

THE BEYOND BELIEFS 1

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What Millennial young adults really think of the 28 Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

RESEARCH PROJECT

PROBLEM Significant effort, financial resources, and study has been given to retaining youth within the Seventh-day Adventist Church by administrators, decision makers, and clergy of that denomination. It is, however, still relatively unknown how young adults who identify as Seventh-day Adventists really feel about each of the official 28 Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, if indeed they have an adequate knowledge of them, and what aspects of these beliefs resonate most (both positively and negatively) with this demographic group. At present, it is only anecdotally assumed that their decision to continue to identify as Seventh-day Adventists as young adults is based on an informed knowledge and full agreement with the 28 Beliefs of Adventism.

METHOD The Beyond Beliefs study wishes to identify if young adults self-reported a knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism and if, after undertaking a General Education class relating to the 28 Beliefs, they reported a more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs. It also wishes to identify how young adults really feel about each and every one of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism, if they like or dislike them, if they believe they are important or not important, and if they feel these beliefs are relevant or irrelevant. The Beyond Beliefs study is unique from many other studies undertaken on Adventist young adult populations in that it collected extensive written responses from the young adults themselves, and in doing so, gave them a real voice to express their reactions and responses to every one of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism in their own words and language. Data mining was conducted on these responses to identify prominent themes that resonate with young adults for each belief.

The first cohort of this study, Spring 2013 (Beyond Beliefs 1), was able to collect close to 1100 responses from a convenience sample of 42 participants at Andrews University, Michigan. From this sample, 37 participants were from the North American Division, identified as Seventh-day Adventist (either baptized or not baptized), and were aged 18-32. This sample produced 930 responses for analysis. Additional cohorts for the Beyond Beliefs study are planned for Fall semester 2013 (Beyond Beliefs 2), Spring semester 2014 (Beyond Beliefs 3), and will include up to 600 participants, including international students.

The study collected demographic and religious attitudinal data in two separate surveys, one taken at the beginning of the study and one at the conclusion. It also asked each participant to write a 150+ word response to each of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism. Participants were asked to describe what they liked/disliked about the belief, if they felt it was important/unimportant, and if they felt it was relevant/irrelevant. They submitted each response after reading the belief statement and commentary as outlined in the publication *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* but prior to undertaking a class related to the associated belief. This was to minimize teacher and peer influence. This data was collected within the context of the General Education class, RELT225 Doctrines of Adventist Faith, taught at Andrews University, which given the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed, satisfied duty of care requirements for participants. Additionally, given the extent of the data being collected from each participant, gathering this data over a 15 week semester provided participants sufficient time to thoughtfully respond to each belief. The researchers acknowledge that this data collection method may result in a participant maturation process due to the length of the data collection period; however, this may not equate to an adverse effect given young adults were being asked to articulate a personal response. This study also made every effort to create a safe environment where participants would not be subjected to didactic or polemic retribution and minimize any potential for paternalism in both data collection and analysis.

RESULTS The demographic inventory administered at the commencement of the Beyond Beliefs study had participants self-report their overall knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism and found the results represented in the first chart to the right. It is noteworthy that only 20% identified as knowing "most of it" or "quite a lot" given two thirds of these participants overall attended Seventh-day Adventist schools in varying degrees, 90% of all participants were baptized members, and all but one were at least a third-generation Seventh-day Adventist. The remaining 80% identified as only knowing "some of it," "a little" and "nothing."

It would seem that baptismal preparation where the 28 Beliefs of Adventism are studied, has not adequately covered the beliefs, or the participant may have been baptized at such an early age that their comprehension and/or retention of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism was limited and impacted their self-report perception. This, however, still doesn't explain the role of parents and grandparents, who in this cohort were all Seventh-day Adventists, except the parents/grandparents of one participant. It would seem that, despite apparent shortcomings in teaching the 28 Beliefs of Adventism in baptismal preparation and Adventist education, parents and grandparents may not be taking a proactive role in ensuring young people know the beliefs. This poses an interesting question. Is it the responsibility of the church or the church school or the parent/grandparent to comprehensively communicate the 28 Beliefs of Adventism? This issue will be explored further in the Fall 2013 cohort of the Beyond Beliefs study where participants will be asked to identify who was involved in teaching them the 28 Beliefs.

Participants were also asked to self-report their knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism at the conclusion of the study which was undertaken in conjunction with the class RELT225 Doctrines of Adventist Faith at Andrews University. The results are represented in the second chart to the right and demonstrate a dramatic shift in self-report knowledge of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism. Participant representation in the "know most of it" and "know quite a lot" categories changed from 20% to 86%. The "know nothing" category disappeared altogether.

The demographics inventory administered as a part of the Beyond Beliefs study asked participants why they signed up for this course, since it is not a required course. The results are represented in the third chart to the right. Only 9% wanted to know more about the topic, another 9% were interested in the topic, 5% thought it would be easy, 21% selected the class because it fit their schedule, but the overwhelming majority stated they only took this class because they needed a Religion General Education class for that semester (56%). This is salient because despite the nonchalant motivation for taking this class, the class had efficacy in contributing to a dramatic shift in the self-report knowledge base of young adults regarding the 28 Beliefs of Adventism. This result may also suggest that young adults could have had a better knowledge of the beliefs than they were prepared to admit at the beginning of the study. Given, however, the dramatic shift observed at the conclusion, if that was the case, taking this class has certainly reinforced their confidence that they know more than they initially thought they did, and this aspect is still a positive one. Comprehensive reporting of all issues identified within the demographics inventory can be found in the *Beyond Beliefs - Full Report, Cohort 1* which is available through www.amazon.com.

From the analysis of the 930 written responses it was determined that Seventh-day Adventist young adults from North America predominantly liked the 28 Beliefs of Adventism and, when they had a comprehensive knowledge of them, claimed to endorse them favorably. The beliefs which provided either a real or abstract benefit for them personally were very well received, as were beliefs that had a relevant application for their life here and now. Thus, the challenge for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, when addressing young adults, is not primarily to convince them of the strengths of the 28 Beliefs of Adventism, but rather, to demonstrate how each belief benefits them and can be applied in their lives right now. To exemplify this, consider *Belief 10 - The Experience of Salvation*, which, since it delivers them from sin, provides a highly regarded benefit to young adults. Likewise, *Belief 4 - The Son of God*, identified Jesus as the standout favorite among the Trinity, mainly because He was the one who actually saved them from their sins and provided them a practical example for how to live. Additionally, *Belief 1 - The Word of God*, which was described as a guide for life, was something that really resonated with young adults since they are just commencing the journey of their adult lives. By far, however, the most prominent theme of the study was *Belief 20 - The Sabbath*, where 82% of the participants associated the Sabbath with "rest," many citing it as a guilt-free day they could take off from their busy lives.

Beliefs that did not provide any easily identifiable personal benefit included *Belief 27 - The Millennium and the End of Sin*, while not denigrated, did pose the question of "so what?" In the case of that belief, it would seem that the focus of young adults is getting to heaven - what happens after that seemed to be secondary and bore little relevance to their lives today. Interestingly, young adult participants who questioned this belief did not call for it to be deleted, but rather, suggested it could be amalgamated with other beliefs, namely *Belief 26 - Death and Resurrection* and *Belief 28 - The New Earth*.

Young adults expressed concern relating to belief statements primarily when they felt that the statement was too long, poorly worded, was ambiguous, or used overly technical theological jargon that was not readily understood. Some also felt there was overlap in many of the beliefs and suggested that some could be amalgamated for ease of remembering them all. What young adults expressed negatively in their responses were often isolated topics expressed in the commentary, not the official belief statement. This disagreement primarily focused on a lack of evidence to support commentary narratives; speculation that was insinuated as fact; and the pronounced emphasis on non-salvation issues.

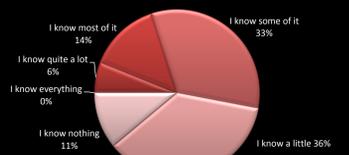
Comprehensive reporting related to themes that were identified in the 930 responses, can be found in the *Beyond Beliefs - Full Report, Cohort 1* which is available through www.amazon.com. In the interests of transparency, all 930 participant responses have been included in that publication.

The Beyond Beliefs study also observed a number of other issues that may require further investigation by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America in order to establish a clearer picture of the issue and formulate an appropriate response. These issues include:

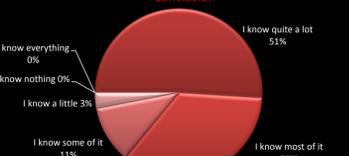
- Early baptism and its association with limited personal conviction in preteens.
- The emphasis young adults place on baptismal candidates being able to understand the importance of a baptism decision. This may not be the case for preteens.
- Inefficacy of post baptism nurture and education related to the 28 Beliefs of Adventism prior to baptism.
- Paternalism and its potential to influence the baptism of young people, as well as research and programming for young adults.
- Young adults' standards for interpersonal behavior and the just treatment of others may exceed that of older Adventists and, as such, expressed concern in their responses relating to the anti-social behaviors of others within the church organization and the reluctance of leadership to address these behaviors.
- Development of a kind church that is consistent with the tolerant and compassionate attitudes expressed by young adults.
- Inadequately labeling young adults with broad, undefined labels, and in doing so, potentially inhibiting their voice from being heard.
- The emergence of Secular Adventism or Non-Practicing Adventists which differentiates from Cultural Adventism.
- The higher propensity of those who did not attend any church schooling, prior to university, to attend church services weekly.
- The sense of ownership young adults have of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.
- The importance of diversity (generational particularly) among researchers exploring young adult populations to minimize potential paternalism.
- A real fear of ghosts, demons, and the persecution. The portrayal of beliefs in a scary way may be negatively impacting the wellbeing of young Seventh-day Adventists.
- Favorable attitudes towards Ellen G. White, even though young adults read her work with limited regularity. This scant reading does not seem to impact their self-reported spiritual commitment levels which were generally reported in the medium to high range.
- The challenge to make Ellen G. White's writings something young adults will want to read; however, this may not be an urgent priority given the limited impact she seems to have on self-reported spirituality and the ability of young adults to understand and study the 28 Beliefs of Adventism.

These issues are explored further in the Fall 2013 cohort (Beyond Beliefs 2) and are discussed in more detail in the *Beyond Beliefs - Full Report, Cohort 1* which is available through www.amazon.com.

Knowledge of 28 Beliefs Beginning



Knowledge of 28 Beliefs Conclusion



Reasons for taking RELT225 Doctrines of Adventist Faith

