

**EVANGELISM, PREACHING,  
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH  
IN THE FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY STUDY OF  
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCHES**

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More than 30 faith groups in the United States joined together in the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project to collect voluminous data from about 20,000 congregations. The findings are being used to strengthen congregational life and to make the public aware of the key role played by congregations in contributing to society under the rubric of FAith Communities Today (FACT). The Seventh-day Adventist Church participated in this study, using a stratified-random method to select 805 congregations in such a way as to represent geographical regions in the United States and ethnic groups proportionately. In the end 413 congregations returned usable surveys—a 51% return rate.

This paper will highlight findings in the areas of Evangelism, Sermon Topics, Social Justice, and Community Outreach. Scales have been constructed from items on Evangelism, Social Justice, and Community Outreach (eight scales). These scales are correlated with the number of people participating in congregational life, the number of active adults, the number of active young people, and the percentage of growth or loss in the previous five years.

The data contain ten measures of outreach to non-members of the congregation which might be labeled “evangelism.” The table below shows the percentage of congregations that reported using a particular method within the previous twelve months. These are arranged in descending rank order. The Presbyterian Church in the USA reported on this same list in 2001. For comparison purposes the Presbyterian ranking of each item is shown next to the Adventist percentages.

**PERCENTAGE OF CONGREGATIONS EMPLOYING  
VARIOUS OUTREACH METHODS IN PREVIOUS YEAR**

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<b>Method</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Pres. Rank</b>
Phone calls or visits by pastoral staff	87%	1
Stressing to members the importance of sharing faith	85%	4
Phone calls or personal visits by lay members	84%	2
A public evangelistic campaign	72%	9
Ads or stories in local newspapers	58%	3
Direct mail or distributing announcements to area residents	53%	8
Special worship services to attract the unchurched	44%	5
Special programs (parenting classes, music festivals, etc.)	36%	7
Radio or television ads	31%	10
Identifying and contacting people who are new in the area	17%	6

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The rankings of the two denominations appear to be quite similar with two exceptions. The Presbyterian congregations are much less likely to conduct evangelistic campaigns, and the Adventist congregations do not do nearly as well in identifying and contacting people who are new to the area.

Key respondents were also asked how often the sermon in the worship service focuses on a particular theme. They answered on a five-point scale from “never” to “always.” The percentages reporting “always” or “often” are displayed below in descending rank order.

**FOCUS OF WORSHIP TOPIC ALWAYS OR OFTEN**

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God’s love and care	95%
Personal salvation	90%
Personal spiritual growth	88%
Practical advice for daily living	72%
Social justice or social action	14%

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It is evident that Seventh-day Adventist congregations hear a great deal about an individual’s relationship with God but very little about corporate action to correct injustices and to make the world a better place. In addition to this information, 77% of the congregations reported that a sermon on stewardship had been preached during the past year.

Congregational respondents also reacted to 18 statements concerning congregational identity. Asked how well each of the statements described their congregations, they could select on a five-point scale from “very well” to “not at all.” The percentages were ranked according to

the percentages choosing “very well” or “quite well.” Listed below are the three top-ranked descriptions and the two bottom ones.

### **DESCRIBES CONGREGATION VERY OR QUITE WELL**

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#### **Top identity descriptives**

Our congregation feels like a close-knit family.	62%
New people are easily assimilated/incorporated into our congregation.	62%
Our congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose.	55%

#### **Last place identity descriptives**

Our community is well-informed of activities in our congregation.	23%
Our congregation is working for social justice	19%

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Congregations tend to see their identities as basically internal and not as likely to include their communities in their self-image. They are even less likely to see themselves as change agents for social progress. Incidentally, the social justice item was next to last at 24% in the Presbyterian responses.

Another set of questions dealt with social services provided to the community. Respondents were asked if the congregation had either provided the service directly within the previous 12 months or had cooperated with another congregation or agency in providing the services. Percentages given in the table on the next page are those of the congregations who had provided the service in one or both of the two ways. The services are divided into five groups which constitute scales for further analyses. An average percentage is computed for each grouping.

The scales descend in percentages of congregations providing the various types of services. Congregations are most likely to help individuals, then provide group social services, and finally to attempt to improve social structures.

## PERCENTAGE OF CONGREGATIONS PROVIDING VARIOUS SERVICES

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<b>Basic outreach programs (BASIC); Average = 57%</b>	
Cash assistance to families or individuals	98%
Food pantry or soup kitchen	80%
Community Services Center	70%
Elderly or emergency housing	21%
Homeless shelter	16%
<b>Extra outreach programs (EXTRA); Average = 29%</b>	
Health programs/clinics/education	53%
Hospital or nursing home facilities	24%
Counseling services or “hot line”	21%
Substance abuse programs	17%
<b>Group outreach programs (GROUP); Average = 22%</b>	
Prison or jail ministry	41%
Senior citizen programs other than housing	21%
Day care, pre-school, or after-school programs	15%
Programs for migrants or immigrants	9%
<b>Teaching outreach programs (TEACH); Average = 10%</b>	
Tutoring/literacy programs for young people	10%
Voter registration or voter education	10%
Employment counseling/placement/training	9%
<b>Organized advocacy outreach (ADVOCACY)</b>	
Social issue advocacy or community organizing	7%

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To seek relationships between outreach measures and congregational “success” the five social-service outreach scales described above were used as independent variables. In addition, three other scales were constructed. The ten items of evangelistic outreach listed above were made into the **EVANGELISM** scale. A subset of three items from this list (public evangelistic campaigns, special worship services to attract the unchurched, and special programs such as parenting classes, music festivals, etc., formed the evangelism through programming (**PROGRAMEVAN**) scale. Four items (Our congregation is working for social justice; Our congregation is trying to increase its racial/ethnic diversity; Sermon often focuses on social justice or social action, and Organized social-issue advocacy in the previous year) constitute the social-justice (**SOCIALJUS**) scale. These eight scales were each correlated with the dependent variables.

For dependent variables we chose the number of persons associated in any way with the congregation (**EVERYONE**); the number of regularly participating adults (**REGADULT**); the number of regularly participating children and teens (**REGKIDS**); and the percentage of growth or decline in participants during the previous five years (**GROWPLAT**). The correlation matrix is displayed below.

	EVERYONE	REGADULT	REGKIDS	GROWPLAT
BASIC	.232**	.221**	.205**	.143**
EXTRA	.235**	.208**	.202**	.147**
GROUP	.376**	.333**	.303**	.151**
TEACH	.191**	.255**	.212**	.036
ADVOCACY	.051	.060	.109*	.118*
EVANGELISM	.250**	.183**	.173**	.182**
PROGRAMEVAN	.284**	.205**	.194**	.235**
SOCIALJUS	.067	.122*	.126*	.113*

\*Significant beyond the .05 level; \*\*Significant beyond the .01 level

If we can define a successful congregation as one in which more people are involved, in which a higher percentage of both adults and youth are regularly participating, and which has grown by a higher percentage of its membership during a five-year period, then various types of outreach apparently contribute to this success. Of the 32 correlations, 23 are significant beyond the .01 level and another 5 are significant beyond the .05 level. Only 4 do not reach significance and 3 of these are in the areas of social justice and organized advocacy. In these two areas none are significant at or beyond the .01 level. While there may be a strong moral case for congregations working for social justice and organizing advocacy programs, these activities contribute weakly or not at all to building vibrant congregations.

On the other hand, the various community services provided do seem to be related to congregational strength. Every relationship was found to be significant beyond the .01 level with one exception. Teaching-outreach programs and percentage of growth during the previous five years were not significantly correlated. Congregations seem to do best by concentrating on meeting the felt needs of individuals and groups who lack basic necessities. Intentional evangelistic outreach methods are strongly related to the success measures in every relationship whether they are conducted through personal contact, advertizing, or formal programs.