

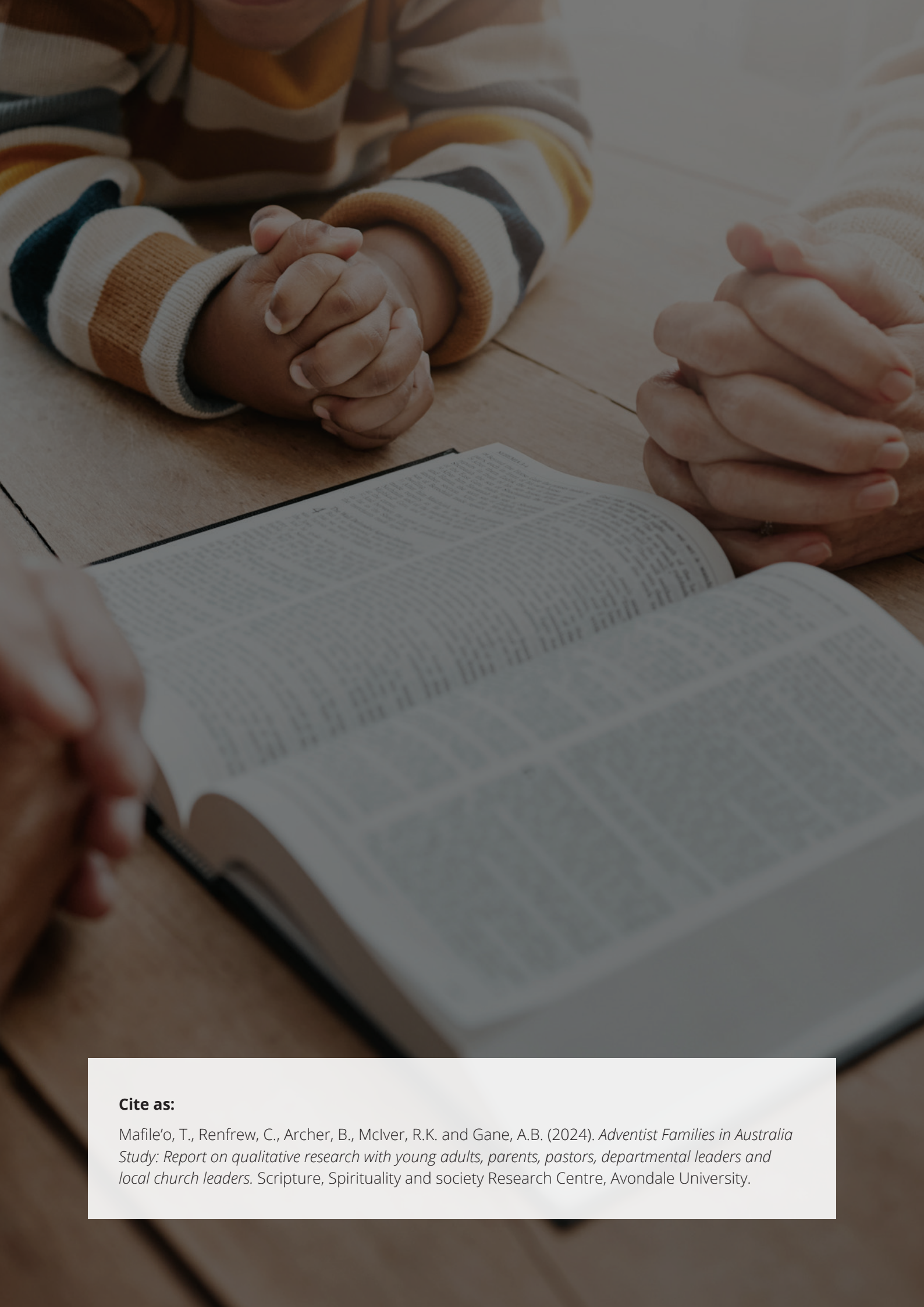


Adventist Families in Australia Study

Report on qualitative research with young adults, parents, pastors, departmental leaders and local church leaders

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1.0 Executive Summary

Practical Ministry Issue

Australian society is changing, and Adventist families are navigating these changes daily. In 2021, at the time of the last Australian Census, there were 63,662 Adventists and 23,250 families with at least one SDA person. 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

While the Adventist Families study overall engaged mixed methods (including secondary analysis of Census data), this current report focuses on the themes and insights emerging from the qualitative data collection. In-depth individual interviews or focus groups were conducted with 69 participants drawn from within 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. Thematic analysis of the interview and focus group

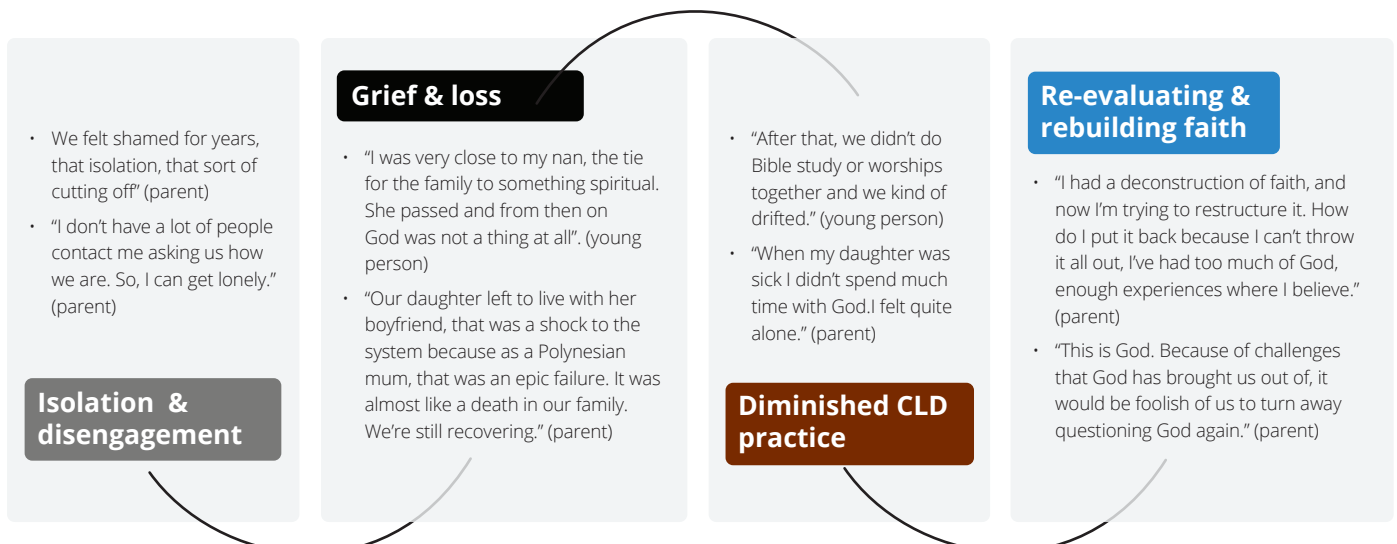
interviews was undertaken. The findings provide rich insights to inform impactful family ministries and Christian life discipleship within Adventist families in Australia.

Key Findings

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.



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

<p>Family Ministry Approach - Apply a family ministry lens across all ministry areas (SPD/Union/Conferences)</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>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)</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Personnel - Rethink the organisational structure to ensure adequate family ministry personnel coverage and visibility across the church system (SPD/Unions/Conferences).</p>	<p>The research highlights that family ministries can get sidelined when mixed with a range of other portfolios.</p>
<p>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).</p>	<p>There are missed opportunities to synergise family ministries efforts and too few mechanisms to energise family ministries through teamwork across the church system.</p>
<p>Strategy - Develop a shared SPD-wide strategy specific to family ministries to drive relevant policy and resource development and good practice (SPD)</p>	<p>Given the exponential potential of family ministry for missional impact, an intentional and cohesive strategy is needed.</p>

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.

Recommendations 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



2.0 Introduction

An Avondale University research team, led by Tracie Mafile'o, was engaged to undertake this *Adventist Families in Australia study*. This research had been identified as a research priority by the Australian Union Conference (AUC) which wish to use it to inform their strategic planning of the Seventh-day Adventist church. The AUC will use this research to develop resources and support for family ministries. The South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist church (SPD) commissioned a series of research projects for its four Unions (PNGUM, TPUM, NZPUC and AUC), to inform long-term strategic decision making.

The objectives of this *Adventist Families in Australia* study were to:

1. Investigate the make-up of Adventist families in Australia, compared with Australian families in general.
2. Identify issues affecting Adventist families in Australia.
3. Examine how family make-up and family issues impact the development of Christian life within Adventist families in Australia.
4. Understand how the church can best support Adventist families, including Christian life discipleship practices within Adventist families in Australia.
5. Examine how family worship and individual Christian life discipleship practices can be strengthened within Adventist families in Australia.
6. Provide recommendations for strengthening family ministries in the Adventist church in Australia.

Christian life discipleship is defined as the lifetime process of making room for God so that He can live in us. This process is transformational in nature and is centred in Jesus Christ and His gospel of the kingdom affecting the whole of life during which spiritual life is formed from the inside out (Andrews, 2010; Arnold, 2011; Calhoun, 2005).

This qualitative report addresses Research

Objectives 2-6, while a separate report, completed by the Christian Research Association providing secondary data analysis of Australian Census data and data from the AUC Attendance Survey, addresses Research Objective 1. An online survey is still being administered, which in due course will add to the overall project findings.

What does the research literature say?

There is scant research examining the life of Adventist Families. Crider and Kistler's (1979) seminal work covered the dynamics of families within the Seventh-Day Adventist church which highlighted the importance of relationship dynamics towards family cohesion. This informed subsequent initiatives through the church, such as family visitations and dedicated youth curriculums (Alicea Santiago, 2014; Daily, 1991). However, few attempts have been made to examine the family unit in a similar fashion. What research has occurred has focused on specific elements of family dynamics. International studies based in Finland (Kuusisto, 2009), India (Kumar, 2023) and the United States (Cincala et. al. 2021) draw attention to the role of socio-economic status in relation to family dynamics and interactions with the Seventh-Day Adventist church. However, these studies have not been comprehensive in nature, and typically rely on small sample sizes. Further research into the socioeconomic status of families within the Seventh-Day Adventist church could address this gap.

Broad research has examined the ways in which denominations engage families through ministry. Mahoney (2010) notes that most denominations have a dedicated perspective on family structure, and in the aggregate, this reinforces a 'traditional' (p. 17) view of what a family looks like. However, this can undermine the faith system of families who do not meet the traditional definition. Single parent families, blended families and de facto



partnership families often find themselves excluded from some denominations due to their non-traditional structure (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001; McGowin, 2017). While these studies have examined Seventh-Day Adventist Church members within the aggregate of other Christian churches, they have not been focussed on exclusively. This does, however, indicate that there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how the Seventh-Day Adventist church engages with families.

Strahan and Craig (1995) examined Seventh-day Adventist church members in depth with a significant focus on parenting styles and the impact on marital dynamics. While Strahan and Craig (1995) found significant links between family worship patterns, marital satisfaction and parenting styles, it was noted that the interaction between the family and the church was usually restricted to Sabbath worship. In addition, Strahan and Craig (1995) noted that when families experienced negative life events, their interactions with the church became less frequent and the relationship with the church became weakened. This outcome is supported by Vanderwaal et. al. (2017) and Jacobs et. al. (2019) who note that when adolescents begin to deviate or rebel from church teachings, it can not only negatively impact their own relationships with the church, but also the relationship of the family with the church. On a broader scale, Činčala et. al. (2021) note that families who experience a significant negative life event - such as a sudden death, or redundancy from work or significant

illness - also receive less pastoral support than they had previously received as a result of their decreasing interaction with their local church. While Činčala et. al. (2021) focussed on the perceptions of church members in North America, it does indicate that this is an area that requires further examination and research.

More recent research has focussed on family worship dynamics. Lee et. al. (1997) and Chelladurai et. al. (2018) note a correlation between children becoming more involved in family worship practices as they get older and an increased willingness to attend church. In particular, as children enter into adolescence, they are wanting more involvement and space to be able to participate in worship activities, however this could be restricted due to parents being unsure how to appropriately encourage such behaviour (Chelladurai et al., 2018). Lister et. al. (2020) notes that parents who both come from a Seventh-day Adventist backgrounds are more comfortable in modelling daily prayer and family worship compared to converts to the Adventist tradition. This indicates that there is a potential gap in the practice of Adventist ministers with regards to assisting families with their family worship.

The current study provides practical, new knowledge on how family ministries can be strengthened in the Adventist church in Australia, by drawing on the perspectives and experiences of Adventist young adults, parents, leaders and pastors.

3.0 Research Methods

Primary qualitative data collection gathered a range of perspectives on Adventist families in Australia using interviews and focus groups. Qualitative data gathering took place either online via zoom or in-person across a range of city, regional and rural settings in Australia. Some participants were drawn from various event venues with large gatherings, such as camps and conventions.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Purposive sampling guided recruitment of youth, parents, pastors and leaders, with the aim to select participants who, collectively, have a range of rich experience to address the research objectives.

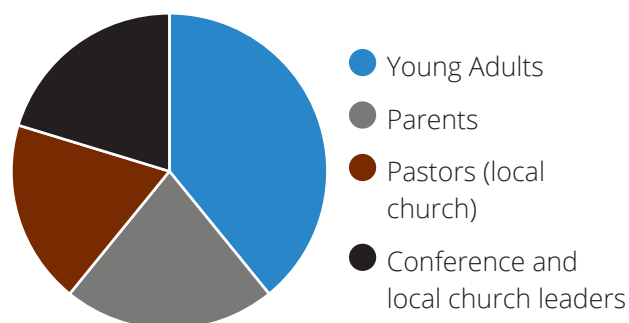
The AUC and Local Conference leadership were approached with a formal request for permission to carry out the data collection with staff and members within their jurisdictions, following initial, informal, discussions. General information about the study was made public via usual church communication channels – including the Family Ministries AUC Facebook page. The following outlines the different groups recruited to participate in qualitative data collection.

- Local Conference Departmental leaders who function in either family, women, children, or youth ministries will be recruited.
- Local Church Pastors with a proven track record of regular home visitation of members (provided by Conference Leaders).
- Local Church family, women, children, and youth ministries leaders.
- Seventh-day Adventist parents.
- Seventh-day Adventist young adults (over 18 years).

Information Sheets (Appendix 1) were provided to all potential participants, explaining the purpose, extent, and process of the research. Written consent was provided by all participants (Appendix 2).

A total of 69 individuals were engaged as participants in the qualitative data collection. The different participant categories are illustrated in Figure #1.

Participants - Categories n=69



Figure#1: Participant Categories

As illustrated in Figure #2, the majority of participants overall were male, which reflects the higher proportion of pastors and conference leaders who are male. Taking young adults and parent participants alone, there were slightly more female (22) than there were male (19) participants.

Participants - Gender

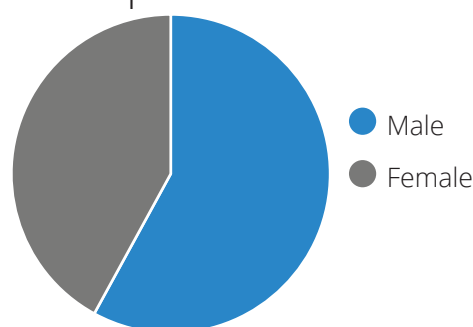


Figure #2: Participant Gender

There was effort to engage participants for qualitative individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups from a majority of Conferences of the Adventist church across Australia. Eventually, participants were from 8 of the 9 Conferences, although 38 of the 69 participants were from two of the larger Conferences (19 participants from each conference). While most participants were Anglo-Australian, 14 participants were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and several other ethnicities were represented amongst the participants.

Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data collected via individual interviews and focus groups was done thematically. Thematic analysis is a well-recognised data analysis choice for qualitative interview data. Interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim

(using either transcribing software or engagement of a contracted transcriber), to allow thematic analysis to occur. Thematic analysis followed Braun et al.'s (2019) six stages: familiarisation, generating codes, constructing themes, revising themes, defining themes, producing the report. Sense-checking was provided through the Steering Group meetings as well as periodic SPD research meetings.

Ethical Review

The study was reviewed and approved by the Avondale University Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH.2023.019 and ETH.2023.020) on 8 February 2024. Care has been taken to ensure voluntary informed consent to participate and to present findings in a way which does not identify participants.



4.0 Key Findings

The research findings are presented in three major sections. The first section discusses the impact of family issues on Christian life discipleship (RO2 and RO3). Second, findings addressing church engagement and support are outlined (RO4). The third section focuses on strengthening family worship and Christian life discipleship practice (RO5). Direct quotes from participants are provided to illustrate the themes, and selected stories are shared throughout to extend understanding.

4.1 Impact of family issues on Christian life discipleship

The research findings deeply illustrate the ways family life issues impact Christian life discipleship practices in Adventist families in Australia. Some participants describe experiences of ongoing positive support and engagement within their church community as they navigate difficult family issues (illustrated in *Story A: My Active and Inclusive Church* and elaborated in later sections). Many other participants, however, experienced isolation and disengagement. This disengagement in turn contributed to a sense of grief and loss and diminished Christian life discipleship practice. Many participants also described how experiencing such family life issues has led them to re-evaluate, deconstruct and eventually rebuild their faith. The rest of this section discusses these impacts of family issues on Christian life discipleship in the participants' experience.

Isolation and disengagement

A range of family issues and their impact on Christian life were illustrated in participant narratives. Issues such as technology and social media, marital infidelity and divorce, local church decisions, LGBTQ, neurodiversity, mental health, and death were featured. The impact experienced by families varied in terms of the issue experienced but generally included the possibility of isolation and disengagement, a sense of grief and loss, a

Story A: My Active and Inclusive Church

As a young adult from a family of 6 siblings, nothing crazy has happened in our family, we've been blessed.

Dad recently had major surgery and we we're just so confident that everything would turn out OK and dad would recover completely. He did and all the family are really grateful. The church has been supportive, even more supportive than normal. They were always checking with me how he was going and that gave me confidence to just trust in God.

The church has impacted my life so much. I started attending about five years ago, the SDA church, and it's definitely helped me and my family a lot. We also enjoy it at the same time, it's everything, the community, the one-on-one sessions that we have, like the amount of time you know the pastor just knocks on the door, rocks up, gives us some material to read or DVD's and just shows interest in us, especially at the beginning.

They're very active, so I think it makes you feel like you're welcome. When I first started to attend, I was given new responsibilities, simple things at first and these responsibilities helped me to develop new skills and confidence. That really helped me.

As a family we open Sabbath; we sit around the table and pray and so we come to God. And Mum will guide me throughout the week to be accountable for how I spend my time. Both Mum and Dad lead me in discipleship and help me.

I'm happy how things run in my church, and I am really grateful. I'm so happy to belong to a church that is active, it's amazing how inclusive they are.

diminution of Christian life discipleship practices, and a re-evaluation and rebuilding of faith.

Families face a wide range of issues and events that lead to a sense of isolation, loneliness, and potential disengagement from each other or their community of faith. Technology and social media bring family disconnection as observed by the following conference departmental director:

Social media - it's the family, young kids, older kids, and parents themselves who get absorbed in that world which disconnects, it really does disconnect the family. (CONF018)

Divorce and the complexities of separated families is another issue according to another conference departmental director:

I've got two divorced sons and the complexities there around single parents trying to raise kids in separated homes, and the tired, exhausted parents not having time to invest in their kids. (CONF021)

Marital infidelity by one parent was the source of isolation and disengagement for siblings as explained by a young adult who reflected that their young siblings' faith had been tested and they 'slowly started to pull away' (YA003).

Another young adult recalls a time when their family experienced disconnection from the church, "we got kicked out of our sabbath school rooms for the university students so they could have cafes and stuff. And so, our families started to feel very disconnected from the church for a little bit" (YA010).

A parent whose child came out as gay speaks of the isolation received from the community of faith:

We felt shamed for years, didn't we? We felt shamed, that it was just very shameful, and the church's response to that, that isolation, that they sort of did to us and that sort of cutting off. (PC051)

Isolation is not just physical, but can be experienced amongst fellow believers, as this parent who dealt with LGBTQ issues in the family states:

I remember feeling very lonely walking around big camp here, thinking there are thousands of people on this campus, there must be others here who are dealing with this topic in their homes. (P061)

Loneliness and isolation from the community of faith are experienced by parents of neurodiverse children as stated by the following parents:

I haven't felt a lot of church support. I don't have a lot of people contact me asking us how we are. So, I can get lonely. And it's a little bit disappointing... I didn't want to condemn anybody, but objectively speaking, it has been lonely. (P044)

Sometimes it's been quite a lonely experience. I don't feel that the church is educated at all in regard to disability. (P053)

A still birth within the family was the factor in a young adults' family that led to isolation and disconnection from the church:

Mum had a still birth, a lot of blame put on us for why we had this still birth. Things like God has did this to you. You must have been bad. Things that are very traditional. We sort of didn't get invited out or connected much, people sort of avoided our family. (YA004)

From a pastoral perspective, the issue of mental health requires effort to stay in touch with those who experience isolation:

We have a family who is rarely able to make it to church...the father, he is dealing with mental health issues, and he is up and down but has been mostly down recently. And so being able to still look out for them which we've been doing. And then the senior pastor was able to go and visit them and touch base there. So, I think that's not making people feel guilty, trying to understand. (PR060)

Many issues can lead to a sense of isolation, loneliness, and disengagement. The implication for family ministries practice is that every effort needs to be made to engage and make meaningful connection with families experiencing a range of issues – including issues navigating social media use, cohabitation, relationship break ups, neurodiversity, gender and sexual identity and orientation, or mental unwellness. Such connection-making should consider the unique needs of particular families and, ultimately, should strengthen connections amongst members within families, strengthen the connection between the family and the local church community, and strengthen individual family members' connection with God. What often follows from isolation, loneliness and disengagement, is a sense of loss and grief with all its accompanying stages.

Grief and loss

Isolation, loneliness, and disengagement can lead to a sense of loss and grief. For example, grief and loss experienced when a significant other passes away. A young adult spoke of engaging in at-risk behaviour due to familial loss:

I started to do drugs again man, because I've lost my Nan, it's been like a whole 3 months, and I've lost like 10 people in my family and like close relatives. (YA029)

In similar circumstance, another young adult states familial loss as a key turning point in their spiritual journey:

I was very close to my nan back then and she was probably the tie for the family to something spiritual and she passed when I was very young and from then on God was not a thing at all...and in all that I became very numb... to everything. (YA005)

A parent equated her daughter's cohabitation as a grief event:

Our daughter was in year 12, she left to live with her boyfriend and that was a shock to the system because first of all, as [a] Polynesian mum, that was an epic failure... It was almost like a death in our family...and we still are recovering from that. (P050)

Grief and loss at times are hidden experiences. A parent whose spouse came out as gay reports:

As we journey through the pain of loss and grief, because that's what it is for both of us...when you have a death in the family or a spouse passes away and there's that grief and loss, people can see it, it's there. Other things, other grief is a little hidden and more private and personal. (P061)

It is "deep set trauma" for one parent who goes on to state for 20 years church was "a place where we were connected, we were part of church that was doing things and helping people. And we liked that and sharing God's faith with others" (PC051). However, after their child came out as gay the church's response felt like a "betrayal that took me a while because I was like in denial for a while. Probably went through the process of grief, I was in bit denial and then I got sort of angry" (PC051).

Loss and grief can be experienced by young adults as their cohort of friends move on with their lives and careers and relocate geographically. A young adult recalls:

A lot of my friends have moved and gone to do different things, and it can be hard to not be able to see them... and not be able to do the things that I used to do... with them. That's been the hardest thing. (YA045)

The impact of grief and loss arising from isolation, loneliness, and disengagement or other events and circumstances have both immediate and long-term effects on Christian life discipleship practices.

Diminished Christian life discipleship practice

The impact of isolation, loneliness, disengagement or grief events on families can diminish Christian Life Discipleship practices. A young adult explains what happened in the family when their dad passed away suddenly:

After that, like we didn't do Bible study together, like worships together [or] anything and like we kind of drifted. (YA008)

One parent experiencing family crisis with a range of issues amongst the children such as mental health and LGBTQ states:

I probably didn't seek as much comfort as I used to in reading the Bible and the promises there in the Bible... it has definitely affected that sort of daily probably prayer life and Bible time". (PC051)

A local church leader observes the impact of busy lifestyles of time poor families on discipleship practices:

All the devil has to do is make us busy or too tired. And everything goes by the wayside. He doesn't have to persecute us. He doesn't have to, you know, to do anything to make us lose our faith. We just do it out of busyness. You know, and things fade out after a while and you're like, "Oh, it's been a while since I did my Bible study." (LCL068)

This is reiterated by a young adult who explains that:

We used to read like a chapter of a book or something and then all through like individual prayers kind of thing. We kind of do the prayers now because it's a bit quicker, we've all got things to do in life. (YA010)

A parent reflects on the impact when their child was diagnosed with cancer:

And when my daughter was sick and things like that, I didn't spend much time with God, and consequently I felt quite alone. (P053)

Families experiencing diminished Christian life discipleship practices, or grief and loss arising from a variety of circumstances, can find themselves in a process of faith re-evaluation and rebuilding.

Re-evaluating and rebuilding faith

When facing significant family issues, some participants in this study reported giving up and not caring, while others experienced crises of faith or a questioning of God. Whether it is a defining of faith, or a reconciling of faith, all involve various levels in the process of re-evaluating, deconstructing, and rebuilding of faith. In relation to mental health, neurodiversity and LGBTQ issues experienced by parishioners, a pastor observes, "A lot of parents are possibly struggling with their spiritual walk"

simply “because of the answers to these questions that their kids are asking” (PR067). Re-evaluation, deconstruction, and rebuilding of faith came to a young adult, who grew up a ‘pastor’s kid’ (PK), during the early years of university study amongst friends who were non-practicing Adventists:

I was heavily influenced by two of them. I slid into drinking beer, and smoking weed. I just didn't know at the time. I just didn't care. You know what I mean? I think during that time, I was still trying to figure out what I believe. (YA041)

A parent reflects on her own Sabbath observance as a student at [Adventist education institution] and the shift in generational approaches toward such practices in her own family. These were reflected on as examples crisis of faith and re-evaluation of faith:

When I first went to [Adventist education institution] myself, my mum would always iron my clothes Thursday or Friday for church. When I was in the dormitories, no one was ironing like me beforehand - because I thought ironing on Sabbath was sin. I think these are all faith crises, little things one faces when amongst other believers. So, like our children now when they go to restaurants or cafes on Sabbath, we're mortified by it. (P050)

After many years of raising a neurodiverse child, a parent recounted their questioning of God throughout those years, and how the questioning has been resolved by an understanding that God has intervened throughout.

We always say, this is God because of what we've been through and what we encounter, challenges that God has intervened and brought us out of. And it would be foolish of us to turn away questioning God again. (PC058)

The process of defining faith for a young adult after the sudden death of Dad is explained as a familial experience involving all the family:

My mum questioned faith a little bit like she still went to church and everything...But like I think that's when we all questioned a little bit... My family were really breaking down and struggling that made me struggle even more because I don't know that faith is really strong around me, so I think that changed a lot. (YA008)

Reconciling faith amongst a shattered family and trying to put the pieces back together is how a parent explains what happened when the spouse came out as gay:

It's hard to reconcile that with God, to be honest. It is hard because he is for families and my family was falling apart. And I still feel like it's shattered although, you know, a lot of the pieces you have to pick up and put back together somehow, but as a family unit, that's never going to happen for us and I know that God is very sad about the situation too, and I just had to reconcile that. That's hard. (P061)

Deconstruction of faith is how one parent explains what took place after a series of circumstances in the family including a foster child returned to drug addicted biological parents, a child coming out as gay, and another child suffering anorexia:

I had what I call a deconstruction of faith. I don't know how else to call it, and now I'm trying to restructure it... So now, OK, how do I reconstruct this? How do I put it back because I can't throw it all out, I've had too much of God. I've had enough experiences where I believe. (P052)

A pastor recounted a story of a parent who experienced significant re-evaluation,

deconstruction, and rebuilding of faith due to her children coming out and identifying as gay in the context of a conservative church community:

Mum went from being a very conservative Adventist to being a very middle of the road, slash progressive Adventist who went on her own theological journey with a couple of us holding her hand. So, she went from last generation theology believing Adventists, to going, that's completely wrong. And because of her kids, she had to reassess her whole spiritual identity as well. And so not just the sexuality, but there's also spiritual identity happening there as well. The whole family spent three to four years in a wilderness of sorts. (PR057)

In summary, a wide variety of issues impact families and their Christian life discipleship development and practice. The impact of such issues can be found in families encountering a sense of isolation, loneliness, and potential disengagement from each other or their community of faith. A sense of loss and grief with all its accompanying stages can follow such experiences and carry the potential for both immediate and long-term diminution of Christian life discipleship practices. It is during these times families undergo a process of re-evaluation, deconstruction, and reconstruction of faith. Rebuilding faith is more likely if the right types of support and engagement are provided, which is discussed in the next section.

4.2 Church Engagement and Support

The participant narratives enrich understanding of how churches can best engage and support families, especially when families experience significant family life issues. The experience related in *Story B: Pulling Back from Church – It's So Hard* demonstrates the opportunities churches have to effectively engage and support such families.

Story B: Pulling Back from Church – It's So Hard

My eldest child is autistic, we have two younger ones with a possible diagnosis of ADHD. I work in early learning and served as a Sabbath school leader for 10 years. My husband has had mental health issues, spiritual trauma from his upbringing, and we have found an amazing psychologist, he's made so much progress. But it's been hard trying to balance life and fun and ministry and all that combined.

I've dealt better with my eldest's issues because that's my background. Hubby's mental health was much harder because there's stigma still in our churches. Prior to counselling, we felt we didn't have enough faith as our prayers were not being answered. That was super hard and a lot of times I felt alone trying to reach out, getting little from the church.

As our eldest was not coping with social cues and sensory issues, we decided to pull back from church. If they attended church, there was no learning because of trying to cope so much in the environment. It was putting lots of stress on hubby and me. So, we decided to start a home church. Starting small, helping my hubby to open the Bible again.

Let's pray together as he hasn't wanted to do that for so long because of what happened in the past, but now we're getting somewhere.

We looked for alternative churches with options for children with disabilities, but there isn't any I could find. I knew if it was a bad week at school, it was almost near impossible to attend church. So, we tried just going to sabbath school or just go to main service, but that didn't work. When church members who did not understand special needs children would say, "he's fine, don't worry", I felt invalidated.

Pulling back from church affected my other kids because they're like, "Why aren't we going to church? I miss my friends." Or "We're lonely, mum". So, it's a constant struggle. It's so hard as my other kids need connection. Now that I've pulled back, I don't hear from anybody, and that hurts. Did they just see me as a commodity? We're trying to invite people over, anything to try and find a balance of how we can incorporate my eldest, and husband's needs, but also make sure that we're still connecting with our church. That's our struggle at the moment.

I hope my church can learn from my story and find ways to support special needs children. It's hard to see children who can't help themselves being punished for not sitting still, for not doing certain things. Our learning styles need to change. If our schools need to up the ante and change strategies, so does our church.

Also, more education on mental health. I'm on an Adventist mother's forum and yesterday there was a mother just like me seeking help. She has two children with special needs and mental health illness in the family. She's feeling so lost and beating herself up because she knows what she should do but she's so overwhelmed.

The participant's experiences suggest that churches need to consider two types of support. First, support is needed during times of family crisis. Such support involves initial acceptance and validation of the situation by the church, ongoing prayer and personal contact, practical help, pastoral/elder visitation, and a small group support network. Second, outside of crisis situations, support more generally involves engaging young adults during Sabbath gatherings, establishing midweek support networks, and opportunities to serve others.

Support during family crisis

Acceptance and validation

Participants found that acceptance amongst the community of believers and validation is a powerful support apparatus for families during times of crisis. A parent of a neurodiverse child recounted their journey from one church to another until they found a community, stating in relation to that new community, "the church, they're so accepting of him" (PC058). Similarly, a pastor observed there was a need for attitudinal change in churches towards people in crisis from "a condemning approach to a more supportive" approach (PR062). One parent acknowledged that even though sometimes people do not know how to respond, "sometimes just listening is perfect" (P061).

Such support was appreciated by a parent who experienced a spouse coming out as gay. They believe their former spouse is fortunate, in that, "the church has not tackled them on this, and they are still involved in a service ministry that is their joy and passion, they love to serve the church this way" (P061). However, this is not always the case. One parent of a gay son who did not experience acceptance relates what happened to the family as betrayal and reflects on the type of response that would have been more helpful:

Story C: Finding Acceptance

I attended a church, and I knew the pastor there. I walked into the church, I was just visiting, and I was curious actually. The pastor saw me, came up to me as soon as I walked in the back door, put his arms around and he started crying. That set me off. Anyway, we talked for a little while, but he couldn't talk long. The church service was about to start, and it was communion service. So, I just happened to attend on a communion Sabbath. And I thought to myself, "Oh dear, do I dare take communion after all that's happened the last six months (resigning from ministry and coming out)?". At that stage, I was still very much emotionally unstable. Anyway, I decided I would. In fact, I think the pastor was the one who said, you know, "Please, please join us." He had a communion service where instead of the deacons bringing it to your seats, as is the normal custom, everyone got out of the seats and went to the front and got their bread and their cup of wine from the front. The pastor knew my story. And when I got to the front, the pastor was there handing them out, and he came from behind the table right to where I was standing and gave me a big hug, handed me the cup and the bread personally. And he was crying again. But this time I was in tears and everyone's looking at me thinking, "What the heck's going on here?" Obviously, I was someone special. But that's all that was said. He didn't say anything else. And you know, I was an emotional wreck for the rest of the service because of his affection and his encouragement just in his actions that day. And I will never forget and always be grateful to the pastor for what he did that day. I was very fragile at that stage and that was probably a major leap forward, a major leap in the right direction, because that was a very strong factor in me then joining up with the little church soon after.

I feel like there's a slight level of betrayal because I probably did fall into this as family, we're a church family. We do this well, families stick through with you, regardless, they might not know what to say, but they go "Well, I don't know what to say, but it must be hard and all I can say is I'm here for you". That's all you need to do.
(PC051)

Story C: *Finding Acceptance* demonstrates one person's experience of support expressed by a pastor, demonstrating acceptance of the person and thereby strengthening the person's faith and church engagement.

Living in a community of faith that is accepting and supportive in the face of varying family crises also involves spiritual and practical support.

Prayer and visitation

Participant stories revealed how prayer and visitation by the church members, and by pastors and elders, is a vital demonstration of support for families in crisis. A young adult explained:

If it wasn't for people pouring into me and praying for me - I think prayer is a big thing that changed as well regarding helping my family get through. (YA003)

Similarly expressed, a parent facing her own family crises with a child's cancer diagnosis stated, "people are compassionate and caring, you know, and wanting to pray for you" (P053).

The local community gathering in-person with families in crisis provides powerful support:

My dad had a car accident, and the church was just there in prayer, which I think is important and is very helpful. Considering Dad's accident, the church travelled up to the hospital, they were at the hospital and like came and prayed for him. (YA011)

Participants also discussed how pastoral and elder visits, in particular, were valued. Support from pastoral and elder leadership of the local church at times of crisis involving personal contact was meaningful for families experiencing crisis. A parent whose son suffered mental health issues states of her pastor, "he came and picked our son up and took him for a coffee" (PC048). Still another young adult recalls during ongoing marital issues with her parent's and issues with her father, support came when:

The pastor helped me realise that my dad was a man before I came along, and I don't know what stuff he went through. (YA032)

A pastor who came out as gay noted the value of elder contact:

There was a couple of church elders, one of whom I'm still in friendly contact with after all these years. And for the first few years he would phone me every two or three weeks to check on my welfare, and I've appreciated that more than anything else. (P046)

A conference departmental director recalled feedback from young adults:

We just want our local pastor to guide us and how we're going to do family worship and all the dynamics that we navigate simply because for them mum and dad aren't helping. (CONF015)

Local church pastoral and elder leadership personal support and in-person contact with families in crisis was highly valued by participants. Prayer and visitation from church members, elders and pastors provides support for families in crisis, as does the more practical intervention when families are in crisis.

Practical help

Practical help with food, cleaning house and appropriate resources. Church members who step into the midst of a family crisis with practical assistance provide wise support. A young adult explained that after the sudden death of her father:

We had some people that would come over and clean for us, so, I think it was supportive of the church because we didn't have to worry about that, especially mum". (YA008)

A parent recalled:

When my daughter was sick...I felt quite alone. But during those times, one of my church friends brought me meals and when we were in the hospital. So those acts of service are helpful and do make you feel that you're being supported. (P053)

Another parent who experienced divorce explains how support came to her from her local pastor:

She came and helped me through with some of the resources, financial and divorce and all that kind of stuff, decisions that you know had to be made at some point. (P061)

Practical needs-based support from the church for families in crisis is needed, however, small support groups were noted as beneficial as well.

Small group support

Support provided in a small group, such as in a sabbath school class context, was discussed by some participants as helpful to families in crisis. A pastor comments on the value of a supportive sabbath school group:

Pretty sure that's why people go to that class because they're able to talk about their traumas during the week, they're given permissions, and they're validated, often they stop and pray over people. (PR056)

Story D: Amazing Sabbath School Group provides a strong illustration of the difference belonging to a small group can make when experiencing significant family issues.

Families facing crisis situations find acceptance and validation of their situation by the local church as the beginning of support. Such support accompanied by in-person prayer and practical help aids the family in crisis to navigate the journey. Further, pastoral and elder visitation providing personal support greatly enhances the coping abilities of the family in crisis. Another layer of support that is considered valuable during crisis is the personal connections and support of sabbath school class members or small groups. Outside of a crisis, and more generally, other mechanisms of support for families were identified.

Support generally

Intergenerational connections

Participants talked about connections between church members and youth during Sabbath gatherings as a support strategy. A young adult recalled:

All their elders are asking how I'm doing a lot. You know, Pastor [name], he's always asking how it's going. (YA045)

Story D: Amazing Sabbath School Group

We were the classic orthodox Adventist family; our son attended an Adventist school K-12. When he was an early teen a close family friend was murdered. Shortly after, he found out his aunty, who was probably, apart from us, the next significant person in his life, had terminal cancer. He also experienced issues with same sex attraction. So, in his teenage years, depression became an issue. And then it snowballed on from there. It's been confronting and eye opening because we've had these extremes where there's been police involved and then our son got into drugs. At one stage he ended up in the intensive care unit of the mental health unit.

Fortunately, we've moved past all of those things, but it does change your how you view things, how you view the church, how you view the outside of the church.

For me, the notion of church is less important. I think I consider myself a Christian, a practising Christian, rather than saying I'm a Seventh-day Adventist. It's been more about that, than thinking about belonging to a church.

We were very lucky to have the Sabbath School class that we had and that's probably the only reason that we continue to go to that church. We had close friends, and our Sabbath School Class was always a very tight unit. That Sabbath School class has always been amazing.

The biggest thing in it all has been the message that it's not up to me ever to judge anyone. It's really important for kids like these to know that God does not make mistakes. Even from a mental health perspective, by not accepting, you're turning people away from God. Surely that should be our number one priority.

Another young adult pointed out that members need to “approach young people and really ask questions about them personally, how they’re doing,” because “that’s what really helped me a lot, was having a mentor. Having a mentor and having someone there to really like look up to in the church” (YA041). A parent explained their church’s united efforts to create “an awesome atmosphere at church for our young people (PC049).” While another parent identified that “mentoring” and “buddying up... would be a big help” (PC043).

According to the participants, families feel supported by their local church when members show interest and connect with young people during sabbath gatherings, churches have mentors, and there is a united approach to create a conducive atmosphere of support. These connections can then flow out to the community during the week.

Support networks

Participants also highlighted that connection beyond the Sabbath gatherings is required to foster spiritual growth and discipleship. It was widely recognised that weekday support networks need to be established. A parent reflected on the need for spiritual support during the week:

I feel like I have close friends in the church, and I think we support each other spiritually during the week with chat groups and different things like that. (P053)

A pastor recognised the need for members to connect during the week and is “trying to put together support networks or ways of supporting them” (PR057). Another pastor observed the strength of groups:

We have several different social groups that form, and they provided a great strength for those different areas. (PR055)

A parent detailed how valuable weekday group life is to them:

Building relationships with others in faith and outside of the actual church, so small groups, I think will help to establish and build, well, personally, my faith. I think you can become a lot more intimate with your relationship with God when you are in a small group. (P061)

A local church leader lamented the lack of group life in her setting:

We get a lot of new people off the street, but they don’t tend to stay very long. We’re not good at connecting them in. We don’t have enough cell groups. (LCL068)

Young adults expressed a longing for more weekday support:

But one thing I could say that could benefit would be coming out during the week, so I think it would be a good thing for the church to stay in touch. (YA029)

You have a relationship with the Lord, that’s great, but maintaining that relationship we can all just stay in touch. (YA032)

The establishment of weekday spiritual support groups that connect in supporting ways provide strength in the social groupings, and aids in establishing faith and intimacy with God. These avenues also offer opportunities for service.

Service

According to participants, opportunities to serve the community of faith and beyond is key to establishing a supportive environment. For one parent service is viewed as “nurturing other people as opposed to our actual faith” (PC049). Similarly,

the most important thing for another parent beyond developing a personal relationship with God is “a service orientation” (PC048). Despite taking on too much at times a parent stated, “I need to be supporting others, it builds your faith” (P053). A young adult recalls how the local church engages them in service and reflected, “a big part of your relationship with God is service” (YA041). *Story E: My Compassionate and Practical Church* demonstrates the role of service in development faith and support.

In summary, support includes that which is provided in times of crisis, and that which is provided more routinely as part of the life of the

church community. According to participants, family ministries for crisis support ideally provides vital acceptance and validation of the situation, as well as prayer, practical help, pastoral and elder visitation, and small group support. Support given generally involves establishment of mentors and connecting with young adults. Further support can be provided by creating networks of members who connect midweek to support each other. An essential element of such support is service to others. A more nuanced approach to supporting and strengthening families involves targeting family worship and family-based Christian life discipleship practices.

Story E: My Compassionate and Practical Church

My family is really close. There's Mum and my two siblings and I'm the youngest in the family. We lost Dad suddenly when I was 14 and that was really difficult for all of us. It rocked Mum and caused her to reevaluate everything. When something so unexpected happens it causes you to question your faith and that's what we all did. Mum continued to attend church but there was a drop from things like bible study that we used to do together, and worships together. It was a struggle to understand why it happened.

My sister is really spiritual, but she changed a lot after Dad's passing and that affected me as well. I saw how she was changing so much; it was so unusual to see my sister struggling, it was like my entire family was disintegrating as they tried to come to terms with our unexpected loss. I think that contributed to my own struggle as I saw everyone around me wrestling with their faith. It just seemed to evaporate, and things changed a lot.

Throughout this period the church was really supportive. They started to provide practical support for our family in what we later realised was a food chain. The pastor was the organiser, and it was an online tool where members opted in to support us with meals for certain days. And so, for weeks we had people bringing us like two meals a day. They would drop off the meals and hang in there with us for a bit. That was good because Mum didn't have to worry about cooking. They also arranged for members to come over and do house cleaning. The church was so supportive because we didn't have to worry about any of those things. It was especially good for Mum who could come home from work and just relax and not have to stress because she already had so much going on. It was time for her to be able to cope in her own way rather than have to deal with everyday things. That was really good for the church to help us in those ways.

My church is a Community Church, so we're all about bringing people in from the streets and making them involved. That was really big when I was younger, seeing that anyone can come to church, because I visit other churches and it's more conservative, which is fine, but like the thing I love is that our church is so inclusive. Everyone treats everyone as equals, which I love and just helping people in need. People coming to church and being at the church will really change their life. It was a big thing for me when I was younger, and I am really grateful that I grew up in a church like that.

4.3 Strengthening family worship and Christian life discipleship practices within families

Participants' experiences demonstrate what has worked to strengthen family worship and Christian life discipleship practices within families. Key strategies include modelling discipleship practices in being visible to children, creating quality time with children, engaging in dialogue and affirmation, and setting patterns for imitation. Prioritising early childhood discipleship is a strategy that includes, regular reading to children, and gathering a resource toolbox. Other strategies include a focus on scripture and prayer as indispensable. While consistency as united leaders of the family and inclusivity of children are also significant strategies. Maintaining a flexibility and willingness to accommodate time pressures are other strategies. In terms of resource strategy, priority needs to be given to equipping families for daily worship practices especially in conversational tools. Pastoral modelling and the recognition of cultural uniqueness are important strategies, as is an overall corporate strategy involving effective lines of communication.

Modelling in family

Become visible in discipleship practices

Parental modelling includes parents practicing their faith and leading by example, visibly demonstrating their personal discipleship practices such as studying bible and praying (Lister et al.,2020). Young adult participants shared how their faith journey was strengthened by seeing their family members model Christian life discipleship practices. Young adults, for example, stated:

They lead a lot by example... Mum always has a morning Bible study and so does Dad and sometimes I see them doing it. So, you know they're wanting to set an example of what a good relationship would look like if you want to continually search for God. (YA045)

My mum studying her lesson every day she is consistent. So, my grandma and my mum and watching both of them and then now me trying to be consistent, I think that has helped with my faith. (YA002)

A pastor underscored this point:

Just let the kids see you praying, let the kids see you reading your Bible and modelling how those conversations happen. (PR057)

Parental modelling begins with parents taking personal responsibility for the discipleship of their children with less reliance on school, conference departments or programed corporate events as observed from a conference departmental perspective:

I think outside of the programme perspective, what families need is less reliance on the church to spiritually raise their children. Adventist families aren't doing worship like they once used to. And it's kind of been offloaded onto the departmental / church / school. (CONF022)

A pastor observed:

There's a real biblical illiteracy amongst our young people, and I'm wondering if that's also neck tied to the lack of family worship that's taking place... Parents have farmed that responsibility out to the sabbath school divisions. (PR064)

The findings highlight that Christian life discipleship practices such as bible study and prayer are primary parental responsibilities to visibly model to their children. This requires setting aside time for such practices as well as time for the gathered family.

Create quality time

According to participants, regularly scheduling the gathering of the family to spend time together, to sit and talk with children, is a priority. One young adult recalls how “Dad and mum always like to get us off our phones, get us out of our rooms, come and like, spend time with the family” (YA027). Similarly, a conference departmental director shares the key is not so much the content, but the time sitting and talking together.

The instigation of that community within your family unit, coming together... Whatever [the content] is, make sure that people come together. The key is we're sitting together and we're talking together within this house, and if we're sharing time as a family that's where you know we need to gather the stability, there's support, there's love, there's all that. (CONF018)

This is reiterated by a pastor:

Some of these important things, like raising children and having devotional time, you know how we gather together and what an important concept to gather together, those things are really important. (PR047)

Creating quality time sitting and talking as a family provides opportunities for dialogue and affirmation.

Engage in dialogue and affirmation

Participants highlighted that parental modelling can be significantly enhanced when parents seek to debrief and engage in dialogue with their children over experiences or events and take opportunities to extend genuine affirmation. A young adult explains:

After every church service Dad always says, "What did you think of the sermon? What was it like? What did you get from it?" which shows that he's interested. And Mum is, you know always saying, well, what do you think? What do you think of the church service? (YA045)

A further example:

Every Saturday, we used to watch the Chosen, the TV series, and afterwards we'd always talk about, like what happened in the episode. What do you think of it? (YA045)

Reflecting on times when their single mother would gather the children for worship, this young adult recalls:

I think she does what she can, you know, does a lot for me and for all the other kids, I think that's one of the most important things, parent concludes with praise to their children. (YA009)

It is during times when the family is gathered talking, sharing, and worshipping, that there are opportunities for parents to dialogue, debrief, affirmation and praise. Furthermore, the key to establishing these practices is to start early.

Prioritise early childhood discipleship

Regular reading

A pastor highlights the value of regular time reading bible stories with children serves as a protective factor:

Reading to your kids 10 minutes a day lifts their vocabulary and increases family resilience because parents and children are spending time together, you know there's

so many outcomes I can point to out of just one... Adventist tradition. It turns out it's a protective factor for our families (PR047)

Prioritising regular reading times with children presupposes the family has adequate resources to utilise.

Gather resource toolbox

The critical nature of ensuring parents have quality bible-based story books to read to their children daily is clearly depicted in the following story told by a director of a local conference department.

A smaller country church has three families with young children that come along. The church wants each of the families to tell the children's story. One family is asked but they don't know what stories to tell, and so the church asks them to just bring the favorite Bible story book that you read your children and bring it along and read that as a children's story. The husband and wife were both raised in very strong Adventist families and they both said. "We don't have a single book, we don't have a single book that we read our kids for Bible stories except for the Bible, and that's too much for them, so we don't". The parents grew up in Adventist families that worked for the church and the whole time, not a single book for their 3-4-year-olds to tell them stories. (CONF013)

Establishing a toolbox of resources and reading good quality age-appropriate bible-based literature to children for 10 minutes each day is understood by participants as a protective factor for families as they lead their children into lifelong Christian life discipleship practices. An important component to the toolbox is to have resources that are bible based.

Focus on scripture and prayer

Participants emphasised that during family gatherings or worship, it is vital to teach from the scriptures and allow them to guide in all situations. They also showed that prayer is indispensable. In relation to scripture, several young adults recall what took place in their family growing up:

Reading part of the bible when I was younger and growing up. Bible stories and all that sort of stuff. (YA012)

Whenever we faced issues, it was always just go back and let's open up the Bible (YA004)

As stated above, one pastor was concerned about biblical illiteracy, while a young person reflects it would have been good to "have had more open conversations about the Bible" (YA041). The scriptures provide the source of authority for teaching our children as expressed by a pastor who stated that "the only real way is to continue to uphold the Bible as an authority" (PR047).

Participants narratives suggest that parents should seek opportunity to teach from the bible, uphold it as authoritative, and engage in open conversations about scripture, laying down a biblical knowledge for children to return to as a guide for any situation they may encounter in life. Working hand in glove with scriptural encounters is the indispensable practice of prayer.

Prayer is also a critical spiritual discipline and component of Christian life discipleship and an integral part of family worship. A young adult stated that what was helpful is that "we do nightly prayers as a family together" (YA009). Capturing the indispensable role of prayer a parent concludes:

In this ever-increasing busy time, I mean, I know families are always busy, but in this information overload time we need a time to pair back, like switch off, and come together as family for prayer, devotion, sharing God's word. (P050)

When time pressures are brought to bear on family worship, prayer remains core to the gathered family according to this young person:

My family we do nightly worships. We used to read like a chapter of a book or something and then all through like individual prayers kind of thing. We kind of do the prayers now because it's a bit quicker, we've all got things to do in life, which is not great, but like we're still putting time aside, just don't go as long. (YA010)

The influence of parents and grandparents as praying persons is incalculable as demonstrated by this young person's experience:

I think back to the prayer thing, like my grandma's the best, consistent for me as well, like the grandma's prayers. She was my role model. (YA003)

Prayer was discussed by participants as an indispensable practice during family worship and has profound influence when modelled by parents and grandparents. Parents who set the expectations that family members pray during family worship are establishing lifelong coping strategies. Several young adults reflect on their experience:

Praying at home consistently, especially like starting the Sabbath. We just take that chance to, like, just pray together as a family. (YA041)

Growing up in an Adventist home shapes the way that I see life now. And if it wasn't for like people pouring into me and praying for me. I think prayer is a big thing that helped my family get through the challenges because it's like throughout each journey, like everyone always says, the power of prayer works miracles. For me that was a big thing. (YA003)

Our grandma, she's genuine when it comes to her prayers. So, our grandma prays in the morning, midday 12:00 and in evening, so whenever we're at grandma's house, yes, we are expected to join her. (YA002)

Prayer is indispensable, it forms part of every family worship. The influence of parents and grandparents setting the expectation of prayer as a normative Christian life discipleship practice in the home has a profound and lasting influence for children as they mature into adulthood and face their own challenges. The central role of prayer and its regular place in family worship provides a springboard to the overall consistency needed by parents in leading their families in worship.

Consistency

Consistent parental leadership, according to participants, is needed for children to join in family worship times, away from distractions such as technology and social media. A young adult recalls:

Mum's very insistent on it [gathering for worship], so even if it's 10:00pm and we're all really tired and like, we gather around. (YA011)

For one young adult, even though their parents were overseas, they still lead by keeping them accountable:

My parents are overseas, so yeah, they keep me accountable asking "how was church this weekend"? Kind of just checking in. (YA012)

Two young adults explain their parent's leadership in requests to come away from technology, games, and social media:

[I'm] truly grateful and blessed to have a dad who helps us keep our connection with God.

Every Friday night, we would be expected to come out like open Sabbath and sanctify hours from Friday night to Saturday night. Dad and mum always get us off our phones, get us out of our rooms, come and like, spend time with the family. (YA027)

And then Mum just keeps me accountable throughout the week. Sometimes I'm lazy like I played games like four nights and so mum is like cut down the games, especially on Sabbath. (YA007)

A pastor explains it “it is every pastor’s dream” (PR065) to have parents who model consistent leadership in establishing a worship time every day for the family. Leading the family in consistent daily worship involves keeping their children accountable to join family worship away from all distractions. A united approach, of support and commitment from both parents, is ideal in gathering the family and creating regular worship experiences:

My parents, I guess playing dual roles. If one forgets then the other one will remember. (YA012)

A local church leader commented that what is lacking in family worship leadership in Adventist homes is leadership from men: “It is lacking in our church, women are crying out because their men aren’t high priest. (LCL069). Although such a united approach can be difficult for single parent families, or families where only one parent is Adventist or Christian, ideally, united and consistent leadership of parents calling children away from technology to join the family lays down the patterns for regular family worship, enabling children to be part of the wider family dynamic. This dynamic is greatly enhanced when the children are directly involved as participants.

Involving children

Participants also pointed out that it is important to involve children in family worship times, intentionally creating opportunities and make space for children to share their experience and participate in worship times (Chelladurai et al., 2018). A young adult reflects on involvement in prayer during worship:

My family, we do nightly worships. We used to read like a chapter of a book or something and then all do individual prayers kind of thing. (YA010)

Another young adult picks up on the sharing time in their family worship experiences:

We have nightly family devotions, but it's more like you kind of share, one person can share what they've learned throughout the week or like what they did in their personal journey. (YA011)

Involvement, participation, and inclusivity during gathered family worship moments can be challenged by the busy pace of life. Parents who can be flexible and still accommodate Christian life discipleship practices in light of time constraints continue to model and lead the family.

Flexible and Accommodating

The participant narratives suggest that families face an ever-increasing demand for their time, and parents can shorten and simply family worship moments due to time constraints and demonstrate flexibility. A pastor recognises the problem from conversations with some of his members:

'We just don't even have the capacity to do family worship.' I'm like, 'OK, so how would you have the capacity to do family worship?' I think it's something that they just don't want to engage in because of everything else that's going on. (PR057)

Another pastor reiterates this issue and calls for different approaches:

Do we all have to be together as a family at one time when the family is so divided with commitments? We must find different ways and methodologies of maybe increasing people's spirituality that can work for them. (PR062)

Despite time pressures, putting time aside for worship is part of this young adult's experience:

We've all got things to do in life, which is not great, but like we're still putting time aside, just don't go as long. (YA010)

Flexibility from a pastoral perspective involves taking every opportunity:

Family worship can be for two minutes in the morning in the car. It doesn't have to be sitting down around a table and pulling out a book or do an activity. We need to simplify things as much as we can for our families. (PR057)

The findings suggest that parents can be flexible and accommodating in their approach to daily family worship, shortening and simplifying as needed, and being innovative and creative. In summary, this section has outlined what the findings suggest families and parents can do to strengthen family worship and Christian life discipleship practices in families. The next section moves to discuss findings about strengthening the resourcing, strategy and communication in family ministries in the Adventist church in Australia.

Resources, Strategy, Communication

The findings show that family ministries needs to equip families for family worship. As referenced

above, some learn Christian life discipleship practices in their family of origin while others have never been exposed to such disciplines and require some other form of teaching and equipping. This is captured in the following conference departmental and pastoral perspectives:

I think if we can get better resources. Families don't even know what it looks like or how to do it. (CONF016)

If there's one thing to teach children and families, it's to have morning and evening devotions. Having that relationship one to one with Jesus and then as a family with Jesus I think has got to be a foundation. So, things that continue to sure that up. (PR047)

I think some training, some more equipping for parents, some specific equipping for parents in terms of how to model their faith daily. (PR057)

Participants identified the need for **training and equipping** Adventist families in the basics of family worship practice. Local church pastors recognise this and approach it from a variety of methods.

Currently, pastors approach **modelling family worship** to their members using a variety of techniques, such as recording their own family's simple devotions to share or inviting families into their own home to model the experience in person. While others seek to model everyday experiences as a worship moment.

I taped my family having family worship and send it to them and they came back and went, 'Oh, wow, that's amazing, we have never seen anything like this before,' and it was like a plain Jane worship, just like I did growing up in my family. (CONF019)

We invite them over to our place for closing Sabbath or something like that, some things I feel are better caught than taught and we'll lead it, we'll model it to them and over a period of time, hopefully they will understand. (PR063)

A pastor believes everyday experiences can be transformed into worship moments for families.

We can create anything that's going on into a worship. Whether we're out riding bikes or walking in the park we can just stop and bring God into the picture and speak into it and allow God to speak into it. So, its parents being aware of or how do I take advantage of all the opportunities that are happening in our life and turn them into worship moments. (PR054)

Such pastoral modelling is valuable and can be complimented by additional resources to assist families to gather together.

Conversational tools were also highlighted. As demonstrated above, there exists an opportunity to develop a range of tools designed to draw families together in conversation and to assist families as they spend time in worship. A pastor named "The Worship Box" as a useful and "easy to use tool to help conversation" (PR055). Another approach to demonstrating family worship and conversational tools is found in the requests for respected specialists in family life to create studio quality family life productions. While a variety of approaches to modelling family worship and family life were recommended and employed by pastors at a local level, not every family is the same.

The Adventist landscape in Australia is diverse and production of resources must consider the **cultural differences** in family worship practices. A pastor makes the effort to visit people in their homes to better understand the cultural differences, to know how to encourage and support them in family worship in ways that make sense for the family culturally:

We have got quite a number of African families, that's a new ball game and learning their cultural protocols. A couple of Filipino families. So, I'm slowly getting into their homes and just finding out what works, what doesn't to help them with family worship. (PR054)

Given the wide diversity of cultural approaches to family life and worship practices, it will require a corporate approach for resource development and their roll out to meet a variety of needs. In summary, the findings suggest how to strengthen the way family ministries equips, trains and resources family worship and Christian life discipleship practices in families.

Corporate strategy and communication

Key to effective family ministry is investment in local church training and resource availability. Such a conference department, resourced by specialist family ministry personnel, and effective communication into the local church, will better meet needs. Local church leaders are seeking greater training and equipping investment in their local church from conference departmental personnel.

The conference, if they have a family ministry person, they really need to get out to the churches. Have these seminars in churches, bring tools to the table. (LCL069)

There needs to be a lot more train-the-trainer kind of thing because the conference office has all these people that are employed full time doing all this work. But if it doesn't translate to the end person/family in the church, there is no point, like there's a big disconnect in the middle. (LCL068)

At the same time, a local conference department director recounted how they have directly

attempted to equip families with family worship tools by adding a family worship space during early morning camp, rather than preaching. Still, structuring conference departmental where multiple roles fall on a single person is seen as a hinderance to effectively equipping churches.

People that work at the conference office... sometimes wear three or four hats. They're so stretched they can't give you the resources because they scattered in their own work. So, they actually can't concentrate and hone in on one thing and do it right and equip the church. (LCL069)

This is reiterated by a pastor:

I can't get a family ministries leader now. Just slipping between the cracks and it's also conflicting with children's ministries leader. So, the children's ministries leader is supposed to sit with all the heads of the departments and say, "How's it going? Do you need resourcing? What are your problems?" So where does family ministries sit? (PR056)

In conference communication and resource accessibility, there is frustration at the lack of cut-through at local church level. A local church leader states:

I'm sure there's so many resources out there that the conference provides that different ministry guys provide, but getting it to us in the family, at church, we never hear about them. We never know about them. Most emails get sent to the pastor, which never gets passed on. (LCL068)

You know, there are so many resources out there, but no one knows where they are. Why do we not have a centralised database? They are not in a repository. They need to be. (LCL068)

A more central place where they can get more information and especially like the Adventist view on things and answers to some of their own questions, I think that might be helpful to be able to address issues. (PR066)

In summary, local church pastors and leaders observe the multiple tasks and roles departmental persons carry and are expected to administer, as unrealistic. Further, under current structures the role of family ministry is effectively non-existent and falls through the cracks. Finally, from a local church leader perspective, there is an identified communication gap with information and resources not flowing smoothly from conference through to local church leaders and members. Attention will now be given to final conclusions and recommendations.

5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

This qualitative study has generated themes on how to strengthen family ministries in the Adventist church in Australia from the experiences and perspectives of Adventist parents and young adult, including those who have experienced significant family issues. To complement young adult and parent voices, local pastors and conference and local church leaders' voices have also contributed insights. Together, the findings generated from the narratives of the 69 participants provide nuanced understanding to enrich family ministries resourcing and practice in the Adventist church in Australia.

Overall, the picture painted from these narratives, is that by better engaging and supporting families the church has greater opportunity for missional impact. The missional opportunity is even more pronounced when families navigate significant family issues and journey through a family crisis. The participant narratives describe situations both where families experienced impactful support (for example from a small group, or through prayer, practical help or visitation), and where the support and engagement was less than adequate, and families experienced stigma, isolation and disengagement. The findings concur with other research (Cincala et al., 2021) indicating that families who experience significant negative life events tend to experience increased isolation and less pastoral support.

While the participants in this current study were drawn from within the Adventist church, there will be myriads of people who are no longer 'in' the church as a direct result of poor responses to a significant family situation contributing to their decision to leave. Future research could collect data from families who have left the church because of a family issue, to better understand how family ministries could have contributed to a different outcome. Nonetheless, this current study strongly indicates areas where the church could be better equipped to serve the changing demographic of Adventist families in Australia.

The data suggests that family ministries as a distinct ministry at the grassroots local level is sparse. Furthermore, local leaders in related areas (women's ministries, children, youth) identified a need for better access to resources and support for their roles. Strengthening both resources and dedicated local family ministries leadership, as well as better equipping pastors, could positively impact retention and nurture concerns in the church. Focusing on families is important because families have a significant bearing on faith-development. The themes garnered in this current study suggest that parental modelling of faith and discipling from early childhood is important. While parents and families are increasingly 'time-poor', intentional time, engaging children in regular devotional reflections and service were identified as Christian life discipleship practices which should be strengthened. There is such potential for strong missional impact through strengthening family ministries. Practical ministry recommendations arising from this study, to harness the exponential potential of family ministries for overall missional impact in the Adventist church in Australia, are listed on the next page.

For SPD, Union and Conferences

<p>Family Ministry Approach - Apply a family ministry lens across all ministry areas (SPD/Union/Conferences)</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>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)</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Personnel - Rethink the organisational structure to ensure adequate family ministry personnel coverage and visibility across the church system (SPD/Unions/Conferences).</p>	<p>The research highlights that family ministries can get sidelined when mixed with a range of other portfolios.</p>
<p>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).</p>	<p>There are missed opportunities to synergise family ministries efforts and too few mechanisms to energise family ministries through teamwork across the church system.</p>
<p>Strategy - Develop a shared SPD-wide strategy specific to family ministries to drive relevant policy and resource development and good practice (SPD)</p>	<p>Given the exponential potential of family ministry for missional impact, an intentional and cohesive strategy is needed.</p>

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.

Recommendations 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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7.0 Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheets



Information Sheet – Leaders and Pastors

Adventist Families in Australia Study

Family ministries is an important part of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist church, yet there have been few studies, and little done recently, on the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia to inform family ministries resourcing. The South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church has commissioned this study on Adventist families in Australia, on behalf of the Australian Union Conference (AUC). This study is engaging a range of stakeholder perspectives on ministry to Adventist families using mixed methods such as interviews, focus groups and surveys. The results of this study will inform AUC's strategic planning for the next quinquennium.

INVITATION

You are invited to participate in an individual or focus group interview. This research project is being conducted by researchers who are part of the Scripture, Spirituality and Society Research Centre at Avondale University. The Researchers are:

Prof Tracie Mafileo (Research Professor), Avondale University tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au

Prof Rob McIver (Professor), Avondale University rob.mciver@avondale.edu.au

Dr Barry Gane (Adjunct Professor), Avondale University barry.gane@avondale.edu.au

Pr Colin Renfrew (Research Assistant), Avondale University colin.renfrew@avondale.edu.au

Mr Ben Archer (Research Assistant), Avondale University ben.archer@avondale.edu.au

There may be other research assistants engaged to assist with data collection.

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

The study aims to:

1. Investigate the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia, compared with Australian families in general.
2. Identify issues affecting Adventist families in Australia.
3. Examine how family make-up and family issues impact Christian life practices within Adventist families in Australia.
4. Understand how the church can best support Adventist families, including Christian life discipleship practices within Adventist families in Australia.
5. Examine how family worship and individual Christian life discipleship practices can be strengthened within Adventist families in Australia.
6. Provide recommendations for strengthening family ministries in the Adventist church in Australia.

In this study, Christian life discipleship is defined as the lifetime process of making room for God so that He can live in us. It is centred in Jesus Christ and affects the whole of life during which spiritual life is formed from the inside out.

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WHO IS BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate if you:

1. Are employed as a minister by the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia and regularly visit your church members (undertaking 5 visits per week minimum). OR
2. Serve(d) in a family, women's, children (including sabbath school) or youth ministry leadership role in a local Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia (either currently or sometime in the last three years). OR
3. Are employed by a Seventh-day Adventist church Conference in Australia with a family, women's, children or youth ministries portfolio.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in either an individual or a focus group interview, either in-person or online. If you are part of a focus group, you will be with others in similar roles from across Australia. If you participate in a focus group, you will be required not to disclose any content discussed by others during the focus group session. If we can attend events where groups of ministers or leaders are gathering, we will prefer to conduct interviews and focus groups in-person. If that is not possible, we will be conducting individual and focus group interviews online using Teams or Zoom.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

It is anticipated that individual interviews will take approximately 45 minutes, while focus groups will take approximately two hours.

POSSIBLE RISKS OR INCONVENIENCES

It is expected that there will be minimal risk or inconvenience to you if you choose to participate. There may be some issues which you or others in a focus group feel very passionate about, and talking about these matters may heighten emotions. If this is the case, you can ask for the interview or focus group to be paused or you could choose to withdraw your participation. The researcher(s) will also check in with you and give information on where you can seek further support if needed.

BENEFITS

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise you any individual benefits from participating in this research. We do, however, anticipate that this research will help the Adventist church in Australia to strategically plan and implement family ministries initiatives.

CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

The identities of research participants will not be included in any reports or presentations. All names will be removed from the data and you will be allocated a numerical code which will be used in all interview data. All aspects of the study, including results, will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise.

However, given that some topics of conversation include sensitive information, if during the course of your engagement with this study, you disclose information which identifies a child (or, if relevant, someone who is in a residential facility) currently at-risk of abuse, the

researcher will be required to report the situation to the relevant authorities, according to the mandatory reporting requirements for the state or territory of jurisdiction where either the participant, researcher or at-risk person resides.

The data will be stored electronically for five years in password protected folders. At the end of the five-year period after the conclusion of the research, electronic data will be erased from discs, servers and hard drives and any hard copy data and identifying information will be confidentially shredded.

USE OF INFORMATION COLLECTED

The information collected will be analysed and generically reported in a research report, research presentations, peer reviewed journal articles and professional conferences. Confidentiality of individual participants and organisations (such as names of local churches and Conferences) will be assured, but the Adventist church in general will be identified. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. Participants will be sent a summary of the final results via email.

FREEDOM OF CONSENT

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only people who give their informed consent will be included in the study. Even if you agree to participate you may withdraw at any time until the commencement of data analysis without giving a reason. That is, your data will be deleted from electronic and paper files and none of your quotes will be used in reporting. If you participated in a focus group, however, while no direct quotes from you will be used in reports or presentations, your influence on the focus group discussion cannot be withdrawn. Further, if you participated in a focus group it will not be possible to remove your contributions from the audio or video recording, even though none of your direct quotes will be used in analysis and reporting. If you decide not to participate or wish to withdraw from the project at any time, you will not be disadvantaged.

Please read this information statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. After you have read this information, if there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, you can contact the researcher.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like further information, please contact Prof Tracie Mafile'o on tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au, +61 2 4980 2198 or +64 212692236.

If you have a complaint or concern about this research project or the way it is conducted, contact Avondale's Research Services Office at PO Box 19, Cooranbong, NSW, 2265 or phone +61-2-4980 2121, or email: researchoffice@avondale.edu.au. You may also wish to discuss your concerns with the researcher.

Thank you for considering this invitation.



Prof Tracie Mafile'o



Information Sheet – Parents

Adventist Families in Australia Study

Family ministries is an important part of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist church, yet there have been few studies, and little done recently, on the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia to inform family ministries resourcing. The South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church has commissioned this study on Adventist families in Australia, on behalf of the Australian Union Conference (AUC). This study is engaging a range of stakeholder perspectives on ministry to Adventist families using mixed methods such as interviews, focus groups and surveys. The results of this study will inform AUC's strategic planning for the next quinquennium.

INVITATION

You are invited to participate in an individual or focus group interview. This research project is being conducted by researchers who are part of the Scripture, Spirituality and Society Research Centre at Avondale University. The Researchers are:

Prof Tracie Mafle'o (Research Professor), Avondale University tracie.mafleo@avondale.edu.au

Prof Rob McIver (Professor), Avondale University rob.mciver@avondale.edu.au

Dr Barry Gane (Adjunct Professor), Avondale University barry.gane@avondale.edu.au

Pr Colin Renfrew (Research Assistant), Avondale University colin.renfrew@avondale.edu.au

Mr Ben Archer (Research Assistant), Avondale University ben.archer@avondale.edu.au

There may be other research assistants engaged to assist with data collection.

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The study aims to:

1. Investigate the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia, compared with Australian families in general.
2. Identify issues affecting Adventist families in Australia.
3. Examine how family make-up and family issues impact Christian life practices within Adventist families in Australia.
4. Understand how the church can best support Adventist families, including Christian life discipleship practices within Adventist families in Australia.
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In this study, Christian life discipleship is defined as the lifetime process of making room for God so that He can live in us. It is centred in Jesus Christ and affects the whole of life during which spiritual life is formed from the inside out.

WHO IS BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate if you are a parent/caregiver of a child or young person (under 24 years), AND you are part of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia through either baptism, attendance, or family association, AND you have dealt with a significant family issue (self-defined). Invitations to participate are being passed on to local church pastors to then pass on to those in their churches.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview, preferably in-person, but online is also acceptable (using Teams or Zoom) with one of the research team. You may participate alongside your spouse if you wish. The venue of any in-person interview will be negotiated with you – but a quiet place is needed. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. This will help us to look for themes across all the interviews and will help us accurately reflect your perspective and experiences when we present the findings.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

It is anticipated that individual interviews will take approximately 45 minutes.

POSSIBLE RISKS OR INCONVENIENCES

It is expected that there will be minimal risk or inconvenience to you if you choose to participate. However, we acknowledge that some of the things you talk about may cause discomfort or may be difficult to discuss. At any time during the interview, you can ask for the interview to be paused, for the recording to stop or you could choose to withdraw your participation. The researcher you are talking to will also give information on where you can seek further support if needed and will check in with you following the interview.

BENEFITS

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise you any individual benefits from participating in this research. We do, however, anticipate that this research will help the Adventist church in Australia to strategically plan and implement family ministries initiatives, which is intended to then benefit Adventist families throughout Australia. Following the interview, you will be provided with a \$20 grocery voucher as a token of appreciation for your time and contribution.

CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

The identities of research participants will not be included in any reports or presentations. All names will be removed from the data and you will be allocated a numerical code which will be used in all interview data. All aspects of the study, including results, will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise.

However, given that some topics of conversation include sensitive information, if during the course of your engagement with this study, you disclose information which identifies a child

(or, if relevant, someone who is in a residential facility) currently at-risk of abuse, the researcher will be required to report the situation to the relevant authorities, according to the mandatory reporting requirements for the state or territory or jurisdiction where either the participant, researcher or at-risk person resides.

The data will be stored electronically for five years in password protected folders. At the end of the five-year period after the conclusion of the research, electronic data will be erased from discs, servers and hard drives and any hard copy data and identifying information will be confidentially shredded.

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The information collected will be analysed and generically reported in a research report, research presentations, peer reviewed journal articles and professional conferences. Confidentiality of individual participants and organisations (such as names of local churches and Conferences) will be assured, but the Adventist church in general will be identified. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. Participants will be sent a summary of the final results via email.

FREEDOM OF CONSENT

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only people who give their informed consent will be included in the study. Even if you agree to participate you may withdraw at any time until the commencement of data analysis without giving a reason, and none of your quotes will be used in reporting. If you decide not to participate or wish to withdraw from the project at any time, you will not be disadvantaged.

Please read this information statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. After you have read this information, if there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, you can contact the researcher.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like further information, please contact Prof Tracie Mafile'o on tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au, +61 2 4980 2198 or +64 212692236.

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Thank you for considering this invitation.

Signature



Prof Tracie Mafile'o



Information Sheet – Young Adult Individual Interviews

Adventist Families in Australia Study

Family ministries is an important part of what the Seventh-day Adventist church does, yet there have been few studies, and little done recently, on the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia to inform family ministries resourcing. The South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church has commissioned this study on Adventist families in Australia, on behalf of the Australian Union Conference (AUC). This study is engaging a range of perspectives on ministry to Adventist families using interviews, focus groups and surveys. The results of this study will inform AUC's strategic planning for the future.

INVITATION

You are invited to participate in an individual interview with one of the researchers. This research project is being conducted by researchers who are part of the Scripture, Spirituality and Society Research Centre at Avondale University. The Researchers are:

Prof Tracie Mafle'o (Research Professor), Avondale University tracie.mafle'o@avondale.edu.au

Prof Rob McIver (Professor), Avondale University rob.mciver@avondale.edu.au

Dr Barry Gane (Adjunct Professor), Avondale University barry.gane@avondale.edu.au

Pr Colin Renfrew (Research Assistant), Avondale University colin.renfrew@avondale.edu.au

Mr Ben Archer (Research Assistant), Avondale University ben.archer@avondale.edu.au

There may be other research assistants engaged to assist with interviews.

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

The study aims to:

1. Investigate the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia, compared with Australian families in general.
2. Identify issues affecting Adventist families in Australia.
3. Examine how family make-up and family issues impact the development of Christian Life within Adventist families in Australia.
4. Understand how the church can best support Adventist families, including Christian life discipleship practices within Adventist families in Australia.
5. Examine how family worship and individual Christian life discipleship practices can be strengthened within Adventist families in Australia.
6. Provide recommendations for strengthening family ministries in the Adventist church in Australia.

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In this study, Christian life discipleship is defined as the lifetime process of making room for God so that He can live in us. It is centred in Jesus Christ and affects the whole of life during which spiritual life is formed from the inside out.

WHO IS BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate if you are a young person aged 18-30yrs, AND part of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia through either baptism, attendance, or family association, AND any ONE of the following describes you:

- Identifies as LGBTQ+
- Has a close family member who identifies as LGBTQ+
- Has a close family member who has struggled with mental health issues
- Is neurodiverse
- Has a close family member who is neurodiverse
- Is a survivor of family violence and currently in a safe living situation
- Has a close family member who is a survivor of family violence and currently in a safe living situation
- Has dealt with any other significant family issue (self-defined).

Invitations to participate are being passed on to local church pastors or youth leaders to then pass on to young people in their churches.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview with one of the researchers. While in-person interviews are preferred, at a quiet venue agreeable to both yourself and the researcher, it is also possible to do online interviews (either Teams or Zoom). With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. This will help us to look for themes across all the interviews and will help us accurately reflect your perspectives and experiences when we present the findings.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes.

POSSIBLE RISKS OR INCONVENIENCES

We acknowledge that some of the things you talk about may cause discomfort or may be difficult to discuss. At any time during the interview, you can take a break, choose not to answer a question, ask for the recording to stop, or you could choose to withdraw your participation altogether. The researcher doing your interview will also give information on where you can seek further support if needed and may check in with you following the interview.

BENEFITS

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise you any individual benefits from participating in this research. We do, however, anticipate that this research will help the Adventist church in Australia to strategically plan and implement family ministries initiatives, which is intended to then benefit Adventist families throughout Australia. Following the interview, you will be provided with a \$20 grocery voucher as a token of appreciation for your time and contribution.

CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

The identities of research participants will not be included in any reports or presentations. All names will be removed from the data and you will be allocated a numerical code which will be used in all interview data. All aspects of the study, including results, will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise.

However, given that some topics of conversation include sensitive information, if during the course of your engagement with this study, you disclose information which identifies a child (or, if relevant, someone who is in a residential facility) currently at-risk of abuse, the researcher will be required to report the situation to the relevant authorities, according to the mandatory reporting requirements for the state or territory or jurisdiction where either the participant, researcher or at-risk person resides.

The data will be stored electronically for five years in password protected folders. At the end of the five-year period after the conclusion of the research, electronic data will be erased from discs, servers and hard drives and any hard copy data and identifying information will be confidentially shredded.

USE OF INFORMATION COLLECTED

The information collected will be analysed and generically reported in a research report, research presentations, peer reviewed journal articles and professional conferences. Confidentiality of individual participants and organisations (such as names of local churches and Conferences) will be assured, but the Adventist church in general will be identified. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. Participants will be sent a summary of the final results via email.

FREEDOM OF CONSENT

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only people who give their informed consent will be included in the study. Even if you agree to participate you may withdraw at any time until the commencement of data analysis without giving a reason, and your data will be withdrawn from the study. This means any recordings, transcripts or identifying information will be deleted from electronic and paper files. None of your quotes will be used in reporting. If you decide not to participate or wish to withdraw from the project at any time, you will not be disadvantaged.

Please read this information statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. After you have read this information, if there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, you can contact the researcher.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like further information, please contact Prof Tracie Mafileo on tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au, +61 2 4980 2198 or +64 212692236.

If you have a complaint or concern about this research project or the way it is conducted, contact Avondale's Research Services Office at PO Box 19, Cooranbong, NSW, 2265 or phone



Information Sheet – Young Adult Focus Group

Adventist Families in Australia Study

Family ministries is an important part of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist church, yet there have been few studies, and little done recently, on the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia to inform family ministries resourcing. The South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church has commissioned this study on Adventist families in Australia, on behalf of the Australian Union Conference (AUC). This study is engaging a range of perspectives on ministry to Adventist families using interviews, focus groups and surveys. The results of this study will inform AUC's strategic planning for the future.

INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a focus group interview with other Adventist youth. This research project is being conducted by researchers who are part of the Scripture, Spirituality and Society Research Centre at Avondale University. The Researchers are:

Prof Tracie Mafileo (Research Professor), Avondale University tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au

Prof Rob McIver (Professor), Avondale University rob.mciver@avondale.edu.au

Dr Barry Gane (Adjunct Professor), Avondale University barry.gane@avondale.edu.au

Pr Colin Renfrew (Research Assistant), Avondale University colin.renfrew@avondale.edu.au

Mr Ben Archer (Research Assistant), Avondale University ben.archer@avondale.edu.au

There may be other research assistants engaged to assist with data collection.

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

The study aims to:

1. Investigate the changing make-up of Adventist families in Australia, compared with Australian families in general.
2. Identify issues affecting Adventist families in Australia.
3. Examine how family make-up and family issues impact Christian life practices within Adventist families in Australia.
4. Understand how the church can best support Adventist families, including Christian life discipleship practices within Adventist families in Australia.
5. Examine how family worship and individual Christian life discipleship practices can be strengthened within Adventist families in Australia.
6. Provide recommendations for strengthening family ministries in the Adventist church in Australia.

In this study, Christian life discipleship is defined as the lifetime process of making room for God so that He can live in us. It is centred in Jesus Christ and affects the whole of life during which spiritual life is formed from the inside out.

WHO IS BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate if you are a young person aged 18-30 years, AND part of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia through either baptism, attendance, or family association. Invitations to participate are being passed on to local church pastors to then pass on to young people in their churches OR to youth event organisers to pass on to young people.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a group conversation (focus group) with about five young people, facilitated by one of the research team. The focus group will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. This will help us to look for themes across all the interviews and will help us accurately reflect your perspectives and experiences when we present the findings. If you participate in a focus group, you will be required not to disclose any content discussed by others during the focus group session.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

It is anticipated that the focus group conversation will take approximately one and a half hours.

POSSIBLE RISKS OR INCONVENIENCES

It is expected that there will be minimal risk or inconvenience to you if you choose to participate. However, we acknowledge that some of the things you talk about may cause discomfort or may be difficult to discuss. At any time during the focus group, you can take a break or you could choose to withdraw your participation. The researcher facilitating the focus group will also give information on where you can seek further support if needed and may check in with you following the focus group.

BENEFITS

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise you any individual benefits from participating in this research. We do, however, anticipate that this research will help the Adventist church in Australia to strategically plan and implement family ministries initiatives, which is intended to then benefit Adventist families throughout Australia. Following the interview, you will be provided with a \$20 grocery voucher as a token of appreciation for your time and contribution.

CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION

The identities of research participants will not be included in any reports or presentations. All names will be removed from the data and you will be allocated a numerical code which will be used in all interview data. As a participant in a focus group, you will be asked to respect the privacy of other focus group members by not disclosing any content discussed by others during the focus group session. All aspects of the study, including results, will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise.

However, given that some topics of conversation include sensitive information, if during the course of your engagement with this study, you disclose information which identifies a child (or, if relevant, someone who is in a residential facility) currently at-risk of abuse, the researcher will be required to report the situation to the relevant authorities, according to

the mandatory reporting requirements for the state or territory or jurisdiction where either the participant, researcher or at-risk person resides.

The data will be stored electronically for five years in password protected folders. At the end of the five-year period after the conclusion of the research, electronic data will be erased from discs, servers and hard drives and any hard copy data and identifying information will be confidentially shredded.

USE OF INFORMATION COLLECTED

The information collected will be analysed and generically reported in a research report, research presentations, peer reviewed journal articles and professional conferences. Confidentiality of individual participants and organisations (such as names of local churches and Conferences) will be assured, but the Adventist church in general will be identified. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. Participants will be sent a summary of the final results via email.

FREEDOM OF CONSENT

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only people who give their informed consent will be included in the study. Even if you agree to participate you may withdraw at any time until the commencement of data analysis without giving a reason. That is, your data will be deleted from electronic and paper files as far as possible and none of your quotes will be used in reporting. As a participant a focus group, however, while no direct quotes from you will be used in reports or presentations, your influence on the focus group discussion cannot be withdrawn. Further, if you participated in a focus group it will not be possible to remove your contributions from the audio or video recording, even though none of your direct quotes will be used in analysis and reporting. If you decide not to participate or wish to withdraw from the project at any time, you will not be disadvantaged.

Please read this information statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. After you have read this information, if there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, you can contact the researcher.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like further information, please contact Prof Tracie Mafile'o on tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au, +61 2 4980 2198 or +64 212692236.

If you have a complaint or concern about this research project or the way it is conducted, contact Avondale's Research Services Office at PO Box 19, Cooranbong, NSW, 2265 or phone +61-2-4980 2121, or email: researchoffice@avondale.edu.au. You may also wish to discuss your concerns with the researcher.

Thank you for considering this invitation.



Prof Tracie Mafile'o

Appendix 2: Consent Form



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Adventist Families in Australia Study

Co-Principal Investigators

Prof Tracie Mafle'o (Research Professor), Avondale University tracie.mafileo@avondale.edu.au
Prof Rob McIver (Professor), Avondale University rob.mciver@avondale.edu.au
Dr Barry Gane (Adjunct Professor), Avondale University barry.gane@avondale.edu.au

Research Assistants

Pr Colin Renfrew (Research Assistant), Avondale University colin.renfrew@avondale.edu.au
Mr Ben Archer (Research Assistant), Avondale University ben.archer@avondale.edu.au

I agree to participate in the above research project and I give my consent freely.

I have read and understand the information provided in the Information Statement.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have been given to keep.

I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing. I will not be disadvantaged in anyway by withdrawing.

The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

If I participate in a focus group, I agree not to disclose any content discussed by others during the focus group session.

I consent to:

- Participate in a focus group that will be audio-recorded or, if the focus group is online, video-recorded, OR
- Participate in an interview that will be audio-recorded or, if the focus group is online, video-recorded

I understand that direct quotes from what I say may be included in research reports, but all information will be de-identified which means that no personal information will appear on any reports.

Name Signature Date

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While a summary of findings will be made available on the Scripture, Spirituality and Society page of the Avondale University website, please provide an email address below if you would like to be emailed directly with a summary of findings at the completion of the study.

Email contact: _____

Appendix 2: About the Authors



Prof Tracie Mafile'o (Principal investigator) is a Research Professor at Avondale University; she also holds a part time academic role undertaking doctoral supervision at Massey University, New Zealand. Prof Mafile'o has a PhD in social work and is a registered social worker in New Zealand. With early experience in social and community work practice, she has served most of her career in higher education teaching, research and administration based in New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. University senior roles held included being the inaugural Director of Research and Postgraduate Studies and then Deputy-Vice Chancellor at Pacific

Adventist University (Papua New Guinea). Until recently, she was Associate Dean Pacific for the College of Health (Massey University). Dr Mafile'o is passionate about community-engaged research and evaluation. She leads transdisciplinary research and collaborates in ways which elevate Pacific-Indigenous voices and which bridge between academia and community. Research and publications have included story-based approaches, Tongan social work, Pacific elder care, cultural humility, youth development in PNG, HIV prevention, health systems and leadership and Pacific research strengthening.

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Prof Robert K. McIver (Rob) (Co-Principal Investigator) began his professional career as a teacher of mathematics in a government high school in Christchurch, New Zealand. Since then he has been a student (twice), a church pastor, and since 1988 he has spent most of his time researching, writing, and lecturing in the Seminary at Avondale University, NSW, Australia. Among his other roles, he is editor of Avondale Academic Press, and director of the Scripture, Spirituality and Society Research Centre. He has wide research interests, and has published in scholarly journals as diverse as *New Testament Studies* and *Applied Cognitive Psychology*. His

book publications include *Verbatim and Gist Parallels Between the Gospels: Coded Greek Synopsis and Selected Statistics; Memory, Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels; Mainstream or Marginal: The Matthean Community in Early Christianity; 1 and 2 Peter; and The Four Faces of Jesus*. He is team-leader on two international research projects for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Global Adventist Pastor's Survey, and the Employees of Adventist Institutions Survey.

rob.mciver@avondale.edu.au



Dr Alva Barry Gane (Barry) (Co-Principal Investigator) began his professional career in England where he served as a pastor, teacher, and Youth Director for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the British Isles. Returning to his homeland of Australia, Barry continued to serve his church as the Youth Director for the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists. During his thirteen years in this role, he completed his first Doctorate, was a member of the research team to complete the first “Valuegenesis” study in Australia and New Zealand and authored a number of professional papers and two books. He was appointed as Professor of Youth

Ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University where he served for seven years. Barry gained his second Doctorate during this time, as well as continuing his research and writing and developing the Doctor of Youth Ministry programme. He returned to the South Pacific to care for leadership and professional development at the South Pacific Division of SDAs. Barry retired in 2015, after serving at Avondale University as Head of the School of Theology, (Seminary). He has published extensively and chaired/supervised over 25 doctoral theses and dissertations. He published two research project reports after leading the Valuegenesis research team in the South Pacific. Barry was also the research director and writer for the Australian Union Conference research project to assess the SDA church’s role and leadership during the Covid crisis, “Covid 19 in the Australian Union Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” Barry and Marilyn, his wife retired in 2015. They have two children, and now enjoy time with them and their five grand-children.

barry.gane@avondale.edu.au



Pr Colin Renfrew (Research Assistant) is a pastor and former administrator and company secretary in the South Queensland Conference. Currently he is serving as research assistant at Avondale University. Pr Renfrew has an MA (Theology). His early career was spent pastoring across Australia and New Zealand before moving into middle management departmental roles in Seventh-day Adventist Conferences in Australia and as the inaugural Church Development Director for the New Zealand Pacific Union. More recently he served the South Queensland Conference for 16 years. He has a passion for equipping members to experience a vibrant faith. Pr

Renfrew has authored articles appearing in popular magazines such as Signs of the Times, Elders Digest, and Adventist Record.

colin.renfrew@avondale.edu.au



Ben Archer (Adjunct Research Fellow) brings a wealth of experience from 12 years in faith-based high schools, where he served as a classroom teacher, curriculum leader, counsellor, and deputy principal. Currently pursuing a PhD at James Cook University, Ben’s research examines career decision-making processes of high school graduates, with a particular focus on the influences of geographical location and spiritual beliefs. Ben’s research expertise lies in systematic literature reviews and qualitative analysis. His most recent publications primarily explore how spiritual beliefs impact the everyday decision-making of children and young adults.

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<https://www.linkedin.com/in/barcher001>

Appendix 3: Acknowledgements

- We thank all the participants who generously agreed to participate in interviews and focus groups.
- Thanks to the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-Day Adventist church (SPD) for funding to undertake this study. We particularly acknowledge Dr Pr Sven Ostring, Director of Ministry and Strategy, and Shaylee Walsh, Project Coordinator, for their facilitation of the programme of research across the SPD.
- Thanks to Pr Sylvia Mendez, Family Ministries Director at the Australian Union Conference at the commencement of this study, and the key contact throughout. Thanks also to Amanda Bews for feedback and to the Conference family ministries directors who engaged in supporting this research process, especially Colleen Savage.
- Thanks to Maddy Voinea who was the key contact at the SPD at the start of this journey, and now in his subsequent role as Marketing Manager at Avondale University, supported the design for the research products.
- Dr Stephen Reid, Christian Research Association, who conducted analysis of the Australian Census data on Adventist Families, for an accompanying report.

