

# Passing the Baton

Determinants of Spiritual  
Parenting in the Irish Mission of  
the Seventh-Day Adventist  
Church

June 2025





# Introduction



# What is known?

- The need to scientifically study Christian parenting (spies in Num 13 & Josh 2)
- Researchers in 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> centuries
  - Roger Dudley (1978) → Valuegenesis study (1900; 2000; 2010) family, church and school
  - Donna Habenicht (1983) – practical ways
  - Tony Campolo (1986) – service
  - George Barna (2000) – until age 13 (9)
  - Pew Research – intergenerational beliefs, religious unaffiliation

*“Generation after generation stands in awe of your work; each one tells stories of your mighty acts.”*

Ps. 145:4-6 (MSG)



# What remains unknown?

- Christian parents entrusted by God to introduce their children to a life-long relationship with Jesus - *but how?*
- Every generation – unique challenges!
- Are today's Gen X and Millennial parents equipped (emotionally, intellectually and spiritually) for this?
- Post – Christian & dechurched world?
- What factors are at play in spiritual parenting in IM?

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# Research objectives

- Uncover the determinants of spiritual parenting among Adventist parents in the Irish Mission
- By considering:
  - The context of faith formation in children (home, school, church, elsewhere)
  - Practical methods used by parents to foster faith in children & parent them in a spiritual manner
  - Challenges to fostering faith – esp. in a pluralistic and increasingly post-church society





# Specifically

- Approaches used by parents to pass spiritual values to children
- Factors influencing choices and decisions – what is taught, how, to whom, when, by?
- Values taught, their sourcing and prioritisation
- Approaches to boundary setting and discipline
- Talking about sex and sexuality
- Perceptions of pluralism
- Challenges faced in trying to raise godly children
- Additional supports needed





# Utility – Provide Church with relevant info to:



- Equip parents better to share faith with children and to be family spiritual leaders
- Develop appropriate parental training packages for parenting diverse age groups
- Foster the idea that every home is a church (White, 1900)
- Build intergenerational faith communities across the Irish Mission
- Equip church members to treat children with respect and dignity and support their spiritual welfare and growth
- Develop a spiritual support system for children from infancy through young adulthood
- Encourage participation in strategic service opportunities for families





# Research team

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# Research Methodology



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# Participants

Small-scale qualitative study

Purposive sampling approach

- Adventist\* parents (single or married)

\*At least one parent in family was a baptised member of SDA church and attending in IM

- With at least one child 17 and under
- 24 participants - 14 female & 10 male





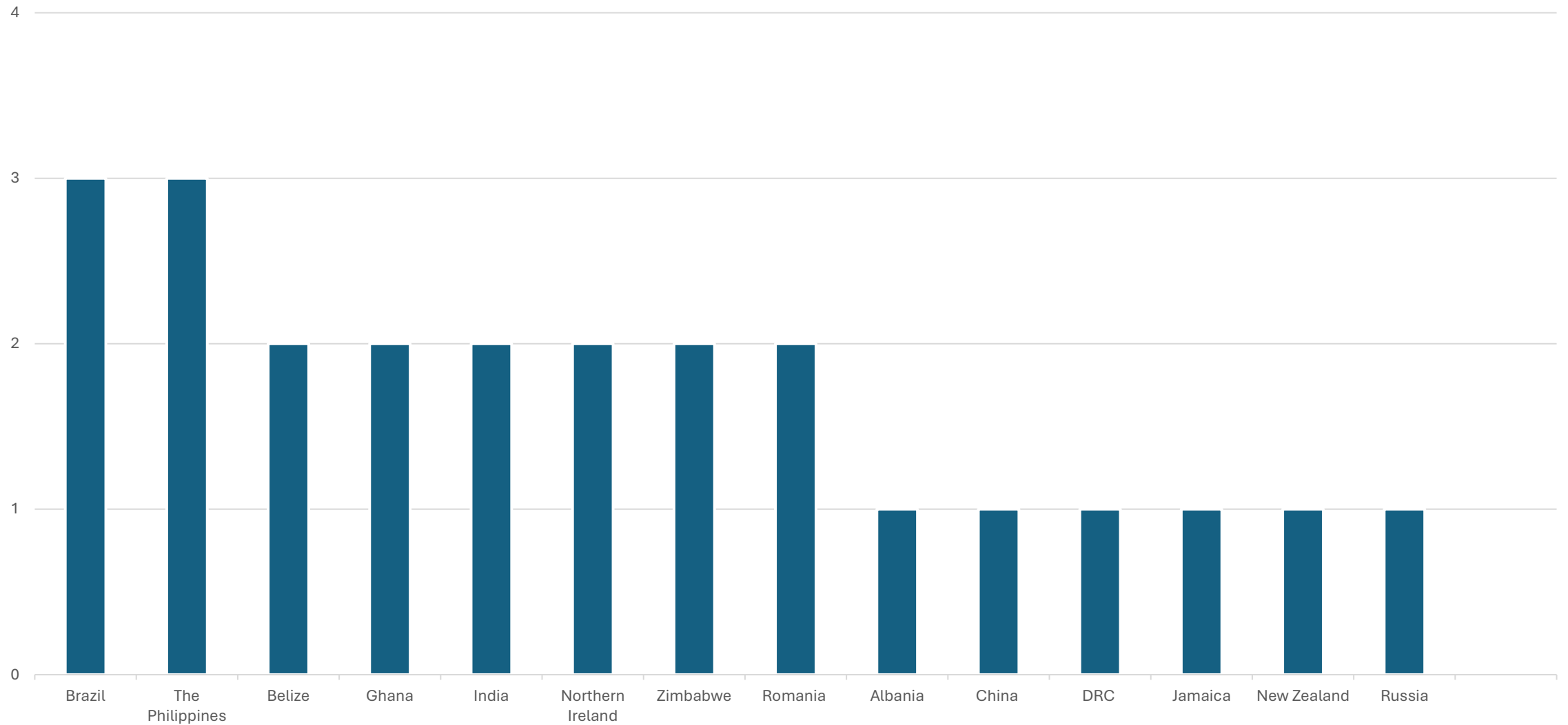
# Cultural/national backgrounds\*

- Ireland & Northern Ireland
- Southern Africa
- Western Africa
- Southern Asia
- Asia Pacific
- South America
- Eastern Europe
- The Caribbean
- Western Europe, the USA, Canada, NZ and Australia

**\*Some spouses not from same culture**



## Participants' countries of origin





# Congregations

Ballinacrow

Belfast

Cork

Drogheda

Drumcondra

Dublin

Larne

Limerick

Longford

Newmarket  
on Fergus

Portlaoise

Ranelagh

Tralee

Waterford



# Children in question

- 49 surviving children
- 43 children aged 17 and under
- Of these 43:
  - Median age 9 years
  - Mean 9.4 years





# Data collection methods

## **1. In-depth, semi-structured interviews**

- March and May 2024
- 8 families – one or two parents
- 90 minutes approx

## **2. Focus group interviews**

- July 2024
- Three groups
- 13 families (one parent each)
- 2 hours

An extra in-depth interview with parent from focus group – her request

**All on Zoom**





# Findings



Reminder:

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## Spiritual nurture important to parents

- Many deeply cared about children's spiritual wellbeing
- Taught children about God – using the Bible, nature, EGW publications...
- Modelled behaviours, reinforced teachings and rewarded effort/compliance
- They prayed for/with children
- Engaged children in conversation, answered questions



But many obligations  
impacted spiritual nurture



- Difficult to spend much time with children due to work, school & extracurricular activity routines
- These were prioritised over time with children (esp. where some children older)
- Few families had consistent daily spiritual practices – many saved for the weekend\*
- Few recognised the impact of this on children's spiritual development



# Markers of spiritual development

- For some – focus on leading children to have a personal relationship with a loving, caring and forgiving God
- Evidence seen in children starting to live principles taught e.g. spontaneous prayer when faced with difficulty, practising kindness
- For others – focus on external markers of religious compliance e.g. church attendance, active participation in church service (roles), tithing, eventually marrying Adventist spouses
- Some realised that A would lead to B, others not – focus was on B





# Adjustments to schedules

To increase time with young children e.g.

- New mothers staying home (for a while)
- Stay-at-home parent\*\* for a time e.g. first 7 years of child's life (older children in school)
- Changing careers or roles to facilitate parenting
- Working from home
- Homeschooling + self-employment or flexible working

\*Mum or Dad depending on career / income

\*Not always linked to spiritual development (e.g. parent out of work)

# But adjustments mostly fleeting

Arrangements varied in durability (where in place to begin with)

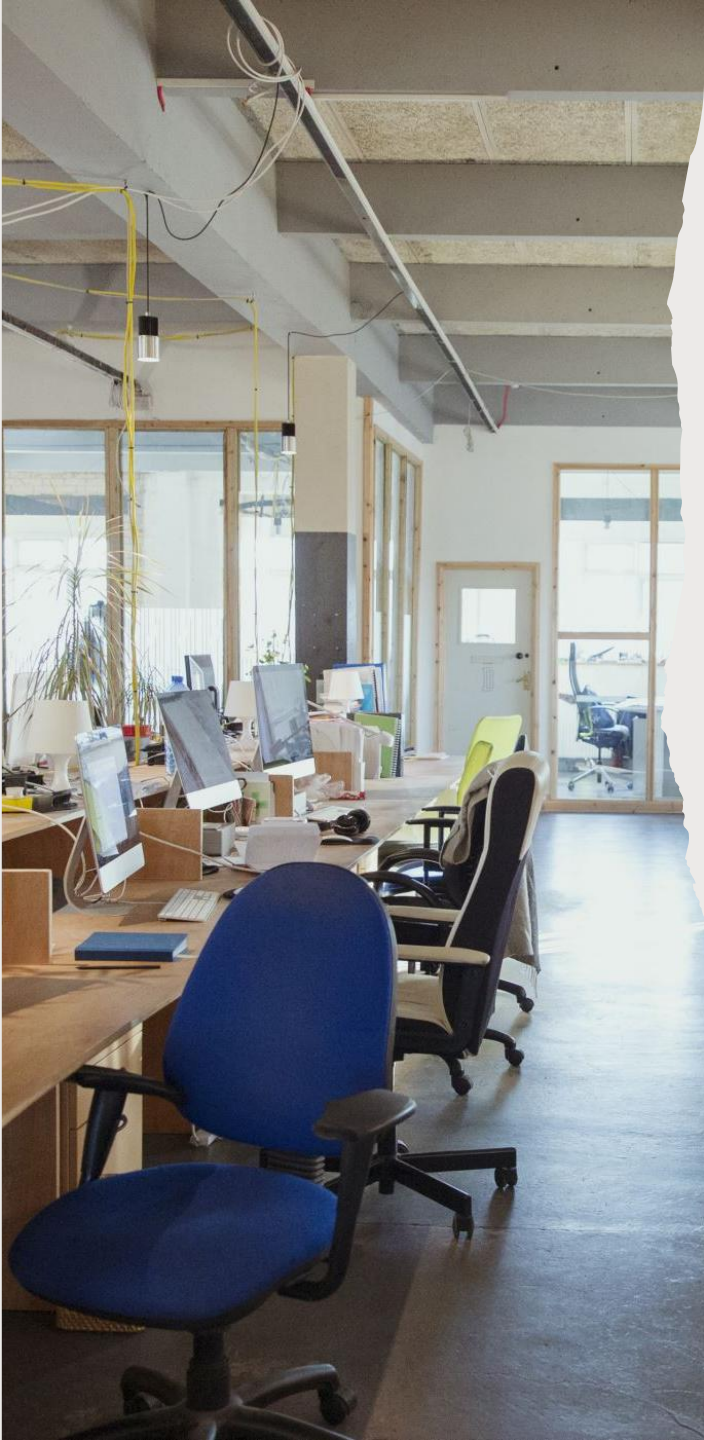
- Rarely in place throughout one's childhood
- Parents often returned to work and children were sent to school
- Sometimes separation due to move to NI / Ireland (one or both parents coming over first)





# Why fleeting / unattainable?

- Some stay-at-home parents esp. migrants 'overwhelmed'
  - Inadequate support from working spouse (time)
  - No other support – no extended family / 'village'
- Financial stability and other goals prioritised (e.g. family reunification €€ threshold)
- Different views between spouses about parenting and money – Mum obliged to work
- Desire for adult pursuits – torn between childcare/spiritual nurture and work
- Some homeschooling parents felt isolated, unsupported and discouraged





# So... emphasis on church attendance

- Given these constraints, focus was largely on Sabbath activities – Friday evening and Sabbath
- Some parents changed work schedules (shifts) to ensure children got to church weekly/often, on time and stayed until the end
- Some therefore outsourced a large aspect of spiritual nurturing to the Church
- Few realised that church attendance/programmes would do little without consistent spiritual engagement at home







# But Church not always positive

Challenges (from other children and adults):

- Segregation – ethnicity, language, disability
- Criticism and judgement – parents' position in Church, homeschooling...
- Undesirable influences – dress, beliefs (e.g. evolution), views on sex / sexuality

Left children isolated, disillusioned, and compounded parents' task

# Church programming

- Age appropriateness of programmes e.g. youth camps with 10- to 24-year-olds – safeguarding
- Non-alignment of IM and GC calendar
  - Some felt topical issues for children not addressed (e.g. drug misuse)
  - Some ‘forced’ alignment in local churches
  - But could also raise age appropriateness issues e.g. Youth Day resources for young kids





# Few supportive networks

- Very few families had robust and supportive spiritual and social networks
- Existing ones mainly based on ethnicity and proximity
- Some parents go to great lengths (e.g. relocation) to access these networks
- To get support parenting and “keep children in church” through friends



# Big desire for positive connections

Parents desired:

- More cohesive and inclusive church experience
- Small groups within churches – for own growth/belonging, but also for access to adult ‘mentors’ for children
- More focused programming – age and issues
- Adventists institutions





# Teaching values

- Sources
  - Bible, EGW and other spiritual sources
  - Own upbringing (wholesale or modified)
  - Observations – in children, society, other cultures
- Determinants of value teaching – when/how
  - Age – but not that big a determinant
  - Personality
  - Birth order – first born vs others – trickle-down
  - Family circumstances e.g. death



## Some values taught to children

Appreciation	Modesty
Clarity of principles	Patience
Cleanliness (in body and language)	Perseverance
Consistency / commitment	Politeness
Discipline	Primacy of God (putting God first)
Empathy	Punctuality
Faith	Reliability
Family and relationships	<b>Respect</b>
Good behaviour	Responsibility
Hard work	Reverence to God
<b>Honesty</b>	<b>Sabbath (importance)</b>
Humility	Service (to God and others)
<b>Kindness (and being nice)</b>	Steadfastness (ability to resist wrongdoing)
Leadership	Temperance
<b>Love</b>	Trust





# Setting and enforcing boundaries

- Parents reported setting clear boundaries for/with children and ensuring adherence
- Focus – equipping their children to survive and thrive even in the absence of parents
- Some struggled to enforce boundaries when:
  - They impinged on their own time e.g. tech use
  - Dealing with ‘wilful’ children
  - Faced with children’s changing mindsets



# Discipline: many approaches

- Some used time-outs (younger)
- Withdrawal of privileges, and talking (especially with older children)
- Potentially problematic methods e.g. 'giving out', screaming, guilt-tripping
- All reported avoiding violence – partly due to own upbringing and impact
- But some seemed short on alternatives for 'serious' mistakes e.g. disrespect



# Instructions on sex and sexuality

- Most actively talked to their children from young age especially regarding care and protection of bodies
- A few didn't know how to proceed (even with preteen/teen kids) – desired support especially for complex subjects
- Many hadn't considered social, legal & other challenges that might arise out of their values, beliefs and teachings



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# Homosexuality, transgenderism

A range of views and instructions:

- Not God's plan, wrong – steering children towards Biblical marriage
- Not God's plan but respect other people (i.e. don't provoke, aggravate them)
- People are on different paths, let God be judge and accept others for who they are (say they are)

Some teens already at odds with parents' views







# But also... silence

Why not spoken about?

- Don't know how to talk about it
- Preference for young(er) children esp. in homeschool to be in a 'bubble' – including at Church – and not having notion of 'acceptance' forced on them
- No need to speak about it – it's normal and kids already know and interact with gay or transgender people


# What is 'acceptance'?

Different interpretations:

- Respecting other people, having a positive regard for them without condoning or condemning their lifestyles
- Condoning, saying: no problem with it, it is okay, even desirable
- Presenting choices and (almost) encouraging children to choose their gender or sexual identity





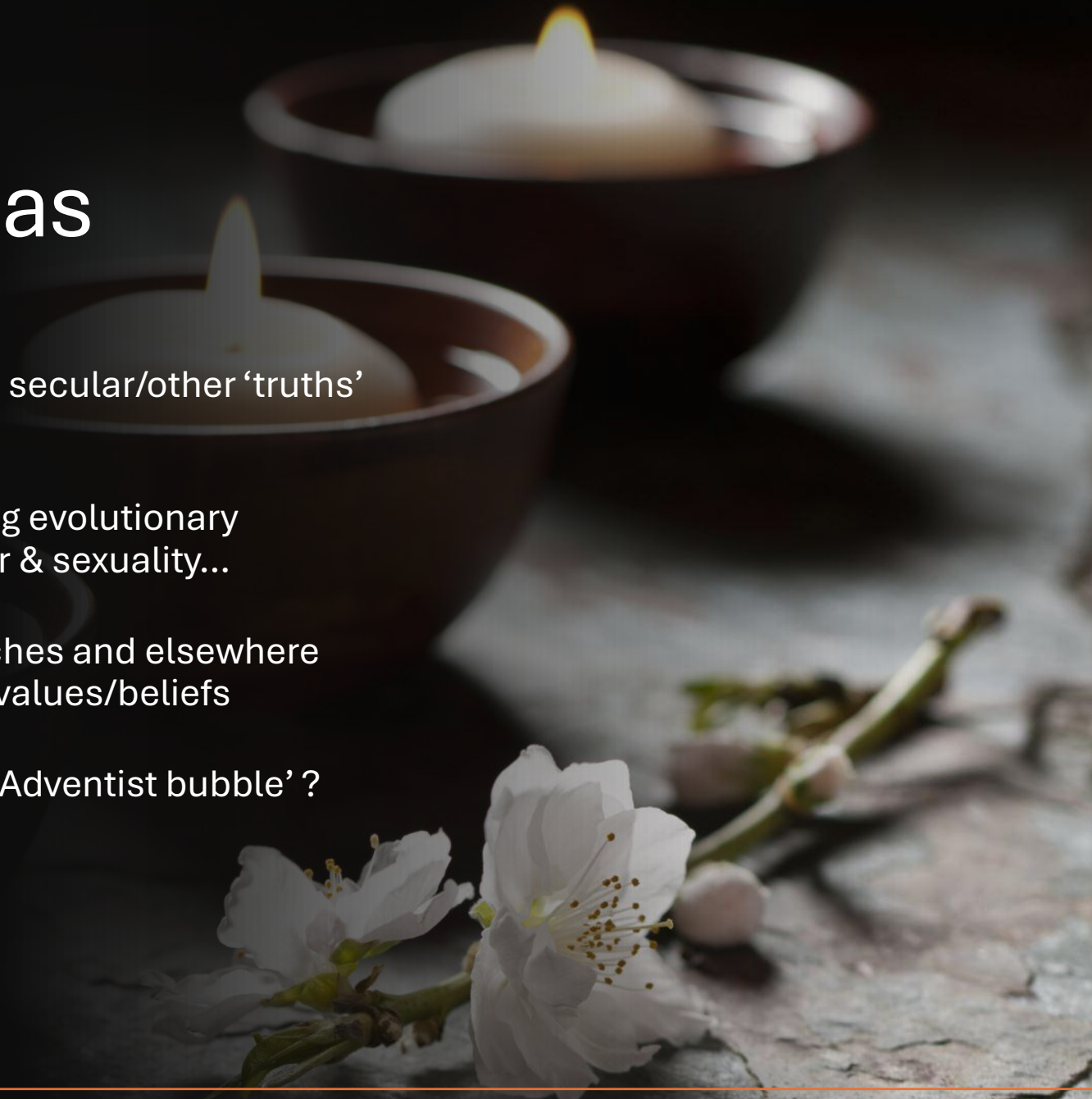
A photograph of a desk with a pencil holder, a stack of books, and a chalkboard in the background. The pencil holder is black and mesh, containing several colored pencils. The stack of books is on the right, with a blue book at the bottom and a yellow book on top. The chalkboard in the background has some faint drawings.

# Pluralism – other faiths, secularism

- Many not threatened by other faiths especially if positive values taught
- Secularism bigger threat for some
- Pluralism positive for some – reinforced children's faith and Adventist identity
- But for others, it presented a danger of children – especially teens – questioning/leaving their faith
- Some curbed/limited exposure to other ideas esp. for young children

# Other 'accepted' ideas

- Most displayed little familiarity with popular secular/other 'truths' beyond Darwinism
- Not equipped to guide children e.g. regarding evolutionary creationism, humanism, ideas about gender & sexuality...
- Children exposed to these in schools, churches and elsewhere and some already pushing against parent's values/beliefs
- So, in some ways, some parents were in an 'Adventist bubble' ?







# Waning parental influence

- Embracing popular ideas coincided with period of waning parental influence – esp. teens and tertiary-level children
- Some parents felt Adventist institutions in IM would:
  - reinforce Adventist worldview (throughout child's life); and
  - help delay/prevent loss of faith

# Technology – friend and foe?

- Digital technology (inc. social media) mainly seen negatively but children (eventually) allowed access
- Some used it in faith formation (to some extent), to connect with others and for entertainment





# Were they doing enough?

- Many felt they were doing their best to raise godly children despite obstacles
- But some afraid children might eventually abandon God and faith
- But few made link between current family obstacles (e.g. time) and that eventuality

*“We are looking for something at the cost of something else.... Is my son who is going to grow up here going to be a victim of my better life?”*

- Obstacles mainly seen as located outside family's control



Believe God for themselves.  
Be a good person.  
Success in life.  
See Jesus coming back.  
Have a sense of belonging.  
Lead a spiritual life.  
Work in an Adventist institution.  
Feel loved and accepted by God.  
Adventist education.  
Be spiritually sensitive.  
Trust God.  
Have a relationship with God.  
Work hard.  
Love God.  
Think critically.  
Be happy.  
Be empathetic.  
Use talents for God.  
Know God.  
Be close to God.  
Make good decisions.  
Stay in God's protection.  
Be close to God.



Misinterpreting parents' intentions.  
Being lost to the world.  
Moving away from God.  
Coming to harm.  
Losing connection with parents.  
Misinterpreting teachings.  
Not loving God.  
Rejecting teachings.  
Misunderstanding God.  
Losing relationship with God.  
Not taking responsibilities seriously.  
Not taking God seriously.  
Marrying non-Adventists.  
Disconnecting from God.  
Losing trust in parents.  
Not finding an accepting church.  
Not taking the Bible seriously.  
Not feeling safe.  
Leaving the Church.  
Focusing on worldly pursuits.



# Recommendations



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# Support parents to develop family spiritual habits

Support parents to:

- To be more intentional about developing and practising spiritual habits
  - daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annually
- See these as the foundation of spiritual growth in children
- Lead children to cultivate these on their own





# Support traversing a new culture

- Traversing culture complex esp. with children
- Possible supports from IM:
  - Orientation classes for new migrants to foster cultural awareness and responsiveness
  - Equip them to develop Biblical responses to cultural challenges
  - Foster sense of belonging esp. for smaller ethnic groups
  - Manage ethnic groupings within churches and impact on overall congregation





# Smaller, more cohesive groups

To foster healthy avenues of support and reduce isolation:

- Establish small groups within churches – centred on spiritual matters, geography, etc. rather than ethnicity
- Encourage regular connection through ‘non-church’ activities to build friendships
- Include children & young people but also ensure their safeguarding



# Support for homeschooling / stay-at-home parents

- To establish networks with similar families – reduce isolation
- In complementary learning materials
- Support for others wishing to make transition – to be hands-on parents but also earn a living e.g.:
  - Parenting and spiritual training workshops
  - Financial literacy, upskilling and reskilling
  - Setting up and running home-based businesses





# Support in dealing with changing mindsets

- A greater array of tools for parents to use in boundary setting & discipline especially when dealing with 'wilful' children
- Support to engage more productively with teens with changing mindsets – challenging/defying family values and expectations



# Handling 'difficult' subjects

- Equip parents to talk to children about issues of sex, sexuality and gender
- Does Church/IM have guidance on these issues?
  - E.g. Age-appropriate workshops facilitated by qualified but also biblically-grounded people
- BUT done with involvement of parents – different families desire different levels of awareness for children



# Broader engagement between Church, parents and school

- Church leaders engage with educational authorities to understand school curriculum – its benefits but also challenges to faith
- Parents supported to take deeper interest in children's education, and to integrate faith in children's education
- Parents' training efforts be reinforced through educational hubs or holiday clubs for Adventist learners







# Adventist education in IM

- IM explore opportunities presented by:
  - Homeschooling – offer support, materials, connection
  - Online/distance education (e.g. partnering with overseas institutions)
  - Actual schools / tertiary institutions in IM?
- Can't replace parents' role but would complement their efforts and reinforce values taught



# Support to navigate tech use

- Equip parents to guide children to develop healthy online habits
- Church – develop more ways to connect with families that are already extensively using technology
- BUT recognise that in some families, use of tech is delayed, limited or discouraged



# The end

Thank You!

Questions & comments

