

Ask Them!

Lianne Sigvartsen discusses “Beyond Beliefs” research with millennial Adventists

“Beyond Beliefs” is a landmark study about the attitudes and behaviors of Seventh-day Adventist millennials. Conducted by Andrews University Department of Religion & Biblical Languages chair Paul Petersen and colleagues Jan and Leanne Sigvartsen, the study originated in a class of 37 students who wrote extensively about each of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. They have since extended their research to more than 700 Adventist young adults, and plan to expand the study worldwide. Melodie Roschman sat down with Leanne Sigvartsen, the originator of the project, to talk about the results of “Beyond Beliefs,” and why they’re important.

What’s the motivation behind your research? How did you decide to start this project?

That’s actually quite a personal question, but I don’t mind talking about it. I had five miscarriages, and thought I wasn’t going to have any children of my own. So I thought, what can I contribute that can be a lasting legacy? For many years I had been a counselor in Australia, specializing in youth and young adults, and had written two post-graduate theses on bullying and sexual harassment.

I’m always totally amazed that when one door gets closed to you another one opens. My husband was given the opportunity to teach Doctrines of Adventist Faith in the religion department at Andrews. I was helping him put together his syllabus, and I said, “Some of these assignments that you’re wanting to do”—because he was having them keep a journal—“this is good data, we could actually do something with this.” We were actually quite excited about it. So we went to Paul Petersen

[department chair] and he was extremely excited about it, because we put it all together and laid it out for him. We had a little preliminary survey that I had just sort of written as a fishing exercise, and in our discussions we both had hit on the same thing: that a lot of decisions for young adults in Adventism and in a lot of religions are made for them, often without their consultation.

One of the criticisms of previous research has been that a lot of research questions are not written in a language that millennial young adults can really even understand. You look at some of these instruments, and I mean, even I struggle, and I’ve got several degrees! I look at this and say, “Good grief! What are you even trying to say here?” So that was the real motivation behind it...We were able to design an instrument based on giving young adults a real voice... That experience combined with this opportunity became the Beyond Beliefs study, and throughout it we have really emphasized that young adults need to be given a voice.

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“It is easier to tell your friend about this guy who loves you so much that they would die for you than about this guy who killed thousands of people on a regular basis, or a guy who’s not really a guy but a spirit.”

Belief 4, God the Son (page 70)

Can you take me—in brief—through your research process?

There are three phases, and each phase took advantage of different cohorts. In the first phase, we wanted to find out what young adults actually thought, so we gave them three very, very broad questions, and let them answer them...What basically happened was that they had to read the fundamental—or the belief, we just called them the 28 Beliefs—of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We just let them talk, and it became very apparent that there was more to the story than previous research had let on.

Okay, we use this example. Previous research had found that there was a correlation between early baptism and retention in the Adventist church. And that was all well and good, so there’s been this big push in the last 20 years: baptize them as young as possible! But, unfortunately, no one stopped to ask a bunch of 20-somethings how they felt about this. In the first cohort we had a young person who stated that she felt robbed of her

opportunity to make a mature decision for Christ because her parents were so eager for her to be baptized without any regard for whether this was something that her older self would have wanted. So what we did is we took all of these responses—because people talked about a lot of things: some of them

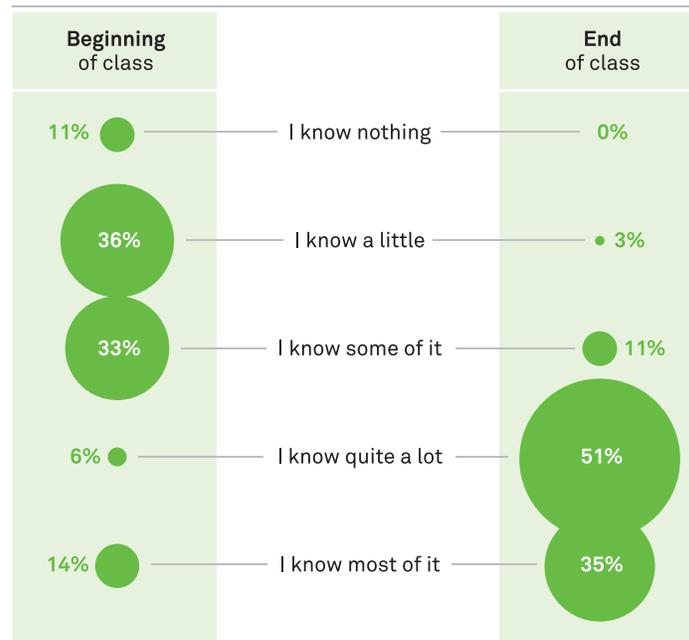
talked about zombies and we were like, “Whoa! Has anybody looked at zombies?”—we took all of the weird and wonderful things—as well as these hard questions too.

Research recently has not gone deep enough so that we have jumped to the wrong conclusions and we haven’t

involved young adults in this process. And let’s face it. These are adults! They are not children. That’s another thing that really concerns me in a lot of Adventist literature and publications. When we look at millennial young adults, what we often [visualize] is a bunch of teenagers standing in a field. That is not a millennial young adult. They are urban. They are not standing in fields. In fact, most of them are working so hard that they do not have time to get out to the country to stand in a field! And what are they doing out in a field? You get no cell phone coverage out there! [laughs]

Our process is to find out what they actually think first, then explore the things that they said. And the beauty of that is when we constructed this 90-question survey—and it’s huge, it’s not just yes or no, Likert scales—we do ask hard questions...We asked questions about nepotism in church hiring practices. Did they do merit-based recruitment? Are they going to continue to discriminate against women?... Every single component of it

Knowledge of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs



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I personally wished that I would have waited to be baptized until I was about the age that I currently am. I feel like so many kids are shoved into the baptismal pools at church because their parents want them to be ‘saved’ or because it is ‘time.’”

Belief 15, Baptism (page 138)

came from a response, in a lot of cases, in millennials’ own words...

We have about 5,000 pages of qualitative data, which I’m in the process of condensing down. We want to be transparent...we want to make this data available to any researcher who wants to use it, because we think that it’s important that not just one group of people does all the research. This is something that people from different ethnicities, different cultures need to participate in, because—I’ll be honest with you—there’s a big difference between Australian culture and American culture, or European culture, or even within Europe, oh my goodness! Just because people look the same doesn’t mean they’re the same.

What were some of the challenges of the project? What were some of the rewards?

I suppose the biggest challenge that I personally faced was that people said, “You haven’t finished your PhD, you can’t do research.” Which, where I come from, is ludicrous. You can’t even get into a PhD program in Australia...without doing at least one or two major research theses. It’s completely different as an education system,

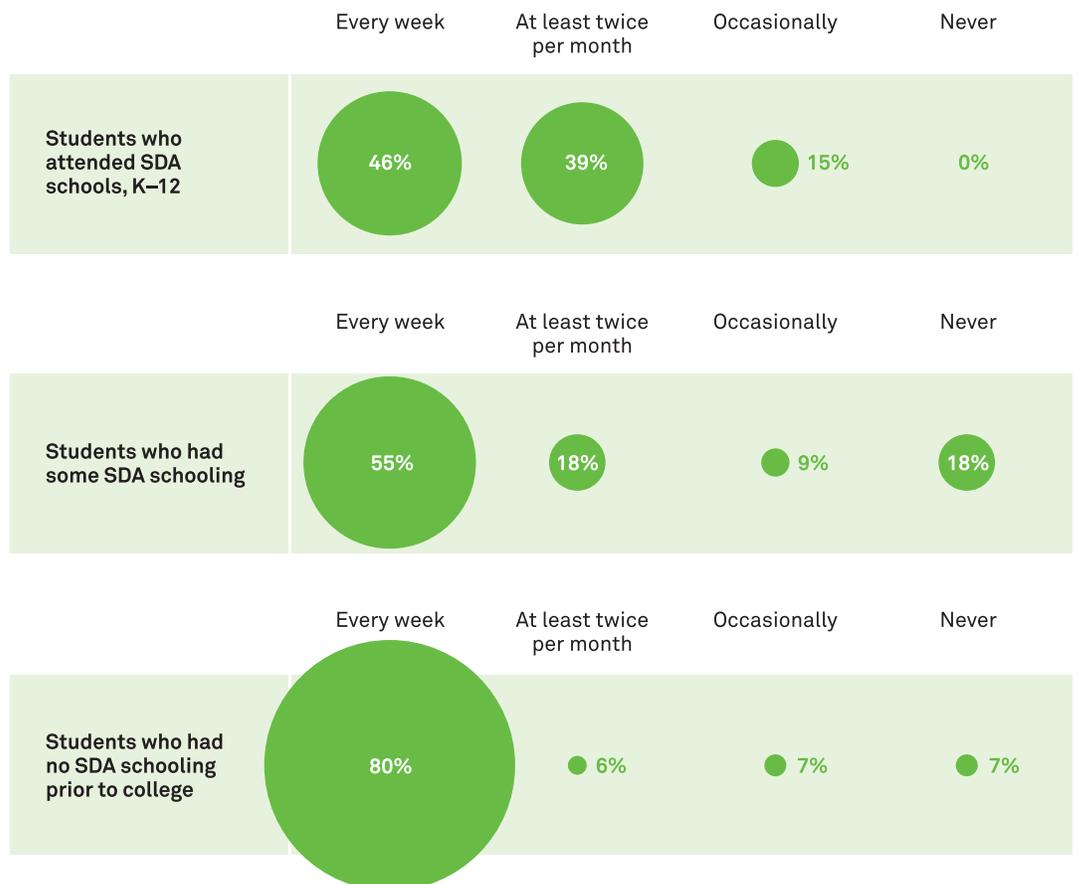
and I suppose that was the biggest hurdle.

Another hurdle was getting funding for the first cohort. We knocked on a lot of doors, and we got some money, but we believed it wasn’t enough to be able to fund wages for myself

and my husband, so we actually donated our time. We believe very strongly in this project because we saw that nothing like this had ever been attempted before. So we donated our time, which slashed our costs quite dramatically!

One of the things that really tickled me was that our surveys—if you get a ten percent response rate on your surveys, you have done very well! But over ninety percent responded. We were upfront with Millennials. We told them, “We want to hear from

Church Attendance



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“Right now, this fundamental is very important because I don’t have my parents telling me what is right and what is wrong. They can’t force me to go to church and they aren’t around telling me what I cannot watch on Sabbath. I still follow their rules that they had when I was younger, but I feel as though I am making my own decision regarding the Sabbath, thus the Sabbath is a lot more enjoyable now than it ever was.”

Belief 20, The Sabbath (page 171)

you. We want you to tell us what you think.” Did they ever! We had people signing up from Jan’s class as soon as registration for the next one opened. His classes were full, to the point where he’s only supposed to have 45 people in his Doctrines class, and it was full long before school even started. People wanted to be part of this study. That was a real reward: to have young people see the vision and see the opportunity. Also, when we made public our findings [they said], “Yeah, that’s right, that’s what it was.” That’s exactly what we wanted. We didn’t want to put our ideas into this.

Did you have any concern that people were telling you what you wanted to hear?

Well, we were filing all the responses anonymously, so we didn’t really know who these people were. And when you read these responses, you know they’re not just telling you what they think you want to hear. I mean, they start talking about zombies! I think it comes back to this [attitude of] “Oh, everybody’s a liar.” These are young people who have been raised in religiosity. I’m as cynical as the next researcher, but I didn’t see any evidence

that these people were telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, because the class was a safe place. There’s an emphasis on discussion, on listening to other people...You give people the opportunity to talk about religion and they will.

What was something that surprised you?

Around 72% are not vegetarians. However, we found that when we talked about stewardship, they were not just talking about giving money to the church: they were talking about being stewards of the earth, and that included looking after the planet and also being kind to animals. I believe that the health message is probably not the most efficacious selling point to this group of people, because they’re under 30. There’s nothing wrong with them now...However, this aspect of stewardship—how did that meal arrive on your plate?—this is very important to young people. Was that animal treated fairly? Was it slaughtered humanely?

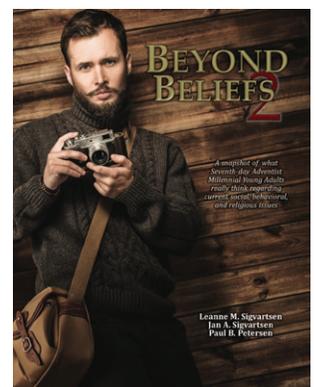
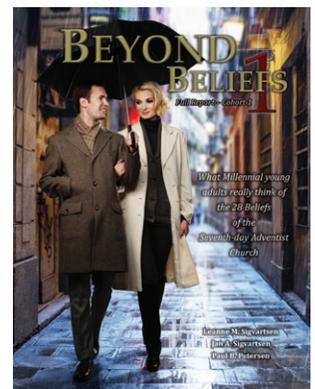
And I suppose another thing that kind of surprised me—because again it’s this assumption, people just make these assumptions not based on anything, they’re just wild guesses pretty much—like

the assumption that research at Andrews [will be skewed] because it’s such a conservative university. Well, we actually asked them a question about that: “are you conservative, are you liberal?” And we had a whole bunch of other options, like “a little bit of both, I don’t know what they mean, I don’t like these terms” and I think it was 15% said they were liberal, only 10% said they were conservative, around 16% said “I don’t like these terms,” just 5% didn’t even know what they mean, and I think 44% said they were a bit of both. Interestingly there was some in the “other” section as well, which is something we had kind of suspected, being foreigners ourselves. These terms are largely American...socio-political terminology. You take it offshore and it means nothing.

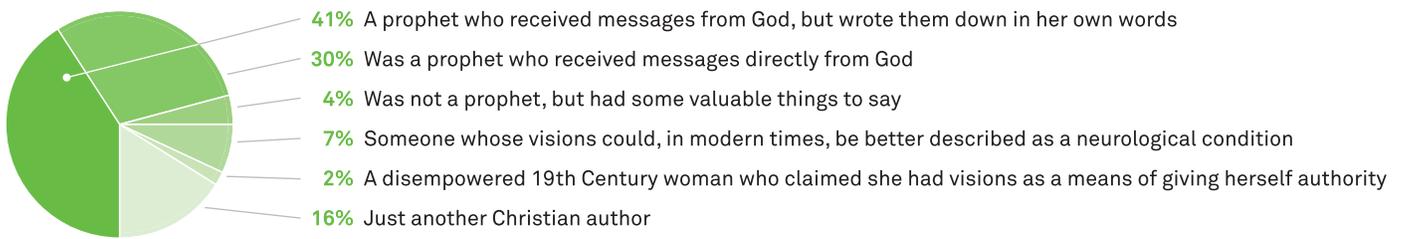
Were there any results that were exactly where you thought they were going to be?

Early baptism...We asked them what age they were when they were baptized, and we found that if you were 14 or older when you got baptized, and were asked if you would do it again—would you be baptized—two-thirds of them said yes. Now, there were one-third that said no. When we

The first volume of study results, *Beyond Beliefs 1*, provides a condensed version of the results from the first 37-member class. After a look at methodology and demographics, the book addresses the 28 Fundamental Beliefs in turn. Each chapter quotes the belief in question then offers a breakdown of the results, with block quotations from student responses, helpful pie charts when necessary, and a graph illustrating major “themes” of student responses. It then concludes with a summary chart that identifies major points regarding problematic areas to address and ideas that young adults identified as beneficial. *Beyond Beliefs 1* is also available in a longer format with the full text of all student responses, and *Beyond Beliefs 2*, which addresses findings of the second phase of the study and the over ninety topics included, will be published soon. *Beyond Beliefs 1* can be purchased on Amazon for \$29.99 US. For more information, visit beyond-beliefs.com



Ellen White was...



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“As humans, we do not have the right authority to judge and to tell others what to do...I do believe that there are obvious movies, video games, and music that we should stay away from and that we should take care of our bodies as the temple of God. But I am afraid of this doctrine being used for judgment when it is not our part to tell people how they should act.”

Belief 22, Christian Behavior (page 182)

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“I like this fundamental because I personally cannot wait for Christ to return again. This world is an absolutely horrific place and Jesus needs to return soon. What I don’t like is that those who died unrighteous will remain dead. I completely understand why that is, but I fear that some of my own family members will be one of them. Also, I am not excited for the end times because persecution will be happening, but I know our suffering will not last long. Still it’s something to not look forward to.”

Belief 25, Second Coming of Christ (page 201)

asked those who were under 14—and we had them as young as 6—two-thirds of them said, “No, I would have waited. If I could do it all again I would have waited till I was older.” Now, there’s a third there that don’t regret their decision. Anecdotally, as they discussed this—and I would really like to do some more research so that we have something empirical—the ones who had a very special baptism, like they went to the beach and were baptized by Grandpa, or something like that, and it was almost sort of like a wedding: they didn’t regret their decision. Whereas people who were lined up at camp or camporee: they were the ones who were regretting this.

Maybe it’s time for us to put in place something [different]. Not to abolish baptism before a certain age, because, again, a third of them are very happy about it. I do believe that there needs to be an emphasis on making this a special event, like a public marriage event. And you wouldn’t get married 500 people at a time, and you wouldn’t shove them through the church. I think they could make room for something similar to the Bar Mitzvah. We have the example of Christ participating in what we assume would have been the Bar Mitzvah.

Also, Jesus was just so popular: out of all of the Godhead, Jesus was it. And you know, people have said to me, “This isn’t important, fundamentals aren’t important, Jesus is important.” And I’ve said, “That’s all well and good, I do believe that Jesus is important, however, any Christian church can give them Jesus. What’s going to keep them with Adventism or attract them to Adventism? Bottom line, it’s the 28 beliefs. And if we can teach them the beliefs—because they like the beliefs themselves, it’s the way that they’ve been carried out or presented or explained that young adults take the most issue with. It’s not the belief itself.

Did you learn anything about yourself?

Coming here and doing a major research project, the assumption was that I was the secretary, who did not write this...If I did speak up, rather than somebody saying, “oh, you’re talking about your research,” I was being “outspoken.” I think the other thing was that [when] I said something like, “early baptism may have been a mistake,” I was being “difficult.” Again, the word that was used. And that was something that shocked me.

I suppose the thing I learned

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“This belief is a little weird to me...why does it matter if I believe this will happen in this way? 1,000 vs 10,000 years, when the unrighteous will be raised, it seems to me these are small details not relevant to being saved or knowing God...It is not relevant. I hardly ever think about it and when I do I find nothing that draws me to consider it or worry about it. I expect it will happen as it says, but it doesn't matter if it does or not to me.”

Belief 27, The Millennium & the End of Sin (page 212)

is, okay, what do I do? Do I maintain my integrity and say, “I can appreciate that this is not how things have been done, but we can keep on doing it that way and keep losing millennials. Because we did all this research in the 80s, and 90s, and early 2000s, and we lost Generation X. I look at my school photo from high school and I was at an Adventist high school, there were like 45 people in that class, and there's probably three who are still in the church... Are we going to do that again? I have two small sons now; what is going to happen to their generation? Is there going to be a church left for their generation?”

What does this research mean for Andrews? For the church as a whole? For individual members?

This is a new way of doing research. This is something that we think Andrews should be very proud to be affiliated with. I think they are; we have been really well received.

Again, for the church, this is something that they can use – you know, we talk about interfaith relationships. This is something that we can share; we've made our data available for anyone who wants it. We're being very transparent with

the responses, with the actual quantitative data. If you're a researcher with a proposal that we think has validity, and reliability, we are more than happy to give you our data... With our global study, we're joining forces with a lot of researchers from around the world. My little survey—well, not little, it's 16 pages long!—is being translated into all of these languages, so we're going to find out. We're giving millennials a voice not only in English—we're giving them a voice in Portuguese, in Spanish. This is so exciting! We're going to hear what they have to say, and I think that is extremely important for Adventists.

I think this is also really important for parents...They don't need to guess anymore, because when they guess, they're often wrong. What they need to do is know. They need to ask [their millennials]. Read what their peers are saying about this. Don't tell them what to believe, ask them what they believe—because they may even teach you something. I am eternally amazed at the responses I saw in this book. I encourage parents—and ministers—don't tell them what they think, ask them what they think. Information is the best jumping-off point. You want to make things better for our

church, and keep them around? Know who we're dealing with, and don't try to force them into a mold.

You said you were going to expand the research to a global level?

Well, secular research actually shows that Millennials, no matter where they are, have fairly similar belief systems and perspectives on things. They attribute that to the digital age... We want to know if that is in fact the case. 17% of our 700 young people were actually international students, and a third of our participants were born overseas. It's a pretty [diverse] group, yet I think we saw [similarities] again and again. This is a great place to do research, because it brings together so many people.

If you had to summarize your findings in one sentence, what would you say?

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is in very good hands if these people inherit it, and they're ready for their inheritance right now. ■

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