CONVERSION AND IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST FAITH TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between conversion and identity-formation in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist faith tradition. It argues that the lack of a clearly-defined and contextualised contemporary identity, coined with the organisational expectations for conformity to ethical and cultural standards, rather than the liberating qualities of the gospel, lead to the demise of Christian identity. Further, empirical research demonstrates that a relationally-internalised faith leads to a positive and secure Christian identity, which enables believers to communicate faith in God in a language, which flows from the heart, and speaks to the heart.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

The Seventh-day Adventist self-understanding is deeply ingrained in the historical roots of the 16th-century radical reformers, such as Anabaptists, and the 19th-century Restorationist movement among American Protestants.[1] These groups examined established church beliefs and traditions in the light of the Bible and the New Testament church.[2] However, the heartbeat of the Seventh-day Adventist identity streamed from the 19th-century apocalyptic fever, and, more specifically, the Millerite

[1] George Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown MD: Review & Herald, 2000), pp. 30-31.
[2] Ibid.

expectancy of Christ's imminent return. According to Bull and Lockhart the Millerite Advent movement "defined itself with reference to the future."[3] The Great Disappointment of 1844 shattered the dream. The momentous event forced the surviving Adventists to search for self-understanding in relation to past experience. As well, it challenged them to define its meaning for the ongoing journey.[4] Doctrines, such the Sanctuary, the Sabbath, the State of the Dead, the Second Coming, and Spiritual Gifts, gave the embryonic movement a new sense of identity and theological distinctiveness. However, as stressed by Knight, with time, "the unifying focal point" of the movement's theology was found in the apocalyptic core of the book of Revelation.[5]

Again, the apocalyptic focus defined the movement, in reference to the future, by giving it a strong sense of distinctiveness and mission. In an environment of 19th-century Protestant America, the progressively growing group of Advent believers paved the way of its self-understanding in terms of doctrinal difference to other Christian denominations. While, with passing time, the sense of theological distinctiveness ignited a vision of "an ever-expanding mission of warning to the world",[6] it also created a barrier of elitist isolationism. Quoting Borge Schantz, Knight identifies the nature of this underlying problem.

> Mission [between 1874-1890] to non-Christians was approved of and praised by Adventists, but it was regarded as the task that other evangelical missionary societies could take care of. When they [evangelicals] had brought them to Christ, the SDAs were committed

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[3] Malcolm Bull, and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 39.

[4] Ibid. Bull and Lockhart argue that the early Adventist believers began to redefine identity in terms of the past. At the same time, they raise the question regarding its significance for the present.

[5] Ibid., p. 86.

[6] Knight, *A Search for Identity*, p. 86.

> to bringing them to the last warning [i.e., the distinctly Adventist doctrines].[7]

Naturally, such a view raises questions concerning the relationship between *conversion* and the *formation of identity*. Is Christian identity determined by its beliefs, or is it an outcome of a faith-relationship with God?[8] Erickson points out that man's identity finds its locus in God – "the fact that God created Him".[9] So, identity includes much more than a well-defined construct of doctrinal beliefs. According to Erickson, it links with man's fulfilment of the divine plan.[10] In other words, Christian identity, and its relationship to life's journey, must include a vertical dimension. As shown in diagram 1, at the foundation of such a journey is the search for meaning, and the experience of conversion. Further, one may ask, what role does Christian identity play in the ongoing journey of life in a changing world?

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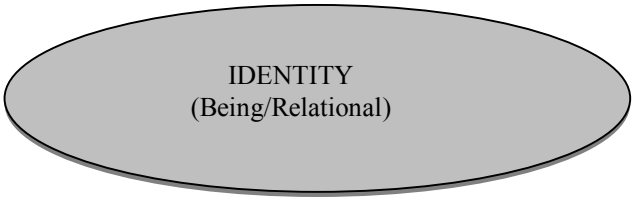
[7] George Knight, *Historical Sketches of Foreign Missions* (Berrien Springs MI: Andrews University Study, 2005), p. xvi.

[8] One of the leading pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church exclaimed "Strive earnestly for identity with the Redeemer. Live by faith in Christ", Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol 6 (Mountain View CA: Pacific Press, 1948), p. 416.

[9] Also see Millard J Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1985), p. 488. Millard suggests, "Man's identity will be founded in the fact that God created him." Hence, identity is linked with much more than a defined construct of beliefs.

[10] Ibid.

SEARCH FOR MEANING



CONVERSION/IDENTITY FORMATION

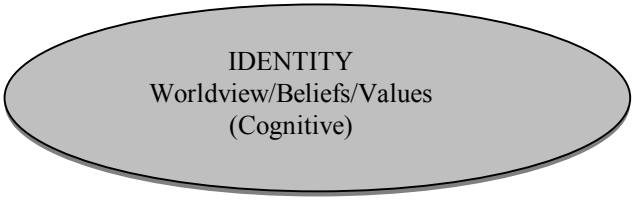


Diagram 1

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Research data suggests that the absence of a clearly-defined and contextualised Seventh-day Adventist identity in the 21st century contributes to a *syndrome of transitional identity* (Diagram 2).[11] The cultural shift from the rational and verbal forms of Christianity to more experimental and emotional forms enhanced a stage of a cognitive dissonance. The emerged tension of seeing mission in terms of 19th-century doctrinal identity, and the contemporary challenge of seeing mission in the 21st century, in terms of spiritually-authentic identity, impacts Seventh-day Adventist relevance and effectiveness in Western society.

This paper argues that the lack of a clearly-defined and contextualised identity compels the church to retract to the faith-affirming beliefs-construct of the 19th century. Further, it adds another dilemma. Hiebert argues, "If

[11] John Skrzypaszek, *Refolding the Flock: Examining Trends in Contemporary Conversion Patterns in the Seventh-day Adventist Tradition in Australia: Suggested Strategies for Arresting the Inertia which Impacts Conversion Growth in the Contemporary Australian Culture* (D.Min thesis: Australian College of Theology, 2009), p. 76. http://nash.mst.edu.au./index.php/component/search/?searchword=thesis&ordering=&searchphrase=all.

the interaction with the outside world threatens to diminish the cultural distinction of the groups, then groups resist, and avoid the interaction."[12] This stance, coined with the internal insecurity resulting from the lack of a life-relevant identity, enhances a barrier of elitist isolationism, and shapes the lenses through which the church views people's lives and the conversion experience.

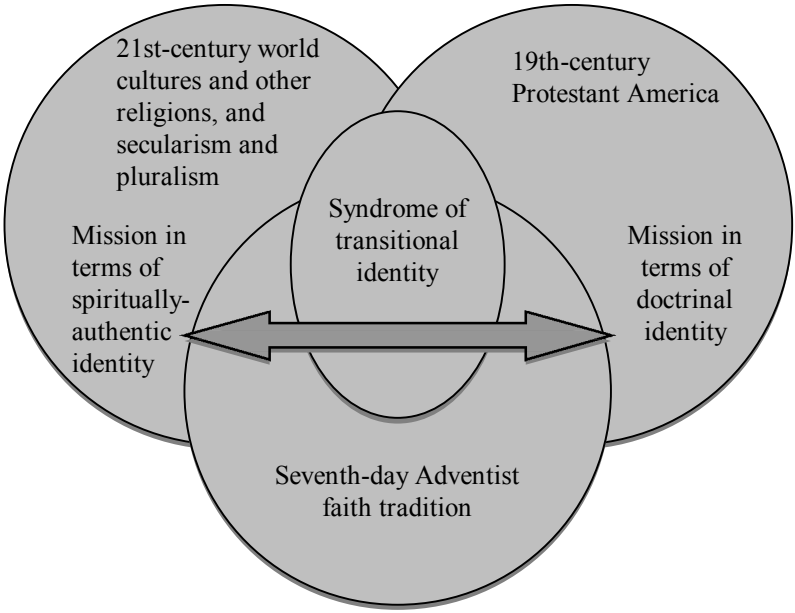


Diagram 2

Further, mission expressed *predominantly* in terms of doctrinal identity delineates strong religious and cultural boundaries, specific beliefs, standards of morality, and lifestyle. The plethora of expectations contributes to the scrutiny, through which the church evaluates the conversion experience of new believers. It often initiates demands for conformity to theological, ethical, and cultural standards, rather than the liberating qualities of the gospel. Hence, the authenticity of conversion tends to be

[12] Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker House, 1983), pp. 278-279.

measured by changes in lifestyle, or, more precisely, whether the converts live an Adventist lifestyle. The cited barriers to conversion are: (a) overemphasis on doctrinal beliefs; (b) people are encouraged to come to church for theological reasons; (c) the danger of evaluating conversion with a checklist of expectations.[13]

DISCOVERING THE PRESENCE OF THE MISSIONAL GOD: THE JOURNEY TO CONVERSION

This research explored the life stories of people who transitioned to the Seventh-day Adventist faith tradition from a secular, unchurched background. Further, it focused on the causes that led individuals to the awareness of God's presence, the experience of conversion, and finally to a successful connection with the SDA community of faith, providing an intentional ministry for the unchurched. The journey divides into three phases, namely the stage of reorientation, the stage of turbulence, and the stage of adaptation (Diagram 3).

[13] Skrzypaszek, *Refolding the Flock*, p. 81.

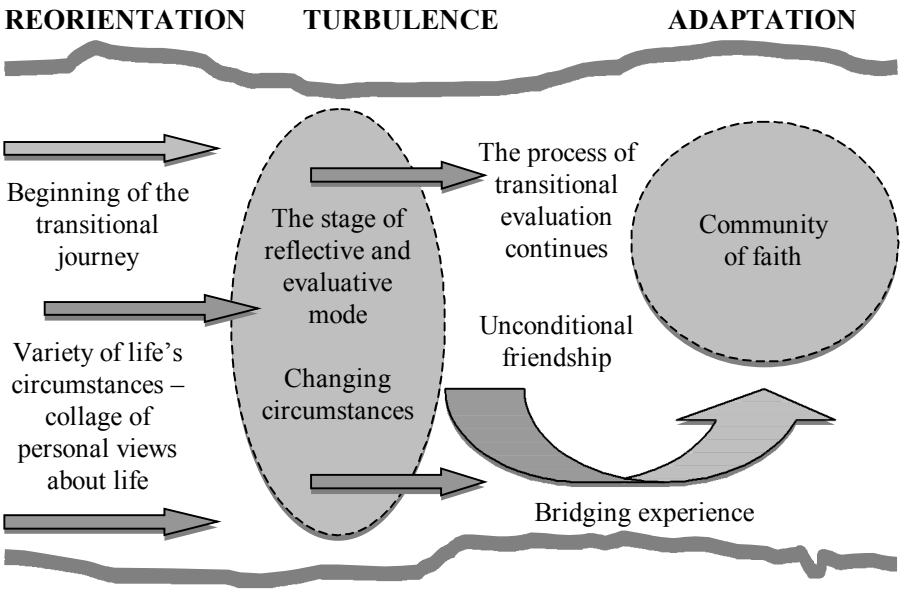


Diagram 3

THE STAGE OF REORIENTATION

The stage of reorientation began with the unsettling time, during which a variety of events or ambiguous circumstances of life challenged the interviewee's worldview, provoking new question about the meaning and purpose of life. Although each experience differed, the common denominator in all cases was the uniquely-personal integration between reasoning and the encountered experiences. *This part of the journey was intimately private, unknown to others, and extended over a long period of time.* However, the injected jolts, triggered by changing circumstances, often unexpected and ambiguous, awakened reactive responses, and instigated a new transitional phase in the experience of life.[14]

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[14] Walter E. Coon, "Book Review", *Horizons* (March 1, 1981), p. 178. Coon highlights the three stages of conversion identified by Gillespie. He refers to this stage as pre-conversion with questioning, tensions, and stress, followed by the stage of crisis and postconversion. However, this paper argues that the preconversion stage is more complex, and divides into the two distinctive stages of reorientation and emotional turbulence. Bailey V. Gillespie, *How and Why People Change* (Birmingham AL: Religious Education Press, 1979.

THE STAGE OF TURBULENCE

The changed circumstances in life's journey introduced a phase of *emotional turbulence*, where, in the vastness of the unchartered waters, individuals searched for a new script. This new phase pulled the mind into an emotionally-charged reflective and evaluative mode. From this private and uniquely-personal domain, the subjects searched, watched, listened, and tested the climate of the changing patterns of life, and the authenticity of the Christian environment. While the distant observer may assess people's lifestyles as secular or irreligious, the responses suggest that the individuals were already engaged in a transitional and transformational journey. *The observed promptings caused by a variety of circumstances initiated a movement towards God*. From the depth of such emotionally-heightened experiences, the subjects searched for safe and secure places. During this phase, the reflective and evaluative mindset increased openness to receptivity to new values. Crabb suggests that the emotional turmoil, or what he refers to as "confusion", creates a state of openness to receptivity.[15] In other words, people search for genuine and relevant solutions to life's problems.

Prior to the successful transition into the community of faith, and the final stage of adaptation, *unconditional friendship* provided an important *bridging* experience. Firstly, during the bridging experience, relational connections played a significant role in providing a nurturing safe place. Secondly, during the bridging phase, time continued to play a significant role in the nurturing process of the subject's transitional journey. It provided the first building blocks towards integration and adaptation of the new life-changing script. Thirdly, the positive impact of the church community, offering *unconditional acceptance*, provided a further nurturing ground for the life-changing commitments and conversion.

It appears the relational bond of *unconditional friendship* shaped the steps towards the subject's connection with God. Rather than entering into people's lives as intruders, by providing domination and submission through information overload, people, who offered unconditional friendship, entered

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[15] Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth Where People Connect and are Forever Changed* (Nashville TN: Word Publishing, 1999), p. 5.

people's lives as welcomed strangers. According to Guenther, a welcomed stranger acts as a midwife, providing presence and attentiveness.[16] During this phase, individuals recognise and accept the authenticity of God's involvement in a human life. Understanding God's commitment to humanity, and how He works in the life of other people, helps them to transfer their allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This change is evidenced by a successful acceptance and adaptation of the liberating and life-changing power of the gospel. The transformational nature of this experience helped individuals to discover their *uniqueness and potential*.

THE STAGE OF ADAPTATION

Thirdly, during the stage of adaptation, one observes the interplay between ongoing reflective evaluation and the growing bond of friendship between individuals and the community of faith. During this stage, the growing awareness of beliefs is tested by the authenticity of the Christian faith, and the question of whether they are walking the talk. At the same time, a healthy Christian climate provides an inspiration for life-changing decisions, and commitment to God.

THE SIGNIFICANT FIND OF THE RESEARCH

The significant finding of this research shows that the transitional nature of the journey to the conversion experience began a long time before the convert's first contact with the SDA community of faith. The initial stages were intimately private, unknown to others, extending over a long period of time. While the sampled community of faith provided an intensified involvement during the bridging process of the convert's journey, there was a noticeable absence of a relational engagement with unchurched people during the critical early stages, in the places where God's Spirit was at work.

The stories, shared by the interviewees, suggest that, through a variety of circumstances, God was attracting them to a relational journey of faith. The survey data supports this assertion, showing that a search for meaning

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[16] Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), p. 1.

appeared the highest on the list of descriptors of life before conversion.[17] The findings show that the early stage creates a time of unsettling changes. These, in turn, heighten openness to new questions about life, and the search for meaning. The research shows that, while the community of faith was active and influential during the later bridging phase in providing a nurturing support, there was a noticeable absence of a relational engagement with people in the early stages of the transformational journey to conversion.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONVERSION AND IDENTITY

The themes emerging from the interviews with converts suggest that varied circumstances instigate the uniquely-personal nature of people's life journey leading to conversion.[18] The promptings, caused by various circumstances, suggest that God has already commenced the process, through which people are lured to Him. Peace points out, correctly, that the "Holy Spirit is an active agent in the whole process".[19] The experience of conversion, or a decisive moment, when individuals decide for God, may occur during the church-organised programs. However, the data suggests that it often occurs at unspecified moments during the bridging phase. It links closely with the relational influence of either an individual or a community of faith.

The role of Christian engagement is crucial, for it involves the experience of entering into people's personal journey as a guest and a fellow struggler. It involves the task of showing what it means to be God's people. In contrast to the program-oriented emphasis of the organisational drive for success, the interview data indicate the important role that genuine unconditional friendship plays in conversion. Here, friends do not act as spectators, but as active catalysts, which authenticates God's involvement in human life.

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[17] Skrzypaszek, *Refolding the Flock*, p. 116.

[18] Peace refers to it as a "plethora of quite different experiences", and that the movement towards conversion takes "place in fits and starts". Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), p. 6.

[19] Ibid., p. 353.

Hence, they encourage people to embrace the transformational experience of one's personal journey with God.[20]

It is evident that conversion means more than adherence to ideas, and conformity to ethical values. It has even less to do with denominational loyalty. Often, these are blurred by self-interests.[21] It is not just an intellectual decision, rather, it involves a heart-response to the awareness of God's acceptance, forgiveness, and involvement in human life. The process includes repentance, and loving commitment to God, and to His service. In all, it places Christ at the centre of one's being.[22] It means "a change in a person's central allegiance, and a personal commitment to follow Christ in life and in death".[23] Stepping into the realm of God's kingdom of grace, individuals rediscover personal worth, uniqueness, and potential – the thriving hub of identity.

In other words, identity formation includes the entire process of a transformational journey towards a personal relationship with God. It involves a human response to God's offer of salvation that enables individuals to recapture their identity, value, potential, and God-designed purpose for life (Diagram 4). Erickson points out correctly, "The key to man's identity will be found in the fact that God created Him."[24]

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[20] The NCSL Research data supports the findings of this research, showing that "newcomers take longer to develop a sense of belonging to a congregation". Therefore, "It is also important to create opportunities to develop relationships with other attenders". Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, Ruth Powell, Keith Castle, and Bronwyn Hughes, *Building My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches* (Adelaide SA: OpenBook Publishers, 1999), p. 45.

[21] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 139.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Allan Edward, "Approaches to Conversion in a Postmodern Setting", in *Adventist Society for Religious Papers* (San Antonio TX: November 18-20, 2004), p. 71. Also, see Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, pp. 6, 7. He suggests that "the essence of conversion is not found in the experience itself, but in the content of that experience." I argue that it flows from the relational attachment of trust to Christ, and initiates "transformation of a cognitive, affective, behavioural, social, and religious nature" of one's life.

[24] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 488.

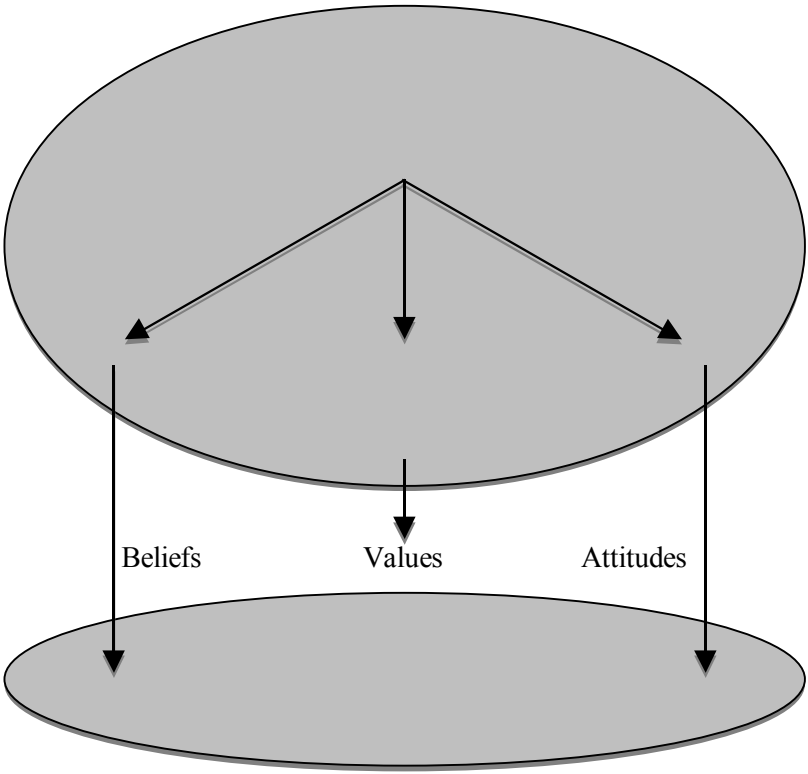


Diagram 4

Hence, the belief system should never be seen as an end in itself. Rather, the doctrine of creation, salvation, and eschatology should serve its primary purpose of leading individuals to the source of spiritual life (John 5:39). Grenz argues,

> Christianity is not merely intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal truths. As important as belief is, it is not enough. To be a Christian is more than merely reciting the Apostles' Creed in church, for faith must entail a personal commitment that becomes the ultimate focus of the believer's affection . . . it includes a personal attachment to a risen

> and living Person, with whom the believer experiences "a personal relationship".[25]

In other words, a relational faith attachment to God anchors identity in the hands of the potter, who moulds and shapes its beauty on the pathway of life's journey (Matt 10:28-31; Luke 13:3-7). It is a lifelong experience, necessitating continual contextualisation of beliefs, attitudes, and values (Rom 12:1-2), making them relevant and applicable to life's journey in a changing world. In this context, conversion is not simply a sociological phenomenon, transitioning individuals from one worldview to another. Rather, it is a matter of transformational allegiance empowering them with a new spiritual vitality and direction in life.[26]

This ardent search for meaning and identity transfers into a congregational experience. According to Roxburgh and Romanuk, the missional church is not about "new techniques or programs".[27] It may be added, it's not about confidence in an elitist-oriented identity. Rather, "At the core, missional church is how we cultivate a congregational environment, where God is the centre of conversations, and God shapes the focus and work of the people."[28] God's saving acts reminds the church that its identity is not grounded in a passive experience of waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus. Neither is the church's identity grounded in activity, but it is grounded in God's call to a journey of pilgrimage. The pilgrimage reminds the church that its identity is not a descriptive nametag that separates it from the world. The pilgrim's identity grows out of the transformational faith-experience with God. In fact, it is anchored in God. Hence, the power to witness does not stem from learned skills, but from life, shaped and moulded by the divine initiative. On

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[25] Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993), p. 45.
[26] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 942.
[27] Alan Roxburgh, and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 26.
[28] Ibid.

the transformational journey, the pilgrims display to the world what it means to be God's people, and what it means to have faith in God.[29]

OUTCOMES

The research data demonstrates that the organisational expectations towards quantitative growth, coined with the emphasis on program-oriented ministry, and the lack of contextualised identity, impacts the effectiveness of ministry to reach the secular and unchurched people in Australia. In consequence, the converts, who transitioned to Seventh-day Adventist faith tradition, on the basis of doctrinal convictions, showed a notable percentage of disadvantages.

THEY DID NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL

(a) Even though a high percentage indicated awareness of God's forgiveness and unconditional love, a notable percentage indicated they did not fully experience God's forgiveness.

(b) Less need of divine help to live a life committed to God.

(c) Moderate confidence in understanding God's purpose for personal life

(d) Moderate confidence in sharing faith with friends.

On the other hand, the converts, who transitioned to the Seventh-day Adventist churches specialising in ministry to unchurched people, showed the following advantages.

(a) They understood the gospel, in terms of full acceptance and forgiveness offered by Jesus.

(b) They spoke of the life-changing influence of the gospel in personal attitudes, commitment to service, and willingness to witness and share personal faith.

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[29] Peter Kaldor, Keith Castle, and Robert Dixon, *Connections for Life: Core Qualities to Foster in Your Church* (Adelaide SA: OpenBook Publishers, 2002), pp. 14-20.

(c) They expressed a high confidence in understanding God's purpose for their personal life.

(d) They indicated a high confidence to share faith with friends.

The research shows that two diverse currents impact conversion trends in the SDA faith tradition. The organisational inertia sways the decision-makers to support the traditional programs. The nature of the faith-affirming programs attracts people from a religious, rather than from the secular, background, and the organisational top-down control contributes to congregational malaise. In consequence, the church bypasses its greatest witnessing potential to secular, unchurched society. As Shore defines it, "Mission consists in living, for the good of the neighbour, godly lives ahead of time, ahead of the end of the age."[30] The resulting climate contributes to the scrutiny, through which the church evaluates the conversion experience of new believers. The demand for conformity to specific beliefs overrides the liberating qualities of the gospel. As expressed by several leaders, the conversion experience is associated with head knowledge of doctrinal beliefs.

On the other hand, churches providing a specialised ministry for the unchurched, by nurturing a friendly and unconditionally-accepting environment, attract unchurched, secular people. Members, who offer unconditional friendship and acceptance, play a significant role in the process leading to conversion. Not only did they transmit objective truth, rather, they acted as witnesses to what God had done in their lives.[31] Edwards suggests that friends still communicate objective information, but it is not "impersonal knowledge".[32] Rather, it is "ideas that interact with feelings and values in complex ways to produce decisions and actions".[33] It may be defined as a relationally-internalised knowledge, which keeps Christians "from being ineffective and unproductive" in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:3-9).

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[30] Mary Hinkle Shore, "Preaching Mission: Call and Promise in Matthew 28:16-20", in *Word & Word*, 26-3 (Summer 2006), p. 325.
[31] Edwards, "An Approach to Conversion in a Postmodern Setting", p. 71.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that a relationally-internalised faith leads to a strong, positive, and secure Christian identity, for it flows from the transformational faith experience with God. Such identity is not grounded in activity or achievements, but in the heart of a missional God. Further, it argues that such an identity displays to the world what it means to be God's people, and communicates what it means to have faith in God, in a language that flows from the heart, and speaks to the heart. On this journey, believers contextualise beliefs into life-applicable principles. In defining and expressing the heart of Seventh-day Adventist identity, the church needs to recapture the vision of how to cultivate astuteness to discern what God is already doing in the lives of people. It needs to discover the presence of a missional God, and enter into people's lives as welcomed strangers, offering presence and attentiveness, helping them to discover the thriving hub of identity, personal worth, uniqueness, and potential.

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