

FACTORS INFLUENCING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH MEMBERS IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the religious beliefs of church members in the three African divisions. It focuses on the role of the African traditional religious system, engagement in personal religious activities, and pastor's preaching on the views of adults and youths regarding various Seventh-day Adventist and other religious beliefs.

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENTATION

A key component of the religious life of an individual is religious beliefs, which make religious life distinct from the routine life of a person. Researches reveal that religious life has a positive effect on a person's well-being. Moreover, there is evidence that people with stronger religious beliefs have more positive subjective well-being (Colon-Baco, 2010). These empirical results show the importance of looking closely at the religious beliefs of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, which focuses on a wholistic approach to well-being (Lechleitner, 2012).

The findings presented in this paper are from the 2017-2018 global church member survey conducted in Africa involving 15,758 respondents: 7,838 from East-Central Africa Division, 5,488 from Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, and 2432 from West-Central Africa Division. There were 9,468 males and 5,838 females (452 did not indicate their gender) who participated in the survey with ages ranging from 12 years to 94 years old.

Within an African context, the basis of any Christian spiritual inquiry is understanding the African traditional religious system, with foundational religious beliefs as important component: belief in impersonal (mystical) power(s), in spirit beings, in

divinities/gods, and in the Supreme Being (Turaki, 2000). This is clearly revealed in the 2017-2018 survey where 93% of the respondents *believe in a personal God who seeks a relationship with human beings*. Similarly, belief in God or a universal spirit is embraced by 89% of the Americans who participated in the 2014 Religious Landscape Study (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Traditional beliefs have an influence upon the religious practices and behaviors of Africans. The Pew Research Center's survey of 19 countries in Africa found that sizable percentages of Muslims and Christians sacrifice to ancestors and spirits for protection and consult traditional religious healers (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010). The 2017-2018 church member survey found that some SDA church members in Africa embrace traditional beliefs such as:

- *Christians may go to witch doctors or spiritual healers for protection or healing (13%).*
- *The soul is a separate, spiritual part of a person and lives on after death (38%).*
- *People who have died believing in Christ are in heaven right now (16%).*
- *The dead have powers to communicate with and influence the living (11%).*

The African SDA youths are more likely to subscribe to these traditional beliefs than the adults. This is also true in Western culture. Canadian millennials are more likely to believe in an afterlife and communicating with the dead than are older generations (Brean, 2018).

In SDA churches in Africa, *state of the dead* is a topic seldom preached by pastors. Although preached among church members who believe in an afterlife, this seems not to change their belief. Moreover, church members who read religious writings of other Christian authors tend to continue believing in African traditional religious beliefs.

Engagement in regular reading of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White and other Adventist authors is an effective antidote against confused views regarding Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and traditional (non-biblical) beliefs.

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