalism regarding practicing the principles of the gospel is a major cause of attrition.
- Lack of relationships in the family is the most serious cause of attrition. Parents with the highest retention rate of adult children are those who managed to provide the most positive and joyous family experience and were close enough to talk about anything in an atmosphere of freedom that allowed children and teens latitude in developing their own faith experience.
- The greatest predictor of future faithfulness as an adult is whether a teenager takes initiative to approach a parent to discuss spiritual matters.
- Closely associated with family relationships are the freedom and trust expressed in discussing controversial issues. There is no greater cause of attrition than to attempt to shield children from knowledge of, or to resist discussion about, church or denominational conflict.

Overall, the most significant factors in avoiding attrition are 1) being able to discuss church problems while also 2) managing to sustain joy and togetherness in the family circle and 3) giving teens freedom to develop their own faith experience in a nurturing, non-judgmental context without the expectation of being super saints.

Testimony of Young Adults in Attrition

Besides questioning the parents, I interviewed a small number of the young adults themselves. Their data highlight the importance of that last principle—freedom to develop

one's own faith. Spiritual carnage results from a lack of freedom, along with a deficit of love and warmth.

All but one of these six young adults described their church experience as:

- Rigid, not Flexible
- Closed, not Open
- Exclusive, not Inclusive
- Unfair, not Fair
- Cold, not Warm
- Dark, not Bright
- Dull, not Exciting

These young adults reported significant confusion and despair regarding Adventist lifestyle standards. They seemed particularly distressed about what they experienced as heavy-handedness in enforcing these standards and unwillingness to even dialogue about them. It was interesting to note that *most of these alienated young adults still embrace many fundamental Adventist doctrines such as the Sabbath, yet they resolutely reject the church that teaches them.* When asked if they might possibly be active members in the Adventist church twenty years from now, if time lasts, all but one of them replied “small chance” or “no chance.”

One of the young adults responding to my questionnaire is not in attrition, being faithful both in attendance and participation in church life, asserting that he will “absolutely” remain committed to the Adventist church. He testified to the opposite in most of the above options, describing his parents’ churches as warm, kind, bright, inclusive, fair, open, and exciting—yet still he experienced them as “stiff.” It was interesting that this active disciple seemed just as disappointed as the others with being “loaded down with restrictions” and rules that “almost always just didn’t make sense.” When asked whether programs at church while he was growing up made him think, he said it was “not at all true.” Although he believes every Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief, he seriously questions the church’s traditional behavioral standards and particularly an unwillingness to dialogue about them.

Together with the data I got from parents, these responses from the young adults themselves highlight what I perceive is a compelling need for a church atmosphere that offers flexibility rather than rigidity and freedom rather than oppression. This is not only essential for avoiding attrition—it’s also Scriptural: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (2 Cor. 3:17).

My study data indicate that many Adventists fail to realize that not all moral issues are absolutes. While some things are clearly right or wrong, with other practices God has left some ambiguity for the conscience to sort out. Prayer, for

example, is a profoundly moral matter, but exactly how much to pray is left open to one's own conscience.

Modesty also is a moral issue—but standards of modesty are not universal absolutes, as is evident from various cultures around the world. In Islamist society, women can't even show their ankles and elbows without violating modesty standards. Often they must cover even their faces. Violators are subject to public humiliation or worse. There is no room for deviation or even dialogue about it.

For Adventists, jewelry is an issue of enduring controversy. Young adults express frustration with church policies, written or informal, that permit “politically correct” adornments like cuff links and gaudy gold pins but forbid even the most demure necklace. It deeply offends them when church members regulate trinkets and trivia while ignoring life-and-death moral issues like poverty and famine or universal concerns like racial and gender equality. They find it incomprehensible that the secular world seems more interested in the great moral issues of our time than many churches are. Also offensive is when obviously out-of-shape adult members lecture them about dairy or caffeine consumption while not even mentioning exercise and other basic health principles. (We may take heart from positive and creative holistic initiatives regarding health from the General Conference Health Department.)

None of the young adults in my research demanded that the Adventist Church adopt their views on lifestyle issues; they just want some latitude in living out their own conscience. Indeed, this is Scriptural: “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). Interestingly, God doesn't say “do what feels good” or “do what you want to do” in moral matters that are not absolutes. Rather, do whatever your conscience is persuaded to do amid moral ambiguity.

Worship music is one of the top five issues of congregational conflict reported by clergy in my data.² Many members seem to canonize their personal musical preferences and go about imposing them upon the church. They care not that young adults and others want some variety besides the old hymns—which really aren't so old. The Psalms are thousands of years older, yet singing them in a contemporary tune is somehow problematic for many members who know what they want the church to be but can't logically explain why—and even if they could, would have no business condemning those who might see things a different way.

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What good does it do for a church to pray for prodigals to come back to church if the person greeting (confronting) them in the church foyer is the frowning older brother of Christ's parable? Condemning and divisive members must themselves be confronted by the church and disciplined if they refuse to cease their ungodly oppression and gossip. Church discipline for Taliban-like terrorists is a sacred responsibility from Scripture: “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition” (Titus 3:10).

So church leaders should warn disrupters of congregational unity once and then again. If they continue to cause trouble, they are candidates for church discipline, as Christ also outlined in Matthew 18.

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To summarize the challenge that Seventh-day Adventists face in resolving the denominational attrition of its young people: parents must foster the positive elements of joyous relationships and intrinsic spirituality in the family while avoiding negative factors such as suppression, rigidity, and legalism. Such spirituality is expressed in the context of Old Testament *shalom*.

Shalom as an Antidote to Attrition

The recent United States presidential election of Barack Obama attracted the interest and participation of America's young adults as no other political candidate had in at least four decades. Thousands of them sacrificed a year or so of their lives for the sake of joining Obama's campaign, and millions cast their life's first vote for him.

What was Obama's attraction to America's young adults? In a word, *shalom*. Whereas older adults may have voted for change, primarily economic and political, I perceive that young adults and teens on board the Obama bandwagon were yearning for something deeper—a fundamental healing of the planet and its people. Although the word *shalom* may not have been their rallying cry, what it represents (at least in its secular dimension) was at the core of the campaign's appeal to young Americans.

I believe that *shalom* is what's missing in the Adventist church for most young adults who leave it. I therefore propose it, in its full Biblical sense, as the fundamental remedy for their attrition.

A definition of *shalom* is in order. It is the foundation for our English word “peace,” only with a deeper, richer, spiritual meaning. Christians, Adventists included, tend to think more like Buddhists than like Jews about peace. Most of us view it superficially and passively—the absence of negativity such as strife, guilt, shame, and anger. By contrast, *shalom* in Scripture is positive, energetic and proactive, fulfilling God’s eternal purpose for this planet.

In studying all 236 verses where *shalom* is seen in the Old Testament, I noticed that it starts with one’s personal relationship with God and ripples ever outward to include the whole world, even the environment.

1) Personal *shalom* with God

Shalom begins in the heart of each believer who discovers peace in God’s forgiveness and acceptance. This is important, in fact, essential, if we are going to be peacemakers in our world. Unless we experience God’s peace personally, every attempt to share what we don’t know ourselves will be dysfunctional.

2) *Shalom* at home

Personal peace does no good to the world if it stays under the pine tree in my back yard where I sit with my Bible, happy in Jesus as my “personal” Savior. *Shalom* calls me back into the house where I argued with my wife, compelling me to seek peace with my family.

3) *Shalom* to the church

Shalom extends beyond a peaceful home with biological kin to our faith family, so that we deeply care about our brothers and sisters with whom we worship—even if we understand the Sabbath school lesson differently and have opposing convictions on worship styles.

4) *Shalom* in the marketplace and classroom

Shalom is not satisfied to keep Sabbath blessings at church. It ripples outward to the marketplace, so that we seek win-win business deals, not exploiting any expertise or advantage we may have. For students, *shalom* goes beyond not cheating in class. We might take notes for those who are absent and even invest a little time tutoring those struggling academically.

5) *Shalom* to the whole world

Shalom extends beyond the marketplace or classroom to people we might rather not associate with. It goes beyond “God bless America” to “God bless Africa” and Europe—and even the terrorists who shout “Death to America.” We want them all to be saved and healed in body and soul.

6) *Shalom* to the animals

Shalom in Scripture is so expansive that it goes beyond the human to the animal world. Ancient Jacob wanted *shalom* for the flock (Gen. 37:14). We too should care about God’s nonhuman creatures, refusing to exploit them. This provides motivation beyond personal health to become vegetarian.

7) *Shalom* to the environment

Biblical peace extends even to inanimate creation: “peace for the seed,” so that the land will yield its produce (Zech. 8:12). Our Creator God is “green” and expects us to be responsible stewards of this world, polluted as it is, even as we anticipate the earth made new. Here at last we have a persuasive theological context for secular society’s enthusiasm, particularly among young adults, for healing the environment.

All of the above, and nothing less, was envisioned by Jesus when he pronounced: “Blessed are the *shalom*-makers.” *Shalom* explains why righteousness in the Old Testament does more than sugarcoat our sins. *Shalom* loves enemies, feeds the hungry, visits the lonely, and seeks social justice locally and around the world.

Seeking *Shalom*

Unfortunately, Adventists historically have been more obsessed in getting past personal guilt into the next world than in caring deeply about being peacemakers in this present world. In fact, conflict rather than *shalom* is in the DNA of many Adventists, going back generations. Both among ourselves and in our community relations, we lack concern for mercy and social justice even as we fancy ourselves as being “God’s peculiar remnant.”

Many Adventist churches are spiritual war zones. I know an elderly little congregation that nearly split amid a nasty discussion about mushroom dishes at “fellowship” dinners.

Tragically, some of our kindest older members, in terms of character, are intolerant when it comes to theology. They greet youth with a warm hug but then condemn their convictions regarding diet, assorted lifestyle issues, and nuances of doctrine.

This must change if we want our churches to be maternity wards rather than hospices. Without a born-again experience, congregations that have managed to survive for a century are doomed to die within a decade.

Theological intolerance, both internal within the congregations and external in relating to the community, is anathema to the younger generation. For them, tolerance and collaboration are top values. We will never persuade our youth to stay with the Adventist church if they perceive their local congregation as contentious, self-righteous, and narrow-minded.

It’s all about *shalom*. If politicians can get Adventist young people excited about compassion and social justice, surely our churches can do the same. Through experiencing *shalom*, the Seventh-day Adventist Church will heal internally and gain influence with neighbors.

Just the honest pursuit of shalom will win the enthusiastic participation of our young adults. When we humbly invite them to join us on that discipleship journey, flawed as we all are, I'm convinced that most of them will stay by our side as fervent and faithful Seventh-day Adventists.

Endnotes

1. Unless noted otherwise, all Scriptures are from the New King James Version.

2. The top five problems in Mid-America Adventist churches as reported by the clergy subjects of my study: power struggles among members, pastoral conflict with lay leaders, worship music style disputes, disagreement about lifestyle standards, and general church gossip (surprisingly, church finances tied for only 14th).