BEYOND THE ORDINARY AND ADVENTIST CONGREGATIONS

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In April and May of 2001, the U.S. Congregational Life Study (USCLS), partially funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., surveyed congregations from about 50 faith groups. Over one million people in attendance at church when the survey was administered completed the 56-item questionnaire. Each participating congregation received a profile on its attenders. The results were published in the book *A Field Guide to U. S. Congregations* by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce. Information was organized into four main categories: Spiritual Connections, Inside Connections, Outside Connections, and Identity Connections.

More recently the authors published a second book: *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U. S. Congregations*. This work is a re-analysis of the original data at the aggregated congregational level. USCLS identified 10 strengths that put congregations “beyond the ordinary.” They are (1) Growing spiritually, (2) Meaningful worship, (3) Participating in the congregation, (4) Having a sense of belonging, (5) Caring for children and youth, (6) Focusing on the community, (7) Sharing faith, (8) Welcoming new people, (9) Empowering leadership, and (10) Looking to the future. For each strength, one or more questions were chosen from the survey, and a scale was constructed and submitted to a reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha. Then the percentage of those in a given congregation who responded in a specified way to each question in a particular scale was calculated, and an index of that strength was constructed by taking the mean of the questions chosen for that strength.

While profiles were prepared for each participating congregation, USCLS has aggregated the scores for all congregations to provide an overall index for each of the ten strengths. In addition those congregations that scored in the top 20th percentile for a strength are considered “beyond the ordinary.” Congregants can measure their strength indices in comparison with the overall figures to determine their strong and weak points and what actions they might take.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States participated with the other faith groups in USCLS. Nearly 5600 Adventist church attenders in 94 congregations filled out the lengthy questionnaire about their faith and involvement in the life of the congregation. The purpose of this paper is to provide the aggregated index for all participating Adventist congregations on each of the ten strengths and to compare them with the indices of the overall sample of all congregations in all faith groups.

To do this we will take each strength, list the items that make up that strength, give the index for the Adventist congregations, and give the index for the overall American congregations.
Strength 1: Growing Spiritually

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Are growing in their faith through participation in activities of their congregations 28%
2. Spend at least a few times a week in private devotional activities 83%
3. Feel their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation 76%
4. Report Bible study and prayer groups as one of the three most valued aspects 23%
5. Report prayer ministry as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregations 15%

Overall “growing spiritually” index = 47%
Adventist “growing spiritually” index = 45%

Strength 2: Meaningful Worship

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Always or usually experience God’s presence during services 81%
2. Always or usually experience inspiration during services 74%
3. Always or usually experience joy during services 76%
4. Always or usually experience awe during services 22%
5. Rarely experience boredom during services 53%
6. Rarely experience frustration during services 64%
7. Report sermons or homilies as one of the three most valued aspects of congregation 35%
8. Report worship services/activities to help them with everyday living to a great extent 46%

Overall “meaningful worship” index = 62%
Adventist “meaningful worship” index = 56%

Strength 3: Participating in the Congregation

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Attend worship services usually every week or more often 83%
2. Are involved in one or more small groups 50%
3. Have one or more leadership roles in the congregation 92%
4. Often participate in important decision-making in the congregation 24%
5. Give 5% or more of their net income regularly to the congregation 77%

Overall “participating in the congregation” index = 60%
Adventist “participating in the congregation” index = 65%

Strength 4: Having a Sense of Belonging Index

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Report participating more in the activities of the congregation than two years ago 30%
2. Report that most of their closest friends are part of their congregation 22%
3. Feel that they have a growing sense of belonging to their congregation 34%

Overall “sense of belonging” index = 37%
Adventist “sense of belonging” index = 34%
Strength 5: Caring for Children and Youth Index

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Are satisfied with what is offered for children and youth (under 19) 56%
2. Report ministry for youth as one of the three most valued aspects of congregation 15%
3. Report that their children and youth worship in their congregation 28%
   Overall “caring for children and youth” index 50%
   Adventist “caring for children and youth” index 33%

Strength 6: Focusing on the Community Index

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Are involved in social service or advocacy groups through their congregation 23%
2. Are involved in social service or advocacy groups in their community 24%
3. Contribute to charitable community organizations 57%
4. Report wider community care/social justice as one of the three most valued aspects 08%
5. Report openness to social diversity as one of the three most valued aspects 10%
6. Worked with others to try to solve a community problem 16%
7. Voted in the last presidential election 55%
   Overall “focusing on the community” index 33%
   Adventist “focusing on the community” index 28%

Strength 7: Sharing Faith Index

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Are involved in evangelistic activities in the congregation 28%
2. Feel at ease talking about their faith and seek opportunities to do so 27%
3. Have invited one who does not currently attend to a worship service in last year 49%
4. Report reaching non-attenders as one of the three most valued aspects of congregation 20%
   Overall “sharing faith” index 32%
   Adventist “sharing faith” index 31%

Strength 8: Welcoming New People Index

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Have been attending worship services/activities of this congregation for 5 years or less 33%
   Overall “welcoming new people” index 33%
   Adventist “welcoming new people” index 39%

Strength 9: Empowering Leadership Index

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Feel congregation’s leaders encourage them to use their gifts/skills to a great extent 33%
2. Feel the pastor takes into account the ideas of worshipers to a great extent 44%
3. Describe the leadership style of the pastor as one that inspires people to take action 42%
4. Feel strongly that there is a good match between the congregation and the minister 35%
Overall “empowering leadership” index 49%
Adventist “empowering leadership” index 39%

**Strength 10: Looking to the Future Index**

Percentage of worshipers who:
1. Feel that congregation has a clear vision for ministry and are strongly committed to it 38%
2. Have a sense of excitement about their congregation’s future 27%
3. Feel that their congregation is currently moving in new directions 27%
4. Feel that their congregation is always ready to try something new 46%

Overall “looking to the future” index 41%
Adventist “looking to the future” index 35%

When we compare the overall national sample with the aggregated Seventh-day Adventist sample, the overall national sample does better at exhibiting strengths. Out of the ten strengths, the national sample has higher percentages of participants on eight of them. The Adventists lead only in strength 3 - Participating in the Congregation - and strength 8 - Welcoming New People. In discussing any of these differences we will mention only those with more than a five-point percentage spread.

The Welcoming New People index has only one item. Adventists do somewhat better than all groups at having a larger percentage of attenders who are new (less than five years). This no doubt reflects the Adventist emphasis on evangelism although the difference of six points is not great considering that many of the congregations in the national sample are affiliated with denominations that historically do not stress making converts.

The Adventist five-point lead on the Participating in the Congregation index is largely due to the item about having one or more leadership roles in the congregation where 92% places them 35 points ahead. That is an amazing involvement. Adventists also lead by 14 points in contributing at least 5% of their income to the congregation. However, this 77% would seem low in view of the fact that Adventists are admonished to pay 10% tithe plus offerings to support the local projects. An explanation may be the way the Adventist financial system works compared with other faith groups. Pastors are paid by the conference not by the congregations. The tithe is all sent on to the conference. So some members may not have counted the tithe in reporting that they contribute as least 5% to the congregation. Somewhat offsetting these leads is the 17-point advantage in being a member of a small group and the 9-point advantage in participating in decision-making on the part of the national sample. Apparently, Adventists are not as likely to join small groups but are more likely to be involved in congregational leadership. However that leadership does not seem to translate into a larger role in making decisions for the congregations.

Of the eight strengths in which the national sample has higher percentages than the Adventist sample, three (Growing Spiritually, Focusing on the Community, and Sharing Faith) are separated by five percentage points or fewer which is relatively minor. However, some of the
individual items are deserving of comment. Adventists were 11 points higher in reporting that they practice private devotional activities at least a few times a week. Only 55% voted in the last presidential election compared with 71% of the overall group. And 11% fewer Adventists invited someone new to attend a worship service in the last year.

While the Meaningful Worship index is separated by only six points, there are several larger gaps in the individual items. The national group are 9 points higher on rarely experiencing frustration during services, 10 points higher on reporting that worship services or activities help them with everyday living to a great extent, and 17 points higher on rarely experiencing boredom during services. This last figure is particularly troublesome since only about half (53%) of Adventist attenders rarely experience boredom during the worship services. Do Adventist congregations have a need to make their worships more interesting?

There is a gap of eight points in the Having a Sense of Belonging index. This is largely due to the fact that only 34% of Adventist attenders feel that they have a growing sense of belonging to their congregations while 58% of the national sample do - a spread of 14 percentage points. Would this help explain some of the membership loss? If new converts are not fully integrated into the life of the congregation, they may look elsewhere for that sense of community.

The Looking to the Future index has a seven-point spread. The item most responsible for this is worshipers who feel their congregation is always ready to try something new - 46% to 56% in favor of the overall group. Do Adventist congregations need to be more innovative?

Adventists also fall 10 points behind on the Empowering Leadership index. All four of the individual items are eight to ten points higher on the national sample. Are the pastors tempted to do it all by themselves rather than equipping and encouraging new leadership?

The largest discrepancy, however, is on the Caring for Children and Youth index - a spread of 17 points. While the two samples are virtually identical on the first two items, a huge spread of 49 points occurs on the item, “report that their children and youth worship in their congregation.” Only 28% of Adventist attenders report this. One reason for the low number may be that young people are away at school and, therefore, do not worship in their home churches. However, this also most certainly relates to the large loss of adolescents from the church during their late teens and early twenties. Other research has revealed this figure to be between 40% and 50%.

These data are not to either praise or blame Adventist congregations. They serve to challenge them. If such congregations would administer the questionnaire to those in attendance at a peak worship service and have a profile constructed, they could compare individual congregations with the national Adventist data and with the national overall data. Such a service is available through USCLS. Congregations could then set goals for improvement and institute changes that would score them in the top 20% of at least some of these strengths making them “beyond the ordinary.”
Information on administering the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, including material provided and costs can be secured from:

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