

A REPORT ON A PHONE SURVEY OF NORTH AMERICAN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

Description of the Study

The North American Division (NAD) has recognized the need to find out more about inactive members - those who do not regularly attend worship services. The Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) at Andrews University was commissioned to design a study, collect and analyze relevant data, and issue a report. To do this, a sample of 5000 households was randomly drawn from the combined union-conference-papers list. From this sample the goal was to find phone numbers for 3000 households and secure completed surveys from 1000 members of those households. Because of the random nature of the selection, it was assumed that some of these members would be active and some inactive.

Adventist Information Ministries (AIM), with facilities for multiple phone calling, was employed to locate the telephone numbers of the 5000 addresses on the list and to conduct the interviews by phone. Unfortunately, AIM's lookup service was able to locate only around 2000 phone numbers. A phone script of 40 questions was constructed, and AIM was authorized to begin calling. The person who answered the phone was asked if he/she was a member of the Adventist Church. If "yes," the interviewer proceeded with the questions. If "no," the person was asked to call an adult Adventist member to the phone.

Calling began on May 19, 2002 and ended on August 1, 2002. A total of six trained individuals made the calls from 6:00 p.m. to midnight, Sunday through Thursday. The results were as follows:

747 persons were reached and completed the survey

586 persons were reached and declined to take the survey

369 attempts were to businesses or bad numbers

The remaining numbers were either never answered after up to five attempts or represented people who began the survey but terminated it before completion.

Frequencies were calculated for all questions and cross tabulations were made between church attendance and the other items and between the five demographic questions (age group, length of time as a member, ethnic background, level of education, and gender) and each of the other items. This report will feature the 747 members who completed the survey. While complete frequencies are available for all items, this report will provide only an overview, highlighting important findings.

Worship Attendance

Worship attendance by those who responded is very high. About 78% indicated that they attend church nearly every week, and another 10% reported two or three times per month. Less than 8% (58 persons) said that they rarely or never attend church. These figures may be biased. As noted above, 586 persons were reached who declined to take the survey. Logic suggests that those who completed the survey were more likely to be regular attenders while those who were not attending were more likely to decline to participate. Given the fact that in study after study those present at Sabbath worship in most congregations constitute about half of the book membership, it is probable that the attendance figure reported here are too optimistic.

Attendance at Sabbath school follows a similar pattern although attendance is less than at the worship service. Here, about 66% report attending nearly every week, and more than 14% rarely or never attend.

Nearly 43% have attended only one particular Adventist church in the previous three months, but 24% have attended three or more different Adventist churches during the same period.

About 73% have attended a church-sponsored social event at some time in the past.

Reasons for Attending Church

Respondents were given six possible reasons for attending church and asked to rate them as being “not a reason,” “somewhat of a reason,” or “a strong reason” for their personal motivations. Items rated as strong reasons for attending are listed in descending order of the percentages of those who selected that option.

Meets my spiritual needs	74%
Learn more about the Bible	66%
Fellowship with friends	61%
Like the sermons	60%
Like the music	46%
Feel it=s my duty	21%

Publications and Broadcast Media

Approximately 83% of the respondents usually read the *Adventist Review* (another suggestion of the slanted nature of the sample), and 61% read their own union-conference paper. Smaller percentages read *These Times* (50%), *Message* (49%), *Guide* (17%), and *Insight* (14%).

The most frequently watched/listened to Adventist radio/television program is *It Is Written* (24%), followed by *Amazing Facts* (20%), *3ABN* (18%), and *The Voice of Prophecy*

(14%). No other program was watched or listened to by more than 7%.

Non-Adventist programs did not draw many viewers/listeners, but about 7% of the respondents tuned in to either or both the Trinity Broadcasting Network and *Focus on the Family*.

Approximately 62% had watched a program in church from the Adventist Communication Network (ACN) at one time or another.

Belief in Adventist Doctrines

Respondents were presented with a list of five key doctrines of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and were asked to indicate their feelings about them as follows: 1. Don't believe it, 2. Have some doubts, and 3. Believe it strongly. Belief tended to be strong among these respondents as demonstrated by the percentages of those who strongly believe.

The seventh-day Sabbath	97%
Creation in seven days a few thousand years ago	93%
Ellen G. White having the gift of prophecy	86%
The sanctuary in heaven and the 2300 days	85%
The Adventist church as the remnant of prophecy	81%

The Sabbath and Creation are overwhelmingly supported. While the other three are somewhat lower, they all have over 80% support. Even here, those who don't believe those doctrines at all are only 3%, 3%, and 6% respectively.

Support for Adventist Lifestyle Standards

A similar question asked for the degree to which respondents support five Adventist lifestyle standards. Percentages indicating those who wholeheartedly support each standard are as follows:

Abstinence for pre-marital and extra-marital sex	96%
Abstinence from all forms of tobacco	96%
Abstinence from all alcoholic beverages	93%
Abstinence from ornamental jewelry	56%
Non-attendance at movie theaters	45%

While support is high for Adventist standards on temperance and moral purity, it drops considerably for jewelry and even more so for movie theaters which gather only minority support. On this last item 23% support the standard to some extent, but 32% do not support it at

all. This finding is in harmony with numerous previous studies.

Attitudes toward Church and Pastor

A majority (52%) claim to love the church. Another 32% have generally positive feelings. While 13% have some mixed feelings, only 3% are generally negative toward the church.

Feelings toward the pastor are also generally positive. Nearly 60% believed that the pastor was a real blessing, and another 25% counted him/her as okay. Another 10% rated their pastor as so-so, but only 4% were very negative.

Reasons for Non-Attendance

A final set of questions was addressed to those who in answer to question 1 reported that they rarely or never attend church. This group was presented with seven possible reasons for non-attendance and asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much influence each of the reasons had on their decision to stop attending. For ease of interpretation the percentages for options 4 and 5 will be combined and listed in descending order. These figures must be interpreted cautiously because only 58 people fell into this group, and, therefore, percentages are often based on very small numbers.

Church's teaching and practice don't match	38%
Services don't meet my spiritual needs	36%
Lack of fellowship	34%
Don't believe some of the teachings	22%
Standards too strict	22%
Unfriendly church	19%
Social pressure from friends or relatives	7%

In contrast, those who claimed that the factor had no influence at all on their decision to stop attending ranged from 43% (lack of fellowship) to 83% (social pressure).

Characteristics of the Sample

Nearly 60% of the sample were over 50 years of age with a third of the total group being over 65 - the largest age grouping. Only 1% were under 21.

Nearly three-fourths (73%) had been members over 20 years with another 12% having been in the church between 11 and 20 years. Only 9% had been members less than 6 years. If age grouping and length of membership are taken together, it seems obvious that this is a very mature group - representing either an aging church or a bias in the sample returns.

The sample was disproportionately White at 72%, followed by African-Americans at 10%, and Hispanic at 7%.

The group was quite well educated with about 40% having graduated at least from college, and 15% (included in the 40%) holding advanced graduate degrees. The largest single group (29%) was those who had taken some college but had not graduated. Only 4% had stopped at the elementary level.

By gender, respondents reflected North American Adventists in general - one-third male to two-thirds female.

Cross-tabulations on The Phone Survey Data

Frequency of Sabbath church attendance was cross tabulated with all of the survey questions except those directed to respondents who no longer attended church. The five demographic questions were cross tabulated with all the survey questions. The result produced over 200 cross tabulations - most of which were not significant. The following findings were each significant at the .05 level or less.

Findings by Church Attendance

Those who attend worship nearly every week are more likely than those who attend less frequently to give as a strong reason for attending:

They like the sermons

They learn more about the Bible (compared with those who attend less than monthly)

They appreciate the fellowship of friends

They are more likely to have attended three or more Adventist churches in the last three months. They are more likely to be readers of the *Adventist Review* and their union conference paper.

No significant differences were found for Sabbath school attendance, having watched a program on the Adventist Communication Network, ever attending church-sponsored social events, belief in distinctive Adventist doctrines, support for Adventist lifestyle standards, or attitudes toward the church or the pastor.

Findings by Age Groups

While the patterns of those who attend nearly every week are quite similar among the age groups, those under 50 years of age are more likely than those over 50 to attend only two or three times a month.

Those under 50 are also more likely than those in the older groups to have had attended three or more different Adventist churches in the previous three months.

Those under 35 are more likely than those who are older to report having watched a program on the Adventist Communication Network.

Those over 50, and especially those over 65, are somewhat more likely to believe in the Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary in heaven and the 2300 days.

There is a linear progression on wholehearted support for the Adventist standard concerning abstinence from all forms of alcoholic beverages, ranging from 78% of those under 21 (only nine cases in that age group) to 99% for those over 65.

Of those who never or rarely attend church, those in the 51-65 age group are the most likely to say that the services do not meet their spiritual needs.

Findings by Length of Membership

Only five respondents had been baptized less than a year, so it is not possible to draw any conclusions from cross tabulations of their cells.

The relationship between length of membership and attendance at Sabbath worship was not statistically significant, but it approached significance at .10 so the trend is being reported. Those who have been baptized 1 to 5 years and more than 11 years are somewhat more likely to attend every week than those who had been members 6 to 10 years.

Those baptized from 11 to 20 years were somewhat less likely than the others to report that a strong reason for attending church was that "it meets my spiritual needs." Also, those baptized 10 years or fewer were more likely than the longer-term members to give as a strong reason for attending church that "I feel it=s my duty."

Those who had been baptized 10 years or fewer were more likely than longer-term members to have attended only one particular Adventist church in the previous three months.

There is a slight tendency for those who have been baptized 20 years or more to strongly believe in the doctrine of the sanctuary in heaven and the 2300 days.

Findings by Ethnic Background

All minority groups were more likely than Whites to have attended church on the previous Sabbath.

Blacks and Hispanics were more likely than Whites to have attended three or more different Adventist churches in the previous three months, and Asian/Orientals were the least

likely of all to have done so.

All minority groups were more likely than Whites to have attended church social events, but Hispanics and African Americans were even more likely to have done so than Asians/Oriental or Caribbean Blacks.

Findings by Educational Level

While about 80% of those with only an elementary education attend church nearly every week, the figure drops to around 71% for high school students and graduates and then rises again for those with a college education to around 80% with 84% and 85% respectively for those with master and doctor degrees. Weekly attendance at Sabbath school presents an uneven pattern. It is quite high for those with only elementary education, but drops for students and graduates of high school. It begins to rise again with college students and reaches a pinnacle of 78% for those with the doctorate, although only 27 respondents fall in that cell.

High school students and graduates are most likely to give as a strong reason for church attendance that "I like the music." This is less true for elementary and college graduates and reaches its nadir with those who hold the master's degree at 16%.

College graduates are more likely than the other groups to have watched a program at church on the Adventist Communication Network.

Holders of graduate degrees are more likely than the others to attend church social events.

Findings by Gender

Men are more likely than women to give "fellowship with friends" as a strong reason for attending church. Men are also more likely than women to have attended three or more different Adventist churches in the previous three months.

While both genders are high on belief in the Adventist doctrine of creation, females are somewhat more likely than males to express a strong belief. The same is true of the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary and the 2300 days although the percentages run about 10 points lower for both genders.

Women are slightly more likely than men to wholeheartedly support the Adventist position on abstinence from all forms of tobacco.

Caution is needed in interpreting reasons for no longer attending church since only 58 respondents fall in that class. However, gender is easier to interpret than the other demographics

because there are only two groups thus having fewer cells and more respondents in a cell. Males are more likely than females to report that “lack of fellowship” had a strong influence on their decision to stop attending.

The men were also more likely to report that the fact that the “church’s teaching and practice don’t match” and “services don’t meet my spiritual needs” were strong influences in their decision to stop attending church.

Conclusions

As noted throughout, this sample appears to be biased in favor of older, longtime, well-educated White Adventists who attend church very regularly and who read key Adventist periodicals. It was hoped that a random selection from denominational membership records would yield somewhat equal lists of those who attend church and those who don’t. We cannot be sure of why that didn’t happen, but the fact that about 44% of those reached by telephone declined to participate in the survey may suggest that “fringe members” did not want to get involved.

Nevertheless, positive things can be learned from this study. We find the major reasons for why members do come to church, and that suggests areas to stress like meeting spiritual needs and helping attendees to learn more about the Bible. We discover which Adventist journals are more likely to be read, which radio broadcasts are preferred, and which television programs are most popular with faithful members.

Even though their numbers are small, we learn from those who do not attend church the strength of their various reasons. Thus we learn how important it is to live up to what we believe, to provide deeply spiritual services, and to make sure that every member finds a caring atmosphere and fellowship within the Christian family.

In spite of the positive benefits of this study, it is still necessary to devise some research method for getting a larger input from Adventists who are not attending church regularly.