

A Demographic Analysis of the Tithing Behaviour of 2562 Seventh-day Adventists in Northern New South Wales, Australia

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An analysis of tithe receipted in Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Northern New South Wales compared to census data reveals that there is a decided difference between the tithing behaviour of the under-fifty-year olds and those over fifty. It is suggested that this explains why there has been an approximately 40% drop in NNSW tithe compared to incomes over the last 25 years.

Giving to most Christian denominations has been falling steadily for some time (Ronsvalle, 1996, 52-53, 76). A recent publication of the Alban Institute entitled *Financial Meltdown in the Mainline?* (Mead, 1998) outlines the impact that continuously decreasing finances have had on many denominations (c.f. Wuthnow, 1997). From their study of the funding of a number of churches in the United States, Canada and Australia, though, Vallet and Zech conclude that a few denominations appear to be exempt from this general trend. These denominations include the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Covenant Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Southern Baptist Convention (Vallet & Zech, 1995, 67). Indeed, in North America, Seventh-day Adventists rank third behind Latter-day Saints and Assemblies of God in the table of mean percentage of income given to the denomination (Hoge, et. al. 1996, 12).

This article will report on a number of lines of evidence that show that, while the Seventh-day Adventist Church shows some immunity from the general downward trend in giving, it is by no means exempt. It may not be facing a financial crisis, but per capita giving amongst Australian Seventh-day Adventists has fallen steadily against income over at least the last twenty-five years.

The primary source of the data reported here grows out of a study initiated in 1999 and continued through 2000 by the North New South Wales Executive Committee of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and coordinated by Robert K. McIver and

Stephen J. Currow.¹ This study was initially conducted to test the perception that those who were under 40 years of age were contributing proportionately less tithe than those who were older. The methodology adopted for the primary study will be outlined first, and then some of the principal findings, illuminated by data from other sources, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics will be given.

Methodology

Within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in North New South Wales (NNSW), and indeed throughout the world-wide SDA Church, it is the practice of many members and attenders to put aside 10% of their income as tithe (Oliver, 2000, 180-82). This is then usually placed in an envelope in the offering plate. In Australia the envelope may be used for other offerings as well, by marking a list of items the giver way indicate which offerings the enclosed moneys are intended for, including church budget. Each church has a treasurer, who writes out a receipt for the tithe and other moneys. The receipt is usually returned to the tithe giver in a new tithe envelope, with their name on the outside. The role of treasurer is a role of trust: both financial and confidential. Often, only the treasurer knows who amongst the congregation is contributing tithe, although some church pastors are also privy to the information.

An obvious starting point for the investigation into tithing behavior was an analysis of tithe receipts held at local churches. One goal was to do such an investigation in a manner in which only those already privy to information regarding the tithing behavior of individuals would be involved where the data included individual names. This meant that the actual analysis needed to be done by the local church treasurers. After extended consultations, and with modifications required by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Avondale College, the following procedure was adopted: First, permission to analyze receipts was sought from the church boards of the 68 local churches that make up the North New South Wales Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Next, the pastors of those churches that gave such permission provided an annotated Church roll and a supplementary list of Church attenders to the local church treasurer. The Church roll was divided into two groups – attenders and non-attenders. Attenders were defined as those who attended their local congregation at least 2 weekends a month. Attenders were further subdivided according to age identified to the closest 10-year period, and whether or not they worked for the church as a minister or teacher, or at one of the church institutions. At the time of the study, all ministers and teachers employed by the Seventh-day Adventist in Australia had tithe deducted from their wages as a matter of course, and those working for the church at any of its institutions could elect to have their tithe deducted from their wages. Both groups were eliminated from the figures, the ministers and teachers because their tithing was involuntary, and those who worked for the church in other capacities, because their tithe might be directed through the local church treasurers, but might also be taken directly out of their wages. Thus, any figures provided by church treasurers for such workers would not represent their true tithing

behaviour. The pastor also provided two supplementary lists of names: those who regularly attended at least 2 weekends a month but who held their membership at another church, and those regularly attending who were not members of the SDA church at all.

Finally, once the local church treasurers had been provided with these lists, they analyzed their receipts. They reported how many in each age group were regular attenders from the lists provided by the pastors, and how many of them were tithers from their own analysis of tithe receipts. The definition of who was a tither or not was explained to the church treasurers in the following manner:

Column 11: No. who return tithe to local church: This is the most important column, and therefore is also the most important definition. In some ways, it is one of the hardest. We would like you to count the “regular tithe payers” for this column. We have decided to classify the following people as “regular tithe payers”: they either

a. Pay tithe at least six times per year

or

b. Contribute less often, but seem to be contributing amounts which as far as you can tell, represents a tithe of their real income [business owners, for example, may contribute tithe only once or twice a year].

The two categories arise from the fact that many farmers and business people only contribute tithe once or twice a year, at the time that they work out how much profit the business has made that year. The church treasurers would almost always have a good idea who such people were from both their names, and the amount of tithe given.

The church treasurer then filled out the numbers in each category on a form provided to them, and returned the form to the researchers. No names came to the researchers, and thus confidentiality was preserved at the level that it existed prior to the research. Only the Church treasurers knew the names of the individual tithers, knowledge which they already possessed.

Tribute should be given to the church treasurers who willingly helped in this research. Volunteers all, the task given them was one that was time consuming and tedious. Nor was the analysis of the rolls provided by the local church pastors an easy task for larger congregations. That 23 churches participated in this research is much appreciated.

The Results

At the time of the study, the NNSW conference of Seventh-day Adventists had 9,760 members on the rolls of its 68 churches. The combined official membership of the 23 participating churches represent 5002 members, or 51% of the membership of the conference. These 24 churches include the two largest churches in the conference (1066 & 1069 members resp.), 8 of the medium sized churches (387, 294, 192, 201,

349, 226, 168, 201), and 13 smaller churches (130, 50, 20, 140, 28, 61, 26, 48, 135, 12, 51, 119, 29), a total of 5002 members. Of these 5002 members, 2639 had been classified as active by their local church pastors.² It is worth noting, that when broken down by age, the smallest number of active members in the age brackets over 20 years of age is 220, and there are over 400 members in each of the age brackets over 40 years of age. The tithe reported from the participating churches amounts to \$1,547,000, or 39% of a total tithe of \$3,955,877 that was forwarded to the conference from the 64 local churches. Thus, while it would have been ideal to have 100% participation and account for 100% of the tithe, these results still represent the tithe giving behavior of a relatively large and representative sample.

The Australian tax year is the period from July 1 to June 31, and Church treasurers were asked to base their report on the 1998/99 tax year. The last reports arrived late in the first quarter, 2000.

The feedback from the pastors and church treasurers is reported in two separate tables (Tables 3 & 4) because several churches provided incomplete data which meant they could not be included in one or other of the two tables. Table 2, representing 21 churches, gives the following information broken down first by 10-year age groups, and then by combining those under and over 50 years of age: number of attenders minus those who work for the SDA church and its institutions, the numbers who tithe, and those who participate in the Church budget via means of the tithe envelope (many would give their offerings for church budget directly into the offering plate). Table 3 gives the total amounts contributed through the tithe envelopes by the various age groups. Table 1 gives the key statistics of the slightly different samples represented in Tables 2 & 3.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	Table 2	Table 3	Total Conference
No of Churches	21 (31%)	19 (28%)	68 (100%)
No of members	3,775 (39%)	4,609 (47%)	9,760 (100%)
No of attenders	2,562 (est. 35%)		Estimate 7,222
Amount of tithe		\$1,546,460 (39%)	\$3,955,877 (100%)

It is instructive to compare the percent of total tithe that comes from the various age groups as represented in table 3 with estimated incomes. The Australian Bureau of Statistics was able to provide data on Adventist Incomes from the various age

Table 2: Reports from 21 Churches on Number of tithers

Age Group	Attendees		Tithing Practice			Church Budget		
	Total attendees minus church workers	% of (adjusted) total attendees	Return tithe to local church minus denominational workers who return tithe through local church	% who tithe	% of total tithers	Participate in Church Budget	% who participate in church budget	% of total of those that participate in Church budget
By ten-year bands								
20-29	199	9.6	80	40.2	6.9	26	13.1	4.3
30-39	247	12.0	114	46.2	9.8	67	27.1	11.1
40-49	382	18.5	206	53.9	17.7	69	18.1	11.5
50-59	310	15.0	185	59.7	15.9	91	29.4	15.1
60-69	381	18.5	232	60.9	19.9	128	33.6	21.3
70+	546	26.4	350	64.1	30.0	221	40.5	36.7
TOTAL	2065	100.0	1167	56.5	100.0	602	29.2	100.0
< or > 50								
20-49	828	40.1	400	48.3	34.3	162	19.6	26.5
50+	1237	59.9	767	62.0	65.7	440	35.6	72.0

bands from the last available census (1996). Not all those who identified themselves as Seventh-day Adventists on the census are attenders, but these figures provide the most accurate available estimate of the income levels of SDAs living in the NNSW conference. Table 4 shows the percentage of total SDA income earned by each age band, the percentage of tithe that comes from that age band, and the difference between the two.

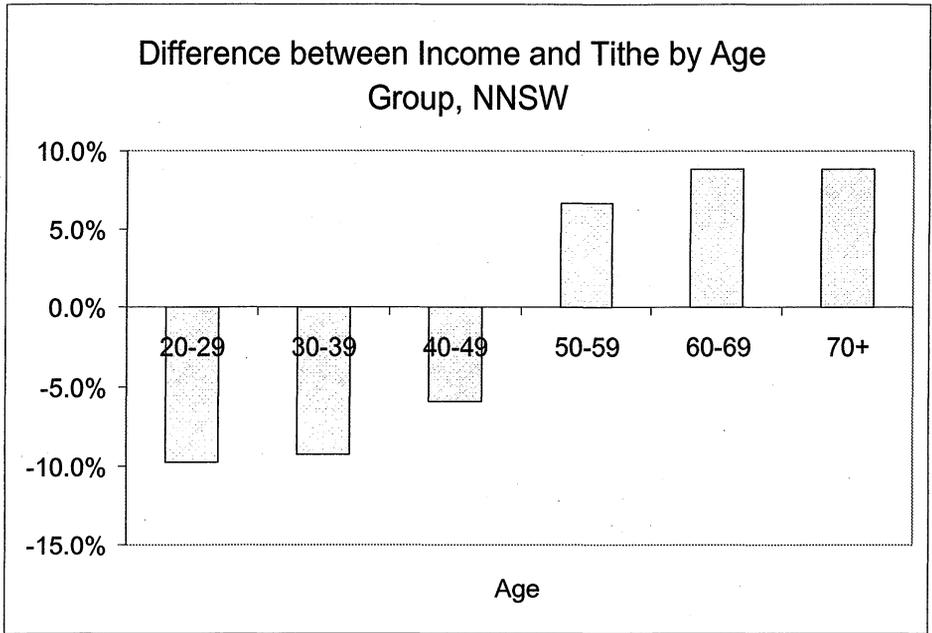
Table 3: Reports from 19 Churches on Amount of Tithe

Age Group	Total Value of Tithe Returned in Last 12 Months	% of total tithe	Total Contribution to Church Budget	% of total budget
0-14	\$1,065	0.1	\$47	0.0
15-19	\$6,641	0.4	\$336	0.2
20-29	\$112,542	7.3	\$5,240	3.6
30-39	\$210,296	13.6	\$18,814	12.8
40-49	\$300,817	19.5	\$27,797	18.9
50-59	\$335,482	21.7	\$18,936	12.8
60-69	\$276,973	17.9	\$25,926	17.6
70+	\$302,644	19.6	\$50,357	34.2
TOTAL	\$1,546,460	100.0	\$147,452	100.0
Amount of anonymous tithe =			\$151,214	

Table 4: Income compared to tithe

Age	% of tot Income (ABS)	% of tot Tithe (NSW Survey)	Difference
20-29	16.7%	7.3%	-9.8%
30-39	22.3%	13.6%	-9.3%
40-49	24.6%	19.5%	-5.8%
50-59	14.7%	21.7%	6.7%
60-69	8.9%	17.9%	8.8%
70+	10.5%	19.6%	8.9%

If the difference between % of total income and % of total tithe is graphed for the various age-bands, the result is as follows:



This graph leads to the following two observations: (1) that each younger age band is contributing less of its income as tithe; and (2) there is a dramatic change in tithing behaviour between the under-fifty-year-olds and the over-fifty-year-olds. The

Table 5: Under-fifty-year old vs. fifty-year-old-plus Tithers

Age	Tot	Tithers
20-49	828	400
50+	1237	767

second observation may be confirmed by further analysis of the data of Table 2:

This data is susceptible to analysis by means of a t-test. A two-sample t-test assuming unequal variances is significant at $\alpha = 0.001$ [t-statistic = - 6.17; critical t two-tailed = 3.30; $P(T \leq t)$ two tail = 8.43E-10]. In other words, there is a statistically significant difference in the tithing behaviour of the under and over 50-year olds.

The Attender Survey

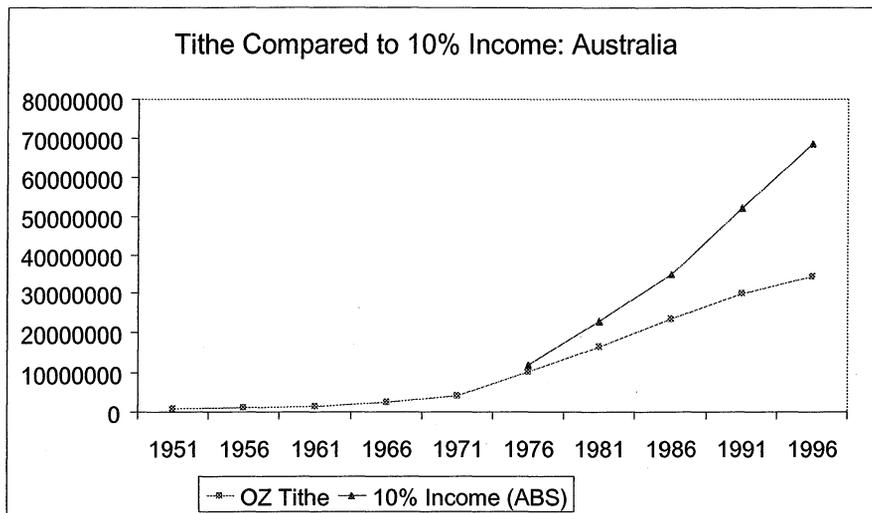
Further confirmation of this observation comes from the preliminary results of a survey done amongst attenders in the NNSW conference. This ongoing survey has been conducted in a number of worship services in Churches in the NNSW conference, and amongst a number of the classes at Avondale College. One of the questions on this survey asks the respondent to estimate how much of their income they have contributed as tithe in the last 12 months. Table 6 gives a summary of the first 1017 useable responses to this question.

Table 6: Preliminary Survey Results of % Income Given as Tithe

% Income as tithe (by 20 year age bands; and -+50)							
	<50	>= 50	1-19 yrs	20-39 yrs	40-59 yrs	60+ yrs	All
0%	81 (14%)	8 (2%)	26 (26%)	36 (11%)	22 (7%)	5 (2%)	89 (9%)
1-9%	140 (24%)	46 (11%)	33 (32%)	80 (24%)	51 (15%)	22 (8%)	186 (18%)
10+%	376 (63%)	366 (87%)	43 (42%)	213 (65%)	254 (78%)	232 (90%)	742 (73%)
Column Total	597	420	102	329	327	259	1017

The first two columns of table six gives the reported tithing behaviour of the under-fifty and over-fifty age groups, the subdivision of the data suggested by the earlier research reported here. By way of interest, the next four columns give the reported tithing behaviour of the four age groups 1-19, 20-39, 40-59 and 60+ years, while the totals for all respondents are given in the last column.

The survey also reveals a dramatic difference in the reported tithing behaviour of the under-fifty vs. the over-fifty age groups. A strong general commitment to the tithing principle is demonstrated in the fact that as many as 63% of the under-fifty-year-olds report that they give a full 10% of their income as tithe. Yet this is a full



24% less than the percentage of the over-fifty-year-olds who report they give 10% or more of their income as tithe. These percentages are much higher than those derived from table 2 above, and a number of reasons might be suggested for the difference. For example, the survey results includes full time teachers and pastors of the church, all of whom tithe, and all of whom were excluded from table 2. Furthermore, the survey also gives evidence that about 1/3 of all tithers are directing some or all of their tithe to places other than the recommended church channels from which the statistics in table 2 were derived (McIver, 2001). It is also not impossible that respondents over-estimate the percentage of income they actually give as tithe.

An important question is whether or not this age-related difference in tithing behaviour is something that has been characteristic of these different age cohorts as they have grown older, or whether by age 50 the individual has more disposable income and suddenly becomes more likely to tithe. While the researchers and church administrators would prefer that suddenly, as a believer becomes 50 years of age, they are much more likely to tithe, the trends of tithe when measured against income would tend to give credence to the suggestion that the tithing behaviour of each age cohort has remained relatively constant over time. The following two graphs give two views of the long-term trends of tithe when compared to income in Australia. In the first, tithe received by the church is compared directly with 10% of the aggregate income of all those who declared themselves as Seventh-day Adventists on the census. In the second, a full tithe (10% of income) is held constant at 100%, while tithe received by the church is given as a percentage of that number. Both graphs go back to 1976 as this is the first year that the Australian Bureau of Statistics is able to give the figures (total church tithe receipts are available from the time the first missionaries

landed in Australian in the late 1800s).

The tithe received by the Church, then, has been declining for the last 25 years (at least) when compared to income. This steady decline can be explained if the tithing behaviour of the various age cohorts remained relatively stable. As each of the younger cohorts aged, they made up a larger percentage of wage earners. That they tithed at a lower rate means that over time the rate of total members who tithe decreases. This explains the graphs above, and enables a prediction of future revenues for the Church. Unless there is a dramatic change in individual tithing behaviour or an increase in membership, the church can look forward to a further 15 years of revenue that declines at the current rate compared to income, after which time, while revenues will continue to decline, their rate of decline will be much slower.

Conclusions

The study was begun in the expectation that a difference in the tithing behaviour of the under-forty and over forty-year-olds would be discovered. In the event, there were several indications that there is a dramatic age-related difference in tithing behaviour, but that the key age is 50, not 40. This explains the decline in the last 25 years of money given to the Church in tithe when compared to the income of attenders. This downward trend appears likely to continue for at least the next 15 years, after which time tithe will still decline relative to attenders' incomes, but at a much lower rate.

Endnotes

¹ The executive committee of the NNSW Conference of Seventh-day Adventists set up a research group to supervise the research consisting initially of Rob McIver (Avondale College), Steve Currow (Avondale College), Peter Colquhoun (president, NNSW conference), and Hank Penola (Secretary Treasurer NNSW conference). At the time of writing, Hank has been replaced by Bob Dale (Secretary NNSW Conference) and Graeme Moffitt (Treasurer NNSW Conference). The research group works under the guidance of the Human Research Ethics Committee of Avondale College, and gives regular progress reports on the research to the executive committee. Rob and Steve would like to express deep appreciation to the conference administration for their support, and the NNSW conference for its financial underwriting of the research. We also thank the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists for funding the cost of Australian-wide data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

² This figure may in fact be misleading as to the ratio of attenders to members. While the medium and small churches were able to provide lists of those who were regular attenders who were not on the local church roll, this proved impossible with the two largest churches. One of these, Avondale College Church, has a very large percentage of members who are either inactive, or attend other churches. As far as attendance goes, though, this church has a very large number of attenders who are either not members, or who have memberships at other churches. From churches where there are more reliable figures and stable populations of attenders, the researchers estimate that on average the number of those over 15 who attend Seventh-day

Adventist churches number about 74% of the numbers on church rolls (the church rolls only represent baptised Seventh-day Adventist members; baptism usually takes place sometime between ages 12 and 19). Between 1971 to 1996, the years for which figures were available at the time of writing, 74% of the number on the church rolls represents between 87% and 93% of those over 15 who declared themselves to be Seventh-day Adventists on the Australian Census.

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