

Adventist Families in Australia Research Snapshot

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Practical Ministry Issue

Australian society is changing, and Adventist families are navigating these changes daily. New understanding is needed for impactful family ministry resources and practice in the Adventist church. This study investigated the changing make-up of, and issues affecting, Adventist families in Australia and how to strengthen family ministries and Christian life discipleship in Adventist families.

How the study was done

Mixed methods were used. Secondary quantitative data analysis of Australian Census data was undertaken to identify the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia. Qualitative research was undertaken to better understand how family issues impact Christian life discipleship and impactful family ministry practice. In-depth individual interviews or focus groups were conducted with 69 participants drawn from the Adventist church across Australia. Participants included young adults (n=27), parents (n=15), local church pastors (n=13) and conference and local church family/young adults/children/women ministry leaders (n=14). Participants came from 8 out of the 9 conferences. The findings provide rich insights to inform impactful family ministries and Christian life discipleship within Adventist families in Australia.

Key Findings

Analysis of the Australian Census data shows:

- Most Adventists in Australia are part of a family, so a family ministry approach is relevant. In 2021, there were 63,662 Adventists and 23,250 families with at least one SDA person.

- Adventist families are diverse. Of all Adventist families in Australia:
 - 13% are one-parent families
 - 72% were couples in a registered marriage, while 1 in 10 were de-facto couples
 - 140 are same-sex couples (one or both partners identified as Adventist)
- Between 2011 and 2021, there was a slight decrease in families where both partners are Adventist and increase in families where only one partner is Adventist.
- Adventists are more multicultural than the total Australian population. One third of Adventists in Australia were born overseas. The languages most spoke in Adventist homes other than English are Samoan (4.7%), then Spanish (2.5%), Fijian (1.6%), Tagalog 1.4%) and Filipino (1.3%).
- Adventist families have a lower medium income than all Australian families (respectively, \$1,887 compared to \$2,138 weekly), although there are regional difference.

Qualitative analysis of conversations with young adults, parents, pastors and conference and church leaders, has enriched understanding about: (1) the impact of family issues on Christian life discipleship; (2) church engagement and support for families; and (3) how to strengthen family worship and Christian life discipleship practices in families and family ministries.

The research deeply illustrates how family issues impact Christian life discipleship. Some participants described experiences of positive support within their church community as they navigated difficult family issues. Many others, however, experienced isolation and disengagement in their families, in church and in their connection with God. This disengagement in turn contributed to a sense of grief and loss and diminished Christian life discipleship practice. Many participants also described how experiencing family issues led them to re-evaluate and eventually rebuild their faith. This process is illustrated below.

- We felt shamed for years, that isolation, that sort of cutting off" (parent)
- "I don't have a lot of people contact me asking us how we are. So, I can get lonely." (parent)

Isolation & disengagement

Grief & loss

- "I was very close to my nan, the tie for the family to something spiritual. She passed and from then on God was not a thing at all". (young person)
- "Our daughter left to live with her boyfriend, that was a shock to the system because as a Polynesian mum, that was an epic failure. It was almost like a death in our family. We're still recovering." (parent)

- "After that, we didn't do Bible study or worships together and we kind of drifted." (young person)
- "When my daughter was sick I didn't spend much time with God. I felt quite alone." (parent)

Diminished CLD practice

Re-evaluating & rebuilding faith

- "I had a deconstruction of faith, and now I'm trying to restructure it. How do I put it back because I can't throw it all out, I've had too much of God, enough experiences where I believe." (parent)
- "This is God. Because of challenges that God has brought us out of, it would be foolish of us to turn away questioning God again." (parent)

The research shows that **family ministries and churches have an important role to engage and support families** navigating significant life issues and to provide support more generally. In times of crisis, participants identified acceptance and validation of the situation followed by prayer, practical help, pastoral and elder visitation, and small group support as important elements of support to families. General support outside of crisis times considered important were mentors, a united approach toward connecting with young adults as well as opportunities to serve others.

Insights from the research show **what works to strengthen family worship and Christian life discipleship practices within families**. Key strategies include parents visibly modelling discipleship practices, creating quality time with children, engaging in dialogue and affirmation, starting in early

childhood, prayer and scripture, regular reading to children and creating a resource toolbox. Consistent and inclusive leadership in the home and being flexible and accommodating given time pressures worked as strategies. In terms of resourcing, priority needs to be given to equipping families for daily worship practices especially conversational tools. Pastoral modelling and the recognition of cultural uniqueness are important, as is an overall corporate strategy involving effective lines of communication.

The research highlighted **how to strengthen family ministries**. Leaders observed that, under current structures, the family ministry role often falls through the cracks. Finally, from a local church leader perspective, there is an identified communication gap with information and resources not flowing smoothly through to local church leaders and members.

Practical Ministry Recommendations

For SPD, Union and Conferences

Family Ministry Approach - Apply a family ministry lens across all ministry areas (SPD/ Union/Conferences)	Explanation: People spend more time with their families than they do in church. Impactful ministry to address nurture and retention engages people as part of a family network, not just as individuals. For example, evangelism could focus on outreach to families and encourage Christian life discipleship in families.
Resource Hub - Create and maintain an online information and resource hub for pastors, local church leaders and families to access innovative, relevant and impactful family ministries resources (SPD/Unions)	Explanation: Our research found that local church leaders and families need better access to curated information and resources to support family ministries. The research also highlighted that families are time-poor, so easy access to good quality resources is needed. The hub could include, for example, resources for mid-week small group engagement addressing issues impacting Adventist families such as mental health and neurodiversity.
Personnel - Rethink the organisational structure to ensure adequate family ministry personnel coverage and visibility across the church system (SPD/Unions/Conferences).	Explanation: The research highlights that family ministries can get sidelined when mixed with a range of other portfolios.
Collaboration - Foster greater teamwork and collaborative work amongst family ministry leaders horizontally and vertically in the church organisation across the SPD, Unions, Conferences and Missions (SPD/Unions).	Explanation: There are missed opportunities to synergise family ministries efforts and too few mechanisms to energise family ministries through teamwork across the church system.
Strategy - Develop a shared SPD-wide strategy specific to family ministries to drive relevant policy and resource development and good practice (SPD)	Explanation: Given the exponential potential of family ministry for missional impact, an intentional and cohesive strategy is needed.

For local church pastors and leaders

- Visitation, Prayer and Practical Help - Be alert and reach out intentionally with visitation, prayer and practical help when families experience crisis.
- Small Groups - Develop strong small groups in churches which provide safe and supportive networks for families and opportunities for meaningful service.
- Local Church Culture - Create cultures of openness, authenticity and inclusivity so church is a safe relational space for all.
- Relevance and Responsiveness - Review and reflect on local church practices and programmes regularly to ensure relevance and responsiveness to a range of family needs and family types.

For families

- Modelling - Adults model Christian life discipleship practices at home and make their bible study, prayer and faith visible to younger generations.
- Start Early - Begin discipleship at home in early childhood.
- Scripture and Prayer - Focus on scripture and always pray.
- Consistent, Inclusive, Flexible and Accommodating - Take leadership for consistent family worship, include all family members and provide opportunities for dialogue and affirmation, be flexible and accommodating especially if time is short.

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