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The Belonging Principle in Church Membership

Warren Butler Ruf
Andrews University

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ABSTRACT

THE BELONGING PRINCIPLE
IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

by

Warren Butler Ruf

Advisor: James North

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ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE BELONGING PRINCIPLE IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Name of researcher: Warren B. Ruf
Name and degree of faculty advisor: James North, D.Min.
Date completed: July 1996

Problem

Meaningful church membership in the United States is diminished by current social trends including privatism, mobility, and theological pluralism. This loosening of the traditional "ties that bind," has created a belief-belonging gap in many Christian churches. While weekly attendance at services might increase, formal membership and institutional loyalty decreases.

Method and Results

This phenomena is examined from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective. Social research conducted in a Caucasian conference in the Southeast U.S. indicated that a sense of belonging is linked to the age of the member. While 90 percent of those above age sixty-five claimed a strong loyalty and attachment to the church, only 65
percent of those below the age of forty-five expressed a sense of belonging. The results are statistically significant within 4 percent.

Conclusion

Meaningful church membership can be understood as a three-dimensional model of beliefs, behaviors, and a sense of belonging. The Adventist Church has recognized the importance of beliefs and behaviors, but it has not fully appreciated the significance of belonging. To promote this neglected component, practical illustrations of belonging enhancement programs are presented ranging from an annual day of membership rededication to a covenant concept of renewable membership.
THE BELONGING PRINCIPLE

IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

A dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

Warren Butler Ruf

APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

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Date approved: July 26, 1996
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE BELONGING GAP

It is easier to become a member of a Protestant congregation than it is to be accepted into the fellowship of community of believers.

Lyle E. Schaller

The Member Who Did Not Want to Belong

Don stopped attending church services in 1990 under suspicion he was involved with a dissident organization. He admitted that some of his theological views annoyed "liberal members" of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), but strongly defended his orthodox beliefs and conservative lifestyle.

But subsequent events revealed that Don was misrepresenting himself as an ordained minister and traveling extensively in the United States and Asia as a spokesperson for an organization critical of the SDA denomination.¹ Concerns about Don’s loyalty to the church increased when he began teaching religion classes in a private college which openly accepted tithe money for operation.

I spoke with Don several times about his five-year absence from our church.

¹Except for names, all facts in the narratives throughout this paper are true. The denomination had withdrawn Don’s ministerial credentials several years earlier.
He requested that we transfer his membership into an independent church he was attending. I informed him that denominational policy disallowed such a transfer between Adventist and non-Adventist churches. I urged him to write a letter of resignation which would allow his words to explain his situation, and our church board would not be forced to determine his suitability for membership. Don replied that he could not conscientiously leave our church; he thought and believed as an Adventist; he lived, wrote, and preached as an Adventist. Resigning his membership was equivalent to a denial of faith.

According to the Church Manual, a member can be removed only through a formal process called disfellowshipping. Of the eleven criteria for disfellowshipping, only one applied to Don's situation—that was "Adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organization." The nature of disloyalty was left undefined, but a prior reference indicated that such groups taught a "doctrine or message not in harmony with the fundamental religious objectives and teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church." Don was sure his beliefs and behavior were within the parameters of this statement, and the privilege of membership should continue.

The church board wanted to treat Don kindly, but urged him to be realistic about his relationship to the church. The board's position was summarized as follows:

---

1 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (n.p., 1990), 50. Subsequently called the Church Manual.

2 Ibid., 160. Nonattendance and nonpayment of tithe were also excluded as reasons for disfellowshipping.

3 Ibid., 156.
Members must decide whether their life choices and behaviors are consistent with the norms and expectations of church membership. Being honest with God means being honest about membership in a local church. If we truly love God, we will spend time with Him. If we love the church, we will invest time fellowshipping with believers and supporting the church.

If your choices and behavior of the last five years were normal for all members, the church would not exist today. Your membership is a validation of legitimacy. When other people hear that you are a member, they naturally assume that you attend regularly, pay tithe, and generally support the local program. But the reality of your involvement is very different.¹

In 1992, the SDA denomination published a lengthy document that confirmed accusations of deception and hurt caused by the same two organizations Don represented.² After reviewing the evidence, the church board voted to recommend that Don be disfellowshipped due to his affiliation with these two divisive organizations. But while the evidence of Don's participation in a disloyal movement became the official reason for disfellowshipping, the board felt that Don's complete desertion of the fellowship was a more accurate rationale. In January 1996, the entire church had the opportunity to review the board's recommendation. Although invited, Don was not present when his name was removed from membership.

**The Belief-Belonging Gap**

For five years Don retained membership in one congregation yet belonged to another. In spite of his theological correctness and conservative lifestyle, Don did not understand the importance of belonging. His experience illustrates one of the most


²North American Division, *Issues: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Certain Private Ministries* (Silver Spring, MD: NAD of SDA, n.d.).

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significant trends in Christian denominations, including the Adventist Church.

The desire to belong to a church in America, particularly one of the mainline Protestant churches, has decreased since around 1965.¹ Between the mid 1960s and 1990 these denominations lost between "one-fifth and one-third of the membership they claimed in 1965, and the proportion of Americans affiliated with them had reached a twentieth-century low."² While the percentage of Americans regularly attending church (40 percent) has remained constant over the last thirty years, seven of the nation's nine largest Christian denominations have experienced a steady membership decline.³ Millions of American Christians, many of them 'baby boomers,' believe in Jesus Christ, prayer, heaven, and miracles. They want their children to have religious instruction. They believe the faith, but for many reasons choose not to belong to an organized church. Don is like many of this generation. "It does not make a difference which church a person attends because one is as good as another."⁴

According to Ray Waddle, a Nashville religion editor, "Denominational

¹Usually the following churches: Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Episcopalain, Disciples of Christ, and the Christian Church.


switching is emerging as a national pastime."  

"Operating as sovereign ecclesiastical consumers," writes Robert Patterson, "they [growing numbers of evangelicals] hop from church to church looking for the best spiritual 'deal' in town." Chuck Colson labels it the "McChurch" mentality. "People change congregations and pastors and even denominations as readily as they change banks or grocery stores."  

"The belief-belonging gap," writes George Gallup, "is sending shock waves throughout American Protestantism." He concluded, "In the 1990s America's faith should hold steady, while the institutional church may possibly waiver."  

The Gap in Adventism  

Adventism survived the significant membership losses in the Roman Catholic Church and the mainline Protestant churches during the 1960s and 70s. But as the denomination neared the 1990s, evidences of similar losses began to emerge in church statistics as well as in the pews. In the late 1980s, the NAD commissioned a major sociological study to explore issues relating to spiritual development and church attachment of Adventist youth. The Valuegenesis study, after surveying nearly 13,000 youth, parents, pastors, and teachers, offered mixed results, at times encouraging and  

4Gallup, 9.
other times depressing. I would like to share an example of each case.

In general, Adventist youth are very supportive of the church. For example, consider the Denominational Loyalty Score, a scale based on the responses to three questions: (1) How important is it to you to attend a church of the denomination you marked above? (2) How satisfied are you with the denomination of which you are a member? (3) If you moved to another city that had many churches from which to choose, would you attend a church of the same denomination you now attend? The results in Table 1 show high scores for Adventists compared to youth of other Protestant denominations.

### Table 1. -- Denominational loyalty score for Adventist youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Seventh-day Adventists NAD</th>
<th>Christian Church (Disciples)</th>
<th>Evangelical Lutheran (LCA)</th>
<th>Presbyterian Church (USA)</th>
<th>United Methodist Church</th>
<th>United Church of Christ</th>
<th>Southern Baptist Convention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reprinted, by permission, of the Education Department of the NAD, from Peter L. Benson and Michael J. Donahue, *Valuegenesis: Report 1* (Silver Spring, MD: NAD 1 Oct. 1990), fig. 3.

The positive results indicated a strong 72 percent of Adventist youth support the church. They scored higher than all mainline Protestant youth, and came very close to the highest score for Southern Baptists.¹ A high percentage (80 percent) of Adventist youth...

youth claim to attend church every Sabbath. Concerning religious salience, or importance, *Valuegenesis* revealed that 84 percent of Adventist youth considered church an important or very important influence in their lives.¹

But what is the glue attaching Adventist youth to the church? The survey explored three aspects of congregational life: the degree of warmth and openness, programs that stimulate thought, and a sense of being cared about. In these responses, Adventists scored significantly lower than all non-Adventist youth, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2.—How Adventist youth feel about their church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Seventh-day Adventists</th>
<th>Mainline Protestants</th>
<th>Southern Baptists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious education programs at my church are interesting.</td>
<td>31 %</td>
<td>66 %</td>
<td>74 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My church offers enough things for kids my age.</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>54 %</td>
<td>39 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look forward to going to things at my church.</td>
<td>36 %</td>
<td>56 %</td>
<td>76 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experience the feeling that adults in my local church care about me.</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>62 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experience the feeling that other youth in my church care about me.</td>
<td>35 %</td>
<td>39 %</td>
<td>54 %</td>
</tr>
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</table>


¹Ibid., 76.
These results suggested that two-thirds of Adventist youth found the church cold and uninviting. "Only 44 percent of Adventist youth surveyed said, 'My church feels warm.'" Among high school seniors, less than 20 percent had developed both a high faith maturity and high loyalty to the Adventist church. Comparing the data, a disturbing picture emerged. As the survey questions became more specific, church loyalty turned to dissatisfaction.

Kangas and Dudley noted similar results in a survey of 1,511 young Adventists. "Many youth seemed to feel that their relationship with the church doesn't really matter, and that all that does matter is their personal relationship with Jesus Christ."  

Accession rates in the North American Division (NAD) of SDA, 1950-1993, dropped 38 percent, from 6.79 percent to 4.19 percent. Even growth rates among ethnic minorities have diminished. The total Hispanic membership in the NAD in 1993 increased by only fifty-one persons, and the percentage of Hispanics in the church decreased by .01 percent. Gary Russell has come closest to placing a figure on Adventist membership loses. "Two-thirds or more of the hundreds of thousands of


4NAD, Summary of Progress, Fourth Quarter (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDA, 1993,) 7.

5NAD, Summary of Progress, Second Quarter (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDA, 1994), 1994, 5.
nonattending and former Adventists are from the baby boom generation and the baby buster generation."¹ The belief-belonging gap exists in Adventism.

**Dissertation Intentions**

Over the last thirty years the meaning of church membership in Christian churches has changed. Traditional loyalty and positive feelings about membership have been replaced with what prominent researcher George Barna calls "negative connotations."² Membership ties people down with unwanted obligations and commitments. People want the privilege of attending, but even strong believers are not as interested in belonging as in previous generations. While this is true for some non-Adventist congregations, is it also a reality in some Adventist churches? I believe so. The first intention of this study was to examine the question, "What is the meaning of church membership?" Successful assimilation into a diverse congregation is more complex than a personal relationship with Christ. With increased mobility, family breakdowns, theological pluralism, and widening varieties of ethical behavior, church members perceive a loss of strictness, responsibility, commitment, and accountability for church membership.

**Proposed Theoretical Model of Church Membership**

I propose that church membership be composed of three dimensions: belief, behavior, and belonging. First, participation in the Adventist Church normally begins

²Barna, 133.
with an intellectual understanding of God revealed in Scripture and the human need for salvation from eternal death (belief). But Adventism is more than a cognitive understanding of propositional truth. The second component of membership is a rich heritage of traditions which undergird church culture and provides it with a sense of meaning (behavior). Adventists have developed a special way of eating, a way of dressing, a way of recreation, a way of worship, a way of evangelism, a way of not smoking, not drinking coffee, tea, or alcohol. These lifestyle behaviors created a century of great social strength. Third, being an Adventist means belonging to a community and experiencing mutual acceptance. Belonging is a psychological-sociological concept that acknowledges the meaningfulness of and commitment to the group. The religious experience is a relationship with God and a relationship with fellow believers. Belonging is defined as the sense of acceptance, participating in church activities, and finding a special place in the group. The three elements of this membership model are interrelated. While affirming the primacy of belief, it is only the first among equals. However, as this model is applied to Adventists history, I would agree with Richard Rice that

*believing* traditionally occupies a position far ahead of any other element in our experience. To be an Adventist is first and foremost to affirm the truth of various propositions, or fundamental beliefs. Doctrinal orthodoxy occupies a place of paramount importance in our conception of religious experience. *Behaving*, in the sense of following various guidelines for diet, dress, and such things would no doubt be second. Traditionally, *belonging* would come in a distant third, if it figured in the picture at all (italics mine).  

1Richard Rice, "Believing, Behaving, Belonging--Exploring a Larger View of Faith," *Spectrum* 20, no. 3 (1990): 30. For Rice this triad represents three dimensions of faith. This project reinterprets the triad as three dimensions of membership.
The first generation of Adventists made correct beliefs the primary conditions for membership. From the 1870s through the 1940s, a host of written and unwritten behavioral standards were given the force of doctrine. The church has reached the time and place to advance the third component. The same emphasis that our forefathers placed on belief and later behavior must now be placed on belonging. Without a sense of belonging, there is no true membership.

The Social Dimension of the Church

Most ministers perceive the church primarily as a theological or biblical entity. But I have learned that the church and the individual religious life can be observed and studied from a sociological perspective. Over the last seventy years sociology has taken a special interest in religion, studying the effects of the religious experience on society, and the reverse, the impact of society on religion. Since church membership is discipleship in a social context, a theoretical framework for this study included a social understanding of the church. To this end the second intention of this study was to become more familiar with the work of a religious social researcher, particularly in the area of religion.

Adventist social research began in 1978 with the establishment of the Institute of Church Ministry. In the first decade, twenty studies were conducted by numerous church entities, ranging from church statistical reports to marketing research for publishing houses. In 1988 the Church Information System was established by the NAD to provide a central distribution source for survey data and reports. After a late
start in sociometrics, the Adventist Church has advanced quickly.

I wanted to better understand scientific data gathering processes so I could develop an instrument that would measure the level of belonging in a selected sample of church members. To generate information about church belonging, a survey instrument was designed to measure the phenomena of belonging within a sample of church members. This self-administered survey was prepared for the entire Georgia-Cumberland Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the research methodology and report on the in-ministry component of this study.

Proposing Strategies for Belonging

The greatest practical value of my report is the reporting and evaluation of specific programs used to reduce the belief-belonging gap. A few churches have completely redesigned their policies of church membership. While untraditional, the merits of these approaches need to be thoughtfully considered. Searching for ways to enhance an attitude of belonging was the third intention of this study. The observations and recommendations presented in chapter 7 of the study are based on personal experience, readings in church renewal, member assimilation, theology, and religious sociology.

Limitations of the Study

The type of commitment addressed in this study was limited to commitment and participation in a local church. Analyzing the meaning of church membership among non-Adventist denominations was beyond the scope of this study, except as a
contribution to the formation of an Adventist concept of membership.

While the belonging principle is universal to the human experience, it is highly influenced by culture. Evidences of belonging in one culture may not cross over into other cultures. This study is limited to exploring the belonging principle in a largely Caucasian SDA conference in the southeastern United States. Interpretations applied to other kinds of churches, such as Asian or African-American, might be inaccurate. More significant limitations related to the research instrument are presented in the conclusion of chapter 5.

Religion by its very nature is regarded as an encounter with a supernatural power. The sociological study of religion cannot probe the transcendental or essential nature of the religious experience. The objective human observer can describe only religious expression, the "this worldly" dimension of religiosity.¹ A study of religious belonging, therefore, must also admit these same limitations.

Finally, some Adventist leaders and members are resistant to creative ideas about church membership. While a covenant concept of membership has a biblical foundation and strong historical precedent, some members believe it will encourage congregationalism or a legalistic application of the gospel. Administrators fear significant membership fluctuations as membership rolls become objects of greater scrutiny. One conference president remarked that an Adventist church practicing renewable membership would never exist in his conference. While it was a major goal

of this project to provide a balanced rationale for some of these ideas, their applicability would be greatly limited by resistant membership and inflexible leadership.

Conclusion

Americans increasingly view faith as an individual matter, to be aided but not necessarily controlled by religious institutions. Don wanted the best of both worlds, to do as he pleased, without regard to the church, and remain a member in regular standing.¹

Meeting the challenges of the 1990s and the twenty-first century will require creative thinking about church membership. Roberta Hestenes writes of lonelinesses negative effect on our culture.

Many people struggle with the problems of loneliness. They feel isolated or cut off from deep relationships with other people. Within western culture, observers have noted in recent years a breakdown in the networks of "natural" community which gives its members a sense of identity and of personal worth and dignity. As an increasing number of people feel this isolation, their life is drained of its warmth and sense of belonging.²

The day is past when unique beliefs and behaviors alone will be the glue to keep people in the church. Mother Theresa once said, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It's the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted—of being

¹The adjective "good" has been dropped in the latest edition (1995) of the Church Manual.

deserted and alone."¹ With a society driven toward privatism and individualism, the belonging concept is a healthy corrective, and the church, of all social structures in society, can be a chief dispenser of this medicine. Unfortunately, at the very time when this "balm of Gilead" is most needed, some churches are experiencing a belief-belonging gap that encourages believers to devalue the importance of church membership.

We can be encouraged that religion has historically provided meaning and a sense of belonging. We do not ask of the church what it has not effectively offered in the past. In the words of Andrew Greeley,

Religion provides not merely meaning in the lives of its practitioners but also a sense of belonging, factors which go far toward explaining the role and the power of the denomination. Religion is indeed . . . a meaning-giving cultural system, but the religious denomination is also a belonging-providing group.²

¹Mother Theresa, quoted in Leadership 1, no. 4 (1980): 124.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEED TO BELONG

How many and wonderful are our privileges as members of the church! Among them, three stand out. The church is a place to belong, a place to grow, and a place to serve.

Robert S. Folkenberg

The Church Prospect

One spring afternoon a Seventh-day Adventist minister was visiting public crusade attendees in their homes. After three weeks of nightly presentations on prophetic and doctrinal topics, the occasion had arrived for a serious conversation about church membership with Jim. Now, with the preacher sitting a few feet away, the thirty-something young professional raised the question on his mind: "How do you become a Seventh-day Adventist? How do I belong to your church?"

"Joining is easy," assured the pastor. "You do not even have to sign your name." For several minutes he described an attitude of minimal commitment or obligation towards church membership. "Membership," he said, "was just being with us." Jim wanted to believe the pastor, but he did not understand the full significance and biblical purpose of church membership. He could not realize that the church was
a very complex social network. On the other hand, the pastor wanted Jim to become a member. But was this justification enough to withhold from him a more accurate description of church belonging? Why reinforce a current trend in religious thinking, an attitude potentially dangerous for the church?

The Belonging Principle

Nearly everyone wants to belong. When separated from family or friends, part of us is missing. Like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, we are always searching until we find home. The need for spiritual intimacy with God was prayerfully described by Augustine, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts can never rest until they rest in you." The origins of belonging go much deeper than animalistic instinctive behavior or Sigmund Freud's concept of the "primal horde." Jim's desire to belong in a church is rooted in spiritual and psychological needs as old as creation, when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). In His image we were created to be social. As George Ernest Wright wrote, "The individual was created for society . . . for he is man only in the midst and as a member of a group. There is no man apart from a people in which he lives and moves and has his being."

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1Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (New York: Bantam, 1960), 65-76.

2All Bible references are taken from the NIV, except where noted.

Developmental psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed that humans are motivated by a hierarchical system of needs ranging from the most basic survival-instinctive needs to the spiritual-psychological need for self-actualization. Maslow noted that as the lower needs were satisfied the next higher need in the hierarchy became evident. For example, a hungry person would not desire an intellectual feast, such as a concert or lecture; an oxygen-deprived person would have little interest in reading this report. But as the lower-level needs are satisfied, new cravings emerge.

According to Maslow the next higher level of need, the third motivational engine, is the need to belong. This need is fulfilled by friendship, acceptance, and closeness to others. Those who once hungered for food and security, now hunger for affectionate relations with family and friends.\(^1\) The lonely couple who wants a child to complete a family, the new family in the neighborhood searching for friends, the wife whose friends are limited to her husband's contacts in his job, are examples of situations where belonging is desired.

Maslow's theory, applied to church membership, suggests that Jim would not appreciate the belonging needs offered by membership until and unless his physical and safety needs were met. Jesus seemed to understand this principle with his social ministry. Christian social concern is a necessary prerequisite to spiritual belonging.

Although a sense of belonging is fundamental to group existence, social scientists cannot agree on a theoretical definition.\textsuperscript{1} The comprehensive concept of belonging is related to theories of group cohesiveness, solidarity, or the quality of sticking together. Bollen and Hoyle have proposed a theoretical model where group cohesion is based on two components, "an individual's sense of belonging" and "his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group" (italics in the original).\textsuperscript{2} Belonging includes cognitive (objective) and affective (subjective) elements. Thus, a sense of belonging is something felt, a gut feeling, in addition to an attitude. Measuring belonging is simply measuring a perception, a subjective opinion about the forces that influence people to remain in the group. Bollen and Hoyle developed a six-item scale for testing group cohesiveness that included multiple statements about belonging and morale. The three belonging statements were intended to measure the cognitive aspect of cohesion while three morale statements measured the affective component. The three statements on belonging follow:

- I feel like I belong to the _________ church.
- I feel that I am a member of the _________ church family.
- I see myself as part of the _________ church community.\textsuperscript{3}

In preliminary testing, Bollen and Hoyle reported that their Perceived Cohesion Scale (PCS) showed high reliability and validity. I was impressed with the


\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., 482.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 485.
scale and used the first question of the PCS in the membership survey described in chapter 5.

**The Beginning of Religious Belonging**

Jim's social-spiritual quest to belong began with a sense of loneliness. Psychiatrist Ann Clark suggests that loneliness is "more common than the common cold." Loneliness is the child of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self estrangement. Becoming a church member was a response to one or more special needs for belonging. As Jim reflected on the presentations, he came to understand that spiritual conversion meant a reorientation of his life, a voluntary act of submission or subordination of life to a holy, transcendent God.

In traditional western culture, conversion focuses on the personal relationship with Christ, rather than the group. The path to spiritual enlightenment is private and unique for each person. Robert Bellah has observed, "Most Americans see religion as something individual, prior to any organizational involvement." While not

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1Ronald B. Sloat, "Cultivating a Greater Sense of Belonging in the Transitional Congregation of West Charlton United Presbyterian Church" (D.Min. Project, Drew University, 1988), 44.


3Other motivations affecting Jim's decision might have been a fear of death or hell, guilt or remorse, a life crisis, a simple quiet reflection on new information, the example of someone else, or the emotional attachment to the crusade speaker.

discounting this theological truth, I would add that conversion does not normally take place outside a social context. Human support, mostly coming from the church, motivates spiritual life, reinforces commitment, and nurtures the believer.

The outward act of conversion is baptism, an event where Jim publicly acknowledges the goodness of God and accepts the Lordship of Christ in his life. The essence of belonging is identifying with something, giving oneself to something bigger. Baptism is a "ritual of integration" that symbolizes Jim's surrender to Christ and the authority of the church. Through baptism Jim is fully accepted into a new social network of the church. While current baptismal practice seems to reinforce the individual element of conversion, the Bible favors a more social interpretation of the event. Joachim Jeremias views with special interest the New Testament record that adult baptisms were accompanied by household baptisms (Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). So, while the act of baptism may be unchanged, modern individualism has shifted the focus to the personal relationship with Christ rather than a relationship to the church.\(^1\) Unfortunately, the thirteen baptismal vows normally used by SDA ministers and evangelists do not adequately address the social nature of belonging or baptism. First, the statement on baptism (number 11) makes no connection between baptism and church membership. In light of cultural trends I believe more emphasis needs to be placed on local church belonging.

Church-Sect Models of Belonging

The quality and nature of belonging that Jim will subsequently experience in his spiritual life will differ according to denomination and church type. Carl Jung observed this difference between Protestants and Catholics when studying the relative absence of religious symbolism in Protestantism. In Protestant thought man stands alone before God, and the nurturing role of church is reduced. The result is a more anxious, insecure, and vulnerable Christian. For the Catholic, a psychological security in the presence of an overshadowing and caring church has a controlling influence about life.¹ Carrier suggests that a sense of belonging might be stronger in Catholicism. Perhaps that is one reason why his book has the imprimatur of the Catholic Church.

In the early twentieth century, sociologists Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch contributed a broad schema for analyzing religious groups that might be thought of as a continuum between "church" and "sect."² Broadly defined, organizations in the "church" category would be religious bodies where the majority of members join through birth or family rather than through conversion. The church is organized as a complex institution, with a leadership hierarchy, creeds, discipline, rites, and common symbols. The tendency of the church is toward the universal and the inclusion or the conversion of all. Sect groups, on the other hand, are


²Ibid., 75-78.
organizationally limited groups with a voluntary, highly committed membership. The sect resists institutionalization, sacramentalism, clericalism, and compromise with the world. Sect members, by their isolation and simple approach to religion, strive to rediscover the fundamental fervor of the spirit, even to the point of persecution for their beliefs.

Features of a Sect Membership

In the sect, traditional visible church structures are replaced with a more spontaneous, charismatic, and functional organization. The purpose of belonging is participation in a brotherhood that leads to communion with the divine.

The church from this point of view, is not in the first instance an institution or a visibly organized society. Rather it is a communion of men, primarily interior but also expressed by external bonds of creed, worship, and ecclesiastical fellowship.¹

Less formal organizations are based on small, intimate fellowship groups, communities of the Spirit. Revival, intimacy, simplicity, authenticity, and a special spiritual message are valued by a group of relatively homogeneous people. This is a church felt more than seen, mysterious more than marketed. Creedal differences, so significant for the institutional church, are overshadowed by vertical and horizontal relationships. The sentiments of this model were recently expressed by lay person Deede Rivers: "It's the person of Jesus Christ who gathers us together, not a

church."¹ With minimal administration and the independence of each group, the length of commitment is usually shorter, suggesting to Carrier that sect groups attract unstable personalities who tend to resist and resent institutional forms.²

Features of Church Membership

The traditional church type values a strong corporate identity dedicated to preserving traditional beliefs and structures. Patterned on civil society, the church provides a package of whole life services to all age groups and interests. Membership means being a loyal citizen in a spiritual kingdom, recognizing and submitting to proper spiritual authority as a secular citizen is loyal to the state. God is the supreme ruler of this religious kingdom; the clergy have special status, often leaving the layperson in a powerless, perfunctory, and passive role. Evangelism means bringing people into the saving institution, but children's baptism becomes the most common method of acquiring new members. Conversion is more likely accomplished through thoughtful reflection, and admission to the church becomes an event of ceremony. In return for their passive support, members receive spiritual security and nurture.

The differences in belonging as observed in either the sect or church types are not meant to suggest that one type is superior to the other. Determining the degree and intensity of belonging has more to do with individual needs and cultural expectations than with the type of group. Individuals should be aware of these differences,


²Carrier, 83.
normative with a sect, or vice versa. Church leaders of sect groups should be aware that, over time, belonging characteristics will change into more church-like qualities.

The Traditional Bonds of Belonging

The church is presented in Scripture as a spiritual body with interdependent parts—members linked together with strong spiritual bonds. While this belief is held universally by Christians, there are significant differences in the strength of the belonging-ties within and among the Christian churches. As congregations pass through the changing cycle of group life, the cohesive factors binding church members together also change. Being aware of these dynamic forces is critical for the continued well-being of the congregation.

In his seminal book on new member assimilation, Lyle Schaller identified twenty situations or "principles" that act as bonding agents in bringing and holding congregations together. Space does not allow a full analysis of each factor, but several have been prominent in the SDA Church and deserve comment.

1. **Theology.** According to Schaller, between "10 to 20 percent of all Protestant congregations" are held together by a highly valued, common belief system. Adventism is grounded in a specific, highly visible prophetic task of warning the world of impending judgment and Christ's second coming. This focused mission is enhanced by other distinct beliefs, such as the seventh-day Sabbath, the

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2Ibid., 31.
heavenly sanctuary cleansing message, healthful living, and the authoritative acceptance of Ellen White's writings. Ironically, the binding potential of these special doctrines will be in proportion to their uniqueness. Thus, Adventist theology presents some of the strongest belonging ties.1

2. Nationality or language. Churches founded within a minority culture have strong bonding power. Many Adventist churches, from the German churches in the 1890s to the Korean and Hispanic churches of the 1990s, are examples of this bonding principle. The natural tendency toward acculturation gradually weakens attachment during the second generation of existence. But the old ethnic bonds are replaced with Adventist subculture bonds complete with dress and behavior codes, a specialized vocabulary, and educational institutions that promote the subculture.

3. The enemy. Churches can become fortified when faced with an antagonist, either real or contrived, external or internal. Being a relatively small and often misunderstood denomination, Adventists have united for psychological safety and support. Stories of persecuted Adventists create the perception that they need to stick together against the government or intolerant religious forces. On other occasions the enemy can be in the church as factions disagree on matters of faith and practice.

Barriers to Belonging

We have established that belonging is hard to achieve in the nineties. "Living

1The opposite to this principle was illustrated in 1995 with the massive losses in the Worldwide Church of God. The denomination was mortally wounded when church leaders revoked the doctrine of the Sabbath and other special teachings.
in community," writes Scott Peck, "neither comes naturally nor is purchased cheaply."¹ One of the major barriers is mobility. Baptists estimate that 20 percent of local members are nonresidents and not connected to the church.² Mobility has made America a "nation of strangers." To be somebody, to move up in the company, requires following the moving van. A more recent study of executive mobility has found that a middle manager can anticipate being moved once every two to five years. As a Shell Oil Company manager put it, "If you want to go up, be prepared to move. And don't tell us you have a problem with the wife. If you want to be static, okay, have roots."³

Another obstacle to belonging is a trend to privatism, a rugged individualism basic to American character, but which, unless checked, can destroy a sense of community and commitment. This was the concern of Robert Bellah, and others, in Habits of the Heart, an eloquent appeal for the church to be a place of belonging again.⁴ Tom Sine, of the Creative Futures Center, identified autonomy as an "epidemic" of modern American culture.⁵ The popular emergence of independent religious expression has been documented by George Gallup. He found that 80

⁴Bellah, 228.
percent of Americans agreed that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues." Ten years later he wrote, "The vast majority of Americans (76 percent) believe it is possible to be a good Christian or Jew without going to church or synagogue."

Dean Kelley, a former Methodist representative to the National Council of Churches, proposed that membership loyalty diminished when churches stopped "perform[ing] their essential business: the dispensing of religion." Religion was an "organizational carrier" of meaning, the interpreter of life, and a mobilizer for life. Presented through sacred writings, myths, legends, and rituals, religious beliefs answered the "why" questions of origin, destiny, goodness, and the great diversity of human existence. The problem with the exodus from the church was not that people left angry. Rather they left empty because the church was not providing them compelling answers to life's difficult problems or providing a reason to stay.

Kelley concluded that the membership losses could be predicted based on the biological principle of entropy, where order degenerates to chaos. In the beginning a religious movement has great power, focus, purpose, discipline, and even suffering to create social strength. But this level of commitment cannot be maintained indefinitely, and each generation loses some intensity. The missionary zeal that initially

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1George H. Gallup, Jr., and David Poling, The Search for America's Faith (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980,) 79.

2Gallup, Religion in America, 9.

monopolized conversations falls back to a dialogue about the virtues of differing views. An uncompromising belief in doctrine is replaced by the idea that no one has a monopoly on truth. A willingness to die for the right turns to indecisiveness. A group focus shifts to an emphasis on self and individualism. The fanatic becomes civilized, tolerant, and socially accepted.

Conclusion

The Kelley thesis leaves little hope for organizations to reinvent themselves or regain spiritual and social power after the effects of entropy. However, if we take Kelley seriously, he provides some of the strategies for maintaining the mission and focus of the movement. Only by demonstrating courage to resist the easier path will Adventist leaders of the future maintain the spirit of Adventism. I believe that the gradual slide of entropy will be first seen in the ways we handle membership and group identity issues. Lowering the threshold of membership, making it easier for someone to join, and minimizing the baptism event will set the stage for eventual membership loss.
CHAPTER 3

A PLACE TO BELONG

We like to think it's our stunning proclamation of the truth that keeps them in the pews. Sermons may get them into the church the first time, but what keeps them coming are friendships that foster inward awareness and support.

Jack R. Van Ens

The Land of Nod

The story of Cain's exile after murdering his brother seems an unusual beginning for a biblical exposition on the meaning of church membership. Yet this ancient story of fratricide and banishment illustrates how evil fractures the human family and alienates the sinner from God. Beyond an individual tragedy, Cain's story is an allegory of human woe.

Adam and Eve were still grieving Abel's death when God exiled Cain and his family to "the land of Nod, east of Eden."¹ Cain responded to this merciful verdict in self-pity and fear. "My punishment is more than I can bear. . . . I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4:13, 14). Cain was a

¹Nod means wandering, Gen 4:16.
free spirit, independent from family traditions and divine values. But a life away from God was a life without divine protection. A godless land was a dangerous place, especially for a fugitive as guilty as he. The essence of Cain's punishment was not physical isolation, for within a few years he established the first city. More important were the emotional homelessness and spiritual alienation from the social structures that provided meaning and belonging to his life, such as extended family, culture, and religion.

The World of Nod

The land of Nod disappeared with the flood, but the wandering experience resulting from disobedience to God's law continued. With the memory of the alluvion catastrophe still fresh, descendants of Noah moved eastward and built fortified towns on the Mesopotamian plains. One municipal project involved constructing a large citadel or tower to enhance the city's reputation and, most likely, to serve as a holy site. Observing the rapid increase in deviant behavior and a population reluctant to disperse throughout the earth, God sabotaged the project. In the fourth major curse of Genesis, which must have fallen on a larger population than just the tower builders, a united language and culture were shattered. In the subsequent massive, expansive exodus, a sense of belonging, the unity of one human family, was gone forever. "The Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:9). The land of Nod became the planet of wandering.
The first eleven chapters of Genesis contain four stories of forced homelessness: Adam, Cain, Noah, and the Babelites. What are these ancient narratives trying to tell us? In the words of Kenneth Louis,

Genesis describes the various ways men separate themselves from God. . . . Adam and Eve are driven from God's presence; Cain is driven from nature; Noah's contemporaries are driven off the earth itself; the builders of the tower of Babel are driven from one another.

Evil, by nature, fractures the unity of man and creation. Isaiah declared, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa 59:2, 3).

The Modern Landscape of Nod

How visible is the "land of Nod" today? Our survey can only hint at the dramatic transformation of the scientific, philosophical, and cultural landscape over the last 150 years. While modern society has greatly benefited from scientific investigation and intellectual inquiry, belief in God has suffered. With the modernist's autonomous, self-sufficient, and anti-supernatural worldview, a concept of God just does not compute. When asked why he had never believed in God, Bertrand Russell responded, "Not enough evidence! Not enough evidence!" But when the plausibility of transcendence is denied, there is never enough evidence. As Richard Rice reflects, "It is safe to generalize that God does not serve as an explanatory factor

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2Rice, 23.
in any scientific enterprise today. "¹ We could expand this to include solving most
human problems as well. Pius XII reflected on the delusion of modernism.

They [promoters of modernism] boasted of progress, when they were in fact
relapsing into decadence; they conceived that they were reaching heights of
achievement when they were miserably forfeiting their human dignity; they
claimed that this century of ours was bringing maturity and completion with it,
when they were being reduced to a pitiable form of slavery.²

As Mircea Eliade wrote, "We might say for the nonreligious men of the modern age,
the cosmos has become opaque, inert, mute; it transmits no message, it holds no
cipher."³ God seems dead. In the words of the prophet, "The idols speak deceit . . .
they give comfort in vain. Therefore, the people wander like sheep oppressed for
lack of a shepherd" (Zech 10:2). Sadly, God watches individuals, families, and
generations wander in the land of Nod, a place of empty forms and relative void.

David Watson asks, "What is at the root of this tragic state of affairs? A fundamental
cause is that there is little or no sense of belonging."⁴

The Meditation Room in the United Nations Building has no religious art,
furniture, or symbols that might offend followers of the world's many religions. The
result is something so stark, empty, and meaningless that it seems more like a padded
cell. Reflecting on those impressions, Marya Mannes wrote, "It seemed to me that

¹Ibid.

²Pius XII, quoted in Dulles, 96.

³Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (New

⁴David Watson, I Believe in the Church (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans,
1978), 75.
the core of our greatest contemporary trouble lay here, that all this whiteness and shapelessness and weakness was the leukemia of noncommitment sapping our strength."^1

Gathered Communities

From the first day of sin, when God called for Adam and Eve to come out of their shameful hiding (Gen 3:9), to the final warning message, "Come out of her, my people" (Rev 18:4), God purposed to bring wanderers back into a state of spiritual unity. Part of God's recovery plan involved creating organizations to proclaim God's intention and provide the belonging fellowship for those who responded. The Bible presents the extensive histories of two institutions that have functioned as gathering agents. The nation of Israel dominated the Old Testament, and the Church of Jesus Christ emerged from Jesus' ministry to seek and save the lost.

In the following three sections we will consider God's call to spiritual wanderers and the covenant relationship that followed. The story of Abraham begins this journey because he transcends the Old and New Testament eras as the initial receiver of God's special favor. This story is also the functional starting point for a study of covenant theology.

God Called Abraham

Johannes Blauw observed a thematic link between the human scattering at Babel (Gen 11) and the call of Abraham (Gen 12). "The call of Abraham, and the

^1Peck, 20.
history of Israel which began at that point, was the beginning of the restoration of the lost unity of mankind and the broken fellowship with God. "1 Abraham became the father of a spiritual family that was not limited to race, a family of believers that would honor and serve God on the earth (Rom 4:6). God’s call for Abraham to leave his home country was only the prelude to a divine initiative that would define a new era of salvation history. Through a series of remarkable encounters, God and Abraham reached a formal agreement called a covenant. God’s remarkable promises to Abraham and his descendants were recorded in Gen 12, 15, with chapter 17 presenting the greatest details. At the heart of the covenant, God declared,

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God (Gen 17:7).

Covenants, well known to the ancient world, bound two parties with certain promises and obligations. While similar in concept, God’s covenant with Abraham was unique in three ways. The first feature was divine sovereignty. Unlike a typical ancient business contract, God determined all provisions and stipulations. According to Edward Heppenstall, “The first characteristic of God’s covenant relationship is that of Lordship.” 2 In the covenant declaration of Gen 17, God refers to "my covenant" nine times. He is the maker and the keeper of the covenantal promises. The second


feature of the covenant was fellowship. Never before, according to historical records, had a deity initiated a covenant with humans as God did with Abraham. The third feature was the eternal nature of the covenant. God was setting in motion something that was much bigger than an private agreement with Abraham.

The approximately nine promises of the covenant are presented in the future tense. For example, "I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after them" (Gen 17:7). After twenty-five years of serving God with mixed devotion, Abraham heard the covenant promises as future blessings, most of which extended beyond his lifetime. Berkhof suggested the extent of the promises. "The establishment of the covenant with Abraham marked the beginning of an institutional church."^2

Abraham's obligations were recorded in the second portion of the covenant and voiced in the present tense. For example, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Gen 17:1). Abraham accepted God as his divine Lord. He obeyed God's voice and kept his commandments (Gen 26:5). He would travel and live where God directed (Gen 12:1), physically mark himself and his descendants by circumcision to confirm the covenant agreement (Gen 17:11), and even sacrifice his son, if necessary (Gen 22). That human obedience and cooperation were attached to the covenant is heard in the angel's affirmation on Mt. Moriah, "I will surely bless you. . . . Through your

^1 Not all promises were future realities. In Rom 3, 4, and Gal 3, Paul wrote that Abraham received forgiveness of sins, adoption into the family of God, and the gifts of the Spirit.

offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Gen 22:18). Abraham's obedience to the covenant was just as critical as his faith in the covenant.

God Called Israel

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Hos 11:1).

As God had called Abraham from Ur, so he delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (Gen 15:16). Based on his earlier covenant with Abraham, God claimed Israel as his people. The reference "my people" is found fifteen times in Exodus, chaps. 3-10, in the KJV Bible.

Israel's encounter with God at Sinai expanded rather than replaced Abraham's covenant (Ps 105:8-10). Moses climbed Mt. Sinai eight times to receive chapters of what became the Book of the Covenant, a rule of life. In political terms the covenant merged religion and state into a theocracy, "a religious confederation united in reverence of and service to Yahweh."¹ Covenant law addressed many aspects of Hebrew life in the wilderness. It was the basis for the vertical and horizontal relationships between God and man, the glue that held everyone and everything together. Israelites were not forced into a covenant relationship with God. Individuals could reject the covenant although that meant separation from the assembly. One commentary listed thirty-six particular religious duties where being "cut off" was a

consequence.¹ For serious crimes, being "cut off" meant execution. More frequently, however, the term indicated expulsion from assembly or forfeited privileges and benefits, perhaps as Cain was cut off from Adam's family in Gen 4.

Christ Called the Church

Through him [Jesus] . . . we received grace . . . to call people from among all the Gentiles (Rom 1:5).

The church was a new society created by the ministry of Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As ancient Israel looked to Abraham for its beginning, the church looked to Christ. Jesus said to the disciples, "You did not choose me, but I choose you" (John 15:16). The Greek word for church, ekklesia, contained two ideas, ek (out of, from) and the verb kalo (I call or summon). The ekklesia were those "who have been called out."² The word meant both the processes of calling and the actual gathering event.³

Christ's new relationship to the church modeled God's relationship to Abraham. While we come to Jesus individually, we do not remain individuals. As members of Christ's family we acquire a new corporate identity in addition to our individual identity.⁴ Rex Edwards correctly observed that Gen 17, the most detailed


³Ibid., 84.

presentation of Abraham's covenant, was a "chapter of crucial importance for the
doctrine of the church."\(^1\) Both Israelite and church covenants were *corporate* in
nature, the latter expanded to include spiritual and literal Israel. They were based on
certain *pledges* of God's blessing. They were provided for *fellowship*. Finally, the
covenants were *confirmed*. In the New Testament, circumcision was replaced with
baptism. As Daniel Jenkins asserts, "The historical root of the church is in the
covenant that Abraham and his children entered with Yahweh their God."\(^2\)

The need for a new covenant was first expressed in the Old Testament.

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the
house of Israel" (Jer 31:31). The new covenant was needed because the "old"
covenant had become misunderstood and misapplied. The new covenant was superior
because it was "founded on better promises" (Heb 8:6). Paul went on to say,

> This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,
declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their
hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. (Heb 8:10, quoting
Jer 31:33)

Jesus was the "Messenger of the Covenant" (Mal 3:1). Yet, he used the word
only once in the Gospels. But that single occurrence came at the moment when he
blessed the grape juice in the Lord's Supper and proclaimed that his blood was the

1995, 36, 37. Edwards presents four features of the covenant: a corporate emphasis,
future promises, fellowship with God, and confirmation by circumcision. He omits
the importance of obligations and the everlasting nature of the covenant.

\(^2\)Daniel T. Jenkins, *The Strangeness of the Church* (New York: Doubleday,
1955), 25.
sufficient to ratify the covenants of all ages through one event, his death. In the way that baptism is the sacrament of belonging for the unbeliever, the Lord's Supper is the believer's sacrament of belonging. More will be said about this in chapter 7.

In other New Testament books covenant language is sparse. Were other motifs better understood by the Gentiles? Had Judaistic distortions rendered the concept problematic? Mendenhall concludes that "it was nearly impossible for early Christianity to use the term meaningfully." When the new covenant concept is used, such as in Hebrews, the emphasis is on a personal experience with God rather than obedience to God. Heppenstall suggests this was to avoid "every shred of legalistic bondage fastened on Israel during the previous fifteen hundred years."

The Germanic word for church, kirche, is tied to the Greek, κυριακή, meaning 'belonging to the Lord.' Bonhoeffer writes of this special relationship: "We belong to him because we are in him." This sense of belonging, this possessiveness, is clear in Jesus' statement on the subject, "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18, italics mine). Christians are called by God into fellowship with his Son. "The vital

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1In Matt 26:28, the oldest manuscripts omit the word "new" before "covenant." In Luke 22:20, the word remains.


3Heppenstall, 457.

responsibility of the church is to lead sinful men into a covenant relationship with God, acknowledging Jesus as Lord, while enjoying a fellowship of love and unity.\textsuperscript{1}

Covenant and Community

As Paul wrote, we were once "foreigners to the covenants of the promise" (Eph 2:12). But God desires to be in a covenant relationship with all people. The covenant is beneficial because it clarifies what God has done for our salvation, calling through His gracious purpose, a people of faith into covenant relationship. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). Belonging to Jesus means belonging to the covenant.

Covenant theology has significant implications for church membership. A covenant concept of church membership has a rich history, particularly with Presbyterians in Scotland, Puritans in New England, and Baptists in the south.\textsuperscript{2} A Lutheran Church Study Commission on Covenant Membership concluded that a covenant concept of membership "as an organizational principle is not contrary to the New Testament witness."\textsuperscript{3} Many congregations who intentionally think about the meaning of church membership consider the implications of covenant membership.

The religious experience is not primarily a private affair. While Protestantism has generally emphasized the individual over the community, this was not the

\textsuperscript{1}Heppenstall, 440.

\textsuperscript{2}For a short bibliography on church membership covenants, see Appendix C.

\textsuperscript{3}William Lindsay, "Membership Covenants in the American Lutheran Church, a Descriptive Study" (D.Min. project, Lancaster Theological Seminary, 1979), 13.
example of Israel or the teaching of Scripture.\textsuperscript{1} The vertical connection was complemented by horizontal relationships (Rom 12:5). The church was, in essence, a community of believers: a group of people that fellowshipped together, ate together, studied together, worshiped together, and ministered together under the Lordship of Christ. The church connected people to each other as parts of the body, with Christ as the head. Community life was for the mutual benefit of each Christian. God designed that we should hear the Word of God not only in the Scriptures, but in the mind, heart, and mouth of fellow believers. Therefore, as Bonhoeffer wrote,

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{2}

The Heidelberg Catechism, a reformation creed, begins with the question, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer begins, "That I may belong—body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{3} The nature of this belonging has great significance for the present study, and we will come back to it later. For now, the point is, a covenant community of believers is not some optional experience for wanderers returning to God, even in a culture that encourages individualism and privatism.

\textsuperscript{1} Allegories of the Christian experience, such as John Bunyan’s \textit{Pilgrim’s Progress}, usually minimize the role of benefits of the larger Christian community. Bunyan’s hero, Christian, had the blessing of only several close friends.

\textsuperscript{2} Bonhoeffer, 21.

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Heidelberg Catechism with Commentary} (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1962), 4.001 in Sloat, 81.
Summary

The Gathering Motif

While God has infinite ways to rescue and reclaim homeless spiritual wanderers, the church was divinely ordained to welcome those responding to God’s call.

The formal relationship between God and His people, either in the Old or New Testament, was based on a covenant of promises and obligations, opportunities and duties. Joe Odle, writing in a manual for new Baptist church members, declares,

The Lord’s churches have the greatest task ever assigned to any individual or group in the world’s history—carrying the glorious gospel of Christ the Savior to every nation and tongue. No other commission like that has ever been given or will ever be given. In carrying out this work, the churches have done more for the world than all the governments ever organized, all the other institutions ever established, or all the armies ever assembled.¹

The church is a community of believers called to belong. In this community each individual has a personal relationship with God that provides the basis for belonging. But Christianity is not individualistic. In the words of Francis Schaeffer, “Once we are Christians there should be community.”²

In this chapter we have observed the consequences of sin and the physical scattering of the human family, causing emotional and spiritual alienation. Part of the covenanted relationship between Jehovah and Israel was calling and rescuing


wanderers. This mandate became much clearer in the New Testament with a new commandment "to gather out a people from the far corners of the earth to bind them in one body, the body of Christ, the church." Besides reviewing the nature of God's call in salvation history, this chapter has biblically defined a church member. A member is called out of spiritual darkness, called into a relationship with Christ, and called into a worshiping community. In the words of an early second-century prayer,

"Remember, Lord, Thy church,
to gather it together in its holiness
from the four winds to thy kingdom
which thou hast prepared for it. Amen."

Dealing with Theological Objections

While SDAs deny the Calvinist belief, "once saved, always saved," we seem very content with the idea of "once a member, always a member—except for murder and adultery." Because baptism is the gate of the church, it becomes synonymous with church membership. But herein lies a problem. Since baptism is normally a once-in-a-lifetime decision, it seems to logically follow that the decision for church membership is the same way.

I believe there is danger when baptism and church membership are linked too close or too far apart. When too far apart, membership becomes a social rather than a theological decision. When too close, the decision for membership is not allowed to

1Church Manual, 19.

stand on its own. While having been baptized indicates some religiosity of the past, membership is supposed to represent a religiosity of the present. Thousands of Adventists have the mistaken feeling that their membership means something even though they are not participating.

People are given the freedom and the duty to follow their own spiritual journey. The idea that once you are born in the family you are always in the family may sound pleasant, but it is not an Adventist belief. The Day of Atonement, which always coincided with the new civil year, was an annual event for introspection, and those who declined to participate in this serious religious activity were "cut off."

The emphasis on obedience in covenant theology is problematic for many evangelicals. But covenant theology does not deny God's grace initiative and promise that He will save us from our sins and this world. Our faith and obedience constitute the human response to this divine act of love. In fact, the covenant provides a healthy midpoint between antinomianism and legalism. Theologians who believe in the total depravity of humanity feel uncomfortable with the emphasis on choice, which is fundamental to the covenant concept. They worry that a covenant will produce a new legalism, a new list of obligations that might serve as the basis of salvation. Those in the church who emphasize strictness, accountability, and discipleship are accused of denying the gospel. But a covenant concept of membership need not go this direction. The covenant should be very basic and inclusionary. Presumably, no one would object to a covenant based on the baptismal vows, but a few might object to the
twenty-seven fundamental beliefs. To require new expectations would violate the spirit of the covenant and cause its demise.

It is painful to see loved ones leave the church. That pain becomes unbearable when action is taken to remove a name from the church books. We think, by keeping a name on the books, we are saying to that person, "There's still a place here for you. You can abandon the church, but we won't abandon you." Children know that mother will not lose hope if their name remains on the church roll, even if they have no present intention to participate in church life. And mothers just feel better knowing a family member is on the church list, even if the physical presence, the mental assent, and the emotional attachment are gone.

The covenant concept of membership has been portrayed as an uncaring method to eliminate inactive members in the church. But are we willing to sacrifice short-term gain for long-term loss? It is true that keeping an inactive name on the church rolls might reassure loved ones and communicate patience and caring towards the individual. It is also true that the church is communicating another message, that membership really is not important, it has no purpose, there is no standard, and no accountability. Membership is not about pleasant memories or future intentions. It is about a present experience and relationship. As Dennis Pumford writes in his membership renewal application form, "If a person could be a member of the U.S. Army, while permanently residing in Mongolia and philosophically opposed to
fighting in wartime, our country would be in big trouble. If a person can be a 
member without doing anything, then membership means nothing."¹

The Adventist understanding of church and membership emerged from a 
unique history and a deep study of Bible prophecy. Chapter 4 explores the Adventist 
concept of the church, giving special attention to the remnant and Laodicean motifs. 
New evidence indicates a stronger presence of a covenant membership tradition in 
early Adventism than formerly believed. The chapter ends with a short summary of 
how church membership has been presented in Adventist literature over the past 130 
years.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARD AN ADVENTIST MEANING
OF MEMBERSHIP

The best predictor of whether a youth will remain in the church is the degree to which the youth belongs and fits in.

Janet Leigh Kangas and Roger L. Dudley

Introduction

Seventh-day Adventists show remarkable diversity when addressing the value and meaning of church membership. A thirty-year church member wrote, "Being an Adventist means everything to me." A middle-aged female acknowledged, "Membership is integral to my daily life." Membership represents allegiance to a movement, commitment to a message, participation in church activities, and responsibility for church obligations. Church membership helps define spiritual identity, an assuring "this is where I fit" in the vast sea of organized religions. As one member wrote, "Church membership is very important to help people feel they are not alone."

Opposing this positive traditional belief, some Adventists view church membership as a neutral or negative influence in spiritual growth, as a threat to personal freedom, and a obsolete concept. Other Adventists fear that emphasizing church
membership will overshadow the primacy of a personal relationship with Christ. A young male wrote, "I feel that a close relationship with God is the most important thing in my life. Church membership is not." Another young Adventist expressed outright disdain. "Membership is a joke! What does membership have to do with my needs." A few Adventists consider membership more hurtful than helpful. "Church membership is at the root of the problem for the Adventists."

Such extreme positions have always existed, but now there is the disturbing evidence of a generational gap where elderly members reflect positively about the church while younger voices express doubt and skepticism. When a member writes, "My personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the only thing that will get me through this world," there is little recognition of any benefit, much less necessity, for church membership.

The diversity in thinking about the church is a thread that runs all the way back to the beginning of the history of the Advent movement. The skepticism towards organization, the strong independent nature of the early Adventists, and the absence of a church concept that valued a "community of believers" has left a legacy for the present.

Adventist Biblical Images of the Church and Membership

The Millerite/Advent movement of the 1830-1840s was founded on the belief that the temporal world would soon end with the visible return of Jesus Christ. Initially, this prophecy-based revival flourished within existing churches. However, in 1843 the tolerant mood within organized denominations turned against those with differing beliefs,
and many with Millerite sympathies were disfellowshipped.

When Christ did not return as predicted on 22 October 1844, the movement disintegrated. One surviving Millerite group coalesced around the common belief that Oct. 22 marked the beginning of a new phase of Jesus' High Priestly ministry, the pre-advent judgement of Dan 7.

Initially, this small and scattered group stayed together through correspondence, magazine subscription lists, and regional meetings, resisting formal church organization because they believed denominationalism was part of 'Babylon's' sin. As they searched for a biblical description of their experience, they naturally considered apocalyptic writings. As church historian Andrew Mustard observed, "Seventh-day Adventists looked for motifs in biblical apocalyptic literature which would assist in articulating their understanding of the nature of the church."\(^1\) According to Gerard Damsteegt, the earliest group designations were "God's people," the "remnant," the "scattered remnant," the "little flock" (Luke 12:32), or the "scattered flock."\(^2\) In the following section we will take a closer look at the remnant motif in Adventist ecclesiology.

The Remnant

Joseph Bates, a co-founder of the Sabbatarian Adventists, proposed the remnant concept as early as 1849. While the remnant theme occurred often in Scripture, the


foundational passage was Rev 12:17. According to Gerhard Hasel, "the remnant of her seed" (KJV) were "God's long line of faithful and obedient ones from Noah and his family, to the end-time in which we live today. They are the last remnant in the flow of time before Jesus Christ returns in glory."²

The remnant would "obey God's commandments" (Rev 12:17). This emphasis on obedience reinforced the early Adventist decision to adopt Saturday as a day of worship. The remnant would also receive a special revelation from Jesus. Damsteegt did not overstate. "The Remnant motif . . . provided a positive argument for their [the Adventists] uniqueness in the history of salvation."³ The legacy of the concept continues in baptismal vow 13: "I believe that the SDA Church is the remnant church of Bible prophecy." The commentary on Adventist doctrine devotes sixteen pages to the remnant concept of the church.⁴

The remnant motif encouraged a struggling church to maintain its unique beliefs and concerned with survival. They were the honest in heart, overcomers, the 144,000, and unique from all other Christians. In the last century, remnant has become more than a denomination. While the Church still upholds the commandments and Sanctuary ministry of Jesus Christ, not all Adventists are part of the remnant. Adventist Jack

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¹"Remnant" is found only in the KJV of the Bible.


³Damsteegt, 244.

Provonsha reflects this larger view, "This gathering of the remnant . . . is bigger than any single institution, although, an institution—even our visible [SDA] Church—may play a significant role."¹

**Laodicea**

In the mid-1850s, another church image emerged. The spirit and momentum of the movement waned as ministers, without adequate compensation, were forced into secular work. The disappointment of continual proclamation of the second advent with little response weakened spiritual motivation and evangelistic fervor. In 1856 James White, editor of an Adventist periodical, wrote about Laodicea.

> It has been supposed that the Philadelphia church [Rev 3:7-13] reached to the end. This we must regard as a mistake, as the seven churches in Asia represent seven distinct periods of the true church, and that Philadelphia is the sixth, and not the last state. The true church cannot be in two conditions at the same time, hence we are shut up to the faith that the Laodicean church represents the church of God at the present time.²

How James White arrived at this conclusion cannot be determined, although Damsteegt suggests that James’s wife, Ellen, was a probable source.³ The effect of the editorial was immediate and revivalistic. The serious tone of the message awakened many out of a false security. Three years after its introduction Ellen White reflected on the purpose of the message. First, it "led to a close examination of the heart. Sins were


³Damsteegt, 245.
confessed, and the people of God were stirred everywhere. Other responses were "deep humility" and "zealous repentance." After an initial wave of emotionalism, and the widespread belief that "this message would end in the loud cry of the third angel," the Laodicean revival passed with "many losing the effect of the message." Ellen White concluded that while the Laodicean message had accomplished some good, its potential was never reached. "The cause of God began to rise, and His people were acquainted with their position. If the counsel of the 'True Witness' had been fully heeded, God would have wrought for His people in greater power."

The Laodicean message has been an effective motif during times of revival; a self-critical reminder that all is not well, and a useful balance to the otherwise triumphalistic tendencies of the remnant motif. Church membership issues are not generally associated with this image although there are some indirect connections. The message continually reminds Adventists that the church comprises a mixed membership, some of whom, in their experience, are lukewarm. Neither can the church be synonymous with the 144,000 of Bible prophecy (Rev 7). The church contains the wheat and the tares of Jesus' parable until the very end (Matt 13:24-30).

Church Membership in Early Adventism

For over a decade, between 1852-1863, Adventists actively resisted any formal


2Ibid.

3Ibid.
church organization. When James White appealed for a church order consistent with the New Testament, larger numbers rejected any organization that was higher than the local church. A. G. Daniells, President and historian wrote that when White first proposed organization, "the majority of people" were "alarmed because they believed that anything approaching organization would result in spiritual declension and unscriptural alliance with the world."¹ The earliest Adventist groups were autonomous, that is, self-governing. There is no reason to believe that the early Adventist groups were any different from many other autonomous, independent churches in New England, the home of congregationalism.

**Congregationalism**

Congregationalism, as a form of church government, was more pervasive than the denomination of the same name, the Congregational Church. The term describes a theology of the church that emerged from the radical Protestant reformation. The first feature of congregationalism was the supremacy of Christ in the church. Christ was the head of each and every local expression of the church. Churches did not need denominational 'glue' because Christ was the 'glue' for the church. Denominational structures were unnecessary because Christ was in charge of the church. The laity, voiceless for so long, received new authority, and decisions concerning church governance were made by the 'brotherhood.'²

²Mustard, 234-235.
A second characteristic of Congregationalism was the belief of the "gathered" or regenerate church. This simply meant that only those who had experienced a conversion and could testify to the work of God in their lives were eligible for church membership.

A third characteristic of Congregationalism was the aversion to creedal statements and tests for church membership. Congregationalism fit the temperament of a New England and Adventist culture and subcultures nicely.

**Adventist Congregationalism**

The earliest Adventist leader to write about local church membership was J. H. Waggoner, editor of the *Signs of the Times* magazine. In the early 1880s, he wrote a series of journal articles on church membership that so impressed the General Conference that the manuscript was published in book form in 1886. In a remarkable statement, Waggoner wrote, "The system of church government among SDAs, as among Baptists, is congregational; each church is to judge the qualifications of its own members."^1

To discover evidences of congregationalism twenty years after denominational organization seems puzzling and inconsistent with the modern perception that Adventism adopted a Methodist church polity.^2 But these are not isolated statements, and the theory is supported by another statement from Waggoner's book. Regarding the manner

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^2Of interest is Waggoner's definition of the Conference--"not a body above the churches, but one representing the churches--composed of churches, or constituted by the churches," 58.
in which persons applied for church membership, Waggoner wrote,  

At the proper time, they should be asked to sign a covenant, simple in form, with a few specifications of points of primary importance. A promise to meet together for worship, and to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev 14:12) is all that is usually embraced in this covenant, and is quite sufficient.¹  

The content of Waggoner's covenant, repeated twice in his book, was very similar to a covenant voted by the Michigan Adventist churches around 1863. Their covenant, published just before incorporation as a conference, reads as follows, "We the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together as a church, taking the name SDA, covenaniting to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ."²  

In several places Waggoner refers to problems of loss of membership: "Most of the difficulties which arise in our churches are owing to the loose ideas of church membership which have so largely obtained in the world" (emphasis mine).³ Later, he was extremely critical of an older Adventist custom (actually from Methodism) where members were dropped for nonattendance at the Quarterly service (Lord's Supper). Waggoner acknowledged that this practice had "fallen into disuse," but he was still concerned about a certain looseness that was caused when members could remove themselves too easily from membership. In order for church discipline to have teeth, members should not be able to simply drop their memberships. Waggoner does not propose how this was to be done, but he objected to any provision that "virtually enables  

¹Ibid., 14.  
²Mustard, 154.  
³Waggoner, 80.
any one to sever his connection with the church by *simple neglect*."¹ It seems the problem had more to do with individual autonomy than it did with congregationalism. Disconnection by neglect can take place in any polity.

**Methodism in Adventism**

When the early Adventists studied church governance, there were only two viable choices, a Congregational or a Methodist model.² Most church historians suggest that Adventists adopted, with small adjustments, a Methodist polity. I believe local churches continued in their preorganizational congregational mode, while the local conferences and higher levels of church administration adopted a Methodist model. Some tensions exist between the two systems.³ When this has happened the traditional solution, from my point of view, has been for the conference administration to limit the authority of the local church by constitutional mandate and strict control of the pastorate.

**Church Membership in Adventist Literature**

The number of published articles on issues concerning membership is amazingly small. Since 1863, articles on the topic have averaged only one every ten years. The oldest *Review and Herald* article is dated 1907. (Perhaps this scarcity shows the influence of congregationalism since church membership was a local church issue and

¹Ibid., 85.

²A third option of Presbyterian polity was never seriously considered.


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thus not part of the larger denominational scene.) The presentations range from J. L. McElhany's apparent reprinting of the Church Manual chapter on church membership to Walter Scagg's remarkably contemporary article on experiencing a sense of community in the church.\(^1\) Most authors detailed the responsibilities of church membership and the importance of conversion before baptism. In 1961 H. J. Harris wrote, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church has sometimes been accused of being the hardest church in the world to get into because one must first attend a long series of meetings . . . prior to baptism."\(^2\)

Adventist Book Centers offer only one book devoted to church membership. Published in 1938, Everson's *Church Membership* is the oldest and only book available. In the first fifteen pages, Everson develops a typical Bible study on the church, which is useful but not exceptional. However, on the topic of church organization, he mistakenly says that "every step in the organization of the Christian church is outlined very definitely" from Scripture.\(^3\) If such were true there would be no levels higher than the local church. The final half of the book contains general presentations on such topics as baptism, the gifts of the spirit, the true church, and the uniqueness of the Adventist Church. Nowhere does Everson address the meaning of church membership.


\(^{3}\)C. T. Everson, *Church Membership* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1938), 15. I hope that some effort will be taken to upgrade this presentation in the near future.
The *Church Manual* and Membership

If the amount of allocated space determines priority, the *Church Manual* does not rank issues of membership very high. The chapter "Church Membership" devotes five pages to baptism, three pages to transfers, and one to rebaptism. Another short section of the *Manual* deals with disfellowshipping. While the *Manual* should address the technical aspects of membership, there is very little on the experiential, or even spiritual, dimensions of church membership.

Based on a careful reading of the chapter, it would appear that a covenant concept of church membership is within policy as long as: (1) there is one official membership list, (2) the process is approved by the church, and (3) the names to be dropped are voted by the entire church. While popular in congregational polity, a covenant concept of membership is not limited to any polity. If accepted by local church administration, there is nothing in the *Manual* to prohibit it.

**Conclusion**

Adventism began with a certain fear of and skepticism about church organization. A personal relationship with Christ is more important than a relationship with the church. As one member said, "I feel my personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the only thing that will get me through this world. Church membership is secondary." But Adventists have been told that the church in some form will survive the difficult times ahead. As a prophetic remnant the church will serve a useful purpose in the end-time crisis. This makes a decision to leave the church risky. Separating means falling away, leaving the band of reformers that is walking the narrow way. While denying the
Catholic dogma of no salvation outside the church, Adventists have created a similar mentality that makes issues of membership heavy with eternal consequences. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this, but the result of this dual purpose creates a powerful shadow when a member desires to leave the church. The question naturally follows, "Is my salvation now at stake?"

Historically, Adventist authors have defined membership as a series of responsibilities. While there is a place for exhorting church members to be serious about membership, themes related to belonging and community are largely undeveloped. It is hoped that this can be rectified in the future.

In early Adventist history, some churches (we do not know how many) practiced some form of covenant membership. We can only speculate on why it became extinct. However, the mere discovery of this trend encourages us find a way to rediscover this legacy.

The report now leaves the theoretical framework and begins to describe and evaluate the social research connected with this study. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the dimensions of religiosity and continues with a rather specific accounting of the belonging questionnaire and the Total Design Method that was used for preparing and implementing the study.
CHAPTER 5

MEASURING CHURCH-MEMBERSHIP BELONGING

Modern social studies have brought home to us the universality of the need to belong. . . . Membership in a Christian community might be the only way of maintaining self respect and giving.

Carl S. Dudley and Earle Hilgert

Introduction to Religiosity

In the late 1950s sociologist Charles Glock developed a multidimensional theory of religious experience. While not the first to propose such a theory, he demonstrated that religious commitment, essentially a synonym for 'religiosity,' could be divided into initially four, and eventually five, distinct categories that could be measured with objective criteria.¹

Based on Glock's early work, Yoshio Fukuyama expanded and renamed the categories as cognitive (intellectual), creedal (ideological), cultic (ritual), and devotional (experiential). He further proposed that these "styles of religious orientation"

¹Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 14. Initially, Glock's construct had four dimensions, but an intellectual category was added in 1962. For Glock, the terms religious commitment and religiosity were interchangeable.
could identify four basic styles of church members.¹ Fukuyama based his findings on the responses of 4,095 members in twelve Christian churches in the United States. Cognitive (intellectual) church members were well informed about Bible knowledge and religious matters. Their greatest joy came from hearing a thoughtful sermon, reading religious magazines, and other intellectually stimulating activities. Cognitive church members tended to be unmarried (though not necessarily young), better educated (the most significant variable), and earned a higher income.² They had a good knowledge of history, both general church history and their particular denomination. Fukuyama proposed that roughly 22 percent of all church members were inclined towards this dimension.³

Cultic (ritual) church members are committed to church activities; they were the church keepers, by far the largest religious orientation in Fukuyama's sample, numbering 44 percent. These members attended church regularly; they financially supported and accepted leadership opportunities in the church. In thinking about the church, they were more practical and less theoretical. Age was a prominent predictor for cultic members. Generally, the most active church members were middle-age members (40-59 years old) with families. Cultic members were more likely to be found in inner-city churches than in suburban locations. Women were slightly more


²Ibid., 29-61.

³Ibid., 14.
active than men, except in inner-city churches where the reverse was true. A cultic orientation was correlated to higher socioeconomic income and educational level.¹ Because inclusivity (wanting to include everyone) is valued over exclusivity in this dimension, the percentage of cultic members in the Adventist Church would seem less.

Creedal (ideological) church members were the faithful members who observed a strong belief system. Fukuyama estimated that 28 percent of his sample scored high in this dimension. A belief orientation increased as church members aged. The poorer and less educated classes were more likely to be creedal in religious orientation. It was positively related to females, particularly widows.

Creedal church members were most likely to be found in mainline Protestant churches, especially Presbyterian and Baptist. Denominations not having formal creeds were less inclined. While having no official creed, Adventism is belief driven, and I would speculate that Adventists would score high in this dimension.

The Devout (experiential) church member appreciated the feelings and inward spiritual experiences from a personal relationship with Christ. Of the four categories, this was the most difficult to measure. But he proposed that 23 percent of all church members were inclined this way, with the majority female. The sex differences were so strong that men were actually inclined against this category. Those aged seventy and over were three times more likely to be devout than someone under twenty years. Like creedal members, the devout member was less likely to be educated and wealthy.

¹Ibid., 62-102.
Devout members tended to be more solitary figures, with little involvement in community organizations.

**Developments in Dimensional Theory**

Since the pioneering work of Glock and Fukuyama, religiosity studies have grown more sophisticated. In the 1970s, Morton King increased the number of dimensions to eleven.\(^1\) In the mid-1980s Marie Cornwall and Stan Albrecht returned to the three classic dimensions of religiosity proposed nearly a century ago by Stanley Hall and E. D. Starbuck, among others.\(^2\) These three aspects of the religious experience were described in various ways such as: (1) belief, (2) behavior, and (3) a sense of attachment (belonging). Cornwall and Albrecht subdivided each dimension into two modes: a personal-individual mode and an institutional-church mode. These two modes resulted in six dimensions that are summarized in Table 3. The "A" category represents the personal-individual mode, and the "B" item refers to the institutional-church mode.

In reviewing the religiosity research over the last twenty years, Cornwall and Albrecht proposed that social belonging was a result of religiosity rather than a dimension of the religious experience. Put another way, a sense of belonging might precede or follow from religiosity, but it was not a dimension in and of itself.


Cornwall and Albrecht noted that belonging was not limited to a religious context, and also that some religious people seemed to lack the quality. Though the correlations between religiosity and belonging were high, they were not necessarily automatic.

Table 3.--Summary of Cornwall and Albrecht's six dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Belief Dimension</td>
<td>A. Traditional Orthodoxy—belief in traditional Christian doctrines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Particularistic Orthodoxy—beliefs particular to a specific religious organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Affective (Belonging) Dimension</td>
<td>A. Spiritual Commitment—the personal, subjective relationship to God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Church Commitment—attachment and loyalty to the religious community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Behavioral Dimension</td>
<td>A. Religious Behavior—personal spiritual disciplines and community service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Religious Participation—church-group involvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


However, another difficulty in correlating church membership with belonging results from the absence of any empirical research in the area of church commitment. Cornwall and Albrecht's summary of the major research in religiosity from 1960-1986 revealed little work in the affective dimension in general, and no research in the area of
church commitment (see italics in Table 3).¹ There is a certain sadness in this revelation, but also a certain excitement. Any social research related to the meaning of church membership and a sense of belonging will travel a road seldom taken by previous scientific researchers.

Creating a Questionnaire on Belonging

Including a data gathering component in the D.Min. project was my desire from the first stage of project proposal writing. Previous experience in developing surveys for D.Min. class projects had stimulated my interest in this skill, and a textbook for the D.Min. project report was also highly influential.²

The University of Georgia Statistics Department had advised that 400 completed questionnaires would be needed to achieve a statistical accuracy of ± 4 percent. To ensure these results, the project design arbitrarily stipulated a random sample of 800 church members of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference who live in the state of Georgia, eastern Tennessee, and Cherokee County, North Carolina. Michael Welch noted that evangelical and independent congregations normally have disappointingly low response rates to questionnaires, and there was good reason to believe that a sizable Adventist sample would be difficult to obtain.³ According to Davies, a typical response

¹Ibid., 230.


³Ibid., 127; usually around 20 percent.
rate for a mail questionnaire was 30 percent. I was hoping for a response rate of 50 percent.

At the suggestion of Roger Dudley, the director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University, I adopted Don Dillman's Total Design Method (TDM), which provided the most comprehensive set of guidelines for increasing response rates. According to Dane, "Some of the individual practices [of the TDM] may seem to be mere gimmicks, but they do enhance response rates."²

To summarize briefly, Dillman's theory proposes "that to maximize response rates all aspects of a study should be designed to create the most positive image."³ Dillman boasted that "no study using the complete TDM has achieved a response rate below 60%."⁴ However, the TDM was expensive. The production and mailing costs of the first four mailings exceeded $500 and might have cost considerably more.⁵ Dillman focused on three elements for maximizing survey response: "minimize the cost for responding, maximize the rewards for doing so, and establish trust that those rewards will be delivered."⁶ While experiencing some minor adjustments, the TDM has not changed significantly since it was introduced in 1978.

¹Davies, 137.
²Dane, 134.
⁵In a third mailing the questionnaire would have been sent by certified mail.
⁶Ibid., 12.
Following Dillman's procedures the questionnaire was developed according to the following plan:

1. The questionnaire was designed as a booklet, with dimensions of $7 \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ in.

2. The questionnaire was printed, landscape style, on legal pages ($8\frac{1}{2} \times 14$ in.) front and back.

3. Originally, Dillman preferred white paper, but his position later softened, allowing other shades.

4. Normally, no questions were to appear on first or back pages. (The Belonging survey had two questions on page 1.)

5. Questions were ordered so that the most interesting and topic-related questions came first; potentially objectionable questions were placed later, and those requesting demographic information last.

6. Each page was formulated with great care following principles such as these: lower case letters were used for questions and upper case letters for answers. To prevent skipping items, each page was designed so that whenever possible respondents could answer in a straight vertical line instead of moving back and forth across the page. Overlap of individual questions from one page to the next was avoided, especially on back-to-back pages; transitions were used to guide the respondent much as a face-to-face interviewer would warn of changes in topic to prevent disconcerting surprises. Only one question was asked at a time; and visual clues (arrows, indenta-
tions, spacing) were used to provide directions. To encourage a response, the completed questionnaire was folded in half, edges secured with a supplied sticker, and mailed. The return address and postage were already affixed. Initially, a tangible reward was considered, but this proved cost prohibitive. Appendix A includes (1) a complete listing of response frequency percentages for all questions, (2) a copy of the authorization letter from the Human Subjects Review Board, Andrews University, and (3) a sample questionnaire.

Limitations of Mail Surveys

The TDM makes the mail questionnaire a viable option for serious social research, but some limitations still exist. While the names and addresses from the Conference membership list were quite accurate, there was nothing to keep any member of the household from completing it. Second, people in lower educational levels were not as likely to complete the survey because of the literacy skills required to read and mark the form. A third difficulty was the potential misunderstanding of questions. Fourth, the TDM implementation process required two months to complete; so it could not be done hurriedly. The fifth disadvantage was cost. To achieve a large return an extensive follow-up program would be necessary. If return postage was being paid, a complete mailing would cost $1.68 per questionnaire. Finally, religiosity questionnaires are generally quite lengthy. The Glock and Stark questionnaire of 1966 contained over 500 items. Morton King's instrument of 1969 took one and a half hours

1Dillman, "Mail and Other," 362.
to complete. The limited space on TDM allowed only a short survey. It was better to have a higher return rate than many unnecessary responses.

Selecting the Questions

Potential questions for the survey were gleaned from other religiosity surveys noted in the Bibliography. This process simplified the writing process and enabled me to compare results between studies. Special attention was given to the first question. According to the TDM, the first question must be: (1) easy, (2) neutral, (3) applicable to everyone, and (4) interesting.¹ Since the title of the survey was "The Belonging Puzzle," the first question simply asked people to identify the location of their favorite seat in church. A square outline of a church auditorium was drawn, and respondents could choose their normal seating position from nine options. As it turned out, the question was not totally successful, since 8.2 percent failed to answer it. I concluded that the drawing confused some people because there were no choices provided for places such as the choir loft or mother's room. The central row of numbers was over the center aisle, not a typical pew location.

In summary, the questionnaire started with an creative interest question, and continued with thirty-four questions on religiosity and belonging. The survey ended with nine demographic questions and a final write-in response question (#35), which was optional.

¹Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys*, 128.
Constructing the Random Sample

In the spring of 1994 the Conference reported a membership of 21,562. However, only 19,815 members had complete addresses in the master membership file. Conference computer technicians had the software to create a random sample through sequential sampling, such as choosing one from every twenty members in a membership list. Recent debates comparing blind random sampling with sequential sampling have been largely resolved with growing support for the sequential sampling method.

To avoid the controversy completely, the membership files were taken to the University of Georgia Statistics Department for blind randomization.¹ The selection process was divided in two parts. First, 800 names were taken from the total population and placed in a primary sample. Then a second draw of 200 names was placed in a reserve sample. Names from the reserve pool were used to replace members in the primary pool whenever one of the following situations existed: (1) members with out-of-state addresses who were probably not regularly attending a Conference church, (2) known minors under the age of fifteen,² (3) members of the researcher's two churches, and (4) inadvertent duplication of names in the primary sample. Approximately fifty names in the primary sample were replaced. Because of the sophisticated random selection process, no attempt was made to "stratify" the sample according to geographical

¹Roozen and Carroll, 127.

²The final percentage of respondents below age 15 was 2.8 percent.

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regions, church size, or ethnic representation. The process of formulating the sample was superior to methods used in most other denominational studies.¹

**Pilot Testing and Mailing the Survey**

Before the questionnaire was mailed, ten people were asked to complete the survey and provide feedback concerning (1) hidden bias, (2) clarity of expression, (3) reasonableness of the response options, and (4) ease of the format. Each question, with all the possible responses, was discussed. While this step did not eliminate all problems, several significant changes were made in the question order, word order, response order, question layout, and ease of taking.

Sometimes meaning is subtle. The value of a good question is whether a person will provide the same response if the survey is taken more than once. This is reliability.² Validity is involved with making sure the question provides the information it was intended to supply. Testing for reliability and validity are difficult, but the pilot testing phase of the program proved helpful in both these areas. The development of one survey question illustrated the problem of validity. Initially, question 9 was written, "All in all, how important would you say your church membership is to you? (Circle one number)

1 NOT IMPORTANT
2 SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT
3 QUITE IMPORTANT
4 EXTREMELY IMPORTANT"

¹Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys*, 126.
²Davies, 123.
Confusion erupted when the pilot group came to this question. Some very committed church members had circled number 1. They said, "Membership must not be important because we never think about it. If membership is not on our minds, it must not be important." Other committed church members circled number 4 because their relationship to the church was important. The fact that the same group could so easily answer the same question so differently indicated a major problem. The question was rewritten to read: "All in all, how important would you say your church is to you?" The four questions on church belonging are examined in chapter 6.

Guidelines for Mailing

The TDM contained strict instructions for mailing the questionnaire. One guideline not implemented involved mailing the questionnaire in an oversize mailer with special postage. To keep the questionnaire packet at first-class postage, a standard envelope was used. Other principles that were followed included:

1. The one-page cover letter by the conference ministerial secretary explained (a) that a very useful study was being conducted; (b) why each respondent was important; and (c) who should complete the questionnaire.

2. The exact mailing date was added to the letter.

3. Questionnaires were stamped with an identification number. This involved sending all the forms through the laser printer twice.

1 Appreciation is extended to Elder Roy Caughron, Ministerial Secretary of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference, who wrote the cover letter.
4. Exactly one week after the first mailing, a follow-up postcard reminder was sent to all those who had not returned the questionnaire.

5. Three weeks after the first mailing, a second cover letter and questionnaire were sent to everyone who had not responded.

6. Two weeks after the second mailing a reminder card was sent to all nonrespondents.

The first mailing of the questionnaires took place on 27 April 1994. Dillman found that surveys mailed close to the beginning of the month had better response rates. For the next eight weeks the questionnaires returned steadily. Each mail delivery began a daily process of counting the number of completed and non-completed returns and recording the identification numbers of incoming mail. As mail flow began to subside, a new mailing was prepared, either the second mailing of the questionnaire or a reminder card. Table 4 illustrates the rate of return over nine weeks.

The Dillman TDM provided a very professional, complex, and disciplined procedure for managing a successful mail survey project. An important component of the project was gaining experience in conducting social research in a careful manner. The Dillman plan provided this opportunity and, considering the reluctance of Adventists to cooperate, this methodology was really put to the test. Fortunately for this study, it proved worthy of the challenge. At the end of the collection period 427 surveys had been returned, a response rate of 53 percent.

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1Dillman, "Mail and Other," 366.
Table 4.—Charting survey returns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Completed</th>
<th>Noncompleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 April—First mailing of questionnaires. Results for weeks 1-2:</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 May—600 follow-up postcards sent to all nonreturns. Results for weeks 3-4:</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 June—Second mailing of questionnaires. Results weeks 5-6:</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response summary for weeks 7-9:</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 June—363 followup postcards sent to all nonreturns.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Entry Procedures

Prior to entering the data I prepared a code book that explained the meaning for the various number values which would be entered as data. As I entered data, I discovered that one survey question had created much confusion. Question 22-D, relating to smoking and alcohol, was dropped from the study. The data were entered on a Microsoft Works spreadsheet and saved as an ASCII text file. After entering the data, fifty questionnaires were randomly selected to detect a percentage of the data entry errors. Data entry error was determined to be less than 1 percent. The statistical analysis program also checked for and corrected errors.
CHAPTER 6

DIVERSE VIEWS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The most direct way of finding out what a person believes, thinks, or feels is simply to ask him.

Charles Glock

Suspicious about Religious Research

A recent letter to the editor of a church magazine expressed concern about the appropriateness of research being conducted in the Adventist Church.

A number of polls have been taken to determine what church members think is wrong with the church and what changes they would like to see made in it. It is time—past time—to have a different kind of in-depth study. This one won't involve expensive professional pollsters. All that will be needed is to dust off our Bibles and the counsels given us by God's special messenger to the remnant church [the writings of Ellen G. White]. Such a study may well reveal that it is our world-loving hearts that need changing. . . . The tragedy of Adventism today is that it has increasingly accommodated itself to the changes that members want rather than to the spiritual transformation that God wants.¹

Buntain's letter reflects a major cynicism in serious religious research which may be interpreted as follows: If the church (usually understood to mean church administrators) would spend more time in Bible study and prayer, it would not need the

¹Ruth Jaeger Buntain, "Polls and God's Counsels," AR, 24 March 1994, 2. This letter was clipped from the magazine and place inside a returned questionnaire.
opinions of church members to know what is wrong or how to choose the correct course of action. To place confidence in social research is like King David relying on a census to conscript an Israelite army (2 Sam 24), the sin of placing greater confidence in numbers than in God.

**Probability of Respondent Bias**

Accurately surveying a group of religious people about their beliefs and practices is difficult when a large percentage of the sample has the opinion of Mrs. Buntain. Some of the problems generally associated with religious research were evident in this project and deserve comment. While the Total Design Method (TDM) was useful in creating a sizable response, it could not eliminate potential bias. For instance, individuals who believed that the religious life is within a private world and closed to public scrutiny would have little desire to share their thoughts. As many as 25-40 percent of the sample were "marginal" or "dormant" members having little present interest or association with the church.¹ Forty persons mailed back uncompleted questionnaires, and many more did not return the survey. These silent voices were underrepresented in the results.

On the other hand, some committed church members were likely to return a survey if only to reflect their positive view of the church. Others might simply give the socially desirable answer, responding in the expected way. Those with more discretionary time, people who like puzzles (attracted to the theme), and members with

higher education levels were more likely to complete the questionnaire. While the amount of bias has not been measured, it was "certainly possible."\(^1\) It would seem reasonable to expect that results are overly good and should be analyzed accordingly.

**Testing for Validity**

Comparing the results for identical questions found in two different surveys presented a crude test for validity.\(^2\) For example, Table 5 compares attendance data from the Georgia-Cumberland sample, a recent study for all SDAs, and a national average for the American public. The response rates from the two Adventist samples are remarkably similar, although they also indicate that southern Adventists are neither more or less faithful in church attendance than members in other parts of the country (there is no Adventist "Bible Belt").

Church surveys frequently ask whether the respondent is an office holder. In Table 6, the results are compared with a comparable question from a recent NAD sample. The results are not as close as the previous example, but the NAD's 57 percent does not seem consistent with my personal experience.

A request for marital status information is normal in the demographic portion of a church survey, and it would seem to provide a good test for comparable validity. Table 7 compares data from the Georgia-Cumberland and NAD surveys. Because a higher percentage of singles was not expected in the Georgia-Cumberland sample, an


\(^2\)Validity is defined in chapter 5.
Table 5.—Comparing attendance percentages for question 6—"How often have you attended Sabbath worship services?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Frequent attendance (3 or more times/mo.) %</th>
<th>Infrequent attendance (2 times or less/mo.) %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia-Cumberland Conference</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Division</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% because of the "No answer" category.

1Roger Dudley and Edwin Hernandez, *Citizens of Two Worlds* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1992), 123; from a survey of 419 adult members randomly selected from Adventist households in the U.S.

Table 6.—Comparing the percentage of office holders for question 12, "Do you hold an office or position in your local congregation?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>% responding Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia-Cumberland sample</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Division sample</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

explanation can only be guessed. Due to their mobility, singles bring attendance percentages down. Since attendance figures are the same, these assumptions are not verified. While table 7 does not break down the singles' category, which included divorced and widowed, those figures in the two samples were within one percentage point of each other.

Comparing the results of these recent questionnaires among an Adventist population provides confidence that the Georgia-Cumberland data are typical and consistent with what would be expected. With this encouragement, the general findings can now be summarized.

Profile of an Average Church Member

Summarizing the results, a typical Adventist in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference would be a married female near forty years of age who has been an Adventist for well over fifteen years. She is slightly less active in the church now than three years ago, but still spends 10-16 hours a month attending church meetings and participating in church activities. She attends church almost every Sabbath.

The church is important to her. The majority of her friends are there, and she has few contacts in the community. She supports the standards for membership as well as the fundamental beliefs of the church. She gives the church somewhere between $50-$400 a month. She is much better educated than her parents. (In one generation the number of college graduates has more than doubled.) There is a 50 percent chance she will move in the next three years, based on what she knows today. The church has been the most helpful in helping her maintain a close relationship with Christ. The church has
been least helpful in meeting personal problems like anxiety and loneliness and encouraging involvement in community activities. She has not observed many cases of church discipline. When she has, she believes they were handled properly about half the time. Most of her important decisions are based on her religious faith. She finds her greatest satisfaction in family, church relations, friendships, leisure activities and lastly, success and achievement, in that order.

**Adventist Belonging**

Four questions in the survey were designed to measure the quality of belonging. They did not form a scale of belonging, although the response percentage for each of the questions was similar. They appeared in the survey as follows:

**Question 5:** How well do you think you fit in with the group of people who make up your local church congregation?

**Question 19:** I feel like I really belong in my local church.

**Question 20:** Newcomers are easily assimilated in our church.

**Question 21:** Do you believe a church membership renewal ceremony, perhaps conducted annually, would focus greater attention on the importance of church membership?

In question 5, some respondents (members in large churches) were asked to compare themselves with a potentially large group of people. Members of smaller churches could answer perhaps more easily. The results appear in Table 9 and echo Lyle Schaller's statement, "There is considerable evidence which suggests that at least one-third, and perhaps as many as one-half, of all Protestant (text continues after tables)
Table 7.—Comparing marital status results from question 26.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Married %</th>
<th>Single % (Widowed &amp; Divorced)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia-Cumberland Conference</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Division¹</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 percent due to a "No answer" category.


Table 8.—Comparing educational level results from question 29A—"Highest level of education completed for yourself?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>% of College Graduates</th>
<th>% with Graduate Degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia-Cumberland Conference</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North American Division¹</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Monte Sahlin, *NAD Church Information System, Report 1* (Silver Spring, MD: NAD of SDA, 1990, 16.)
Table 9.—Responses to question 5, "How Well do you think you fit in with the group of people who make up your local church congregation?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I fit in the church very well</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am trying to fit in</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not fit at all</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

church members do not feel a sense of belonging."¹ In this sample, approximately one-third do not think they are fitting in as well as they would like.

Question 20, relating to the assimilation of new members, was taken from Ronald Sloat's "Belonging Survey." (More information about Ron's study is presented in the chapter 7.) More than 80 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed.² This compared favorably with the Georgia-Cumberland sample, where 83 percent thought assimilation was generally successful or "we're working at it." These overly rosy perceptions indicate how easy it is to forget the assimilation failures. Most long-term members have either never been assimilated, because they were always within the church family, or the process took place so long ago that they have completely forgotten the difficulties of assimilation. Most church members do not see the assimilation failures who have long since left the church.

¹Schaller, p. 16.

²Sloat, 127. The study was non-scientific.
Question 21 solicited reaction to a strategy for enhancing a sense of belonging. Most were non-committal. However, of those who gave an opinion, two out of three were in favor of the idea.

The Central Question

Responses to question 19 offered the most direct and focused measurement on belonging. According to the responses, approximately three out of four church members responded positively, roughly the same percentages as responses to Question 5 (How well do you fit in?). The research question sought to identify what factors from a preset list would most likely influence and promote a sense of belonging? Do some subgroups in the sample rank higher than others? To answer these questions, this research project was accepted by Dr. Somnath Datta as a class project in a master's-level statistics course at the University of Georgia during fall quarter 1994. Two students, Chanida Sonamai and Xiaowen Tao, were the student researchers.

The Research Process

To simplify the analysis, the four response options for question 19 were reduced to two (see table 10). The belonging/nonbelonging responses were related to seven selected independent variables in order to ask the following seven questions:

1. How does belonging relate to respondent's educational level?
2. How does belonging relate to father's educational level?
3. How does belonging relate to mother's educational level?
4. How does belonging relate to the community you were raised?
5. How does belonging relate to the community where you reside?
Table 10—Responses to question 19, "I feel like I really belong in my local church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Total</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Total</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding off and a "No answer" score.

6. How does belonging relate to family income?

7. How does belonging relate to age?

Using a significance level of 0.05 for the test $H_0$, there was a strong connection with the age variable and a weak connection with the variable on the father's education.¹

The students tested the data in several ways, using logistic regression and a regression equation. All three tests produced the same results. In the words of Sonamai and Tao,

¹Seventy-eight respondents failed to complete this question causing 18 percent data loss. Thus, there is some doubt about the significance of father's education.
The results show that there is higher chance for old people to feel that they belong to church than the young people. For people of the same age, there is higher chance for those whose father have higher education to feel that they belong to church. For example, 52 percent of people at age 22 whose father spent 12 years in school feel that they belong to the church whereas up to 68 percent of people at the same age who father spent 20 years in school will feel the same way.... The only factor which makes us question this conclusion is the high amount of missing data for the father's education question.1

Table 11 shows the specific breakdown between belonging (question 19) and age (question 34). Between ages 0-45 the ratio of belonging to nonbelonging is 2 to 1. The baby boomers' and baby busters' attitudes toward belonging are very similar. A big jump can be seen in the next age bracket. The ratio is now 4 to 1. Finally, for those over 65 years there are nine "belongers" for each "non-belonger."

Table 11.— The relationship between Belonging (question 19) and Age (question 34).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Nonbelonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14 (64%)</td>
<td>8 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-45</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22 (67%)</td>
<td>11 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-65</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20 (77%)</td>
<td>6 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17 (89%)</td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample = 420  Frequency Missing = 7

1Chanida Sonamai and Xiaowen Tao, "Study of Church Belonging and Beliefs about the Meaning of Membership," Project for Statistical Consulting (STA928), University of Georgia, Fall 1994, 16. See Appendix A for additional tables.

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Study Evaluation and Recommendations

Like good wine, belonging seems to be linked to time and age. The longer a person is in a group the greater will be the sense of ownership and emotional attachment. While we know that, for now, the older members are the natural belongers, we are left to wonder if this pattern is true for every generation, or if the elderly of our era are special. There is evidence from other studies that there is a generation gap in belonging. This study certainly supports the theory that the belief-belonging gap is a characteristic of the young. But the question arises, as the young age, will their attitudes change? Will they become more loyal, more committed, and more generous? Without a longitudinal study that determination cannot be made. For the present we can only be saddened by the gradual loss of what might be the most loyal generation in the history of the Adventist Church. As they pass to their rest, we can only wonder if church institutions will survive the next generation.

As the analysis phase of the research project commenced, I was very pleased with the 53 percent returned questionnaires. I was also very hopeful that the statistical services provided by the University of Georgia would compliment my woeful ignorance. When it came time to submit the data for analysis, I was faced with a choice. I could pay approximately $1 per questionnaire (total of $427), or the work could be done free as a student project for a master's level statistics class.

Without too much initial second guessing, I took advantage of the free offer. I soon discovered that while the students seemed to understand the nature of the project, they were inexperienced in behavioral research. My project required more work than
was necessary for earning credit in the class. Only when it was too late did I realize that my project was probably too complicated for the students, and it would have been better to pay the money.

I would summarize my regrets as follows:

1. I wish I had developed a belonging scale based on all four related questions rather than just number 19.

2. I wish I had related the belonging question to more than just age, education, income, and rural/urban questions. What if we had related belonging to size of church, length of membership, activity level, church attendance, attitudes about standards, or any number of other variables? I believe that before publishing these findings more data will have to be more fully analyzed. Roger Dudley correctly observed that the statistical analysis portion of this project is the weakest portion of this report.

3. A consultant to guide through the various tests and regressions would have been helpful. While I have learned much on my own, statistics is a discipline that requires more than private book reading and independent study. Although I attempted to understand a large amount of technical writing and reports of religiosity studies, most of it remained a mystery to me. Having a technical consultant would have been ideal.

Of course, all these wishes would have required more money. Without a special grant, some of these ideas simply were not possible. However, I do pause to wonder how often social research lacks quality conclusions due to underfunding. How much money our church spends on social research is an appropriate question. And if it is expensive, are we willing to spend in order to get reliable results? These are questions
that administrators need to ask before considering research.

While I cannot prove it, I believe that Adventists, as well as other religious conservatives, are one of the most difficult groups on which to conduct social research. Assuming that the results are going to be skewed by as many as five to ten percentage points to the good, is the heavy monetary investment still worth it? I attempted to measure belonging among all Adventists in Georgia-Cumberland. After all my work, I must face the realization that I probably measured only the active Adventists. I am less optimistic now that social research in a religious setting can give reliable answers.

What can be done in a local church setting to make membership more meaningful? Chapter 7 explores a spectrum of activities and process. Some are designed to raise awareness. Others will require significant time and effort to implement. This chapter features the relevance of this topic. Recently, several Adventist experiments in covenant membership were tried, and more are on the way.
CHAPTER 7

DESIGNS FOR BELONGING

Solitude without community is merely loneliness
Robert N. Bellah et al.

Introduction

A visitor once expressed disappointment that, after attending his first Sabbath School, Worship, and fellowship luncheon, no one had asked him to join the church. "Don't you want me as a member? Why didn't anyone ask me to join?"

The pastor urged the visitor not to take the congregation's silence too seriously. He tried to explain the meaning of membership.

I am pleased that you have been thinking about joining us. It takes some time to understand the purpose of the group, the way the group operates, and how you find your own place in the group. Church membership is like a marriage with some pretty important and serious vows. I appreciate your desire, and I would like to help you plan for membership.¹

The visitor had assumed church membership was like joining a local spiritual health club. He was interested in the services the church provided. He liked the social interaction, the moral emphasis, perhaps even the cooking. He did not realize

¹From a conversation with John Doe, January 1995.

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that church means more than what happens on Saturday morning. "It's going to take some time," he replied. "Maybe that is best."

This chapter reports on various ways to make church membership more meaningful and enhance a sense of belonging. As applications of the belonging principle, they come from different contexts.

**The Journey to Belonging**

A simple sociogram illustrates the dynamic world of belonging in a church. (See fig. 1.) Farthest from the circle center, with no sense of belonging, are guests and nonmembers. The outer circle encloses the official membership of baptized members. The center circle represents all church members committed to a close, intentional community. Generally, they will be active members and departmental leaders. The small ovals represent the many small groups in the church, such as a prayer group, a task group, choir, Pathfinders, or Sabbath School class. These small groups may include individuals from anywhere in the diagram, even nonmembers. The journey to belonging begins on the outskirts of the circle and moves toward the center.

The circular walls must be strong, but at the same time porous because people can choose to move closer to belonging or farther away. Some social and spiritual forces are bringing and keeping people together while other forces tend to pull individuals away.

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1Based on Schaller, 69. Schaller's model would be improved if the small group circle extended to the center of the fellowship circle.
I have used this diagram to start a discussion about membership belonging. One time I asked a group of members to place an "x" where they believed they belonged in the circle, then place another mark where they thought they were three years ago. They could also mark where they wanted to be one year in the future. Occasionally, I have the people place a "p" where they think their pastor is located. Some responses have been surprising.
A Membership Reaffirmation Service

The idea for a special membership renewal service was first suggested, quite innocently, during a Sabbath School class in the Auburn, Georgia, SDA Company. The lesson, based on Josh 24, covered the renewal of the Sinai Covenant. During the class discussion, Mrs. B commented, "We don't really do anything like that today. We often rededicate our lives to the Lord at the end of the sermon or during camp meeting. But this event (in the Bible story) was more significant." John, a younger Adventist spoke up, "Well, what about the Communion service? Isn't that a rededication service?" The discussion continued about the role of the covenant in Josh 24. Mr. K, an older member, remarked, "That day, for Joshua and the Israelites, was like a Day of Atonement [Lev 23]. They were committing themselves as a people to God. It was a corporate rather than a personal renewal."

Several minutes later, Betty, the action person in the class, proposed, "Why don't we select one Sabbath a year to renew our baptismal vows and rededicate ourselves to the church?" Mrs. B quickly added, "We could do it on our anniversary Sabbath coming up in three weeks." Everyone thought the idea was excellent, and I, who had been listening to this discussion, was asked to make the arrangements for the service.

Several years ago Myron Widmer of the Adventist Review proposed that Adventists plan an annual Faith Reaffirmation Sabbath based on the biblical precedents of Josh 24 and Deut 27-33. He wrote in conclusion, "I believe the response would be the same today if we—as the worldwide church or as a local
congregation--would set aside one Sabbath a year to review God's leading and reaffirm our commitment to the gospel."¹ While our idea for a membership reaffirmation Sabbath went beyond Widmer's proposal, the purpose was essentially the same.

I had no resources for such a program. Impressed with some certificates in a Christian bookstore, I decided to design one that would be appropriate for this special service. A letter explaining the special service was mailed to church members in advance of the special Saturday.

Fifteen persons, an average attendance, were present on a rainy Saturday morning for the membership renewal service and the fourth anniversary of the group. The sermon was outlined as follows: Belonging in Creation, Belonging in the Covenant, Belonging in Christ, and Belonging in the Church.² As the sermon moved directly into the renewal service, the deacons began to distribute the litany to the members. After describing the purpose and nature of the event, I led the congregation through the litany. At the conclusion of the reading, those wanting to affirm this litany were invited to rededicate themselves to church membership by gathering in front of the pulpit for a dedication prayer. The prayer contained sentiments of thanksgiving for the church, acknowledged Christ as head of the church, vowed our attachment to the church, and petitioned grace to be faithful to


²Taken from Sloat, 58-69.
the covenant. The service ended with a song. After dismissal the membership certificates were distributed to all members present. Since this was the first renewal Sabbath, copies of the worship litany and membership certificates were mailed out to all members, even those not present at the service. I wanted to avoid a potential misunderstanding from those not present.

Everyone was aware that the idea for this event had come from within the congregation, and a positive response was anticipated and received. After the event some suggested that the service be expanded to include a Friday night service, featuring activities or presentations that would address such issues as team-building, conflict resolution, or the history of the church. This special service required no board action or special accommodations. It was safe because it grew out of group consensus. Documents used in the membership renewal program can be found in Appendix B.

The Teaching Tool

In the early 1980s Wayne Willey\(^1\) searched for something that would strengthen church attachments. While pastoring the New London, Connecticut, SDA Church, Willey was invited to join a local Seventh Day Baptist ministerial fellowship. Through these ministers Willey first learned about membership covenants and annual covenant renewal.

Using the thirteen baptismal vows as a membership covenant, Willey

developed a "teaching tool" to help church members think about their present experience as a basis for membership. The annual process started in December with members receiving a copy of the baptismal vows in the church newsletter. Initially, Willey asked that members only sign the vows and return the document. When he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, this program was expanded into a Covenant Renewal Service that occurred on the first Saturday of the year. After a sermon titled, "The Ties That Bind Us Together," Willey invited all who desired to renew their covenants with Christ and the church to assemble around the Communion table. To involve all guests and visitors, Willey also provided copies of a generic Christian Covenant, which made no claims to the local church. Willey baptized several who made their first decisions for Christ through this Christian Covenant. Willey followed this practice in several districts, believing the service helped the congregation start the new year positively.

Wolley never tried to replace traditional membership practices with renewable membership. He never submitted the idea to a church board for approval, and the practice never received much criticism. When members questioned its purpose, he liked to say it was a special "teaching tool." When Willey left a district, the annual service would also cease. Reflecting on his use of covenant membership, Willey says, "I tried to use the idea as a carrot and never as a stick." The covenant was never used as a mechanism for removing names from the church rolls. In fact, he could not think of anyone who had ever refused to sign the

1Wayne Willey, telephone interview by author, 6 Dec. 1995, Athens, GA.
covenant. Instead, the covenant became a vehicle for enhancing practical
discussions about beliefs, behavior, and other things in a person's life. While
Willey was not aware of membership covenants in early Adventism, he did know of
the early Adventist practice of Communion Service where the meeting opened "with
the reading of the membership roll by the church clerk. . . . Absence from quarterly
meetings without report [excused absence] for nine months was grounds for
dismissal from the church." Willey was convinced that "a return to the practice of
early Adventism regarding church membership would be the most effective way to
maintain unity.”

The Sloat Report

In 1988, Ronald Sloat experimented with a special program to enhance a
sense of belonging in his 318-member United Presbyterian Church of Amsterdam,
New York. His well-written D.Min. report describes a series of congregational
meetings planned by himself and a special five-member lay advisory committee.
This "Church Action Project" consisted of three, 90-minute, attitude-raising
programs utilizing a wide assortment of learning events, such as videos, discussions,
Bible studies, skits, and stories. The programs were held on three successive
Thursdays in March 1987, and were well publicized in the newsletter and at church
on Sundays. In addition to the Advisory Committee, Sloat recruited a nine-member


"Laity Team" to help facilitate the program. Sloat is to be commended for the large number of church members involved in the project. He later reported that the program benefited the lay team and transformed the church. Thus, any program designed to enhance a sense of belonging in the church, or change the meaning of membership, should have abundant church member involvement. A program linked only to the pastor has little long-term benefit.

The programs featured both serious and entertaining activities: a story about "warm fuzzies," the movies Cipher in the Snow and Walls to Walls, and the story "The Rabbi's Gift" were some of the program highlights. Forty-seven members, roughly half the active membership, attended the first session; twenty-four were present for the second "act," and thirty-three members experienced the final program. It was unfortunate that congregational support did not match the investment of time by the leaders. Sloat described the project as relevant, rewarding, and inclusive. The lack of greater congregational participation made evaluation of the project difficult. Sloat designed two surveys for either side of the Church Action Project.1 Eight years later, Sloat reflects on the experience fondly. A long-term benefit of the program, he acknowledged, was the sense of unity and energy that subsequently helped the church celebrate its 200th anniversary. The program has not been repeated in the church where he remains pastor.2

1Sloat, 104-124.

2Ronald Sloat, telephone interview by author, 5 Dec. 1995, Athens, GA.
Covenant Baptist Church

Pastor Fred Williamson wanted to keep church membership simple. As the founding pastor of the Covenant Baptist Church in Mesa, Arizona, he tried a "new" idea, the annual renewal of church membership. The centerpiece was the church membership covenant, an official document outlining the relationship between the church and each member. Specific sections of the covenant reviewed commitments such as: personal acceptance of Christ as Savior and Lord, public confession of faith by baptism, regular participation in worship, regular personal devotions and corporate study of God's Word, serving—or preparing to serve—in some area of ministry, and sharing time, talent, and money in God's work.

In January, copies of the covenant were sent to all members and current friends of the church for prayer and consideration. On Covenant Sunday several members read the covenant aloud, the Scriptures that affirmed it, and made explanations for those who were unfamiliar with it. At the end of the service, attendees were invited to bring their signed forms to the Communion table as a public act of commitment. Individuals presenting covenants for the first time were interviewed by the diaconate to evaluate their Christian testimony and arrange for baptism. They were also placed in one of five family groups led by the deacons. New Christians were invited to join a small group study on basic Christianity. Special provisions were made for those not present on Covenant Sunday and non-resident members.

The church constitution allowed a three-month grace period, during which
the membership stayed in force. During this period the pastor and deacons contacted those who had not renewed their membership to determine what concerns may have motivated their decision. For most it was a case of oversight, but sometimes problems were discovered that needed attention. A few chose not to renew, but this was still much better than being dropped by the church.

This plan increased the workload of the deacons, but it was the most important kind of work. Sometimes new members expressed reservations about the concept, but most accepted it after the process was explained. The benefits of this form of membership renewal were:

1. Increased awareness of the decision to make a commitment
2. Fewer inactive members
3. More accountability to the Lord and the local body
4. Increased leader sensitivity to the spiritual welfare of the congregation
5. The creation of a channel for concerns that might go untreated
6. The opportunity for personal spiritual renewal

The title of Zehring's article (see footnote) was unfortunate, but this may be the common perception of covenant membership. As can be observed in the above list, the best benefits of this model have little to do with "deadwood" and everything to do with enriching the meaning of church membership.

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The Early Influence of Willow Creek Community Church

In the mid-1980s, Adventist pastors began to study the church growth methods of Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC) of South Barrington, Illinois. Since its beginning in 1975, the WCCC, under the leadership of Bill Hybels, has become one of the largest churches in the United States. Space does not permit a full review of the church's philosophy and methodology of ministry, but the annual leadership conferences have exposed Adventist ministers to a renewable covenant concept of church membership. Until 1995, the Willow Creek policy for accepting new members was based on six criteria:

1. Acceptance of Christ as Savior and be at least twelve years of age
2. Completion of one year of regular church attendance
3. Attendance at a special Membership Class
4. Personal interview with an elder
5. Signed statement of Commitment
6. Public affirmation before congregation.

Membership was renewed annually. "Each member shall sign a yearly Statement of Commitment to reaffirm his or her continued desire for membership. In the event that membership is terminated, the process of reinstatement shall be the same as above." The WCCC process for becoming and remaining a member was hardly revolutionary.

1Willow Creek Community Church, Structure of Ministry (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Community Church, n.d.), 21.

2Ibid.
Wisconsin Adventist Experiments

Influenced by WCCC's intentional approach to church membership, several SDA ministers decided to apply it in an Adventist context. In nearby Wisconsin, Dennis Pumford of the La Crosse SDA Church developed a plan called "membership renewal." Simply put, "this plan allows the individual to renew his or her membership each year . . . by examining himself/herself, and in a positive way, reaffirming their belief in God, acceptance of salvation, and agreeing with the basic principles of the Christian life."¹

The membership renewal plan offered members three choices: (1) renewing their previous church commitment, (2) requesting a pastoral visit because of a personal difficulty, or (3) deciding to end their membership. The final option actually read as follows: "At this point, I am unable to renew my membership. I am struggling with [please circle the right response] a) beliefs  b) practices for which I must take time out and withdraw my membership."²

Following custom, Pumford presented the proposal to the church board, where it was approved with strong support. At the subsequent church business meeting. The response of the larger congregation was not so positive. If fact, Pumford did not feel there was a consensus to proceed with implementation. Before any more progress could be made, he accepted a call to another church.

¹Dennis Pumford to the Members of the La Crosse, Wisconsin, SDA Church, n.d.

²Ibid.
While the original proposal has been modified several times, Pumford has yet to fully implement a membership renewal program, either because of inappropriate timing or other situations. Pumford has more experience than any other Adventist pastor at trying to promote and implement a membership renewal plan. His lack of success so far is indicative of the difficulties and challenges of applying this different way of thinking. One conference president upon hearing Pumford's plan stated that a renewal membership church would never exist in his conference as long as he was president.

Pumford is now in the Oregon Conference. In the summer of 1996 he is participating with other pastors in planting a new church. The decision has already been made to incorporate a renewable membership process. Initial membership will be on a provisional basis for a maximum of one year. To achieve full membership, called a 3-D membership, for "Definite, Devoted, Disciple," individuals will have to attend training sessions, participate in a ministry that is compatible to their spiritual gifts, and make a commitment to a daily devotional life. This membership would be renewed annually.\(^1\) With the support of the conference, Pumford is looking forward to realizing a dream.

**Hamilton Community Church**

Mark Bresee, a pastor in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference, also attended leadership conferences at WCCC and desired to experiment with their philosophy of

\(^1\)Dennis Pumford, telephone interview by author, 30 Nov. 1995, Athens, GA.
ministry. While pastoring the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Church, he had opportunity to establish part of the congregation in a new location, approximately ten miles from Southern College. From the outset he made it clear that the new church would not be typical in an Adventist sense.

Bresee intended to adopt the renewable membership policy of WCCC. But, for reasons not completely clear, the church began with a more traditional style of membership and has not been able to make a complete transition.

**Willow Creek Restructures Membership Policies**

In the early 1990s Willow Creek Community Church leadership sensed that the church was losing momentum as several frustrating problems became evident. Rapid growth during the previous decade made the original membership policy obsolete. Originally, members had close contact with elders, and there was some awareness of who comprised the membership. But the church did not have the leadership structures in place to maintain accountability for authentic membership. For two years the church did not accept any new members while it prepared a new membership program.

Finally, in the summer of 1995, a new membership program was introduced. One of the new features was the publication of a *Participant Member Manual* and a structured 12-20-hour course, studied either individually or in a small group setting. This course was a significant upgrade over the previous membership classes. The *Manual* is designed to orient the new member to the church and introduce him/her to
a small group experience or church ministry. According to the current WCCC philosophy, a nonparticipating member is a contradiction in terms. In a bold decision, WCCC deleted/dropped all current members from its membership rolls. Veteran members, some of whom had been in the church for twenty years, were required to complete the training process just like the new members. Opposition to the plan was heated, and senior pastor, Bill Hybels, conducted several focus meetings with disgruntled members. Hybels's position was simply this: If you are a witness for Christ and bring people into this church, you need to know from your own experience what it is like to go through the membership training program. One member who had objected strongly was enrolled in the first orientation program. After finishing the new program, he determined that the new plan was terrific.

Small groups ministry is the heart of the new plan. Group leaders will be responsible for the initial interview process and the annual renewal. To accommodate the increase in membership, the number of small groups has risen from 137 to over 1,000. Only in exceptional cases will members not be part of a small group.¹

Belonging and Small Groups

The final question (#35) in the Georgia-Cumberland survey on belonging invited respondents to write general comments about the importance of church membership and to provide suggestions for enhancing a sense of belonging. The most

¹Bruce Bugbee, telephone interview by author, 15 Nov 1995, Athens, GA.
frequent suggestion was for small-group ministry. The following comment is an example.

A large portion of our membership is involved in small groups. These small groups serve as a bonding agent since there is no way the Pastor can see each member regularly. I personally know of some members that had become discouraged and attendance was irregular. Since joining a small group, they are more active and their church commitment strengthened.

While few people would question that small groups meet the belonging needs for group members, some pastors have not seen the connection between small groups and church belonging. In fact, if small groups are able to supply the belonging needs for group members, what need is there of the church? A few pastors even believe that the small group undermines the church because it creates a powerful little church within the larger church.

Karl George resolves this dilemma by proposing that the human need for belonging is met on several levels. He believes there is a need for belonging in a small, cellular group as well as in a larger, celebration-type structure. His "meta-church" model incorporates both levels of belonging. These thoughts are developed in the comparison between "village" religion and "camp" religion. In the old European village, "a sense of belonging was assumed, even from before birth." But this automatic belonging was not present on the frontier where, in order to belong, "people must give a testimonial and tell the story of their religious experience." According to Karl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1992), 59-60.

George, modern society has a great need for the frontier, camp meeting style that is fundamental to small group ministry.

A visitor, therefore, needs to be helped to tell his or her story to a group of members who will empathize, identify themselves as fellow travelers, and make the person feel accepted. If these circumstances occur, outsiders become insiders.¹

Concluding Thoughts

A colleague recently asked me, "Briefly, how would you advise me to make church membership more meaningful in my traditional church? After six years of study and reflection, what does it all boil down to?"

First, I would propose that each local church produce a church membership manual. This booklet would include a summary of the membership policies of the Church Manual, but it would lay a better foundation for the meaning and purpose of church membership. I envision a publication between twelve and twenty pages, divided into sections such as (1) God's Church—What It Is and Is Not, (2) Belonging Rituals: Baptism and Lord's Supper, (3) The Purpose of Fellowship, (4) A Reciprocal Blessing: How the Church Helps You, and How You Help the Church, and (5) How to Leave the Church. The booklet would be produced by the church board, although most writing would be done by the pastor. While such documents are currently rare, I believe they will become more common in the future. The double value of intentionally thinking about membership and communicating it to the members will strengthen the church.

¹Ibid., 73.
Second, I would evaluate and probably upgrade the belonging events in the church: Child Dedications, Baptisms, and Communions. A new sense of belonging begins as new thought and energy are invested into these services. As Rex Edwards writes, "Because of our repeated emphasis on baptism's nonsacramental and 'merely symbolic' nature, we tend to regard the rite itself rather lightly. . . . Our Puritan background has left us impoverished in the art of 'celebrating through the created order.'" The manner in which new members are admitted provides the best opportunity to speak and model belonging.

Third, I would develop an annual membership rededication service similar to the one described at the beginning of the chapter. This is a necessary step in helping to change the prevailing attitude about "once a member, always a member." Only when this event has become accepted without reservation (perhaps three years) can the fourth stage be started.

Finally, a special subcommittee of the church board would design a new covenant membership policy. While current models might be helpful for designing the policy, the final product must satisfy the local context. The education process would include an orientation for all members, current and future. On the recommendation of the board, the plan would be approved by the full church. Either the church board or a special membership committee would be responsible for the annual membership renewal campaign and perhaps the annual Covenant Sabbath.

Successful implementation of covenant membership renewal in an Adventist

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context is still in the future. All the preceding cases indicate that the task is not easy, and, in some places, not even possible. Many pastors would be delighted to serve a church with membership renewal already in practice. Jim Redfield writes, "I've advocated this approach for years but have never had the right circumstances."^1 Loren Fenton recently wrote, "I'm serious about this subject. I truly think it would be an improvement over our current 'lifetime membership whether you want to or not' policy. C'mon, folks! Let's get real."^2

Until recently, such an experiment would not have been possible in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference. But beginning in 1997 a church will be planted in Atlanta, Georgia which will adopt aspects of the WCCC plan. Hopefully, the success of a handful of progressive Adventist Churches will pave the way for wider acceptance and easier application.

Like a king who should count the cost before going into battle, the creative pastor should count the cost before tackling such a large project as membership renewal. Those contemplating change should remember that adjustments in one part of a system affect other parts of the organization; changes naturally produce intended and unintended consequences, and a significant lag time might extend from the time of implementation through the full cycle of consequences.

So, as I come to the end of one D.Min. project, I can see the outline for


another. I welcome fellow travelers on this journey towards enhanced church belonging. I hope you have found a foundation on which to build a new sense of community. The fact that we are not alone in this endeavor should provide great encouragement. I hope to remain a continued resource on this topic, and that others will join me in establishing an unofficial research center where hopes and good ideas can be exchanged.
EPILOGUE--A PARABLE

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT

In my imagination, the D.Min. project rose before me as a huge mountain, covered with large hardwood, virgin forests, like the Smokey Mountains in my first district. I had wanted something difficult, a challenging task, something that would affect more than just me and my little world of two small Adventist churches. Working on the mountain was my own choice. Initially, it was a wish come true.

But the assignment that went with this mountain soon caused me to reconsider my dream. The strange task involved cutting down every living tree, inspecting each log to determine the quality of wood, and finally selecting the best 120 specimens for use in building a cathedral. I objected to the work being so wasteful. I was creating an ecological nightmare. When I complained about the terrible waste, I was told this was a magic mountain, and when the work was completed the ground would be reforested with even better trees.

The best logs were to be loaded on seven logging rigs parked in the valley. Special machines took these logs out of the narrow ravines and steep slopes. Most of this work was to be accomplished alone, primarily in my spare time at night.
For the first few months I just groped and plodded. I considered slapping down the first 120 trees and be done with it. When other pursuits distracted me for weeks at a time, I was tempted to quit. On other days I would sense that this endeavor would reveal my strength of purpose, determine my degree of passion, and expose the true source of my motives.

Soon after the work began I came upon a most unusual tree. It seemed as hard as stone. Axes just bounced off, and the chain saws didn't cut so much as grind their way through the petrified wood. I had heard stories of block trees. Each morning I prayed not to find one. Yet, on closer inspection those block trees scored very high on quality, and a few even went on the trucks.

The greatest difficulty in this whole enterprise was determining which 120 trees would end on the trucks. I did not seem to have the capacity to deal with all the variations of quality. My mind was often confused with which tree to keep and which to discard. One time I had a whole log truck filled with twenty-five to thirty logs all ready to go, and then realized that better trees were available. I had to unload the truck and replace all the logs. No log was ever safe, and I would despair at the loss of time and energy in trying to make good selections.

Days turned into years as the progress slowly continued. The mountain took on a checkerboard appearance, a random series of clearings, thick forest, and then more clearings. Mounds of discarded trees, like mini-mountains, rose from the center of each clearing. The project defied organization.

While I was alone, I knew in my heart that I was being watched by unseen
beings and helped by supernatural forces. The evidence was confirmed through the many prayers that were spoken for my work. My friends, sensing the difficulty, knew the best contribution they could make was leaving me alone, yet supporting me with their thoughts. (Leaving the pastor alone was very hard for some.) And God was there, providing strength, wisdom, courage, patience, and making the way easier. And the way did get easier. As a puzzle goes together faster at the end than the beginning, so the work progressed faster as more and more log trucks were loaded.

As I look around me today, all the trees are cut and only a few more logs need sorting for the trucks. The hardest thing I have ever done is almost over. And yet, even now, as I begin to reflect on that experience, I will not remember the difficulties so much as walking through a virgin forest of the most beautiful trees, soaking in the terrific view from the top of that sacred mountain, or looking back towards the mountain and saying, "I know you... like the back of my hand. I can be anywhere on you, and I know exactly where I am, and how to get home." I have become a master of sorts, not of the mountain range, for sure, but of this one mountain, yes.

The experience has been more valuable than I envisioned. Meanwhile, for me, the weather has turned cold, and I hear that snow is coming. Now, with all the trees down, I will have one terrific ski slope.
APPENDIX A

Frequency Percentages for Church Belonging Questionnaire

Over 800 members of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference have been randomly selected to participate in an important study on church belonging and beliefs about the meaning of membership. All answers require just a circle response. Let's start with something easy.

1. In the worship service, where do you usually sit (e.g., in front or along the side)? In the diagram of a typical church sanctuary, circle the number which most closely matches your favorite place. If no number matches, just leave blank.

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   0 = 8.2

   **Rear/Exit**

2. How long have you been a member of the SDA Church? Think of when you were first baptized or joined the church by profession of faith. (Circle one number)

   - Less than one year: 1.4
   - 1 to 5 years: 9.4
   - 6 to 15 years: 19.9
   - More than 15 years: 66.7
   - No answer: 2.6

3. How long have you been a member of your present church? (Circle one number)

   - Less than one year: 7.5
   - 1 to 5 years: 40.0
   - 6 to 15 years: 29.5
   - More than 15 years: 21.8
   - No answer: 1.2

4. How would you describe the size of your church? (An estimate is fine)

   - Very small (0 to 50 members): 9.8
   - Small (50 to 150 members): 31.6
   - Medium (150 to 500 members): 32.1
   - Large (over 500 members): 25.1
   - No answer: 1.4
5. How well do you think you fit in with the group of people who make up your local church congregation? (Circle one number)

- I don't know: 11.0
- I really don't fit in: 7.7
- I fit in, but not too well: 26.2
- I fit in very well: 52.9
- No answer: 2.2

6. On average, how often have you attended Sabbath worship services since January?

- Less than once a month: 13.3
- One or two times a month: 8.7
- Three times a month: 8.4
- Almost every Sabbath: 67.0
- No answer: 2.6

7. How many hours per month did you spend in church meetings and activities since January? (Include Sabbath School, worship prayer meeting, committee meetings, community service, fellowship events, church work bees, church school, etc.)

- 0 to 5 hours a month: 24.1
- 6 to 10 hours a month: 15.5
- 11 to 15 hours a month: 22.2
- Over 16 hours a month: 34.7
- No answer: 3.5

8. Are you more active or less active in church activities compared to 1990?

- Less active now: 33.5
- About the same: 38.2
- More active now: 26.5
- No answer: 1.9

9. All in all, how important would you say your church is to you? (Circle one number)

- Not important: 3.5
- Somewhat important: 15.9
- Quite important: 30.0
- Extremely important: 48.5
- No answer: 2.1

10. Has a minister ever preached a sermon about the importance of church membership, other than a sermon about baptism, since you became a church member?

- Yes: 26.7
- No: 64.9
- No answer: 8.4
11. What are your beliefs about the standards of membership in the SDA Church?

   Standards are to strict and rigid  8.7
   Standards are in the acceptable range  75.4
   Standards are too lenient  11.9
   No answer  4.0

12. Do you hold a church office or leadership position?

   No  54.1
   Yes  43.6
   No answer  2.3

13. Have you, or someone close to you, ever received church discipline and/or loss of church membership? (Circle number)

   No  73.5
   Yes  23.7
   No answer  2.8

14. As you reflect on that experience, even if you didn’t agree with the decision, do you feel that the church handled the situation with understanding and spiritual concern?

   No  12.4
   Yes  12.9
   Did not apply  71.0
   I really don’t know  .9
   Other  2.6

15. Think for a moment of your four closest friends (individuals or couples with whom you have social and recreational contact). Do not include relatives. How many of those four close friends are members or part of your present church congregation?

   None  21.5
   One or two  25.5
   Three  14.1
   Four  34.7
   No answer  4.2

16. One way of measuring commitment is through contributions. Estimate your family’s monthly contribution of tithes and offerings since January. (If single or widowed, count yourself as a family.)

   Under $50 a month  17.8
   $50 to $200 a month  28.8
   $200 to $400 a month  25.8
   $400 to $600 a month  10.1
   Above $600 a month  11.5
   No answer  6.1
17. Have you ever voluntarily left the church for longer than six months, even if your membership was not officially dropped?

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. How helpful has your church been to you in the following areas of your life?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Little</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Much</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintain a close relationship with Christ.</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discover and develop my spiritual gifts.</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise my children properly. (Leave blank if childless.)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet my personal problems like anxiety and loneliness.</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become involved in community service work.</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. I feel like I really belong in my local church. (Circle one number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20. Newcomers are easily assimilated in our church. (Circle one number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assimilation</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We accept them easily</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We're working at it</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration is hard work</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can't assimilate anyone</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. Do you believe a church membership renewal ceremony, perhaps conducted annually, would focus greater attention on the importance of church membership?

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't Know</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22. How necessary is it for you to believe and practice the following behaviors. Begin each statement with the words: "As an Adventist I . . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree with the 27 Fundamental Beliefs</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend Sabbath School regularly</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in Communion Quarterly</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am a member of a small Bible study group</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live a simple lifestyle.</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23. People obtain satisfaction from various aspects of their lives. While most or all of the following probably bring you satisfaction, please mark a *1* next to the aspect which brings you the most satisfaction, a *2* next to the aspect which is ranked second in importance, and a *3* next to the aspect which is third. Continue until you have ranked all 5 items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>4th</th>
<th>5th</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement and success</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure time and recreational act.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships/social interactions</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church memb./religious assn.</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24. Everyone must make important decisions during life, such as which occupation to pursue, what goals to strive for, whom to vote for, what to teach one's children, etc. When you have made or do make these decisions, to what extent have you based your decisions on your religious faith?

- 6.8% I sometimes base decisions on my religious faith, but not most of the time.
- 25.3% I feel that most of my important decisions are based on my religious faith, but usually in a general, unconscious way.
- 66.5% I feel that most of my important decisions are based on my religious faith, and I usually attempt to make them so.
- 1.4% No Answer

25. Please react to the following opinion: "I believe an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church teaching." (Circle one number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly disagree</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildly agree</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
26. Circle your marital status?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

27. What is your gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28. In how many community clubs or organizations do you hold membership? (Civic, military, political, professional, recreational, service, social, YMCA, etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other answers</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29A. Highest level of education completed for yourself?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to Junior high</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29B. Highest level of education completed by your Father?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to Junior high</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29C. Highest level of education completed by your Mother?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to Junior high</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior high</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

30. Do you plan to move from your present locality within the next three years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, likely</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably, maybe</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely not</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
31. In what type of community were raised?

- Farming/rural community/small town 56.9
- Urban, suburban, or metro 35.1
- Outside USA 7.0
- No answer 0.9

32. In what type of community do you presently reside?

- Farming/rural community/small town 62.3
- Urban, suburban, or metro 36.8
- Other answers 1.9

33. What was your approximate annual family income during 1993?

- Under $10,000 14.1
- $10,000 to $20,000 16.2
- $20,000 to $35,000 23.2
- $35,000 to $50,000 19.4
- $50,000 to $75,000 11.7
- Above $75,000 7.5
- No answer 8.0

34. Please circle your age group:

- 0 to 15 years 2.8
- 16 to 30 years 18.7
- 31 to 45 years 32.8
- 46 to 65 years 25.5
- Above 65 years 19.7
- No answer .5

35. In there anything else you would like to tell us about the importance of church membership? Do you have any special ideas for creating a greater sense of belonging in your church? Is your church doing anything right now to stress the importance of membership? If so, please use this space to write about it.

- Positive stories 4.7
- Critical stories 14.3
- Emphasis on relationship with Christ 3.3
- Importance of small groups 1.4
- Practical suggestions 2.6
- No answers 73.8
Summary of Statistical Analysis and Tables

Introduction

In addition to the frequency responses, Chanida Somanai and Xiaowen sought to determine if there was a relationship between belonging (question 19) and several other independent variables. The following tables and special notes, adapted from their report, summarize their findings.

Table 1. Comparing Question 19 (Belonging) and Question 29A (Education)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grades 9-10</th>
<th>Grades 11-12</th>
<th>Tech. School</th>
<th>Grades 13-15</th>
<th>Grade 16</th>
<th>Grades 16+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelonging</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.44%</td>
<td>3.41%</td>
<td>1.71%</td>
<td>8.78%</td>
<td>7.07%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.27%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>6.34%</td>
<td>28.78%</td>
<td>25.85%</td>
<td>15.85%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective Sample Size = 410

Frequency Missing = 17
Table 2. Comparing Question 19 (Belonging) and Question 29B (Father's Education)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Tech. School</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td></td>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelonging</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.64%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>13.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective Sample Size = 349  Frequency Missing = 78  Warning: 18% of data are missing.

Table 2. Comparing Question 19 (Belonging) and Question 29C (Mother's Education)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Tech. School</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td></td>
<td>13-15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelonging</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective Sample Size = 361  Frequency Missing = 66  Warning: 15% of data are missing.

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Table 3. Comparing Question 19 (Belonging) and Question 31 (Where Raised)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rural/Small Town</th>
<th>Urban/Metro</th>
<th>Overseas</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
<td>5.98%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelonging</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>35.65%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective Sample Size = 418    Frequency Missing = 9

Table 4. Comparing Question 19 (Belonging) and Question 32 (Where Do You Live?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rural/Small Town</th>
<th>Urban/Metro</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelonging</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective Sample Size = 418    Frequency Missing = 9
Table 5. Comparing Question 19 (Belonging) and Question 33 (Income)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Below $10,000</th>
<th>$10,000</th>
<th>$20,000</th>
<th>$35,000</th>
<th>$49,999</th>
<th>$50,000 Above</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonbelonging</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.17%</td>
<td>17.48%</td>
<td>25.19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effective Sample Size = 389  Frequency Missing = 38
March 29, 1993

Pastor Warren Ruf
150 New Haven Dr.
Athens, GA 30606

Dear Pastor Ruf:

The Human Subjects Review Board has reviewed your proposal, "Exploring the Meaning of Church Membership in the Georgia-Cumberland Conference," under the exempt review procedure. You have been given clearance to proceed with your research plans.

If there are any modifications to the proposed research protocol or consent form, or you encounter problems as a result of the study, please notify us in writing. Feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

If your research is going to take more than one year, you must request an extension of your approval in order to continue with this project. The present approval duration is for one year. We wish you success on this project.

Sincerely,

Kent R. Randolph
Assistant to the Director,
Office of Scholarly Research

kr

c: Dr. Jim North

Suggestion: The cover letter should have a contact address and telephone number of whom to contact if the respondent has questions.
The Belonging Puzzle

Over 800 members of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference have been randomly selected to participate in an important study on church belonging and beliefs about the meaning of membership. All answers require just a circle response. Let's start with something easy.

1. In the worship service, where do you usually sit (e.g., in front or along the side)? In the diagram of a typical church sanctuary, circle the number which most closely matches your favorite place. If no number matches, just leave blank.

2. How long have you been a member of the SDA Church? Think of when you were first baptized or joined the church by profession of faith. (Circle one number)

This survey has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of Andrews University #2-284. Data collection supervised by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Statistical analysis provided by the Department of Behavioral Research, University of Georgia, 1994.
3. How long have you been a member of your present church? (Circle one number)

1 LESS THAN ONE YEAR
2 1 TO 5 YEARS
3 6 TO 15 YEARS
4 MORE THAN 15 YEARS

4. How would you describe the size of your church? (An estimate is fine)

1 VERY SMALL (0 TO 50 MEMBERS)
2 SMALL (50 TO 150 MEMBERS)
3 MEDIUM (150 TO 500 MEMBERS)
4 LARGE (OVER 500 MEMBERS)

5. How well do you think you fit in with the group of people who make up your local church congregation? (Circle one number)

1 I DON'T KNOW
2 I REALLY DON'T FIT IN
3 I FIT IN, BUT NOT TOO WELL
4 I FIT IN VERY WELL

6. On average, how often have you attended Sabbath worship services since January?

1 LESS THAN ONCE A MONTH
2 ONE OR TWO TIMES A MONTH
3 THREE TIMES A MONTH
4 ALMOST EVERY SABBATH

7. How many hours per month did you spend in church meetings and activities since January? (Include Sabbath School, worship, prayer meeting, committee meetings, community service, fellowship events, church work bees, church school, etc.)

1 0 TO 5 HOURS A MONTH
2 6 TO 10 HOURS
3 11 TO 15 HOURS
4 OVER 16 HOURS

8. Are you more active or less active in church activities compared to 1990?

1 LESS ACTIVE NOW
2 ABOUT THE SAME
3 MORE ACTIVE NOW

9. All in all, how important would you say your church is to you? (Circle one number)

1 NOT IMPORTANT
2 SOMewhat IMPORTANT
3 QUITE IMPORTANT
4 EXTREMELY IMPORTANT
10. Has a minister ever preached a sermon about the importance of church membership, other than a sermon about baptism, since you became a church member?
   1. NO
   2. YES

11. What are your beliefs about the standards of membership in the SDA church?
   1. THE STANDARDS ARE TOO STRICT AND RIGID.
   2. THE STANDARDS ARE IN THE ACCEPTABLE RANGE.
   3. THE STANDARDS ARE TOO LENIENT.

12. Do you hold a church office or leadership position?
   1. NO
   2. YES

13. Have you, or someone close to you, ever received church discipline and/or loss of church membership? (Circle number)
   1. NO
   2. YES

14. As you reflect on that experience, even if you didn't agree with the decision, do you feel that the church handled the situation with understanding and spiritual concern?
   1. NO
   2. YES

15. Think for a moment of your four closest friends (individuals or couples with whom you have social and recreational contact). Do not include relatives. How many of those four close friends are members or part of your present church congregation?
   1. NONE
   2. ONE OR TWO
   3. THREE
   4. FOUR

16. One way of measuring commitment is through contributions. Estimate your family's monthly contribution of tithes and offerings since January. (If single or widowed, count yourself as a family.)
   1. UNDER $50 A MONTH
   2. $50 TO $200 A MONTH
   3. $200 TO $400 A MONTH
   4. $400 TO $600 A MONTH
   5. ABOVE $600 A MONTH
17. Have you ever voluntarily left the church for longer than six months, even if your membership was not officially dropped?

1  NO
2  YES

18. How helpful has your church been to you in the following areas of your life? Circle the number which matches the following code:

1  NO HELP
2  LITTLE HELP
3  SOME HELP
4  MUCH HELP

Begin each statement with the words: My church has helped me . . .

Maintain a close relationship with Christ. 1  2  3  4
Discover and develop my spiritual gifts. 1  2  3  4
Raise my children properly. (Leave blank if childless.) 1  2  3  4
Meet my personal problems like anxiety and loneliness. 1  2  3  4
Become involved in community service work. 1  2  3  4

19. I feel like I really belong in my local church. (Circle one number)

1  NEVER
2  Seldom
3  OFTEN
4  ALWAYS

20. Newcomers are easily assimilated in our church. (Circle one number)

1  WE ACCEPT THEM EASILY
2  WE'RE WORKING ON IT
3  INTEGRATION IS HARD WORK
4  WE CAN'T ASSIMilate ANYONE

21. Do you believe a church membership renewal ceremony, perhaps conducted annually, would focus greater attention on the importance of church membership.

1  NO
2  I DON'T KNOW
3  YES
22. How necessary is it for you to believe and practice the following behaviors? (Circle either YES or NO)

Begin each statement with the words: As an Adventist . . . .

- Agree with the 27 Fundamental Beliefs.
- Attend Sabbath School regularly.
- Participate in Communion Quarterly.
- Do not smoke tobacco or drink alcohol.
- Am a member of a small Bible study fellowship group.
- Live a simple lifestyle.

23. People obtain satisfaction from various aspects of their lives. While most or all of the following probably bring you satisfaction, please mark a "1" next to the aspect which brings you the most satisfaction, a "2" next to the aspect which is ranked second in importance, and a "3" next to the aspect which is third. Continue until you have ranked all 5 items.

_____ ACHIEVEMENT AND SUCCESS
_____ YOUR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
_____ YOUR LEISURE TIME AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES
_____ FRIENDSHIPS AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS
_____ CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS

24. Everyone must make important decisions during life, such as which occupation to pursue, what goals to strive for, whom to vote for, what to teach one's children, etc. When you have made or do make these decisions, to what extent have you based your decisions on your religious faith? (Circle one)

1. I SOMETIMES BASE DECISIONS ON MY RELIGIOUS FAITH, BUT NOT MOST OF THE TIME.
2. I FEEL THAT MOST OF MY IMPORTANT DECISIONS ARE BASED ON MY RELIGIOUS FAITH, BUT USUALLY IN A GENERAL, UNCONSCIOUS WAY.
3. I FEEL THAT MOST OF MY IMPORTANT DECISIONS ARE BASED ON MY RELIGIOUS FAITH, AND I USUALLY ATTEMPT TO MAKE THEM SO.

25. Please react to the following opinion: "I believe an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church teaching." (Circle one number)

1 STRONGLY DISAGREE
2 MILDLY DISAGREE
3 MILDLY AGREE
4 STRONGLY AGREE

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Breathe easier, the difficult questions are over. From now on we would like to learn some information about you that will help interpret the results of this study.

26. Circle your marital status?  
1 SINGLE (never married)  
2 MARRIED  
3 WIDOWED  
4 DIVORCED

27. Circle your gender.  
1 FEMALE  
2 MALE

28. In how many community clubs or organizations do you hold membership?  
(Civic, military, political, professional, recreational, service, social, YMCA, etc.)  
1 NONE  
2 ONE  
3 TWO  
4 THREE OR MORE

29. Highest level of education completed for yourself and your parents?  
(Enter a letter in each of the following blanks, using the choices A-F below.)  
_____ YOURSELF  
_____ YOUR FATHER  
_____ YOUR MOTHER  
(A) JUNIOR HIGH  
(B) SENIOR HIGH  
(C) TECHNICAL SCHOOL  
(D) SOME COLLEGE  
(E) COLLEGE GRADUATE  
(F) GRADUATE SCHOOL

30. Do you plan to move from your present locality within the next three years?  
(Circle one number)  
1 YES, LIKELY  
2 PROBABLY, MAYBE  
3 DEFINITELY NOT

31. In what type of community were you raised?  
(Circle one number)  
1 FARMING/RURAL COMMUNITY OR SMALL TOWN  
2 URBAN, SUBURBAN, OR METRO AREA  
3 OUTSIDE THE U.S.

32. In what type of community do you presently reside?  
(Circle one number)  
1 FARMING/RURAL COMMUNITY OR SMALL TOWN  
2 URBAN, SUBURBAN, OR METRO AREA  
3 OUTSIDE THE U.S.
33. What was your approximate annual family income during 1993? (Circle one)

1 UNDER $10,000
2 $10,000 TO $20,000
3 $20,000 TO $35,000
4 $35,000 TO $50,000
5 $50,000 TO $75,000
6 ABOVE $75,000

34. Please circle your age group:

1 0 to 15 YEARS
2 16 TO 30 YEARS
3 31 TO 45 YEARS
4 46 TO 65 YEARS
5 ABOVE 65 YEARS

35. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the importance of church membership? Do you have any special ideas for creating a greater sense of belonging in your church? Is your church doing anything right now to stress the importance of membership? If so, please use this space to write about it.

Thank you! Please fold to show stamp and address, anchor with staple or attach sticker and mail.
Promises to Keep:
A litany for Faith Reaffirmation Sabbath

Minister: Having been led by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, we do now, in the presence of God and angels, most solemnly and joyfully renew a covenant, as one body of Christ.

Congregation: Membership does not save. We have been saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Good works cannot save. Culture cannot save. Baptism does not save. Christ has done that and there is nothing equal to it.

Minister: Through the Holy Spirit, we will walk in Christian love; strive for the advancement of the Auburn Adventist Church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.

Congregation: Love the church. *Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it* (Eph 5:25). The fact that Christ loved the church is sufficient reason for us to love, support, and give ourselves for it.

Minister: *"Keep yourselves in the love of God (Jude 21)."* We give this church pre-eminence over all institutions of human origin; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of this church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

Congregation: Obedience is the ground of abiding in His love. *"He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me. (John 14:26)."* Obedience is the requirement for happiness in the Christian life. *"If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them (Jn 13:17)."*
Minister: We will watch over one another in brotherly love, remember each other in prayer, aid each other in sickness and distress, cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech, be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and, mindful of the rules of our Savior, to secure it without delay.

Congregation: Besides our own lives, we acknowledge our church facility as your gift to us. We promise to keep it a special place for prayer, worship, study, and fellowship. We will maintain it as we would our own homes.

Minister: We take great joy in rededicating this building and ourselves to you today. And until that day comes when we see you, we desire to remain faithful.

Certificate Used in Membership Reaffirmation Service

Certificate of Membership

Is Presented to

Good Member

Who has freely chosen to publicly reaffirm a faith in the gospel and commitment to the distinctive truths and mission of the Auburn, Georgia, Seventh-day Adventist Church

October 28, 1995
APPENDIX C

Bibliography on Church Membership Covenants

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VITA

Name: Warren Butler Ruf

Place of Birth: Bay Shore, New York

Date of Birth: April 1, 1952

Parents: Rolland M. Ruf and Barbara M. Butler

Married: Jane Crevasse

Higher Education:
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