

## **A Look at the Current Range of Attitudes Toward Homosexuality Among American Adventists**

By Carrol J Grady

Have you ever wondered what Seventh-day Adventists in the pews really think about topics that generate heated discussion on occasion? I have. Especially about a topic I'm particularly interested in; homosexuality. Do most of us side with the official church statement [1] that condemns "homosexual practices and relationships" as sinful, while affirming the "dignity of every human being"? How many of us have found our understanding of homosexuality changing as new information is made known?

### **Purpose of Study**

Up until about 40 years ago, Adventist opposition to homosexuality was no different from that of most other Christians, indeed from American society in general. However, as continuing scientific research has brought a growing understanding of homosexuality, the consensus of experts shifted and it is no longer included in the list of mental disorders by professional organizations. [2] Today, polls show that a majority (53%) of the American public favors gay marriage. [3] Currently, 12 states, the District of Columbia, and two Indian tribes legally recognize gay marriage, and it is possible that next month the Supreme Court could overturn the Defense of Marriage Act.

Churches, too, began to wrestle with this "new light," particularly the more liberal churches, while conservative denominations stepped up their opposition. Today, the following denominations welcome and affirm gays and lesbians, and some perform same-sex unions/marriages and/or ordain gay and lesbian clergy: United Church of Christ, Alliance of Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), Metropolitan Community Church, most "Old Catholic" communities, Presbyterian Church (USA), and some Quaker communities, as well as three of the four branches of Judaism in the United States. [4] And although the Roman Catholic Church officially condemns homosexual behavior, a recent poll showed that 82% of American Catholics are not opposed to gay marriage. [5] In a 2003 study at a large public university in Texas, in which Seventh-day Adventists were included among a group labeled "conservative protestants" this group had significantly more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than "moderate protestants" and even more negative than "liberal protestants." [6]

But no published study has previously been conducted to look specifically at attitudes among individual Adventist members. Have attitudes in the pew changed, along with societal attitudes at large? I was interested in finding answers to these questions by doing a survey to find out more about the attitudes of Adventists across the country toward homosexuality, so I enlisted the help and sponsorship of Dr. Aubyn Fulton, Professor of Psychology at Pacific Union College. Dr. Fulton and I designed the survey itself, while I was responsible for recruiting participants and Dr. Fulton did the statistical analysis of the results. These results were be presented

formally at the Western Psychological Association Convention in April; what follows here is an informal summary and discussion of what we found.

## Our Sample

We decided to identify a representative sample of Adventist churches in the United States, and then ask each pastor to help us invite their church members to complete our survey. The Adventist church is organized into geographically based Unions; we divided these Unions into North (Lake and Mid-America), East (Atlantic and Columbia), South (Southern and Southwestern), and West (Pacific and North Pacific). Then we determined what percentage of the total US denominational membership each of these Unions comprised, and on that basis randomly selected a proportional number of churches from each region: five from the North, eight from the East, 12 from the South and 13 from the West, for a total of 38 churches. We sent letters to the pastors of each of the 38 randomly selected churches explaining our project and asking them to either provide us with an email list of their members, or to forward our invitation to take the survey to their members themselves. Twelve of the 38 pastors (31.5%) agreed (Two each from the north and east, three from the south and five from the west, ranging in size from 22 to 765 members). Ten pastors chose to forward our survey invitation to their members themselves, while two small churches where few members had computers filled out paper surveys and mailed them to us. In one church the pastor moved shortly after agreeing to participate, so the church secretary announced the survey in the church bulletin and we estimated that half the membership had seen it. We estimate that 919 people were invited to take our survey. We received 441 completed surveys, for a total response rate of 48%.

The General Conference Department of Archives and Statistics does not presently collect information on age, ethnicity, or gender, but using information from a 2008 Pew Forum Survey that included Seventh-day Adventists, we can compare our demographics with theirs.

<u>AGE</u>	<u>18-29</u>	<u>39-49</u>	<u>50-64</u>	<u>65 and older</u>
Pew Poll	20%	44%	21%	15%
Our Survey	22%	46%	22.7%	9.3%
<u>ETHNICITY</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Asian</u>
Pew Poll	43%	21%	27%	5%
Our Survey	57.8%	27.9%	7.5%	5.2%
<u>GENDER</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>		
Pew Poll	60%	40%		
Our Survey	57.1%	42.9%		

Our age and gender demographics are fairly consistent with those of the PEW Poll, but ethnically, White members are considerably over-represented, while Hispanic members are

under-represented. We contacted a number of ethnic churches, but only one fairly large Black church agreed to participate.

In addition, 428 respondents identified as **heterosexual** (97.1), six as **homosexual** (1.4%) and seven as **bisexual** (1.6%). A Gallup Poll published in October of 2012 reported that 3.4% of the US population identifies as LGB.<sup>5</sup> Our 3% total is close to that.

We asked participants to indicate the length of time they or their family had been Adventists. 25% were **first-generation**, 23% were **second-generation**, and 52% represented **three or more generations** of Adventists.

Participants were also asked to identify their perspective on the Adventist faith; are they **conservative** or **very conservative** (31%), **moderate** (44%), or **liberal or very liberal** (25%)? This is a fairly balanced spread.

Finally, participants were questioned about personal contact with LGBs; 65% said they were closely or casually acquainted with a lesbian, and 72% were closely or casually acquainted with a gay man.

Although caution should be used in interpreting the results of this survey, it does provide the best picture we have at this time of how American Adventists understand and view homosexuality. It can serve as a baseline for other studies in the future.

## Survey Findings

Let's begin by looking at the number of those who agreed/strongly agreed or disagreed/strongly disagreed with the following statements in the survey; later we can discuss the differences between the various demographic groups.

First are two statements about beliefs regarding the nature of homosexuality which were close to evenly split. **I understand homosexuality to be a result of factors that are beyond voluntary control.** Another way of saying this might be that homosexuality is not something people choose. 45% agreed; 55% disagreed. **I believe that with the proper motivation and interventions, people who identify as homosexuals can be changed to heterosexuals.** A total of 55% agreed that orientation can be changed and 45% disagreed.

The next three questions about acceptance by the church show a majority with attitudes of acceptance. **I would welcome a gay or lesbian person who came to my church.** On this question there was near consensus, with 94% agreeing to this statement. **If a gay or lesbian couple who lived together romantically attended evangelistic meetings in my church and asked to be baptized, I would insist that they quit living together before they were allowed to be baptized.** Only 48% would insist on such a couple separating before being baptized, while 52% would not impose this restriction. **I think gay and lesbian people should be allowed to be**

**members in good standing in Adventist churches.** 53% agreed to membership for gays and lesbians, while 47% did not.

Three statements about participation in church life follow. Attitudes here were less accepting, with the exception of musical participation. **I think gay and lesbian people should be allowed to serve as Sabbath school leaders or teachers in Adventist churches.** More than a fourth (29%) agreed; 71% disagreed. **I think gay and lesbian people should be allowed to serve as deacons or elders in Adventist churches.** More than one in four (28%) also agreed on this, and 72% disagreed. **I think gay and lesbian people should be allowed to share their musical talents in Adventist churches.** Maybe it's their reputation for musical abilities, but 80% were happy to have gays/lesbians provide music for worship services, and only 20% did not want them to do even that.

Next are statements referring to the church's relation to societal issues. **I believe that Adventists should politically oppose the legalization of gay marriage.** Only 56% of respondents agreed with this statement, while 44% disagreed. Perhaps this reflects the strong role religious liberty directors have played in some areas by urging members to vote against gay marriage because of their belief that it is sinful, in spite of the traditional Adventist belief in liberty of conscience.

**I believe that gay men and lesbians do not have the same rights to equal employment and housing opportunities as straight Americans do.** Over three-quarters (77%) believe that LGBs should have equal housing and employment rights, even if they believe the behavior is sinful; only 23% are not in favor of granting those rights.

The following statement concerns religious belief about homosexuality. **I believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin.** This is another question which elicited high consensus, with 86% agreeing the Bible calls homosexuality a sin, and only 14% disagreeing. It should be noted that this question states homosexuality itself, not just homosexual actions, is condemned by the Bible. Perhaps this reflects a common fuzziness in understanding of the various terms used in discussing this issue.

Respondents also completed the six items on the "Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men" scale by Herek (2002). This well-validated and often-used measure is scored on a 4-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), with high scores indicating negative attitudes. The average score on the ATLG for our sample was very close to 3, meaning that our average participant agreed with negative attitudes about homosexuality.

Interestingly, many of the demographic variables tracked in our survey were significantly related to the various attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality that we asked about. A multiple regression analysis showed that six variables together explained a highly significant 36.7% of the variance in the overall attitudes towards homosexuals as represented by the ATGL score (adjusted  $R^2 = .367$ ,  $F(5,518) = 49.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In order of the strength of the relationship, liberal respondents, those more acquainted with gay men, younger respondents,

white respondents, women and those who live in the northeast reported more positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. For the most part, the same variables, sometimes in different orders, predicted more positive attitudes toward homosexuals participating in various ways in the life of the church, and adherence to beliefs that are generally seen as being positive about homosexuals (that sexual orientation is not a choice, that it cannot be easily changed, and that it is not a sin). Fewer of our demographic variables related to attitudes about welcoming homosexuals to church, or the belief that homosexuals have the same rights as heterosexuals, because the majority of our respondents indicated agreement with these positions regardless of their demographic status.

## **Conclusions**

We should first recognize the survey's limitation in being representative. Only about a third of the pastors agreed to participate, and a little less than half of the members of these churches completed the survey. It is certainly possible that those who did participate tended to be more liberal than those who declined. There could also be a bias toward the more technically savvy respondents, since the survey was conducted by computer. We also neglected to include a question about educational level, so this element is missing from our analysis. Nevertheless, this does represent one of the most complete samples to date of American Adventists to be asked about their attitudes toward homosexuality.

The survey results indicate that we should be careful not to make sweeping statements about what Adventists believe because there is a wide range of attitudes toward, and understanding of, homosexuality among American Adventists. This makes me think of my own journey. I am a fourth-generation Adventist; my parents worked in Adventist hospitals in Maryland and California. I attended Adventist schools, and spent my growing-up years in Takoma Park, Maryland, then our world church headquarters. I never questioned what I was taught about our church – basically that we were the only Christians who really had the whole “Truth.” In college I fell in love with a theology student and married him, determined to be the best pastor's wife ever. After ten years in Southeastern California Conference and five in the then Hawaiian Mission, we and our three boys became missionaries in the Far Eastern Division and lived in Singapore for 15 years before returning to work at the General Conference. It was while there, 23 years ago, that we discovered our youngest son is gay and began a long period of learning about and trying to understand this strange and unexpected place where we found ourselves. Our eyes were opened to a world of pain and heartache we had never known. Slowly, our love for these “outcasts” grew, and our ignorance and prejudices were overcome. I believe it is the same for many of our church members today. Keeping up with growing knowledge about homosexuality, as well as having a family member or close friend who is LGB, fosters understanding and empathy. As more and more gay and lesbian church members “come out of the closet” at ever younger ages, it seems that nearly everybody has someone in their family with a different sexual orientation. As research continues to bring more information to light, and as there is more discussion in many Christian churches and other world religions about how we treat others who are different, I have come to believe that this “new light” is a present truth that the Holy Spirit is bringing to us.

The survey also shows that, despite a pretty general belief (86%) that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible, there is a more nuanced attitude toward homosexuals themselves. Although only a quarter of respondents self-identified as liberal/very liberal, 94% affirmed that they would welcome an LGB person to their church; more than half (53%) said we should allow them to be church members, and (52%) would have no problem with baptizing a gay or lesbian couple who are living together. More than a quarter would even be willing for LGB people to serve as Sabbath School leaders or teachers, elders, and deacons. This indicates that more and more church members are coming to believe we must treat LGB people like everyone else, as members of our family and brothers and sisters in Christ.

Close to half of respondents (45%) report that they understand homosexuality is not a choice, and that sexual orientation cannot be changed. This indicates that the American Adventist Church is moving closer to accepting that homosexuality is not a sinful choice and that it is not something that can be healed or changed.

Finally, as I recall how difficult it was for anyone to even talk about this issue back when we first learned our son is gay, it is easy to conjecture that if a study such as this had been conducted twenty or even ten years ago, the result would probably have shown considerably more negative attitudes than this one. Two of the variables in this study that are high predictors of positive attitudes – close acquaintance with an LGB person, and being a young person – indicate that as we look to the future we are likely to see even more positive attitudes in the church toward our differently oriented brothers and sisters.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat46.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/discrimination.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/159089/religion-major-factor-americans-opposed-sex-marriage.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT-affirming\\_Christian\\_denominations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT-affirming_Christian_denominations);  
<http://forward.com/articles/165958/-of-jewish-groups-have-gay-friendly-policy/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.newsmax.com/US/Quinnipiac-Catholics-gay-marriage/2012/12/05/id/466540>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1387580?uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21101752378427>

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