

PRE-WARNING SIGNS OF BACKSLIDING IN CHURCH MEMBERS: PATTERNS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Authors

Peter Omundi Aricha⁽¹⁾ ; Mahlon Juma Nyongesa⁽²⁾ ; Feliks Ponyatovskiy⁽³⁾ 

Main author email: arichap@aua.ac.ke

(1.2.3) Adventist University of Africa Theological Seminary, Kenya.

Cite this article in APA

Aricha, P. O., Nyongesa, M. J., & Ponyatovskiy, F. (2025). Pre-warning signs of backsliding in church members: Patterns and interpretations. *Journal of pastoral and practical theology*, 4(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpvt.v4i1.734>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 10.03.2025

Accepted: 07.04.2025

Published: 06.05.2025

Scan this QR to read the paper online



Copyright: ©2025 by the author(s). This article is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Abstract

This study aims to determine pre-warning signs of backsliding exhibited by church members in Kisii, County. The phenomenon of backsliding and church non-attendance among men is one of the emerging tendencies in the postmodern religious worldviews. This research applied a quantitative method for data collection. The quantitative design utilised a questionnaire with structured closed-ended questions on a four-point Likert scale of measurement and collected respondents' attitudes and opinions, which factored the backslidden members in this study. The design provided the blueprint for this research. Data was analysed electronically using the Statistics Package for Social Science (SPSS) software for descriptive data analysis to capture the percentage. Based on the findings, the warning signs for backsliding that stood out include but are not limited to, the following categories: church-oriented, personal, sociological, or external signs. Therefore, the study recommends that each church member be actively involved in weekly church activities so that the backsliders can be reclaimed, retained, and nurtured spiritually. The church should implement the following programmes: small group ministry, prayer ministry, visitation programme, and leadership training to curb this worrying trend of backsliding.

Key terms: Backsliding, coldness in prayer, declining love, growing inner corruption, indifference to the work, man-centred worship.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Churches generally anticipate a steady numerical increase in membership across genders, largely driven by evangelistic campaigns, outreach programmes, camp meetings, seminars, departmental congresses, and spiritual revivals. However, an alarming trend has emerged: Men are leaving churches at a disproportionately higher rate than women, often soon after baptism. This decline has significantly affected their spiritual development, social standing, and contribution to leadership roles traditionally occupied by men within church communities. Despite the seriousness of this phenomenon, scholarly literature addressing male-specific backsliding remains scarce, highlighting an urgent need for focused research.

Existing studies on church membership dropout have generally examined broad causes without critically engaging with gender-specific insights. Patterson et al. (2023) identified church dropouts among men convicted of criminal offences or experiencing mental health and interpersonal struggles. Similarly, Russell (1990) attributes membership discontinuation to adultery, a decline in personal spirituality, inadequate baptismal preparation, and failure to receive support during crises. However, these studies do not differentiate between male and female patterns of disengagement or the unique pressures that may contribute to male backsliding.

Nielsen (1977) highlighted key reasons for faith disassociation, including Sabbath work conflicts, smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug use—factors that might disproportionately affect male church members due to societal expectations or economic pressures. Meanwhile, Lewis (1999) examined church dropouts within the Grenada Mission of Seventh-day Adventists, attributing attrition to a lack of inclusivity, interpersonal conflicts, and poorly structured programmes—elements that might contribute differently to male versus female retention.

Research on newly baptised members in Asia-Africa by Harelimana (2014) has focused on integration into church life but does not explicitly address gender-specific trends. Similarly, Light (2012) examined discipleship in African evangelical contexts, touching on modernism, postmodernism, African Traditional Religion, and core Christian doctrines. However, these frameworks, while insightful, do not engage directly with male-specific disengagement factors.

A study by Kabuje and Mligo (2021) explored Christian backsliding among Tanzanian university students, identifying peer pressure, psychological struggles, and lack of personal faith as major contributors. This perspective raises important gender-related questions—are men more susceptible to external influences leading to spiritual decline? How do societal expectations and traditional masculinity norms contribute to their disaffiliation?

Locally, research within the Adventist Church in Kenya has investigated member retention strategies, such as Kiage's (2014) study in Nyaguta District. However, a critical gap remains as no study has systematically examined why men disengage from regular church attendance and ultimately drop out of church membership.

This research seeks to bridge that gap by assessing the phenomenon of male backsliding and exploring whether distinct societal, cultural, or theological factors contribute to their departure from church life. Understanding this trend is vital, as men play pivotal roles in families and church communities. Biblically, men were positioned as fathers, rulers, and priests, tasked with leading and instructing their households spiritually (Deut 6:6-9; Prov 22:6; Job 1:5). Their absence from church leadership jeopardises key ministries, such as eldership, deaconate, Adventist Men's Ministries, and Youth Mentorship programmes (Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists).

Without strong male spiritual figures, families and churches suffer, leading to diminished moral standards, weakened mentorship, and a lack of authoritative guidance for younger generations. If these patterns persist, churches risk having a generation of children who lack proper spiritual foundations and role models, potentially leading to societal moral decline. By addressing male backsliding, this study contributes to the broader discussions on theology, sociology, emotional dimensions (psychology), and gendered spiritual behaviour.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Signs of Backsliding

Spiritual decline is often a gradual process, marked by subtle shifts in devotion before culminating in disengagement from faith. While Beeke (2011) provides valuable insights into this phenomenon, broadening the discussion to include multiple theological and sociological perspectives reveals additional dimensions of backsliding. Various scholars define this spiritual deterioration as a consequence of internal struggles, external influences, and doctrinal misunderstandings.

Coldness in Prayer and Spiritual Apathy

A diminishing commitment to prayer is widely recognised as an early sign of backsliding. Beeke describes this as prayers becoming mechanical and lacking heartfelt devotion. Similarly, Foster (2018) argues that prayer should foster intimacy with God rather than become mere routine. When personal prayer loses sincerity, believers drift into a state of apathy, reducing their spiritual resilience. Bonhoeffer (2021) similarly warns against passive faith, asserting that disengagement from fervent prayer leads to spiritual stagnation.

Indifference to the Word and Doctrinal Erosion

A weakening passion for Scripture is another significant marker of spiritual decline. Beeke suggests that believers grow indifferent to biblical truth, making worship services burdensome rather than enriching. This idea aligns with Tozer (2019), who cautions that spiritual dryness emerges when individuals prioritise intellectual acknowledgement of Scripture over heartfelt engagement. Additionally, Keller (2019) discusses how modern distractions and secular influences contribute to diminishing scriptural commitment among believers.

Growing Inner Corruption and Moral Relativism

Unchecked sin and moral decay often signal backsliding. Beeke notes that believers neglect self-examination, leading to the multiplication of sinful desires. Lewis (2020) illustrates how small

compromises in morality progressively distance individuals from God. Stott (2021) further explores the dangers of moral relativism, arguing that backsliding occurs when individuals justify sinful behaviours rather than seek spiritual renewal.

Love of the World and Secular Influence

Beeke warns against increasing worldliness, describing it as a powerful force that entangles believers. This aligns with Schaeffer (2018), who discusses the cultural shift toward secularism and its impact on Christian devotion. Wells (2020) also critiques modern evangelicalism, claiming that consumerism and self-indulgence dilute Christian convictions, making backsliding more prevalent.

Declining Love for Fellow Believers and Church Disunity

Backsliding fosters division within Christian communities, leading to weakened relationships and reduced spiritual accountability. Beeke describes how disagreements among believers escalate into hostility, weakening communal spiritual support. Volf (2022) similarly explores how unresolved conflicts breed resentment and disengagement from church life. Additionally, Wright (2023) argues that church fragmentation diminishes opportunities for spiritual growth.

Man-Centred Worship and Idolization of Spiritual Leaders

One of the most concerning aspects of backsliding is the shift from worshipping God to idolising human figures. Packer (2020) warns against placing trust in leaders rather than directly in God. Peterson (2017) similarly argues that ministers must guide congregations toward God rather than themselves. The rise of celebrity pastors, as examined in leadership studies, has contributed to misplaced faith, leading people to rely on human intercession rather than personal devotion.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research employed a quantitative research design. The quantitative research design utilised questionnaire with structured closed-ended questions of a four-point Likert scale of measurement to collect respondents' attitudes and opinions, to include the backslidden members in this study. The research design provides the blueprint for the research.

The Population and Sample Size

A population consists of all individuals or objects relevant to a study, while the sample size is a smaller, representative portion used to draw conclusions about the entire population. In this case, the research targeted a sample size of two hundred backslidden men from the two pastoral districts (Mochenwa and Rigena) for the last ten years, but the researcher got back 179 respondents.

Sampling Procedures

Guided by the purpose, research questions, and various perspectives of the research design, the research purposively selected eight churches from the two mentioned districts, which translated to four churches from each district. After identifying the study population, a sample was needed to accurately represent that population.

Sample Selection and Identification Process

Respondents from Mochenwa and Rigena pastoral districts were purposively selected with the assistance of church elders, deacons, clerks, and departmental leaders. These individuals identified backslidden men using formal church records, personal knowledge, and direct engagement with former members. To ensure objectivity and minimize bias, church leaders conducted the selection process by reviewing membership rolls, cross-verifying disengagement patterns through leadership discussions, and assessing self-reported backsliding cases. In instances where records were incomplete, church officials reached out to individuals or their close associates for confirmation.

Clear inclusion criteria guided the process: churches needed at least twenty backslidden men, participants had to be absent from church for no more than ten years, fall within a specific age range, and possess English literacy to ensure effective communication. These measures ensured a structured, transparent, and representative selection process, strengthening the reliability of the study's findings.

Instrumentation

In data collection, the research used a questionnaire as a research instrument for a survey. This was structured closed-ended survey with questions on a four-point Likert scale of measurement. The questionnaire was divided into four areas: (A) demographic profile, (B) level of agreement, (C) level of frequency, and (D) level of satisfaction. It helped the researcher to obtain a clear image of the phenomenon under study.

The questions were framed to be precise and to the point for clarity. A total of two hundred questionnaires were administered to the backslidden men members. The questionnaire also assisted in answering the statement of the problem, which sought to investigate the reasons why men backslide from weekly church service attendance and the possible resolutions to that effect. A four-point Likert scale interpretation of tables 1-3 of the measurement of the respondents' attitudes and opinions were as follows:

Table 1. Likert Scale, Scoring, and Verbal Interpretation for the Reasons for Backsliding and Personal Experience during Church Membership

Numeric Scale	Scaled Response	Numeric Likert Scale Average Weight	Scale Interpretation	Verbal Interpretation
4	Strongly Agree	3.50 – 4.00	Very High	
3	Agree	2.51 – 3.49	High	
2	Disagree	1.50 – 2.49	low	
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00 – 1.49	Very low	

Table 2. Likert Scale, Scoring and Verbal Interpretation for Personal Practices and Involvement as a Church Member

Numeric Scale	Scaled Response	Numeric Likert Scale Average Weight	Scale Interpretation	Verbal Interpretation
4	Always	3.50 – 4.00	Very High	
3	Often	2.51 – 3.49	High	
2	Rarely	1.50 – 2.49	Low	
1	Never	1.00 – 1.49	Very Low	

Table 3. Likert Scale, Scoring and Verbal Interpretation for Personal Fulfilment from Church Experience

Numeric Scale	Scaled Response	Numeric Likert Scale Average Weight	Scale Interpretation	Verbal Interpretation
4	Very Satisfied	3.50 – 4.00	Very High	
3	Satisfied	2.51 – 3.49	High	
2	Dissatisfied	1.50 – 2.49	Low	
1	Very Dissatisfied	1.00 – 1.49	Very low	

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics

Demographic data on research participants is crucial for determining if the individuals in a study represent a subset of the target population, allowing for reliable generalization of the results. In this study, demographics aided the researcher in identifying specific members of the sample based on key characteristics such as age, marital status, family background, religious background, educational background, and occupation. The pie charts below show a summary of the demographics of the respondents in percentage form.

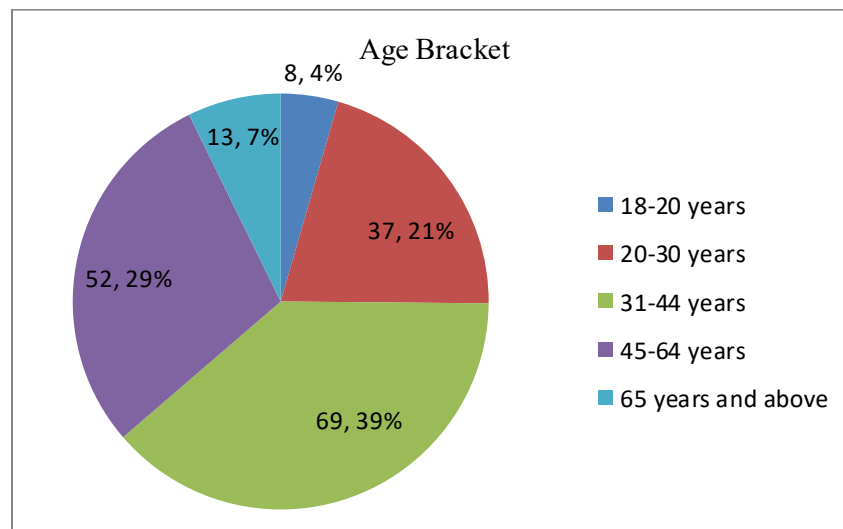


Figure 1 Age Bracket

As shown in Figure 2, the distribution of the participants' age brackets (n=179) indicated that 4% were between 18 and 20 years, 21% were between 20 and 30, 39% were between 31 and 44, 29% were between 45 and 64, and 7% were 65 years and above. This means that the majority of the respondents were between 31 and 44 years old.

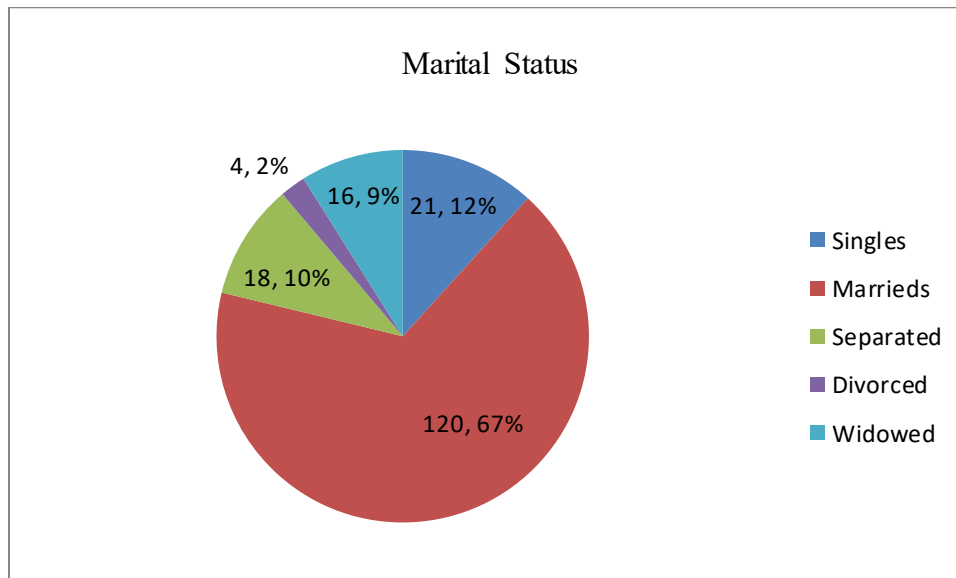


Figure 2 Marital Status

As shown in Figure 3, regarding the marital status of the participants (n=179), 12% indicated that they were single, 67% were married, 10% were separated, 2% were divorced, and 9% were widowed. This means that a majority of the respondents were married.

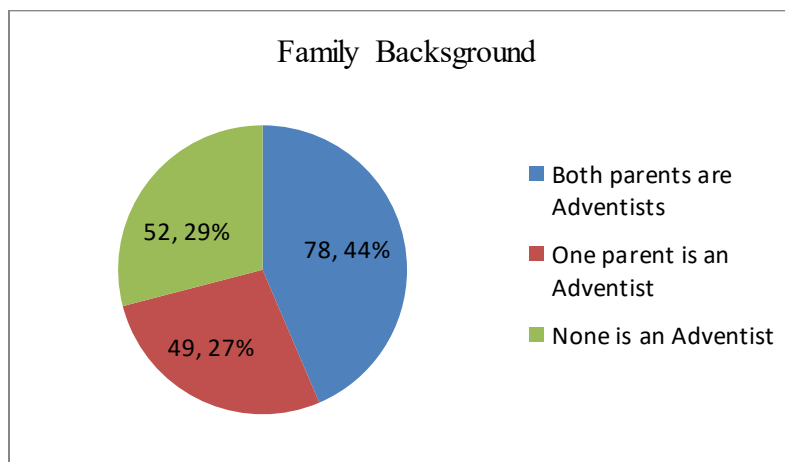


Figure 3 Family Background of Respondents

As shown in Figure 4, in terms of the family background of the participants (n=179), 44% have both parents being Adventists, 27% have one parent being an Adventist, and 29% have neither parent being an Adventist. This means that the majority of the respondents have both parents as Adventists.

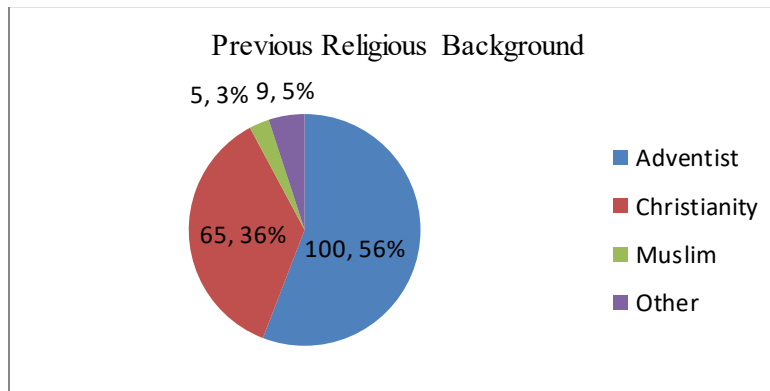


Figure 4 Previous Religious Backgrounds of the Respondents

As shown in Figure 5, regarding previous religious background (n=179), 56% indicated that they had been Adventists all through, 36% belonged to other Christian faiths before converting to Adventism, 3% were Muslims, and 5% were from other religions. This means that the majority of backsliders belonged to different Christian churches before converting to Adventism.

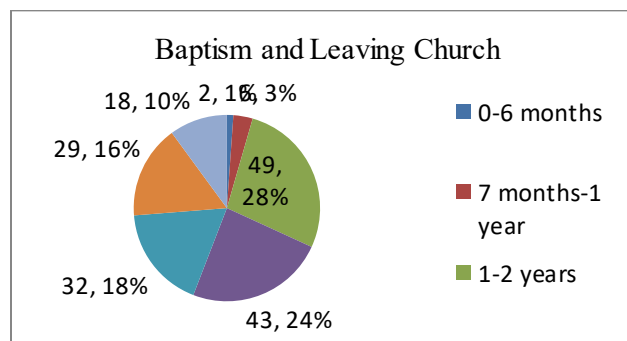


Figure 5 Period between the Respondent's Baptism and Leaving the Church

As shown in Figure 6, in terms of the period between baptism and leaving the Adventist church (n=179), 1% indicated that it took them only between 0-6 months to leave, 3% between 7 months and 1 year, 28% between 1-2 years old, 24% took 3-4 years, 18% took 5-7 years, 16% took 8-10 years, while 10% took 11 years and above to leave the church. This means that the majority of those who left the church took 1-2 years to leave.

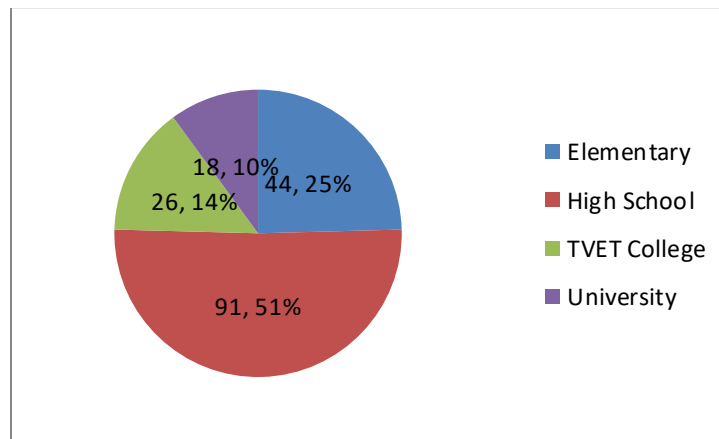


Figure 6 Education Background of the Respondents

As shown in Figure 7, the educational background of the respondents (n=179) is as follows: 25% had only elementary education, 51% reached high school level, 14% had TVET or college-level training, and 10% had university-level education. This means that the majority of the respondents had a high school level of education.

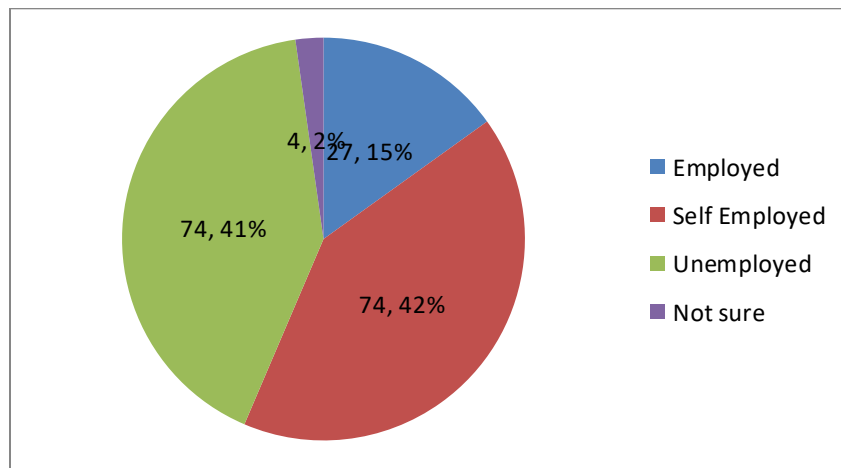


Figure 7. Occupation of the Backsliders

As shown in Figure 8, in terms of occupation of the respondents (n=179), 15% indicated that they were employed, 42% were self-employed, another 41% indicated that they were unemployed, and 2% indicated that they were not sure what their occupation was. This means that the majority of the respondents are either self-employed or unemployed.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Additional contributing factors include insufficient financial support, lack of conflict resolution management programmes, not being accepted, not being loved, lack of forgiveness, not being cared for genuinely, lack of reaching people in the community, the church members' lifestyles not being in harmony with the standards of Christian living, lack of commitment and devotion from church

members, and not getting involved in all church programmes. Finally, the backsliders were dissatisfied with small group ministry, prayer ministry, Bible study, handling of church finances, the elders' leadership style, the Sabbath afternoon programme, mid-week prayers, and the visitation programme, the return of tithes and offerings, and departmental leadership. Determining which factors specifically contribute to a higher percentage of Adventist men backsliding is difficult. The respondents also shared several personal experiences related to their church membership. In addition, it can be noted that the respondents held varied opinions about their personal practices and involvement in church activities while they were members. Furthermore, backsliders express diverse views on their personal fulfilment from the church experiences they had during their time as members.

Recommendations: This study recommends that church members closely examine why individuals from the Adventist. There is a need to develop a programme, strategy, or model to address the issue of backsliding among men. To further understand the phenomenon of backsliding, research using a mixed-method approach, involving a questionnaire, focus group discussions, and interviews, is needed. Due to the various reasons for backsliding and church dropouts, weekly teaching seminar materials, Bible interpretation study guides, and close-range training guidelines for pastors and elders must be developed and established at the Field office level. The Field office should develop weekly registers to record Sabbath School attendance, initiate action units, develop a training tool for pastors and church elders to manage small group ministries, Bible study, and prayer groups, mid-week prayer, create a workable afternoon programme, and establish regional home churches. The Field office should emphasize and implement a parenting programme and a happiness class for the newly baptized members. Research should also focus on discipling and mentoring new converts to prevent backsliding. Finally, there is a need to implement a reclamation, retention, and nurturing programme to curb this worrying backsliding trend.

6.0 REFERENCES

1. Akama, J. S. & Robert M. (2006). *Ethnography of the Gusii of Western Kenya: A Vanished Cultural Heritage*. The Edwin Mellen Press.
2. Batterton, K. A., & Hale, K. N. (2017). The Likert scale: What it is and how to use it. *Military Operations Research Society*, 50(2), 32–39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26296382>
3. Beeke, J. R. (2011). *Getting back to the race: The cure for backsliding*. Adelphi, Cruciform Press.
4. Burch, P. E. (2007). Acknowledged and Perceived Reasons for Non-Attendance at Christian Churches in the Pacifica Community, a Suburb of San Francisco, California. Dissertations. 253. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/253>.
5. Buttrick, G. A. ed. (1984). *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustr. Encyclopedia: Identifying and Explaining All Proper Names and Significant Terms and Subjects in the Holy Scriptures, Including the Apocrypha: With Attention to Archaeological Discoveries and Researches into the Life and Faith of Ancient Times. 1: A-D / George Arthur Buttrick; Kepler, Thomas Samuel u.a. [Hrsg.]*, 14. print Abingdon Pr, 339.
6. Bonhoeffer, D. (2021). *The Cost of Discipleship*. SCM Press.
7. Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, & mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

8. Foster, R. (2018). *Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth*. HarperOne.
9. Harelimana, J. K. (2014). Membership retention in a growing church: The case in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry*, 10, 53–67.
10. Hill, G. P. (2014). *Addressing reasons for members' non-attendance at the Elmhurst Seventh-day Adventist Church*.
11. Smith, J. (2022, April 11). *Gesima County Assembly Ward*. <https://kenyacradle.com/gesima-county-assembly-ward/>
12. Jones, M. S. (1988). *Reclaiming inactive church members*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.
13. Jones, S. J. (2003). *The evangelistic love of God and neighbor*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
14. Keller, T. (2019). *Preaching: Communicating faith in an age of scepticism*. Viking.
15. Kiage, P. G. (2014). *A strategy to increase the retention of members in the Nyaguta District* [Unpublished manuscript].
16. Lewis, C. S. (2020). *The Screwtape letters*. HarperCollins.
17. Lewis, C. P. (1997). Falling from the faith: Causes of membership dropout in the Grenada Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. [Unpublished manuscript].
18. Lewis, C. P. (1997). *Falling from the faith: Causes of membership dropout in the Grenada Mission of Seventh-day Adventists*. *Digital Commons @ Andrews University*, 395, 76, 78.
19. Lewis, R. (2009). *Mentoring matters*. Nairobi, Kenya: Evangel Nurturing and Equipping.
20. Longman, T. (2013). *The Baker illustrated Bible dictionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
21. Mahaney, C. J. (2009). *The Cross-Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing*. Multnomah.
22. Masillamony, P. (2000). *Training Laity to Minister to Inactive Members in the North Tamil Conference*. DMin diss., Andrews University.
23. Melbourne, B. L. (2007). *Called to discipleship*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Association.
24. Nichol, F. D. (Ed.). (1980). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible commentary* (Vol. 6). Hagerstown, Review and Herald Publishing Association.
25. Nielsen, L. C. (1977). Disassociation: An investigation into the contributing factors of backsliding and separation from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Michigan. *Andrews University*, (56), 4.
26. Packer, J. I. (2020). *Knowing God*. InterVarsity Press.
27. Peterson, E. (2017). *The pastor: A memoir*. HarperOne.
28. Pollock, A. J. (2023). *The difference between backsliding and apostasy*. <https://bibletruthpublishers.com/the-difference-between-backsliding-and-apostasy/algernon-james-pollock/salvation-assured/a-j-pollock/la59572>
29. Russell, H. A. (1990). *A study of the causes of membership dropout among selected churches in the East Jamaica Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists* [Unpublished manuscript].
30. Salazar, R. N. (2011). *A lay visitation program to help reclaim inactive members at the Hillsboro Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hillsboro, Oregon* [Unpublished manuscript].
31. Santos, M. S. (2011). *Discipleship master plan: A disciple-making strategy for the South Flint Seventh-day Adventist Church* [Unpublished manuscript].
32. Schaeffer, F. A. (2018). *How should we then live? The rise and decline of Western thought and culture*. Crossway.
33. Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. (2022). *Seventh-Day Adventist Church manual* (20th ed.). Silver Spring, Review & Herald Publishing Association.

34. Stott, J. (2021). *Basic Christianity*. InterVarsity Press.
35. Tess, P., et al. (2023). Mentoring: A traditional Cook Island approach to support men. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X231172638>
36. Tozer, A. W. (2019). *The pursuit of God*. Christian Publications.
37. Volf, M. (2022). *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*. Abingdon Press.
38. Wells, D. F. (2020). *No place for truth: Or whatever happened to evangelical theology?* Eerdmans.
39. Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, East-Central Africa Division. (2014). *Working policy*. Nairobi, Kenya.
40. Wright, N. T. (2023). *Simply Christian: Why Christianity makes sense*. HarperOne.