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FEATURE

**Holding on to Their Faith: The Lived Experiences
of Adventist Church Members in Southeast Asia**

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***Abstract.** Guided by Kumpfer's (1999) model of internal self-resiliency factors, this phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 224 Seventh-day Adventist Church members from seven countries in Southern-Asia Pacific Division. The study aimed to address the concern of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the faith nurture and faith commitment of its members, specifically on what factors influenced their decision to hold on to their faith. The participants revealed that they were converted to the Church through the influence of their parents and church members, attendance at evangelistic meetings, and, in countries where public evangelism was not possible, through Adventist education. Their faith was nurtured by their regular engagement in Bible reading and prayer, attendance at church services, and participation in church activities. They encountered challenges such as a lack of spiritual fervor in the church and conflicts/misunderstandings. Despite these challenges, they declared their commitment to remain in the church. They attributed this decision to their belief that the SDA Church is the true church whose teachings are based on the Bible and their assurance of present and future rewards.*

Keywords: Faith nurture, faith commitment, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Adventist church members, Southern-Asia Pacific Division, Adventist education, resilience.

Introduction

The phenomenon of church membership decline has pervaded almost all denominations, even the mainline Protestant groups such as the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, and the Presbyterians. The United Methodist Church has also experienced the same downward trend (Medcalfe & Sharp, 2012). Krejcir (2007), who had closely followed the trend of church membership from 1990 to 2000, found that “the combined membership of all Protestant denominations in the USA declined by almost 5 million members (9.5 percent), while the US population increased by 24 million (11 percent)” (p. 2). This was a noteworthy finding.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has an estimated worldwide membership of 18 million. During the second Summit on Nurture and Retention held at the General Conference (GC) headquarters on November 18-20, 2013, however, commissioned researchers from the different divisions reported that while the Church was gaining membership through new converts, an alarming number of members were leaving. “For every 100 people the SDA Church gains, it loses 43 previous members” (Oliver, 2013, p. 1). The net gain, then, is 57.

This phenomenon has captivated the interest of many researchers. Various denominational groups have conducted research on why church members leave the church (Lois, 2011; McMullin, 2013; van der Merw, Grobler, Strasheim, & Orton, 2013). While the question of why church members leave the church demands immediate answers, another question—why church members choose to hold on to their faith—calls for equally important answers, which may shed light on what the church can do to retain its members. This paper explores the experiences of Adventist church members in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD), specifically regarding how they were converted to the faith, how their faith was nurtured, and why they had decided to remain committed to the church despite the challenges they faced. The relevance of this paper to education was based on the assumption that the home, the school, and the church play a role in training youth to overcome adversity by developing the resiliency factors outlined in Kumpfer’s (1999) resilience model.

Review of the Literature

Dudley (1977, 1978, 1993, 1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2007) has conducted a number of studies, some longitudinal, which focused on the faith development of Adventist youths and young adults. These studies attempted to find answers concerning why some of them leave while others choose to remain in the church. In an effort to address this issue, the SDA Church, in 2013, engaged the Barna Group, a leading research organization on faith and culture, to do a study entitled “The Seventh-day Adventist Millennial Study.” The respondents of this study were classified as either engaged (those who attended church services at least

monthly and considered the church relevant to them) or disengaged (those who did not meet one or both of the criteria) young adults. The findings of this study revealed differences in the attitudes and behaviors between these two groups. Disengaged young adults had much weaker positive and much stronger negative experiences with the church, specifically the one which they attended during childhood (Jenkins & Martin, 2013).

Some other studies sought to find factors influencing church members' decisions to remain in the church. One example is a longitudinal study conducted by Kangas (1988) involving 1, 511 teenagers in North America. She found 12 factors that explained 47% of the variance regarding why the respondents remained Adventists. The strongest factor was "agreement with standards (27% of the variance)." Other factors included

"Frequency of personal prayer, love expressed by members, frequency of church attendance, the church meeting their spiritual needs, undesirable aspects of competition, aid felt toward independence, both parents as members of the church, frequency of Bible reading, perceived spiritual commitment of parents, closeness of relationships, and perception that members live what they believe." (para. 4)

Some of Kangas' (1988) findings were corroborated by Dudley (1999b), who concluded that "adolescents whose biological families remain intact, whose father and mother both attend church frequently, and who participate in family worship are more likely to remain committed to the family faith when they reached adulthood" (p. 118). Further, he found that "attending church-related schools during the junior-high years, finding oneself in basic agreement with church lifestyle standards, being actively involved in congregational programs and projects, and having a frequent personal devotional life" (p. 118) are contributing factors to the young adult's decision to remain committed to the church. Dudley's (1999b) study also revealed an interesting insight—those who make an intentional declaration to remain committed to their childhood faith are more likely to keep that commitment "when they reach adulthood and are 'out on their own'" (p. 118).

Most studies on retention and attrition have focused on the youth and young adults; however, and were mostly done in the United States, Canada, and Europe (see Casti, 2010; Donahue & Gillespie, 2003; Dudley, 1994; Dudley, 1999b). Very little research on this topic has been published from Asia and other parts of the world, especially involving other age groups. Hence, when the research team was commissioned by the GC of the SDA Church to conduct a survey on church members' spiritual experiences, attitudes, and beliefs in SSD, they also decided to explore why, in spite of the challenges the church members experienced in the church, they continued to hold on to their faith.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How were the SDA church members in SSD converted into the faith?
2. In what ways have the faith of the SDA Church members in SSD been nurtured?
3. What challenges have they encountered in the Church?
4. Why have they decided to remain committed to the Church?

Theoretical Framework

Kumpfer's resilience framework, specifically the internal self-resiliency factors, was adapted to guide and inform this study. Resiliency is generally defined as "successful adaptation despite risk and adversity" (Masten, as cited in Kumpfer, 1999, p. 181). It is also a process that starts with the initiation of stressors or challenges and ends with an outcome. Kumpfer (1999) posits that each individual's response to a stressor or challenge may differ because of many internal resiliency characteristics, which are generally grouped into five clusters—emotional stability, spirituality/motivation, cognitive competency, behavioral/social skills, and physical well-being.

The *motivation* cluster is made up of the belief systems that inspire individuals and give them a sense of focus for their creativity and effort. This motivation cluster includes dreams and goals, purpose in life, existential meaning for life, spirituality, belief in uniqueness or in oneself, internal locus of control, determination, and perseverance (Kumpfer, 1999, p. 198). The *cognitive* and *behavioral/social competencies* clusters, which coexist, assist individuals turn their goals to reality. Goals are not achieved without actions. In the same way, actions without plans may be disastrous. Additionally, *behavioral/social competencies* include life skills (i.e., problem solving, communication) and interpersonal skills (i.e., empathy, social support, intimacy). *Cognitive competencies* include intellectual competence and academic/job skills, moral reasoning, insight and intrapersonal reflective skills, self-esteem and ability to restore self-esteem, planning ability, and creativity. The *emotional stability and management* cluster relates to a positive outlook about life. This group includes happiness over depression, humor, and recognition and management of destructive impulses. Finally, the *physical well-being* cluster focuses on characteristics that correlate with good health, health maintenance skills, physical talent development, and physical attractiveness. In a review of these factors, Kumpfer (1999) emphasized that a resilient person may possess most of these characteristics, if not all.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology. It is a phenomenology that explored the lived experiences of the participants by giving them a voice through storytelling. Through this medium, the essence of their shared experiences could be identified (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The participants were encouraged to tell their stories—how they were converted to the faith, how their faith in God was nurtured, and how they continued to hold on to their faith and remain committed to the church in spite of the challenges they experienced in the church.

Research Setting

SSD was organized in 1919 as the Far Eastern Division. It was renamed the Asia-Pacific Division in 1995. In 1997, the territory was divided, giving it its present name. It was recently reorganized in 2011. It has a membership of 1,175,324, which is 0.12% of the slightly over 1 billion population of the 14 countries comprising it. It is subdivided into nine unions and 57 missions/conferences, two of which (Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste) do not belong to any of the unions. The study covered seven countries of diverse cultures and religions. These were Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. The countries represented six unions: Central Philippines, East Indonesia, North Philippines, South Philippines, Southeast Asia, and West Indonesia; a total of 36 missions/ conferences.

Participants

Two hundred twenty four participants from seven countries in SSD participated in this study. The selection of the churches was done through random sampling, while the selection of the participants was done through purposive sampling. The following steps were taken to do the random sampling: (1) A list of unions and missions/conferences under the SSD was taken from the SSD office, (2) For conferences/missions where churches were grouped by district/area/region, randomization was first done by district/area/region using the RAND() function of Excel, and (3) Additional randomization was done among the churches within the chosen district/area/region. Six churches were selected per mission/conference.

For purposive sampling, the following steps were taken. First, through the help of mission/conference officers and staff, the selected churches were contacted. Then the church elders or church pastors were instructed to recommend two names of church members who met the following criteria: (a) he/she must have been a church member for the past 10 years, (b) he/she must have been actively involved in church activities and programs, and (c) preferably, he/she has the ability to converse in English.

Data Collection

The main bulk of the data was collected through in-depth interviews using a researcher-formulated interview guide. Prior to interviews, interviewers were trained to conduct the interview sessions. This training was necessary to calibrate or synchronize styles in conducting in-depth interviews to better ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Given the wide territory to be covered, the research team employed research assistants. A number of research assistants were employed to gather data in the Philippines and Indonesia, the two countries with the highest membership and the most number of missions/conferences in SSD. The research assistants were administrators and faculty members of Adventist colleges and academies. For schools that had a research center, the data gathering was led by the research director. Through phone calls and emails, the research team trained the research assistants in the practice of gathering data through in-depth interviews.

The office of the Executive Secretary of the SSD recommended the research team to the Unions and the missions/conferences. In turn, the mission/conference presidents or secretaries recommended the research team to the church/district pastors, who coordinated with the church elders of the selected churches. The church elders or church pastors then recommended two names of church members who met the criteria. Most of those who were recommended were those who held leadership positions in the church, although this criterion was not specified. They were usually the church elder and the youth leader. Finally, the interviews were conducted at a convenient time for participants, which was usually either after lunch on Sabbaths, after the midweek prayer meetings, or after working hours at their homes.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Additionally, several research assistants employed stenographers to write the interview, verbatim. The transcribed interviews were sent through email to one of the members of the research team who managed the data. Each participant was assigned a code to protect his or her anonymity, and the data was properly safeguarded to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the following steps were observed: (1) The transcribed interviews were read and reread, (2) Key phrases and sentences were highlighted, (3) The highlighted key phrases and sentences were coded, (4) The codes were grouped into themes, (5) Recurring themes or patterns of meaning clarifying significant experiences were identified, and (6) Significant phrases and statements which were revelatory of the themes were quoted.

The data collected were not aggregated by country or by mission/conference. Instead, the results from all the countries and missions/conferences were analyzed together. Hence, the findings present the combined picture of the lived experiences of the SDA Church members in SSD.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and situates them in the current body of literature.

Conversion Experiences

The conversion stories of the participants revealed three recurring themes. The first is having Adventist parents (45.5%). In a majority of these instances, both mother and father were committed to the church. The second theme was the influence of church members who were either their friends or neighbors (27%). Finally, the third theme was attendance at evangelistic crusades (9.5%).

The majority of the participants who were converted through evangelistic crusades were from the Philippines where public evangelism was allowed. In countries where public evangelism was not possible, however, the prevalent modes of gaining new converts were through the influence of family members and church members, and as a result of an Adventist education.

Most of the participants attributed their conversion to the Adventist faith to their being born in Adventist homes. Some of them said they accepted Christ because of the positive example of their parents. Participant A26 testified, "My parents are SDAs. I like their example so I joined the SDA Church and have been a faithful member until now." (At the time of the interview, he was 46 years old.) Another participant, A25, related the powerful witness of her parents: "Since I was a child, I have seen how my parents lived a godly life. I didn't follow them just because they were my parents but because I believe this is the true religion." Participant C26, who was also born to Adventist parents, said he was converted at a young age. "My parents were converted into Adventism. I was born after their conversion. It was my decision to become an Adventist at age 12. I understood why I was baptized."

Some participants, however, said that they were baptized when they were still children and had little understanding of the church doctrines. When they reached young adulthood, they longed for a faith experience and engaged in a search for truth. The testimony of B7 reveals a faith journey: "I come from an Adventist family and have learned about Adventism since I was a child. But I tried to gain information about other religions and found that Adventism is the best religion."

Another recurring reason for the conversion of the participants was the influence of church members who were either their neighbors or friends.

Participant A20 had Adventist neighbors. “They would serenade us early in the morning. I loved to listen to their songs and I was converted.” Participant E5 could not control his tears as he related how an 11-year-old child introduced him to the church when he was 26 years old. He said that the child invited him to attend church and he did. He was baptized and remained a faithful member; however, he felt very sad because the child who led him to the church had left the faith. The conversion of D6 was because of a friend in college. “I liked her lifestyle. She had peace in her heart. So I decided to go to church with this friend. Later, I decided to be baptized.”

Public evangelism proved effective in the Philippines. There were participants who testified that they were converted to the faith because of their attendance at evangelistic meetings. The testimony of A26 is a classic example of many such conversion stories. “I loved listening to God’s Word. I liked the messages, especially the ones on Sabbath and food. Later, I studied the Bible with a layman and was baptized.”

Aside from being born to Adventist parents, Adventist education was the recurring theme of the conversion stories of those who came from countries where Christianity was not a dominant religion and where public evangelism was not possible. One participant, G4, who was a church elder, related this story: “I could not continue my studies after elementary. I stopped for so long until I was 17. We didn’t have schools in the countryside. So I went to a city where I could attend a government school. I stayed in a dormitory owned by the SDA Church. The wife of the pastor helped us with our homework in school and gave us special training. I was baptized when I was 19.”

There were also a few participants who were born to parents who became Adventists because of Adventist education. For example, both parents of Participant G1 were not Christians but studied in Adventist schools. After they were married, they went to another country where they met a pastor. “This pastor visited my parents and shared God to them, and soon my parents were baptized together.” Another example was the mother of Participant G3. She was a non-Christian who studied and worked as a cook in an Adventist school. While in that school, she accepted Jesus Christ as her Savior. She met a working student (G3’s father) in that academy and later they were married.

Aside from the influence of parents, some participants learned the truth from their siblings who were studying or had studied in Adventist schools. Participant E3 was converted through the influence of his brother who became an Adventist after attending an Adventist academy. His brother sent him to the academy he had attended and there he, too, was baptized.

Two more conversion stories echoed the same theme. One of the brothers of Participant C1 attended an Adventist academy. During the weekends when he came home from school, he would give Bible studies to his other siblings until all

of them were baptized. Another participant, E6, testified how he was led to know Christ. "I was not a Christian. When I was 22 years old, I was sleepwalking. I got out of the house and did not know anything. It continued for many nights. The doctor advised me to read religious books. I could not find any religious book except the Bible of my brother who was attending an Adventist academy. When I started reading the Bible, my sleepwalking stopped. Later, I found an Adventist church. I attended church services and studied with the pastor. More than a year later, I was baptized." Similarly, Participant C21, who had been a church member for 59 years, was another witness of the impact of Adventist education. "My parents were pagans. They died when I was 10. I attended an Adventist school. There I studied the Bible. I was baptized when I was 16 years old."

The themes on the conversion stories of the participants reflect the findings of Kangas (1988) and Dudley (1999b). Both studies affirmed the positive influence of Adventist parents and the training they give in the home on the faith commitment of their children. Barna (as cited in Gillespie, Donahue, Boyatt, & Gane, 2004) emphasized the importance of family: "We know of no influence as great as early family life" (p. 75). Further, Dudley (1999b) supported the significant role of Christian education. His findings showed that those who had attended church-related schools were more likely to remain in the church. Gillespie et al. (2004) stated that the "Adventists have seen and continue to see Christian education as a cornerstone of moral teaching and training for the children of the church" (p. 35) and that "it continues to bring an evangelistic fervor to its ministry with children, youth, and young adults" (p. 36). Hence, they concluded that the Adventist church still has "a multitude of reasons to be in the education business" (p. 36).

Nurturing Experiences

The recurring themes that emerged from the responses of the participants were (1) Bible reading and prayer (49%), (2) attendance in church services and participation in church activities (47%), and (3) warm fellowship and support of church members (29%).

Almost one half of the 224 participants indicated that their faith had been nurtured through personal Bible reading and prayer. One participant, E5, gave this observation: "The more I read and read the Bible, the more my faith becomes stronger." Another participant, D3, shared how the Bible had enlightened her in times of confusion: "I see God's Word is my light. When I see other people do something that I don't understand, I . . . study God's Word on my own." Similarly, one youth leader related a story about how he was misled by a very charismatic person who taught that God would come at a certain time. When the prediction did not happen, he realized that he should find out the truth for himself.

“I want to seriously study the Bible. Before, I just followed my dad and the pastor. That time made me grow up.”

Other researchers have similar findings. Roehlkepartain and Benson (1993), in their study with youth in Protestant churches, confirmed the importance of Bible study and personal prayer. They found that these two spiritual practices were rare for young people, but that those who regularly read their Bibles and pray attest that these practices are important sources of faith nurture.

The second top recurring theme was attending church services and participating in church activities. One participant attributed the growth of her faith to the following services: “There were the activities that nurtured me: the Sabbath worship, the Sabbath School, the MV program . . . and others” (G1). Although coming from another country, B3 echoed the testimony of G1 and even added a new dimension, sharing one’s faith with others: “Being involved in church activities. Sharing faith and what you believe with church members.” Another participant attested to the powerful impact of attending church services: “I don’t miss Sabbath programs; that’s how my faith is nurtured” (B4).

This phenomenon is not new. Lytch (as cited in Roberto, 2007) explains that when people get involved in group activities such as through church attendance and participation, they build their “knowledge of the symbols, rituals, narratives and habits” (p. 2). This knowledge enables the person to develop a system of belief (Kumpfer, 1999) that will become the basis of his or her faith and resilience. Chaney (2008) also affirms that “the positive feelings that congregants experience through church attendance have immediate as well as long term benefits. By and large, this makes it possible for congregants to receive immediate gratification from the church experience as well as a trajectory of continued religious involvement” (p. 15).

Warm fellowship and support of church members came as the third recurring theme for faith nurture. The description of one participant of what his church was like confirms that a person’s need for positive relationships goes even beyond young adulthood. He said, “My church has love, warmth. There is no discrimination. The church members are not judgmental. There is belongingness” (C2, 53 years old). In this church, the participant said that it was not only his faith that was nurtured, but also the faith of other church members. He saw that from 30 members, the church membership rose to 190 in two years.

In addition, two participants testified about how church members helped them through critical life events, such as death of an immediate family member. One woman, B2, lost her husband to cancer after two years of illness and another participant lost her son. B2 shared her deep feelings of gratitude: “I never thought the Adventist family would show such great attention after the passing away of my husband. I am amazed to see how the SDA family cares for me.” C24, who

lost her son, was also grateful: “My son passed away. I blamed God. . . . The fellowship in the church helped me cope with my loss.”

Participant G2 recalled how her faith was nurtured after she was newly baptized. At that time, she was in another country, pursuing a master’s degree. “Every Sabbath and even on Sundays, the church members would take us somewhere or to their home. They always served us food and took us sightseeing. There was always someone who was strongly interested in us and we felt that. That was how I grew in the faith and learned about God.”

Dudley’s (2007) findings explained how church members learn about God’s grace and acceptance through “warm, supportive, interpersonal relationships with grace-filled people” (p. 76). The participants, through their positive contacts with other church members, developed a healthy concept of God as they saw how the teachings of the Bible and the church were acted out in the lives of other church members. This positive concept of God and pleasant memories about the church eventually made their faith stronger, enabling them to overcome whatever challenges they encountered in their faith journey. Warm relationships and strong support among church members are important underlying reasons why people choose to remain in the church. “Past studies indicated that if someone left the Adventist church it was almost always because of bad experiences or relationships, not because they changed their beliefs” (Nash, 2013). Further, Sahlin (as cited in Nash, 2013) said, “Three out of four leave for reasons having to do with their relationships with people and groups, while less than one in five leave because they no longer believe in some teaching of the church.”

Faith Challenges in the Church

The answers of the participants about the challenges they have faced in their own faith varied widely. This difference in SSD may be due to the diverse cultural, political, and economic situations of the countries within the Division’s territory. Some challenges ran across countries but some were specific to certain countries. The top recurring themes were (1) lack of spiritual fervor in the church (30%) and (2) conflict/misunderstanding in the church (24%).

Lack of spiritual fervor in the church was described by the participants in different ways such as non-participation of members in church activities, non-attendance or coming to church services late, lack of interest in religious matters, lack of cooperation and unity, boring sermons, disconnect between the church’s teachings and the lifestyle of the members, and others. One youth leader, G3, lamented, “We face lots of temptations. We need power. We need stronger faith. But on Sabbath, we cannot feel the power.” He wished he could hear meaningful sermons and experience warm fellowship with other church members. “I want the preaching to focus on Jesus Christ. If we focus on Jesus Christ, we will know all things.” He further observed that very few members attended church. “They are

busy all day, all week. They do not want to come to church because they are tired.”

It was also noted that in several churches, especially those in the urban areas, there were very few church members present during the Sabbath School. The attendance markedly increased before the divine service and dropped dramatically during the afternoon service. In conversation with church leaders, the interviewers noted that many of those attending the city churches were regular “visiting” members. These were members who were baptized into the church but just came to church during the divine service and gave very minimal support to the church or none at all.

While some participants expressed their concern for lack of nurture of young people, one participant lamented for the lack of response of the young people: “I find the youth not motivated to do missionary activities. I fear that in the future, there will be nobody who would continue the work of our church. My work is to train young people to be medical missionaries, but only few among our youths are interested to participate” (C4). One participant, however, attempted to explain the lack of interest of young people toward religion and how the church should reach out to them. “They are learned and educated. They have questions. ‘Why does Jesus have to die?’ They do not see the need for Him to die. ‘Why did Jesus have to create us? Who wrote the Bible? Humans. And why do you believe?’” The same participant, G6, added, “when they have problems, they ask, ‘Please pray for us.’ They still believe that there is a higher Being. At least they are thinking”. Understanding the youth and their struggles to reconcile the beliefs of their childhood church is very crucial. How does the church deal with the questions of the youth? Des Jarlais (2013) gives a glimpse into the perspective of the youth:

Some feel that the church is threatened by differences with its point of view. These young adults grew up believing that Adventism was obviously the only correct belief system, and people who thought differently were stupid. When they discover credible opposing points of view and they don’t have a reasonable answer, they feel a loss of credit for a system that they felt had taught them it had all the right answers. They want to be able to ask questions on tough subjects, without always being provided definitive answers (p. 23).

Some participants also articulated their concern that the church had not met their needs. “I feel the church has not met my need as a church member. The preachers during the divine service preach shallow topics” (C1). Another participant made the same observation: “When I go to church, I want spiritual lessons from the church. But I do not seem to learn much from those who give the sermons. Every time I participate, I feel I am not quite satisfied with my spiritual experience” (G2).

Jacobs et al. (2013), in a study among the youth, confirmed that “the most important aspect” that attracted the respondents to attend church “was the relevance of sermons, with 85% saying it was important or extremely important” (p. 12). The same study also revealed that the main reasons for their non-attendance to church were (1) they found none where they would fit in, (2) they did not see the benefit of attending, (3) they disagreed what was being taught or emphasized. Kerjcir (2007) explained that the teachings of the church should be “tied into the needs of our people” and that there is a need to make them “informative, in-depth, relevant” (p. 5). Otherwise, if the people find our presentation of God’s Word unattractive and boring, they may not make the choice to stay in the church from which they perceive they cannot get something “from which they can grow or use in their daily lives” (p. 5).

The second top recurring theme for challenges the church members experienced was conflicts/misunderstandings in the church. These conflicts/misunderstandings were presented in many forms. Among these were power struggle in the church leadership, pastors and leaders who were perceived as the cause of the problems, too much control in church leadership, false accusations among the brethren, gap between the senior church members and the youth, gossiping and backbiting among church members, and others. G2 related that there was a time she was actively involved in the church. “I organized so many programs.” Then later conflicts arose and she felt very bad because “they said those conflicts happened because of me.” So what she did was distance herself and minimize her involvement in the church. She confessed, however, that because of her non-involvement, she was not feeling fulfilled in her spiritual experience.

Because of conflicts/misunderstandings, some church members felt that the church had become an emotionally unsafe place. One participant shared her story: “There is someone in the church who hates me so much. . . . She even talks against me in the church and makes me feel bad” (D8). Another participant, a church officer, claimed that he wanted to just be an ordinary member because being a leader makes one more vulnerable to challenges (E1). He was accused of doing something he did not do. But even after the accusation was proven untrue, he felt that the person who accused him was “still trying to harm me and my family. We are not at peace when we go to church” (E1).

In addition, some participants felt that too much control from church leadership caused conflicts/misunderstanding. “If there is one or two of leaders who try to dominate, try to control, to monopolize. . . This is not a healthy trend. Maybe this is the reason why some members do not participate” (C24). The participants said that in churches where controlling church leadership was experienced, conflicts/misunderstandings always ensued. The source of conflicts/misunderstandings was not confined only among church members and officers.

There were cases when pastors were viewed in a negative light. “Some pastors dominate the church and the church board” (E3). Further, this same participant observed that “most of the pastors, I feel, are not committed to the work.” Other participants echoed the same observation: “Sometimes, there are pastors who don’t handle their flock well. Sometimes, their wives don’t know how to attend to the needs of the brethren. At times, they are even the cause of trouble. This is a sad reality but this is the truth” (A103). To summarize the challenges faced by the church, B38 said: “There are personal interests being shown, lack of brotherly love, and many jealousies and much pride.”

According to Dick (2001), church affiliation promises an avenue for fulfillment of social needs—the need for belongingness, friends, and the need to give and receive love. Once these needs are fulfilled, the need to feel esteemed or recognized surfaces. Esteem needs are fulfilled either through self-derived esteem, or earned from others, such as the achievement of reputation or status. The individual will continually seek the satisfaction of these needs for self-security. On the contrary, when an individual’s need for self-security is not met in the church, he or she may decide to leave.

Holding on to Their Faith

Two top recurring themes emerged about how church members held on to their faith: (a) belief that the SDA Church is the true church and its doctrines are founded on the Bible (58%); and (b) assurance for present and future rewards such as salvation, the second coming, and a wonderful life with God filled with meaning, peace, and happiness (21%).

All the participants signified at the time of the interview that they did not have any intention of leaving the church. “I don’t have any thought of leaving the church. I want to stay in this church until my death” (E10). More than half of them (58%) claimed that their reason for staying in the church was their belief that the SDA Church is the true church and the doctrines are founded on the Bible. Following the same theme, they made these declarations: “This Church is blessed with very strong Bible-based teachings” (A103). “The truth which the SDA preaches and teaches is Biblical. It makes me stay in the Church despite the challenges and hardships that a Christian . . . faces” (A52).

The claim to remain committed to the church because it has the truth was much pronounced among the participants who were not born into the Adventist faith. Studying the Bible strengthened the faith of the participants, thus, enabling them to remain committed. One participant said, “There is no other truth. The truth is here. I cannot go back to my old religion” (E3). Participant C14 declared his reason: “I have found Jesus in this Church.”

Strong agreement to the claim that this is the true church was also articulated by those who were born in the SDA faith. One of them testified, “This is the true church. The Bible will attest to that. This is the reason why I have remained in this Church of my childhood. I have never thought of changing my religion. Until now, I have remained faithful to this Church” (A23). One participant who was “born of an Adventist mother” acknowledged that he had decided to stay in the Church because of the Church doctrines and “through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (A22).

Some participants experienced overwhelming challenges and there was a period in their faith journey when they thought of leaving the church. What held them back was their confidence that the Church teaches “according to the Bible . . . to what the Lord says” (E4). “I thought of leaving before, but after studying the Bible, I continued my faith despite my difficult situation” (E5). The participants’ decision to stay in the church was preceded by a thorough searching of the Bible and an in-depth understanding of the Church doctrines. Some of them gave these testimonies: “After searching, I found that this is the true church” (E6). “I believe the Bible is the only foundation of truth, and Adventists are preaching the truth from the Bible” (B4).

The participants’ belief in the authority of the Scriptures to inform faith and practice is central to their faith journey. This finding is similar Kent’s (2013). Kent found that even those who left the church still saw the Bible as authority. The majority of the respondents (79%) confirmed that they still believed in the authority of the Scriptures as taught by the SDA Church, and 90% of them signified their belief in the benefits of the Bible study.

The second top recurring theme regarding why church members remain in the Church was the assurance of receiving present and future rewards. The participants expressed that their faith commitment had led them to experience meaning and purpose; peace, happiness, and satisfaction; and a feeling of blessedness in this present life. The participants testified to the blessings they had received: “I have found the happiness of knowing the truth” (A101). “I have found meaning of my life” (A96). “Peace within; comfort; somebody hears my problems. I know that God hears. . . There’s always an answer. I have this inner peace” (C2). “A joyful life to be faithful in Jesus and allow the will of Jesus to happen in my life” (C8).

One participant compared her encounter with God to finding “something new which gives me peace and inner joy. . . . I feel the love of God” (C22). Her family stopped her from going to church and burned her Bible. She did not attend for three months but decided to come back even against her parents’ will. “I got chased out,” she said, but “I asked God to help me.”

Finding peace also comes from overcoming destructive emotions. One participant attested to this: “The feeling of competition is gone. The yearning

for a luxurious life is gone. I have instead a feeling of a peaceful life” (A12). Other participants confirmed the healing power of knowing God and His character. They perceived Him as One who cares and is bigger than all their problems. “I don’t have to cope with trials and I don’t have to fight alone because God is always there for me . . . If I have relied on myself . . . all these 50 years, I would have committed suicide” (G5). Another participant said, “Whenever problems come, I feel nothing is impossible with the Lord. The pain turns to wisdom” (C3).

The participants’ claim of experiencing satisfaction was not rooted in materialism. On the contrary, several participants had gone through financial difficulties. One participant confessed, “I have found satisfaction even in a simple life. I am contented, in spite of financial instability. I trust that God will provide” (A102). Another participant highlighted the vanity of worldly pleasures and the concept of being blessed to bless: “Before I was not happy with my life. All were just world pleasures. Now, I am happy and contented. I may not be very blessed materially, yet I feel I am rich to bless others with what God has given me” (A55).

In addition, the participants hoped for future rewards which they articulated as receiving eternal life and being with God. Their picture of heaven and the joyful anticipation of being there were clearly mirrored in their statements: “I deeply believe in the text, “Whosoever believes in him shall have eternal life” (C3). “I stayed in the church despite its weaknesses and failings because I love Jesus and I wait for His soon coming” (A10). “I believe that I have hope in heaven” (A84). “Through faith, He will save me on the resurrection day and He will take me to His home in heaven where He has prepared a place for me” (A94).

Abel (2005) asserted that people adhere to religion because of the supernatural and secular benefits they can get. It was evident that the participants chose to remain in the church because of the present rewards such as a sense of meaning and a feeling of contentment and joy despite their trials, and their assurance of future rewards of everlasting life in heaven.

Conclusions

What did the participants mean about their faith journeys? They made it clear that their journey to faith commitment, that is, their decision to remain in the church, started with their conversion and their faith nurture. Their stories revealed that they were converted into the church because of the influence of their Adventist homes and other church members, their attendance at evangelistic meetings, and Adventist education. Further, they showed that their faith was nurtured through regular engagement in Bible reading and personal prayer, attendance in church services, and participation in church activities.

The participants faced varied challenges, but in spite of these challenges, they decided to remain committed to the Church. According to the framework of internal self-resiliency factors of Kumpfer (1999), a person is confronted with stressors or challenges as manifested through negative life events and experiences, which he or she successfully overcomes in the end as evidenced by a positive outcome. In this study, the participants, most of them having held or holding leadership responsibilities when the data was collected, identified their stressors or challenges as lack of fervor in the church and conflicts/misunderstandings. Being leaders and dealing with a church that was lukewarm in their faith experiences and divided by conflicts/misunderstandings, the participants, although they talked about their challenges, continually interspersed their stories with hope for present or future solutions to their problems.

These participants may have possessed one or several of the five clusters of resiliency characteristics identified by Kumpfer (1999). The results show that among the five clusters, the most evident were spiritual or motivational characteristics, especially the ability of the participants to dream and develop goals, and create a sense of purpose in life. They also included cognitive competencies, especially the ability to reason morally which includes “judging right and wrong, developing internal images or standards for the way things should be . . . , valuing compassion, fairness and decency, and serving others” (p. 202); and behavioral/social competencies, especially the ability to show empathy and interpersonal social skills which are shown in “their sense of responsibility for others, willingness to care for others, and ability to be empathetic of the needs of others” (Werner, as cited in Kumpfer, 1999, p. 207). Further, the participants credited the home, Adventist education, and the Church in nurturing their faith and helping them develop the self-resiliency factors.

Finally, the participants attributed their faith commitment to their belief that the SDA Church is the true church and that its teachings are based on the Bible. This realization was rooted in their diligent study of the Bible and in-depth understanding of the Biblical truth. Further, their personal knowledge of God and His character and the trustworthiness of His promises in the Bible gave them the assurance that they would receive their rewards in this present life and the life to come.

Recommendations

1. Church leaders and members should engage in Bible reading and personal prayer, regularly attend church services, and actively participate in church activities.
2. Adventist homes and schools should train children and young adults to read the Bible and pray regularly, and should introduce these spiritual practices in creative and meaningful ways to inspire love for God.

3. The Church and its schools should devise programs to meet the various needs of the church members, especially the youth and the educated.
4. The church leadership should be sensitive and prompt in resolving issues such as conflicts and misunderstandings that divide the Church members. Further, Church members should be trained in conflict management.
5. The home, school, and church should promote the development of self-resiliency factors such as spirituality/motivation, cognitive competency, behavioral/social skills, emotional stability, and physical well-being among the children, young adults, and other church members.

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