

# Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study Fact Sheet

## What is the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study?

It's a major research project commissioned by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The purpose of this research project is first to understand the many different levels of church attachment or detachment among recent graduates of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities. In addition, the research project will look at the important issues of why church attachment or detachment takes place and how the church can improve its retention of young adults.

The Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study is part of a large group of research projects the General Conference has recently commissioned from Adventist institutions and researchers around the world.

## Why is the General Conference commissioning the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study?

Recent research studies identify an alarming decline in the number of young adults who are actively involved in a local church in North America. A recent research study found a 68% attrition rate among young people reared in the Collegedale Church of Seventh-day Adventists (Rainer, 2009). Rainer and Rainer (2008) found that across Christian denominations in America, the attrition rate is at 70%. "If this trend is not reversed, the viability of Christianity in America, including Adventism, could come into question" (Cross, 2011, p. 2). As a result of this youth and young adult attrition rate, almost half of white North American Seventh-day Adventist members are 60 years of age or older (Sahlin & Richardson, 2008). The Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study has been commissioned by the General Conference to focus on this problem and to answer the following core questions regarding the high attrition rates among young adult Adventist church members:

1. Who is most likely to be retained or lost to the Adventist Church?
2. What type of breaks occurred?
3. What circumstances triggered the break?
4. Why do young Adventists think others leave?
5. What correlations, if any, are there to education?

6. What correlations, if any, are there to personal spirituality?
7. What are their perceptions of and attitudes towards the Church?
8. What is their current connectedness to the Adventist Church?

## Who is conducting the research project?

The Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study will be conducted by the Robert H. Pierson Institute of Evangelism and World Missions at Southern Adventist University and by partners at other Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities. The Pierson Institute has accepted the General Conference's request to conduct this research as part of the Institute's overall mission, which includes the promotion of scholarly research and publication of research findings concerning evangelism and missions. The research team already includes scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines, including business, education, psychology, religion, and social work.

## What research methods will be used in the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study?

Researchers are discovering that "contemporary teenage autonomy from adults is unprecedented and astounding." (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 185). Because of this "unprecedented" separation between younger and older populations, young adult attitudes regarding the church and even their definitions of church and of church attachment and detachment must be carefully studied in order to provide accurate results. The first phase of the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study will be a qualitative study, using focus groups in which young people are encouraged to share their attitudes toward and definitions of spirituality, of the church, and of attachment and detachment. Focus groups will be conducted with active and inactive Adventist college seniors and alumni. Other focus groups will include seniors and alumni who are members of other religions, self-identified "not religious but spiritual," and atheists and agnostics. The purpose of the Phase 1 inductive, qualitative focus group interviews is to discover both the issues which should be addressed in a Phase 2 quantitative research instrument and ways to ask

questions which are relevant to and understandable by young adults.

From the qualitative focus group research of Phase 1, a comprehensive quantitative research instrument will be developed. In Phase 2 of the research, the quantitative research instrument will be administered online to all 2001-2010 graduates of participating institutions. At the conclusion of the research project, it is expected that the main findings will come from the participants' answers to the Phase 2 quantitative research instrument.

To avoid any concern about the comparison of retention rates among Adventist colleges and universities, the research data collected will not be aggregated for individual institutions. The reason for involving a variety of colleges and universities is to provide a diverse and comprehensive sample of Adventist young adults.

#### **When will the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study be conducted?**

Phase 1 focus groups will be conducted in the spring and summer of 2012. The Phase 2 quantitative research instrument will be developed and field tested in the fall of 2012. The Phase 2 instrument will be administered online during the winter of 2012-2013, with the data analysis and research write-up in the winter/spring of 2013. The report will be presented to the General Conference in June 2013.

#### **Why should Adventist colleges and universities get involved in the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study?**

The study is an opportunity for Adventist colleges and universities to help the Seventh-day Adventist Church discover how contemporary young adults view their church, what the levels of local church attachment or detachment are among recent SDA college/university graduates, to provide some understanding of why attachment or detachment takes place, and to provide insights into effective ways to retain and reclaim young adults as active members of local Seventh-day Adventist churches. The study should also provide insights into how SDA institutions of higher learning can better minister to their students spiritually while on campus and better equip them for life as church members after they graduate. The validity of the findings will be

strengthened by including as large a sample as possible from a variety of Adventist campuses. The research results from this project can be an important help to both educational institutions and church organizations in retaining contemporary young adults as active committed members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

#### **How can Adventist colleges and universities get involved in the Twenty-first Century Adventist Retention Study?**

Colleges and universities which would like to participate in this important research project can become involved in the following ways:

1. Sending the Phase 2 quantitative research instrument to all 2001-2010 graduates. Because the Phase 2 quantitative instrument will be administered online, this can be done with minimal commitment of time and resources.
2. Appointing faculty or staff as members of the project's overall research committee to participate in the development of the Phase 2 research instrument, in data analysis, and in the writing of the research findings.
3. Joining the Pierson Institute as a partner in the research study by appointing faculty or staff as members in the core research team. These faculty or staff participants would be active partners in all phases of the research project, including the conducting of Phase 1 focus groups.

The General Conference and the Pierson Institute actively seek and welcome participants at any of the above three levels.

#### **Resources**

- Cross, T. (2011). *Toward an integrated youth ministry: A case study of the application of principles from Ephesians among teens and their families for the Friday evening youth ministry programming of the Collegedale Church of Seventh-day Adventists* (Unpublished doctoral thesis project abstract). Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.
- Rainer, S.S. (2009). *Collegedale Church of Seventh-day Adventists young adult dropout and assimilation study*. Unpublished research, Rainer Research of Lakewood Ranch, FL.
- Rainer, T.S., & Rainer, S.S. III. (2008). *Essential church? Reclaiming a generation of dropouts*. Nashville: B&H.
- Sahlin, M., & Richardson, P. (Nov. 2008). *Seventh-day Adventist in North America: A demographic profile*. North American Division secretariat demographic survey. North American Division and the Center for Creative Ministry. Milton Freewater, OR.