

Andrews University  
The Institute of Church Ministry

A STUDY OF COMMUNITY AWARENESS OF THE  
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH BEFORE  
AND AFTER A PUBLIC RELATIONS  
MEDIA CAMPAIGN

A Research Study  
commissioned by  
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The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to proclaim the gospel in the setting of the messages of the three angels of Revelation 14. This includes giving this gospel to all peoples, calling out those who choose to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus, and incorporating them as responsible members of the church.

But before the message can be accepted, the church must win a hearing. It must gain the attention of the neighborhood that surrounds it. The community must know about the church and what it stands for. The church must gain both attention and respect.

In an attempt to foster this awareness, the Porterville, California Seventh-day Adventist Church retained Michael A. Jones and Associates, an advertising-public relations firm located in Keene, Texas, to conduct an Adventist Awareness campaign in their city. The firm employed various appropriate media to enable the residents of this community to become familiar with the Seventh-day Adventist church and the benefits it has to

offer. The campaign ran from June 1983 to the spring of 1984.

Jones and Associates commissioned the Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) at Andrews University to direct two telephone surveys of the Greater Porterville area. The purpose was to discover the awareness of and attitudes toward Adventists and to identify changes between the first and second survey which might be attributed to the campaign. This report describes these surveys.

#### Methods

ICM developed a simple telephone survey with seventeen questions and an introductory script (copies of these are attached to this report). In a pilot study of the questionnaire, ICM completed twenty telephone surveys in the southwestern Michigan area. It was found that to get twenty people to agree to answer the questions, it was necessary to complete calls to twenty-five people (five refusals). Allowing for busy signals and no one home, it took slightly over one and one-half hours to complete the twenty surveys.

Then ICM randomly selected 800 residential telephone numbers from the Porterville directory for the first survey and another 800 numbers for the second survey. ICM sent master copies of the survey and the lists of telephone numbers to a Porterville member who had been designated by the church as Director of Data Collection.

The church assumed responsibility for the actual

calling. The Director of Data Collection recruited a number of people who he felt would have pleasant telephone mannerisms. Each caller was assigned a section of the list. The first survey was conducted in June of 1983, just before the campaign. The second survey was conducted in the late spring of 1984, some time after the campaign had concluded. All completed surveys were returned to ICM for processing.

### Findings

The data from the two surveys have been arranged in two profiles which are attached to this report. This section will provide comments on how the two resemble or differ from each other.

First, it must be noted that the return rate is very low for a phone survey. On the first survey only 325 completed calls were reported. Of these only 36 refused or were unable to answer the questions so the ratio of completed questionnaires to completed calls was a very respectable 89 percent. However, 475 of the numbers or 59 percent were never reached. Whether these represent homes that did not answer the phone, disconnected lines, busy signals, or some other explanation cannot not be determined from available data. It is not certain how many times a given volunteer tried a number before giving up. It seems unlikely that it would be impossible to reach more than 41 percent of a list of local phone numbers.

The second survey has an even poorer track record. Only 201 of the numbers, or 25 percent, were reported as reached. Of these, 42 people, or about 21 percent, had never heard of Adventists, and therefore the caller could not continue. Since only about 5 percent had answered "No" to the first question on the first survey, it appears that the proportion who have never heard of Adventists has actually increased. While the campaign could not have produced that kind of effect, it would appear that it has not decreased the proportion of people who have never heard of the church.

Caution is in order here though. The low return rates suggest that it is possible that some volunteers did not report all those for whom they were not able to complete a survey because the respondent was not familiar with Adventists. Thus comparison figures for those not completing the entire questionnaire may not be meaningful. Even in comparing the other questions, the low return rates cast some doubt on the reliability of the results. It is impossible to know to what extent these two profiles might have been different if 650 to 700 calls had been completed for each.

The second question, What comes to your mind when you think of Seventh-day Adventists? is a complex question. The answers were coded under five major headings with a number of subheadings. In the major categories, there is a tendency for an increase in responses in the distinctive

teaching/doctrine and in the miscellaneous categories. There is a tendency for a decrease in responses in the behavior and the caring people categories. This shift is statistically significant, using the chi square test.

Much of the difference in the first three major areas, however, can be explained by the dramatic drop in percentages classified as "general statement." This classification was assigned when the caller checked the blank for a category but did not write in the specific response. The difference on the two profiles in this respect may indicate that the callers were more precise in writing in the information on the second survey.

As to specific subheadings, respondents were more likely to mention the Sabbath and health teachings and to be aware of health classes after the media campaign. Other differences are too small to be significant in either direction. Under miscellaneous comments, it would appear that following the campaign respondents were somewhat more likely to give favorable comments. Negative impressions were very few.

Question 3 shows a tendency to see Adventists as more like other churches or to withhold comment following the campaign, but the differences are not significant.

In question 4, people who answered after the campaign seem to shift to some extent from "Yes" to "Not sure" on whether Adventists believe some of the basic Bible teachings. Here again though, the margin of difference is

within sampling error and is not significant. Most people in the first survey did not confuse Adventists with Jehovah's Witnesses (4c) or Mormons (4e) so there was no room for positive change.

In question 5, people were somewhat more likely to have heard of Adventist Stop-smoking Clinics and Services to the Needy after the campaign, but again the differences are too small to be statistically significant.

The number of respondents having Adventists as personal friends is about the same in both samples. A smaller proportion of the second sample have Adventist relatives, but of course this cannot be attributed to the campaign. In fact, it may be a partial explanation for why a smaller percentage in the second sample had heard of Seventh-day Adventists. The ethnic backgrounds and age groupings of the two samples are approximately the same, but the proportion of males in the second sample is significantly greater.

#### Conclusion

It has been mentioned that the small percentage of the sample who were actually contacted by phone and/or lack of precision in recording what happened to those who did not answer the questions (that is, Did they answer that they had never heard of Adventists? Did they refuse to answer the questions? Or were they never reached at all?) must call for caution in interpreting the results. Another caution is

found in the fact that the second survey was not taken for some weeks after the media campaign concluded. Therefore, it cannot measure the immediate effects of the campaign. It should, however, say something about the residual or long-term effects.

Recognizing these cautions, it may be concluded from a study of the two profiles that little change in the awareness and attitudes of the community toward Adventists took place between the surveys. Most, but not all, of the small shifts were in the favorable direction, but, in general, these were too minor to be significant given the size of the response. Exceptions to this general statement are that, following the survey, respondents were significantly more likely to be aware of the Sabbath and health teachings of Adventists as well as of their health ministries. An answer to the puzzling question of why a larger proportion of the sample had never heard of Adventists after the campaign is most likely found in the data-collection procedures or as an artifact of the particular sample.

Recommendations for a future project of this type are that each caller be required to keep a log showing the disposition of each number and that each number be called until it is reached. Unless the number had been disconnected there would be a report for every person in the sample. That way it would be known for certain what proportion of the sample had really never heard of



Adventists. This has been an experimental study. The lessons learned should lend preciseness to future research in this vital area.