Seventh-day Adventists in North America

A Demographic Profile

North American Division Secretariat
Demographic Survey

By Monte Sahlin and Paul Richardson
November 2008
Introduction

This report provides the same kind of information that is provided by the census for an entire country or city. This is a demographic profile of the Seventh-day Adventist community in North America. As of January 1, 2008, the Church had 1,062,189 members in the United States, Canada and Bermuda. Using the findings from this study, another 14 percent must be added to this figure to allow for children in church-related families who are not yet baptized, making a total estimate of 1,211,204 adherents.

The information in this report is based on a probability sample survey. A total of 931 telephone interviewers were conducted in 2007 and 2008 using a stratified random sampling method to make sure that a proportionate number of interviews were randomly selected in each of the 58 local conferences that make up the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. From these interviews, information was collected on a total of 1,207 individual family members.

All probability surveys are subject to sampling error. At the 95th percentile of reliability the standard allowance for sampling error in this survey is four percentage points, plus or minus. Additional information about allowances for statistical sampling is provided in the technical appendix. This report and the entire project meets the professional standards of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

This study was commissioned by the NAD Secretariat and conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry, a research and information center affiliated with the NAD Church Resource Center. Paul Richardson is the executive director. Monte Sahlin served as the principal analyst. The research assistants who worked on this project include Serena Aufderhar, Jan Greve, Jeanne Hartwell, Miriam Pottinger, Carmen Rusu, Norma Sahlin and Brenda Smith.

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About half of Seventh-day Adventist members attend an Adventist church almost every Sabbath. The question does not account for those who may be visiting a congregation other than the one where they are a member. Members who identify their ethnicity as a minority group are more likely to be regular attenders than are those who are white. Young adults and teens are more likely to be regular attenders than are adults 32 to 62 years of age.

Nearly a third of church members (28 percent) report having attended an Adventist church on two or three out of the last four Sabbaths. Adults from the Baby Boom generation and Gen X are more likely to be in this category than are those under 30 and those over 62 years of age. Respondents who identified their ethnicity as white and not Hispanic are more likely to be in this segment than are those who identified themselves with ethnic minorities.

One in ten of the members interviewed said that they had not attended an Adventist church during the last four Sabbaths, and almost an equal number said they had attended just one Sabbath out of the four. All demographic segments are equally likely to be found in this category.
Seven in ten Adventist Church members in North America (71 percent) have been baptized members for more than 20 years. Members over 62 years of age are more likely to be long-term members, as are those who identify their ethnicity as black or Asian.

Just one in seven members (14 percent) have been baptized in the last ten years: two percent in the last year, five percent in one to five years, and seven percent in six to ten years. Young adults and teenagers are more likely to be in all of these categories. In fact, 70 percent of those baptized in the last year are under 32 years of age. There are also significant portions of the recently baptized and the recently-baptized young adults who are Hispanic.

Another 14 percent of the total sample are members who have were baptized 11 to 20 years ago. Those in their 30s and 20s are more likely to be found in this segment, as are Asian and multiethnic members.

Over the last two decades, since the last NAD Demographic Survey was conducted in 1990, there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of long-term members. The percentage of members baptized in recent years has declined by half.
Just one household in four among Seventh-day Adventists in North America has minor children in the family. Small percentages have already completed their education or are of preschool age, which means that only about one Adventist family in five is currently in the market for school enrollment.

Parents in their 30s and early 40s are most likely to be among those who have school-age children in their household. Members who identify their ethnicity as Hispanic are most likely among the ethnic groups to have school-age children. Only 43 percent of the Adventist households with children are white; 26 percent are black, 22 percent are Hispanic, five percent are Asian and six percent identify themselves as multiethnic or from some other ethnic category.
Since the last NAD Demographic Survey was conducted in 1990, the number of childless households among Adventists in North America has increased significantly. The proportion of families with children who either live at home or are away at boarding school or a similar situation has declined by a quarter.

This is the source of a great deal of the enrollment difficulties facing Adventist education at all levels. The number of church-related families in the child-rearing years is declining more rapidly than the overall growth of the denomination can make up for. The result is a constricting pool of potential students in the Adventist community.
The median age for Seventh-day Adventists in North America is 51. (All of the minor children of members are included in this data set and the calculation of the median age.) This compares to a median age of 36 in the United States and 35 in Canada. There is a significant trend toward the “graying of Adventism” in North America.

The breakdown in the graphic above follows the same procedures as are used by the U.S. Census and Statistics Canada. The latest data from both agencies is included for comparison purposes; 2007 data from Statistics Canada and the 2006 American Community Survey from the U.S. Census.

Adventists are over-represented among those 55 years of age and older. With the exception of one segment, Adventists are under-represented among those under 45 years of age. That exception is the 15 to 19 age group. The differential in this narrow segment is within the error factor for this survey and therefore is not statistically significant.

Previous research has estimated a median age for Adventists in North America as high as 58. Because of the methods used in this study, it is now clearly evident that the previous research did not make an allowance for unbaptized children and reflected only data from adult church members.
The “graying of Adventism” in North America becomes even more starkly apparent when the age data is displayed by generations. Adventists are over-represented among the older generations and under-represented in the new generations.

The Millennial generation is today's teens and young adults. Born from 1977 through 1994, they are 14 to 31 years of age in 2008.

Generation X are today’s young families. Born from 1965 through 1976, they are 32 to 43 years of age in 2008.

The Baby Boomers are the middle-aged today. Born from 1946 through 1964, they are 44 to 62 years of age in 2008.

Today’s senior citizens are those born before the Baby Boomer, in 1945 and earlier. They are age 63 and older in 2008.
Nearly two-thirds of the members of the Adventist Church in North America are currently married. This includes those whose spouse is not a church member. Members 32 to 62 years of age (Baby Boomers and Gen X) are more likely to be married, as are those identify their ethnicity as Asian or white. Almost all local congregations tend to be dominated by married people, and research has shown that they are typically not very responsive to the needs of single adults.

Nearly one in six church members (17 percent) are widowed. Those over 62 years of age are much more likely to be in this segment. This represents the largest portion of the single adults in local congregations.

About one in eight members (13 percent) have never married. Those under 32 years of age are more likely to be in this category, making up two in five of the never married. Black and Hispanic members are also more likely to be among the never married.

Just six percent of church members are divorced and still single. Another one percent are still married but separated from their spouse. Both of these categories are equally likely in all demographic segments by age and ethnicity.
Since the last North American Division demographic survey was conducted nearly two decades ago, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of single adults among the membership. This is in part related to the overall aging of the membership. Research has also shown that the average age at which young adults get married has increased and this has helped to swell the percentage of never married singles in the membership.
Compared to the general population in North America, the Adventist Church includes significantly greater percentages of married and widowed members. The church is not reaching young, single adults to the same degree that it is engaging married people and older people who have lost their spouse.

This reality is very likely related to the overall “graying of Adventism.” It is also true that the denomination has not made either singles ministry or young adult ministry a major priority.
Nearly a third of the members in the North American Division (31 percent) were not born as citizens of their current nation of residence, Bermuda, Canada or the U.S. This represents an immigration rate nearly three times the national rate in the U.S. and Canada.

Immigrant members are more likely to be found among those under 44 years of age. The same is true among those who report their ethnicity as Asian, Hispanic or multiethnic and other.

This is consistent with previous research that has shown that the Adventist Church in North America is growing much more rapidly among some immigrant groups than it is among native-born Americans, including the children of immigrants. There are other immigrant groups among which there is little or no church growth. The greatest growth appears to be among immigrant communities from nations where the percentage of Adventists in the general population is greater than the percentage in the U.S. and Canada. This leads to the finding that immigrant church growth is driven more by immigration than by evangelism.
The percentage of immigrants in the Adventist Church is more than double the rate for the general population in the United States and significantly greater than the percentage in Canada. The Adventist Church also has a larger percentage of immigrants among its membership in North America than do other denominations of one million or more adherents, according to data at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.
Nearly half the white population in Adventist households is over 60 years of age, while Hispanic and Caribbean immigrants are more likely to be under 44 years of age.
The percentage of whites in the Adventist Church in North America has declined over the past two decades to about half the membership. At the same time there has been significant growth among minority groups. The Adventist community in North America is on the threshold of a “majority minority” situation in which none of the four major ethnic segments will constitute a majority.

The difference between the percentage of blacks in this survey and that of the most recent report from the NAD Office of Human Relations (OHR) is most likely related to the growing number of young adults who choose to identify themselves as multiethnic. The OHR data collection does not allow for this type of input. Nonetheless, it is likely that growth among native-born African American members has plateaued or actually begun to decline in recent years.
The Adventist membership in North America is significantly more diverse than the general population. In fact, the ethnic profile of the Adventist membership is very close to what the U.S. Census projects for the American profile in 2030. Adventists are ahead of the curve.

It should be noted that this is due in part because of the success of the Regional Conferences. The Adventist presence in the black population in the United States is two or three times greater than in other ethnic groups. It is not by accident that the most visible Seventh-day Adventists in American society are blacks.

Church growth is currently most rapid among immigrants, but this has not yet resulted in a significantly larger Adventist presence among Hispanics or Asians. This may be due to how recently immigration has become a driver for church growth in the North American Division. It may also be related to the fact that this growth is almost entirely among recent arrivals. Research has shown that there is no significant growth among “second generation” immigrants and there is a serious dropout problem among Adventist youth growing up in immigrant families.
Half of the Seventh-day Adventists households in North America are located in metropolitan areas and half are located outside of the metropolitan areas. About one quarter of the member families are located in each of four contexts: 27 percent in central cities with populations of 50,000 or more; 23 percent in the suburbs of these cities; 29 percent in small towns outside a metropolitan area; and 21 percent in a rural area.

Members over 62 years of age are more likely to live in small towns outside metropolitan areas, while members under 44 years of age are more likely to live in both the suburbs and central cities of metropolitan areas. White members are more likely to live in small towns and rural areas, while ethnic minorities are more likely to live in metropolitan areas, both the central cities and the suburbs. Alongside this pattern there is also a growing number of Hispanic members living in small towns outside metropolitan areas.
The percentage of Adventist Church members living in central cities has increased significantly over the past two decades, while the percentage living in the suburbs has declined. This is most likely linked to the growth of immigrant congregations. Nothing has changed outside the metropolitan areas.
Seventh-day Adventists in North America are more strongly located where the population is not. Half the membership lives in small towns and rural areas where only 20 percent or less of the general population resides. Research has shown that the location of Adventist churches and the deployment of Adventist pastors is even more strongly in the non-metropolitan regions where only a small portion of the population is located.

The failure to strategically locate significant activity and personnel where the vast majority of the population lives is very likely related to the slowing of church growth in recent years. It appears from conference reports that little evangelistic impact or church growth is occurring in the small towns and rural areas.
Where is your home relative to your local church?

A little more than a third of Adventist Church members in North America (35 percent) live in the same community where their local church is located. Those who report their ethnicity as Asian are more likely to do so.

Another third of the members say they live in a different neighborhood, but in the same city or town where their church is located. Black and Asian members are more likely to give this response, as are young adults.

About one in four members (23 percent) live in a different town than their church, but in the same county. Members age 32 to 44 are more likely to give this response, as are those who indicate that they are Hispanic or multiethnic.

One in ten members (9 percent) say they live outside the county in which their church is located, and some of these told our interviewers they actually live outside the state or province. White members are more likely to give this response.
Two in five Seventh-day Adventists in North America live in households with incomes of less than $25,000 a year, a category that includes the working poor as well as those below the poverty line. The majority of these members are over 62 years of age. There is also a significant share of Hispanic members in this segment.

Nearly a third of Adventists (30 percent) are from the lower middle class or households with annual incomes of $25,000 to $49,999. Younger adults, those in their 30s and 20s, are more likely to indicate that they are in this economic segment with nearly equal proportions among all ethnic groups.

A quarter of Adventist families fall into the middle (16 percent) and upper middle (8 percent) segments of the socioeconomic spectrum with annual household incomes of $50,000 to $99,999. Those from the Baby Boom generation are more likely to be in this category, as are those who identify their ethnicity as African American or Caribbean immigrants.

Just seven percent of members live in households where the annual income is $100,000 or more. Those in their 40s and 30s are more likely to be in this segment as are those who identify their ethnicity as white.
Over the last eight years the Adventist membership in North America has increased among the lower middle and middle classes, while declining among households above the national median income. This is very likely related to the increasing share of North American Adventists who are immigrants. In general, immigrant families typically have lower incomes in both the U.S. and Canada.

Clearly, if the economic profile of the membership declines, then this will place some additional stress on church finances. The greatest difficulty may be related to Christian education as there is a growing number of families who would find it more difficult to meet the cost of tuition, etc.
The Adventist membership is stronger among the working class and the lower middle class than it is among the middle and upper middle classes. The Adventist faith has the smallest presence among those North Americans with the highest incomes.

This is significantly different from survey results through 1997. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a growing upper middle class presence in the Adventist membership in North America. (See References; Sahlin 1998, pages 18-19.) As a result of this change in trends there is undoubtedly an impact on church finances and the funding of Christian education.
Half of the church members in North America are outside the workforce: 35 percent are retired, eight percent are full-time homemakers, five percent are full-time students; and two percent are on disability or unemployed. Members over 62 years of age are almost all of them among the retired. Women 32 to 44 years of age are more likely to be full-time homemakers and young adults are more likely to be full-time students. Hispanics are also more likely to be full-time homemakers or students.

A total of 26 percent of church members (the majority of those in the workforce) are professionals, managers or proprietors of a small business. Baby Boomers (44 to 62 years of age in 2008) are more likely to be in this group, as are members who identify their ethnicity as Asian.

One in six church members (16 percent) are employed in office, technical, sales and service occupations. Those who are 32 to 44 years of age (Gen X) are more likely to be in this segment, as are those who say their ethnicity is black or Hispanic.

Less than one in ten members (8 percent) are employed in Blue Collar occupations in construction, manufacturing, transport, public service and farming. These are equally spread among most demographic segments.
The major changes in the occupations of Seventh-day Adventists over the past two decades are driven largely by the doubling in the proportion of retired people among the membership. This is further evidence of the “graying of Adventism” in North America.

The other major change reflected in these data is the disproportionate decline in the percentage of Blue Collar workers and the increase in the number of members pursuing education as full-time students. This is likely driven by the changes in the economy that has significantly reduced the number of manufacturing jobs and the expansion in the number of knowledge workers.
Adventist Church members in North America are more likely to be employed in professional and managerial occupations than is the general population in North America. They are somewhat less likely to work in retail, sales, clerical, technical and office occupations. The percentage of Adventists employed in Blue Collar occupations is about half that of the general population in the U.S.

The occupational profile is shaped, of course, by issues related to Sabbath observance. Historically, many Blue Collar and retail jobs require work on Friday nights or Saturdays. Adventists have often moved out of these jobs to other occupations.

The high percentage of members employed in professional and managerial positions may not immediately seem to fit with the data on income. It should be kept in mind that retired persons and others outside the workforce have been removed from these data, and there is a much larger share of the retired on fixed incomes among the Adventist membership and the general population. It also is likely that a much larger share of Adventist professionals are employed as teachers and in other human service professions that are typically not highly paid.
The majority of Adventist Church members in North America have a college education. Baby Boomers and Generation X are more likely to have a college education, while older generations are more likely to have a secondary diploma or less. Members who identify their ethnicity as Asian are more likely to have a college degree, while those who identify themselves as Hispanic are more likely to have only a secondary diploma.
Over the last two decades the percentage of Adventists in North America with college degrees has increased substantially. At the same time there has been a significant decrease in the proportion of Adventists with only a secondary diploma or less education. Only the percentage of church members with graduate degrees has remained the same.

This trend is related to larger trends in North American society. The employment market today requires much more education in order to get a good job with sufficient income to support a family above the poverty level. This trend also reflects the natural result of the value that Seventh-day Adventists place on education.

The lack of change in the percentage of members with a graduate degree may be related to the dropout problem in the Church. Research has shown that members who grow up in the denomination and attain the highest levels of education are more likely to leave the church.
Seventh-day Adventists in North America are a well-educated people. The percentage of the members with a college degree is more than double that of the general population. (The educational system in Canada is somewhat different from that of the U.S.)

There is a well-established linkage between education and income, which raises the question why Adventists seem to have lower incomes but greater education. In considering this question, it must be kept in mind that there is a much larger share of retired individuals among Adventists than the general population and retired people with higher education are less likely to have higher incomes. It is also true that many well-educated Adventist members are employed in education and other helping professions that are not highly paid.
The majority of Adventists in North America have attended a church-related school at some point in their lives. Baby Boomers and Gen X are more likely to have done so, while those in the Millennial generation (today’s young adults and teenagers) are somewhat less likely to have done so. Those who identify their ethnicity as Asian, white or multiethnic are more likely to have attended an Adventist school, while those who identify themselves as Hispanic or black are less likely to have done so.
Just 29 percent of the church members who have attended an Adventist school have done so through all three levels; elementary, secondary and higher education. This represents just 15 percent of the total church membership. Members over 62 years of age are more likely to give this report as are those who indicate that their ethnicity is Asian.

The largest share of the members who attended an Adventist school (34 percent) did so only at the college level. Those from the Baby Boom generation were more likely to report this pattern, as were those who identified their ethnicity as Asian or black.

About a third of members have attended only secondary or elementary school or both. Baby Boomers and Gen X are more likely to report patterns of this type. Hispanic members are more likely to report having attended Adventist schools only at the secondary level.
The majority of Adventist members grew up in an Adventist family and started going to church as a child. Members under 44 years of age are more likely to have joined the church in this way, as are those who indicate that their ethnicity is Asian or white.

Nearly a third of members (31 percent) joined the church through a personal relationship; because their spouse, relative, friend, coworker, neighbor or other acquaintance shared the message with them. Informal friendship evangelism is the single most effective method for the Adventist Church in North America. About two out of three adult converts say this is what brought them into the church. This is particularly true for young adults, blacks and Hispanics.

One in ten members report that they joined the church through public evangelism. Most of these are older members over 62 years of age. One in 20 church members joined the church through personal Bible studies. Hispanics are more likely to give this response. All of the others from the list of 12 methods used by our interviewers were each mentioned by only a very small percentage of members.
About half of the members interviewed could not think of any Adventist periodical that came to their home, despite the fact that both the union papers and Adventist World are very widely circulated. It also appears that their continues to be confusion about Adventist World and what used to be the NAD monthly edition of the Adventist Review.

Older members are more likely to see the primary Adventist journals, the union paper, Adventist World and Adventist Review. Young adults are about one third as likely as those over 62 years of age to see these core publications.

Young adults are more likely to see the Sabbath School lesson materials and journals that were not on the list of 12 that our interviewers used. These would be journals not officially published by the denomination.

Message magazine is more likely to be received in African American homes and Signs of the Times is more likely to be received in the homes of white members. Not surprisingly, Spanish-language periodicals are more likely to be received in the homes of Hispanics.
Over the last two decades there has been a significant decline in the percentage of Adventist Church members in North America who see most church periodicals. The one exception is Message magazine, which has retained the same proportion of readership among the members.

The comparison for Adventist World likely suffers from lingering misperceptions surrounding the recent name change. For many years a monthly edition of the Adventist Review was distributed to all or most member homes until it was replaced by Adventist World in recent years. An additional 31 percent of the respondents told our interviewers that they regularly get the Adventist Review in their home. If this were true for the weekly publication, that would mean a circulation of more than 100,000 while the actual circulation of that journal is less than 50,000. Clearly, a number of the respondents said “Adventist Review” when they were actually referring to Adventist World. But even if an estimated adjustment were made due to the evident confusion, the percentage of members who are aware of Adventist World arriving in their homes has declined at least some since the 1990 survey.
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<th>Age Group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age 85 and older</td>
<td>4.47%</td>
<td>54,146</td>
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References


Statistics Canada. 2007 Tables. www.statcan.ca

Technical Appendix

In interpreting survey results, it should be borne in mind that all sample surveys are subject to sampling error. That is the extent to which the results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole population had been interviewed or completed a questionnaire. The size of such sampling errors depends on the actual number of interviews or questionnaires, not the number of responses as a percentage of the population.

The following tables may be used in estimating the sampling error of any percentage in this report. The computed allowances have taken into account the effect of the sample design upon sampling error. They may be interpreted as indicating the range (plus or minus the figure shown) within which the results of repeated samplings in the same time period could be expected to vary, 95 percent of the time, assuming the same sampling procedures, the same interviewers and/or the same questionnaire.

Table A shows how much allowance should be made for the sampling error of any percentage reported. This table would be used in the following manner: If a reported percentage is 33 for a group that includes 1,250 respondents ... then, go to the row that says "percentages near 30" in the table and go across to the column headed "1,250." The number at this point is 3, which means that the 33 percent obtained in the sample is subject to a sampling error of plus or minus 3 points. This means that very probably (95 chances out of 100) the actual figure would be somewhere between 30 percent and 36 percent, with the most likely figure the 33 percent obtained in the survey.

In comparing survey results in two sub-samples, for example, men and women, the question arises as to how large a difference between them must be before one can be reasonably sure that it reflects a real difference. Table B and Table C indicate the number of points which must be allowed for in such comparisons to make them "statistically significant." Table C is for percentages near 20 or 80. Table B is for percentages near 50. For percentages in between, the factor to be allowed for is between those shown on the two tables.

Here is how these tables are used: If 50% of men respond a certain way and 40% of women respond that way also, for a difference of 10 percentage points between them, can we say that the 10 point difference reflects a real difference between the two groups on that question? Let's say the sample contains about 750 of each gender.

Since the percentages are near 50, consult Table B. Since the total sample is 1,500, look for the number in the column headed "1,500." Since the two sub-samples are 750 persons each, look for the row designated "750." Where the row and column intersect, you will find the number 6. This means that the difference between the two groups must be greater than 6 percentage points to be "statistically significant." In other words, we can conclude with considerable confidence that a real difference exists in the answers of men and women to this question.
### Table A
#### Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error

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### Table B
#### Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference

In Percentage Points for Percentages near 50

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### Table C
#### Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference

In Percentage Points
For Percentages near 20 or Percentages near 80

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