

# Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church

Personal Stories  
From a 10-Year Study

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# Contents

Introductory Remarks ■ 5

## C H A P T E R

- 1 The Joys of Youth Research ■ 11
- 2 The Long, Long Journey ■ 17
- 3 Numbers, Numbers, Numbers ■ 27
- 4 The Religion of the Survivors ■ 38
- 5 History of a Religious Rebel ■ 48
- 6 Why Adventist Youth Leave  
the Church: In Their Own Voices ■ 60
- 7 Predicting the Future ■ 68
- 8 More Predictions ■ 80
- 9 Coming Home ■ 93
- 10 Welcoming Home the Prodigal ■ 103
- 11 Why Adventist Teenagers  
*Stay in* the Church ■ 114
- 12 Grace, Relevancy, and  
Confidence in the Future ■ 120
- 13 The Disappointed ■ 134
- 14 You Gotta Accentuate the Positive ■ 145
- 15 A Superior Investment? ■ 151
- 16 Please Give Me a Chance to Speak! ■ 162
- 17 May I Disturb You? ■ 170
- 18 Bonding With the Church ■ 181
- 19 How Would You Do It? ■ 194
- 20 A Glimpse of the Future ■ 200

A P P E N D I X 1 What My Church Did Right ■ 209

A P P E N D I X 2 Adolescent Heresy: The Rejection  
of Parental Religious Values ■ 213

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## My Personal Journey

**H**ow does a person past the “normal” age of retirement become so involved in studying youth and youth ministry? I suppose you could lay it partly to my personal history, partly to my professional involvement, and partly to just plain obsession. Whatever.

Most of the first 27 years of my service to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination involved some form of youth ministry. I taught in church schools and junior academies. I served as a Bible teacher and counselor in two academies. I was principal of a large senior boarding academy (the toughest professional job I ever held). I put in nine years as director of youth ministries for two conferences and about half that time also served as superintendent of education. I led out in Pathfinders, summer camps, camporees, Weeks of Prayer, youth evangelism, canoe trips, youth rallies, European adventures, etc. This kind of thing gets in your blood.

Somewhere along the line I earned a doctorate in counseling. For my dissertation topic I selected a subject that seemed a natural for my experience: youth alienation from religion. I surveyed 400 students from 20 Adventist academies. Some of my teachers urged me to publish the results. Since a dissertation makes very poor general reading, I took the main information, wove into it stories from my years of experience, and wrote a book in a more popular style. *Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to Do About It* sold thousands of copies all around the world and forever locked me into the role of youth researcher. I was hooked.

Having finished research for my counseling degree, I popularized it in *When Teenagers Cry Help: How to Counsel Effectively*. Then after an extensive study of values transmission and moral development I produced

## *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*

*Passing On the Torch.* Fascination with the problems of youth relating to the popular culture led to *The World: Love It or Leave It*.

In the meantime I had been called to the Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, where I have been for nearly 20 years at this writing. My job was to coordinate important research projects for the church. I was no longer on the front lines of youth ministry, but I could include youth studies in the various enterprises of ICM. My wife needed a project for her master's thesis so we joined forces and surveyed several hundred family units to discover how the values of fathers and mothers corresponded to those of their teenage sons and daughters.

An especially auspicious project was the Valuegenesis study, surveying more than 11,000 young people in grades 6 to 12 on the subjects of values, beliefs, and behaviors. I served on the advisory council for the study and was given the special assignment of writing a book that would make the major findings available to church leaders, pastors, teachers, and lay members in North America. The result: *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*.

My greatest of all challenges, however, was the study that has led to this book. As I will detail in chapter 2, it has involved me on and off for about 16 years. The assignment was to select 1,500 teenagers, scattered all across North America, and survey them every year for 10 years. The object was to find out why young adults are leaving the church and how to prevent it. I was to collect, compile, organize, and analyze all that data and present the highlights in a readable book—this opus you now, at long last, hold in your hands.

I offer this brief personal account only because I do not believe you can sense the importance, the magnitude, the import of this work unless you know a little of my personal history, my professional involvement, and my obsession with this subject. No other religious body has ever attempted such an ambitious task. This is a *first*—and very probably an *only*.

My obsession? For at least the past 13 years, hardly a day has gone by that this project has not been in my thoughts. I worked on it by day and slept with it at night. I rattled on about the subject to everyone I met. Many times I have lain awake at night, thinking of new questions to ask or new ways to analyze or fresh ways to present the material.

Along with associates, I have already published one book: *The World of the Adventist Teenager* (with Janet Kangas). There have also been about a dozen articles in Adventist periodicals, such as *Adventist Review*, *Ministry*, *Journal of Adventist Education*, *Spectrum*, and *Journal of Adventist Youth Ministry*. In addition we have published five articles on the research in scholarly journals and made seven presentations at professional meetings. Sometimes I wonder what I am going to do with myself when this is all over.

### **THANKS FOR THE MEMORY**

From this breathless recital, you might infer that I did all of this by myself. That would be far from the truth. A project of this kind depends on the cooperation of many people. While fading memory may make the list incomplete, I must try to thank them.

First, this research was entirely financed by the North American Division, whose leaders carry a tremendous burden for the salvation of our youth. As you may surmise, 10 years of printing, postage, supplies, phone calls, clerical work, data entry, computer analysis, writing, etc., costs many thousands of dollars. Our prayer is that these resources will not be wasted but will result in many commitments to Christ and His church on the part of our youth and young adults.

My major contact and support person at the division office has been the assistant to the president; first Bob Dale, then Gary Patterson, and finally Monte Sahlin. Each has been completely supportive, not only financially, but in giving wise directions and constant encouragement. It has been a great privilege to work with these wonderful friends. The project has also been supported and encouraged by two departments in the North American Division in particular. Youth and Young Adults have participated through Les Pitton, Ted Wick, and José Rojas. Education has backed the study through Fred Stephan, Gil Plubel, and Richard Osborn.

Back on the campus of Andrews University, many students have aided in this project. First of all was Janet Kangas (now Lankheet), whose role I describe in chapter 2. For three years she worked with me—organizing the project, collecting names from the church clerks, tracking responses for the first two years, and helping me write a book and four

## *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*

articles while earning her Ph.D. Later Phil Muthersbaugh earned his D.Min. degree by collaborating on the seventh year of the study.

When Janet left to take a position at the General Conference, it was obvious that we needed someone to check in the questionnaires, keep track of who had responded and who hadn't, and try to locate missing addresses. This job was ably filled by student workers—in succession Bronwyn Cochran (now Miranda), Samir Selmanovic, and Jane Khor. I wish to especially thank Jane, who worked the last two and a half years of the project and who was largely responsible for bringing many young adults who had ceased sending in questionnaires back into the study.

Work like this calls for extensive computer analysis, including competence in the Statistical Packages for the Social Science (SPSS) software that we employ. I wish to thank several students who have helped with this throughout the years: Melody Marotz, Samir Selmanovic, Zarko Vukmirovic, and Gyung-Gu (Gabriel) Kim. At the end of the 10 years we knew we needed professional help to merge all data into one working file. We were ably assisted by Jerome Thayer, director of the Center for Statistical Services in the School of Education at Andrews University.

Six of the chapters in this book are based on answers to the free-response questions in the tenth-year survey. Three students sorted through the hundreds of comments and helped me identify themes for the respective chapters. Chris Hagen, a seminary student in the same age group as our sample, worked on three of the chapters; Wenguo Shang, an M.B.A. student in the School of Business, tackled two of them; and Leon Roman, another seminary student, took responsibility for the final chapter.

I also profited greatly from the advice and ongoing support of Steve Case and Randy Wisbey, both former professors of youth ministry in the seminary. My office manager, Ginger Ellison, has coordinated the mailings, typing, and all clerical work for the past nine years. I am grateful to Becky Lane Scoggins for permission to reprint her outstanding article, which you will find in the appendix of this book. Special thanks goes to my dear wife and lifelong companion, Margaret (Peggy) Dudley, whose love, devotion, and support kept me going all these years.

With all my heart, I thank all these wonderful friends I have named above. Each one is special to me. In a sense, however, my highest thanks must go to the teenagers and young adults whose responses made this



work possible. I thank all 1,523 who joined in, but I especially acknowledge the 783 who stayed through to the very end, filling out surveys year after year, writing letters filled with valuable advice, spilling their hearts out for the sake of those coming behind them. Though I've met only a handful of them personally, I love them all. I wish I could hug each one individually and express my special thanks.

## **DEALING RESPONSIBLY**

In this book you will read a number of experiences written by our sample of teenagers and young adults, and you will find numerous quotations from them. At the very beginning of the research I promised them confidentiality. "No one outside of our research staff will ever be able to identify you," I pledged. Therefore, while I have assigned names in order to present these young men and women as more personal—real people rather than simply statistics—I have in every case changed the names. Also I have either changed or deleted any geographical references or names of recognizable institutions. All data in our files are by code number only, with no names attached.

In my desire to protect these youth who have trusted their deepest feelings to me, I think it is only fair to tell you that I have further edited their comments. Respondents might write under pressure or in haste. They might not have the best verbal skills with which to get across their ideas (though some do). So I found misspelled words, grammatical errors, poor sentence structure, etc. I decided to correct these. I considered the fact that to give it to you "just as they wrote it" would add authenticity to the study. But then I concluded that the important thing was their *message*. Why let amusing gaffs distract from what they really wanted to say? So I smoothed out their writing to make it clear and correct, but never did I alter the meaning or add anything that was not in the original. I have, of course, abridged some of the comments, but never in such a way as to change the original intent.

## **THE SCHEME OF THINGS**

This book is composed of three types of material. First, we have all the number-crunching. Here are the vital statistics on the young adult picture. Here also are statistical predictions in which we can see what

## *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*

variables are related to which other variables so that we can say that X predicts Y. Second, we have the free-response answers to six crucial questions in survey 10, such as What were your reasons for dropping out of the church? These themes occupy six chapters. They are filled with direct quotations, which have been selected as typical of the hundreds that we received. Third, a number of case studies have been included. These take a teenager and follow his or her experience right through the whole 10 years. Cases have been selected on two criteria: (1) they are typical of a large number of respondents and (2) the young people wrote more extensively than most did. Four chapters are completely devoted to cases studies, and shorter versions appear in a couple of others.

I thought about dividing the book into three parts, each with its respective material. But I decided against this. The “numbers” part can be a bit heavy reading for those who do not delight in that sort of thing. The comments and case studies add more of the human element. Therefore, I decided to intersperse the various types with the idea that after having to struggle to get the mind around something solid, the “human interest” stories would offer a sort of dessert.

My aim in this book and this study is to present that which would meet the most respectable standards of scholarship but, at the same time, would be fascinating. I want to stir minds and move hearts. I want you to rejoice with me over the good news and cry with me over the tragedies. This project is not merely an academic exercise. This is the lifeblood and the future of our beloved church.

While I hope you read, comprehend, and believe, most of all I ask you to do something. If we as adults learn from this study and pull together, we can change the future. We can save this precious new generation. I thanked many people on my team. The greatest thanks goes to God. He sustained me and my team all these years to present this report. He will help us use it to His glory. Join me in my obsession for our youth. Each of us *can* make a difference!

—Roger L. Dudley



## CHAPTER 1

# The Joys of Youth Research

I'm looking at the pictures of Baby Belinda. This one was taken when she was only 2 days old. She has an open-eyed, wondering look on her little face, and on the back it says: "7 lbs., 3 oz., 20½ inches long." Then here is one taken at three weeks; Belinda is cradled in mother Kathleen's arms. Kathleen smiles proudly from the print. Finally, I have one of Belinda at about 3 months. She's wearing a little red bonnet with white lace and a little dress with two strawberries stitched on the front. On the back Kathleen has written: "She doesn't have too much hair."

How did I get these? Well, they are part of the longest and most significant project I've ever attempted—tracking a large binational sample of teenagers for 10 years. The task has had its share of frustrations, but the rewards have been immeasurable. I'll tell you all about the task later, but first allow me to describe one of the rich rewards.

Kathleen had been one of the subjects in our project from the beginning, but about halfway through she came sharply into my focus with a plaintive note that she attached to her questionnaire: "I have not really been devoted to my religion or to anyone else's," this 20-year-old young woman wrote. "I am very confused right now as to what to do with my life. I am pregnant, and this is very new information to me. This will affect my life very much, and I don't know what to do. My mother and my family do not know about my pregnancy yet, and I don't know how to tell them, since they don't realize that I have been sexually active. I am very discouraged. I just don't know what to do with my life now."

Of course, I can't write personal letters to all 1,500 youth and young adults in our study. But this project is not simply an academic exercise;

## *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*

it is a ministry. When there's a cry for help, those who care about youth will respond. So I did.

“Dear Kathleen: Thank you for sending in your survey and for sharing your very real problem. I can understand your confusion and discouragement, for this problem does change your life a great deal.

“However, I want you to know that God loves you just as much as ever, and He will forgive you if you ask Him. Even though you have to live with the consequences of your choice, God is able to work it out for good in the end (see Romans 8:28).

“I would suggest that you confide in your parents. Even though they will be disappointed, they still love you and will provide a source of support during this difficult time. You may also want to find a Christian counselor who can help you sort your options and find new direction for your life.

“At any rate, our team will pray for you. We care about what happens to you. Please keep us posted.”

Many months passed before I heard from Kathleen again. My letter was written in August; her reply didn't arrive until the following May. But when I opened it, the long letter was dated in January.

“I am finally responding to your letter of concern over my situation of being pregnant and unwed. I would like to thank you for your concern, not even knowing who I am. Your letter has touched my heart and my mother's also, who was crying when I read it to her.

“You asked me to write and tell of the decisions I have made and will make. I have decided to keep my baby, but I need to start from the beginning. I told my mother about my pregnancy even before I received your letter. She was very upset at first, as I expected. But she has shown me nothing but love and support ever since. I know now what God's love truly is. She has shown me so much human love that God's love is even more real to me.

“I have gone through the local health department, which has an excellent program for mothers. I have a doctor through them, am on Medicaid, and am getting food supplements from the same department. God has really blessed me. He found a job for my mother so I could quit the job I had to work for her doing her paper routes.

“We just recently went through a scary time with my mother's

health.” Kathleen then gave a lengthy description of how her mother had diabetes, was on insulin, and then was thought to have blockage in a coronary artery. They were ready to perform angioplasty, but a study showed that the blockage could be treated with diet and medication. The medical expenses ran more than \$3,000, but because it was done at a university research hospital, they were required to pay only \$800, which they were doing with regular payments.

Things were tight financially, but they were able to qualify for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program to help pay heating bills. This was wonderful, because previously they could afford to keep the house at only about 60 degrees.

Kathleen’s long recital was for the purpose of expressing her praise at how God had been working miracles in their lives.

“I have been able to have an ultrasound, and we found out that I’m going to have a little girl. I am very excited about that. I will name her Belinda. She is very active inside me, which is thrilling to feel. God is giving me a growing love for her even though I get frustrated and scared often. That’s when I fall back on my mother to help me stand up.”

Accompanying that long handwritten letter was a shorter one, dated in May: “I finished that letter four months ago and never got around to sending it. You can see that I’m not very diligent at corresponding. Belinda will be 3 months old tomorrow. She made her way into this world in February after 23 long hours of labor. God is teaching me many things through this wonderful blessing.

“Through all of my labor my mother was there for me, and when it was all finally over, I had a precious little girl. I have grown to love her very much. She has learned to smile and does so frequently. Every day I think about how bad I messed up, and yet God has still blessed me. From her birth weight of seven pounds three ounces, today she is a strapping 12 pounds 14 ounces. I’m so excited to see her grow.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I would like to send you some pictures of her and me so you can at least have an idea of what I look like. [Now you know where I got the pictures.] Then when we get to heaven, you will know who to look for so we can meet, and I can give you a hug for caring when I was down and helping me make it through a rough

## *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*

time. Thank you so much, and may God bless you and keep you. Your loving friend in Christ, Kathleen.”

I’m sure that the reader will note that I did very little to deserve such abundant gratitude—one short letter. But that is the point of this chapter and, in one sense, of this book. When our youth are hurting—as so many of them are—just a little kindness, a little caring, a little understanding can be like manna from heaven to these suffering ones. As Ellen White put it: “Words of kindness, looks of sympathy, expressions of appreciation, would to many a struggling, lonely one be as a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul.”\*

Kathleen’s letter certainly deserved an answer. “Dear Kathleen: Thank you very much for your recent letter updating us on the birth of Belinda. And thank you for the pictures of both of you. They are darling.

“Your letter was so very encouraging as you spoke of your renewed faith in God. I am so happy that through all your trials you have discovered that God is with you and that He is working out a plan for your life. Life hasn’t been easy for you, but you have risen above the hard knocks and found a new purpose for being. May God continue to bless you in that life.

“Your letter reveals a very optimistic tone as you shared how you have surmounted many financial difficulties. However, I can see that it hasn’t been easy. I would like to help a teeny bit so I am enclosing a small check. It won’t make a great deal of difference, but maybe you can buy something that Belinda needs. Also, I hope that your mother is feeling better. Please give her our regards.”

We didn’t hear from Kathleen for about two years. Then a letter that brought both good news and bad news.

“At this time in my life I feel that my religion and my God are very close to me and very important. I think the shock and overwhelming responsibility of having a child has made me depend on Jesus Christ more than ever before. Sometimes I wonder how God, when I was out having sex with different guys and doing a lot of other stuff, could bless me so much.

“Yes, my daughter is a lot of responsibility and sometimes very trying, but I love her very much, and I want to teach her about a loving and forgiving God. My life is totally changed, and she constantly

reminds me of why I want to be different from what I used to be.

“Although I feel a closeness to my Jesus, sometimes I feel isolated from church. I usually always take my daughter to Sabbath school, hardly ever to church. Ever since Belinda was born and the pastor found out by reading the newspaper, I feel like he has been avoiding me. I bumped into him several times at church and at the grocery store, and he told me he would come over to my house and we could talk. Belinda is now 16 months old, and he has never come over. I feel inhibited to approach him. There is a slight element of shame on my shoulders, not of Belinda but of myself and what I’ve done.

“I would like very much to have her dedicated in the church. Even though she’s a little old for that, my mom said I should anyway. I don’t know; I am kind of scared. Also, I do feel the other members have been very supportive of me and very loving too. I really enjoy the friendships.”

Of course I wrote back. “Dear Kathleen: Just before writing you this note I looked again at the pictures of Belinda that you sent me when she was just a baby. Hard to believe that so much time has passed and that she is now running around. May God bless you in the responsibility of raising her to love Him.

“I agree with your mother that you should have Belinda dedicated. She doesn’t have to be a tiny baby; you can dedicate children at any age. I’m glad to hear that the members of your church have been loving and supportive of you. I’m sorry that the pastor didn’t come to see you, but sometimes pastors get very busy with urgent things and tend to forget something if it isn’t pressing them. Don’t wait for him. You call him and tell him that you want to get Belinda dedicated and want to talk to him about it.”

A year later, in her last real communication to me, Kathleen explained: “I have a boyfriend now who is a Seventh-day Adventist also. I am really excited about seeing him. He is very spiritual and very disciplined. I like him a lot, but I am scared also. He has been married and divorced. He is quite afraid of women and any kind of relationship. I really don’t know what to do. My daughter likes him also but feels threatened by my relationship with him. I don’t know what to do but take one day at a time.”

Ah, Kathleen, that’s what we all must do. God’s grace is sufficient just for today, but that is enough.

## *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*

The purpose of this book is to report on the most important research project on youth retention ever undertaken by the Seventh-day Adventist Church—and, I believe, by any church. But I have begun with this story in order to demonstrate that research is not all mind-boggling statistics and dusty facts. Youth research is also ministry. I am a professional researcher. I am also a minister of the gospel with a special burden for our young people. Research is hard work, but it has wonderful rewards. While I have been gathering information to benefit the church at large, I have also been privileged to touch lives with grace. I am in awe at how God has used me in small ways to bless young people. The story of Kathleen is but one of many.

So yes, this book will have statistics never before available. It will have information crucial to youth ministry. But it will also have flesh-and-blood people. It will carry stories—some of them heartening and some heartbreaking. This is the real world of the Adventist teenagers and twentysomethings where I have lived for the past 13 years. Right now my transcendent goal in life is to share this world with you. I want to introduce you to Ariel and Benson and Celeste and Patti and Sally and hundreds of others. Pull up a chair and join me.

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\*Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 7, p. 50.