

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.

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.

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.

Findings by Age Groups

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
- To have attended three or more different Adventist churches in the previous three months
- To believe in the Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary in heaven and the 2300 days
- To fail to support Adventist lifestyle standards about alcohol

Those under 35 are more likely than those who are older

- To have watched a program on the Adventist Communication Network.

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 Gender

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

- Women are more likely than men
 - to express strong belief in creation, the heavenly sanctuary, and the 2300 days
 - to support abstinence from tobacco