

Nurture and Church Member Well-Being in a Global Seventh-day Adventist Sample

Karl G. D. Bailey* & Duane C. McBride

*kgbailey@andrews.edu

50-word abstract:

We report a two-factor model of effective and failed nurture in the church—encouragement for wholeheartedness, efficacy in ministry, and belonging. Effective nurture explained a small amount of variance in well-being beyond controls including religious affiliation and behaviors, while failure to nurture explained substantial variance in religious stress and struggle.

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Church member well-being plays an important role in retention. Individuals who disaffiliate from religion report low levels of health and well-being (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016; Scheitle & Adanczyk, 2010) and high levels of stress (Vargas, 2012). On the other hand, religious behaviors are positively related to well-being (Ellison, 1991; Levin, 2013; Páez et al., 2018) in many cultural contexts (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011; Lun & Bond, 2013). Nurture may also drive church member well-being (Fatima, Sharif, & Khalid, 2018; Jackson & Bergeman, 2011). In this study, we identified a best-fit model for nurture—support for wholehearted action, self-efficacy, and belonging (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000)—and then examined the relationship between nurture and well-being.

Methods. We report data from 24607 people across 13 world divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church who completed all of our target items in the Global Church Member Survey (GCMS) in 2017 and 2018. We selected two single-item measures of **overall well-being** (Gallup/Pew) and happiness (World Values Survey) in the GCMS. We also selected four measures of **spiritual well-being** (Garssen, Visser, & de Jager Meezenbroek, 2016) that distinguished well-being from struggle. We selected four-item spiritual growth and three-item spiritual decline scales (Cole et al., 2008) to measure broad spiritual well-being, in addition to four-item Sabbath growth and two-item Sabbath stress scales (Bailey & Timoti, 2015) to measure well-being in the context of a definitional, high-cost religious practice (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). The GCMS included nine items to measure **nurture** in the church (modified from La Guardia et al., 2000; six effective nurture items and three failure to nurture items. One-third of each concerned wholeheartedness, efficacy, and belonging. We first used confirmatory factor analysis with the *lavaan* (0.6-3) package in *R* (3.5.3) to fit three possible models for the nurture items. We then used the best-fitting model in nested hierarchical linear regression (see blocks in Table 1).

Findings. The two-factor effective/failure nurture model (CFI = .948, TLI = .928, RMSEA = .061) was the best-fit model. However, nurture only accounted for a small additional amount of variance in well-being beyond control variables; affiliation accounted for larger increases in R^2 across all types of well-being (see Table 1), and religious behaviors for spiritual well-being. Failure to nurture uniquely accounted for over a third of the total R^2 in both spiritual decline and Sabbath stress variables.

Discussion. We replicated the finding that a committed religious life relates to higher levels of well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ellison, 1991) despite a biological and psychological tendency to return to a well-being set point (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). We extended this by demonstrating that a lack of nurture in the church related to higher levels of religious stress and struggle, highlighting the need to develop local church plans to nurture and disciple every member.

Table 1. Changes in variance accounted for (ΔR^2) across six measures of overall and spiritual well-being.

outcome	demog.	affil.	attend	horiz.	private	caring	nurture	total
well-being	2.9%	3.9%	0.9%	1.7%	0.7%	0.2%	2.1%	12.4%
happiness	0.6%	7.2%	0.8%	1.7%	0.7%	0.5%	1.8%	13.2%
spiritual growth	1.3%	10.0%	4.1%	11.4%	3.7%	0.2%	1.6%	32.2%
spiritual decline	4.8%	3.5%	1.7%	0.0%	3.9%	0.1%	10.7%	24.7%
Sabbath growth	1.6%	14.1%	2.3%	5.6%	2.7%	0.4%	2.7%	29.4%
Sabbath stress	2.9%	3.1%	2.1%	0.1%	2.2%	0.1%	8.8%	19.3%

linear regression blocks: demog = demographic variables, affil. = affiliation variables, attend = frequency of attendance variables, horiz. = horizontal faith maturity, private = frequency of personal and family religious behaviors, caring = perception of caring variables

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