

# Public Perceptions

of the Seventh-day Adventist Church  
in North America

CENTER FOR  
CREATIVE  
MINISTRY

2003

Public Perceptions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church  
in North America

Center for Creative Ministry  
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How well is the Seventh-day Adventist Church known to the general public in North America? What does the average person know of the Adventist mission and message? What are the attitudes and opinions about the Adventist Church?

These questions are important to an evangelistic faith, especially a mission-driven, conservative Protestant denomination with a history of less than 160 years and about one million members in the United States and Canada. Since 1970, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America has commissioned polls of the general public each decade. The surveys in 1970 and 1986 were conducted by Gallup International and those in 1994 and 2003 by the Center for Creative Ministry.

Each of these studies are based on similar random samples of the general public and standard scientific polling methods, using the approved techniques of the public opinion survey profession.<sup>1</sup> Comparable questions were asked in each survey in order to establish trends.

In the survey conducted in 2003, a random sample of 1,284 individuals was interviewed by telephone across the United States and Canada. All survey research is subject to sampling error. The results may differ from those that would be obtained if the entire population had been interviewed. The error factor in this study is about three percentage points, plus or minus. This is expected range within which the results of repeated sampling in the same time period might vary 95% of the time, assuming the same sampling procedure and interview process were used. This survey was conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry under contract with the North American Division Office of Information, Research and Strategic Planning directed by Kermit Netteburg, assistant to the president of the NAD.

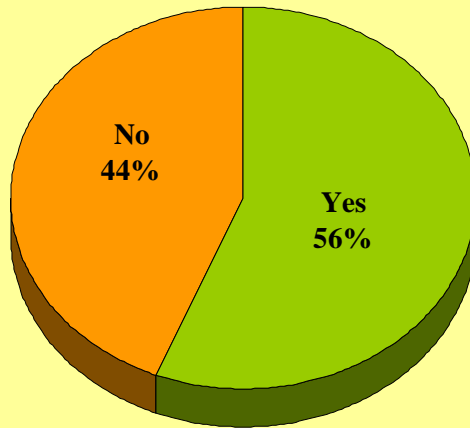
## ***Name Recognition***

A clear majority of the general public say, “Yes,” when asked, “Have you ever heard or read about the Seventh-day Adventist Church?” (See graphs on the next page.) In 2003 about 56% of the individuals interviewed recognized the name of the Church, although some of these respondents revealed in a follow-up question that they actually associate that name with other religious groups.

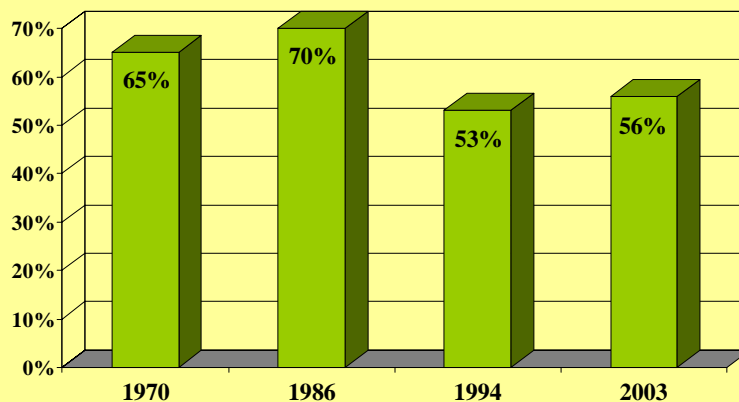
There was an increase in name recognition from 1970 to 1986, and then a significant decline in 1994. The latest survey in 2003 indicates that there has been an increase. It is not as large as the previous decline, but the turn-around is important. Hopefully it marks the beginning of a new era of increasing visibility for the Church.

Younger adults are significantly less likely to have heard of the Adventist Church than are adults over 39 years of age. (See the graph at the top of page 3.) People born after 1964 are nearly half as likely to say they have heard of the Adventist Church than are those born before 1946. A similar gap was found in all three previous surveys. It very likely reflects the fact that younger adults simply have less knowledge of the world around them than do older adults.

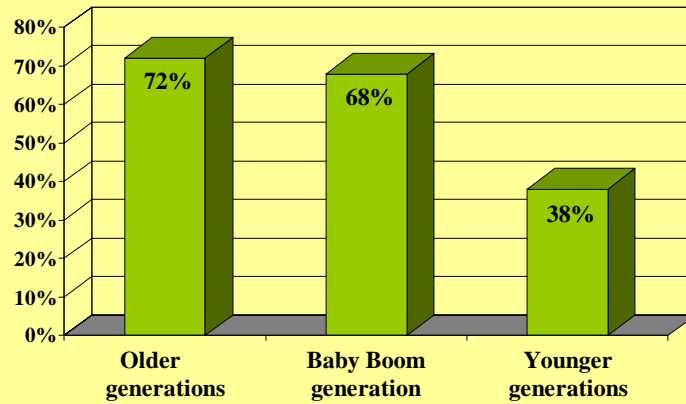
Have you ever heard or read about  
the Seventh-day Adventist Church?



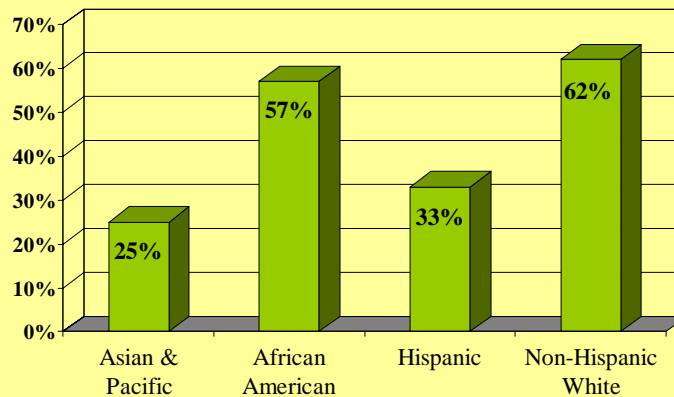
History of name recognition of the  
Adventist Church by the general public



### Name recognition of the Adventist Church by generation



### Name recognition of the Adventist Church by ethnicity



White respondents are more likely to have heard of the Adventist Church, while those with a Hispanic or Asian-Pacific ethnic background are less likely to give that response. Women are more likely to recognize the name of the Adventist Church than are men.

## ***Knowledge and Opinions***

The respondents who indicated in the first question that they have heard of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were immediately asked an open-ended follow-up question designed to provide evidence of the opinions that people have about the Adventist Church and its mission and message: “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the name Seventh-day Adventist?”

About a third of the respondents (31%) told interviewers that “nothing” came to mind. Another 15% simply stated what they had been told in the first question—the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a church or religion. (See the top graph on the next page.) This segment of the general public simply have no knowledge about the Church, its ministries, mission and message. The lack of visibility far outweighs any negative attitudes toward the Church. Asian-Pacific and white individuals are more likely to say that they do not know anything specific than are other ethnic groups.

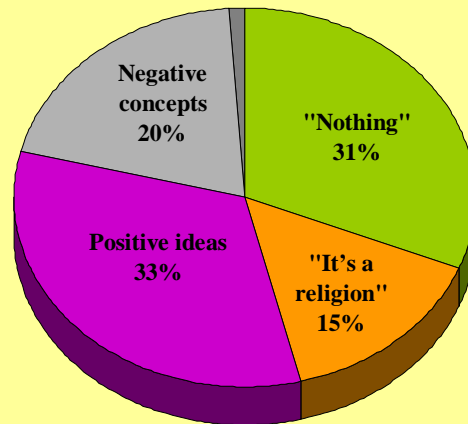
A third of the aware respondents (33%) express positive ideas about the Adventist Church, including references to going to church on Saturdays, personal contact with Adventists, vegetarian diet, the health ministry of the Church and comments such as “they are good people.” African Americans are much more likely to have positive concepts of the Adventist Church than are other ethnic groups. Individuals born before 1946 are more likely to have positive attitudes than are younger adults.

One in five of the aware respondents (20%) express negative and often inaccurate ideas about “Seventh-day Adventists,” including labeling the Church as a cult or identifying it with “Mormons” or “Jehovah’s Witnesses.” Many of these respondents say that the Adventist Church is a religion that is “very different ... not mainstream ... strange ... fundamentalists.” Other say that, in their mind, the Adventist Church is “pushy” because they “knock on your door [uninvited].” Hispanics are more likely to have negative concepts of the Adventist Church than are other ethnic groups.

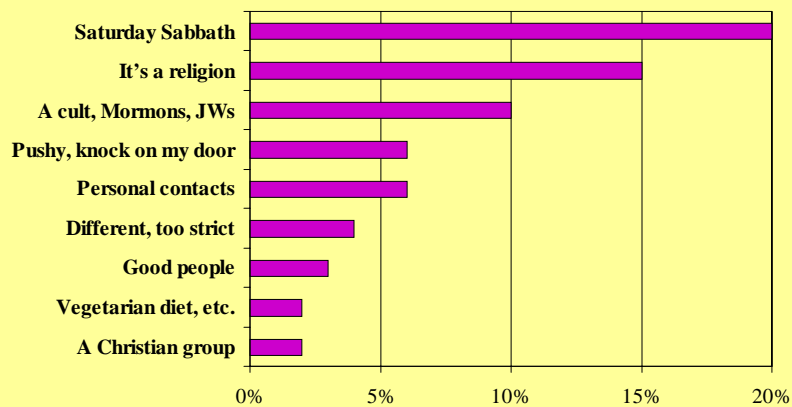
## ***Positive Attitudes***

One in five of those who have heard of the Adventist Church know about the Sabbath and that the Church worships on Saturdays. (See the lower graph on the next page.) In the 2003 survey, African Americans are twice as likely to give this response. Older adults, those born before 1946, are also more likely to know about the Sabbath. In the previous surveys this item also surfaced as the most common specific fact that is known to respondents.

## What comes to mind?



## What comes to mind?



About 6% mention personal contact with Adventists in response to this question, although larger numbers report contact in a later question when they were asked directly. This includes respondents who volunteer, “I know somebody who is an Adventist” or mention a relative or friend, as well as those who say what comes to mind when they hear the name of the Church is “Great hospitals!” or mention Florida Hospital or Loma Linda University, the best-known of the health care institutions sponsored by the Church. One of these respondents said, “I go to an Adventist school.” Another reported, “We had a Bible study in our home.” Yet another responded, “There is an Adventist Book Center in our area.”

Just 3% make general, positive comments such as “they are good people.” This segment of the aware group feels that, “They do some pretty good things.” In view of the general lack of informed knowledge of the Church and its ministries and missions, these general comments may reveal a hazy notion about Adventists even though it is positive.

Only 2% make references to vegetarianism and other aspects of the Adventist commitment to health and healthy lifestyles. As more and more organizations have come to promote many of the same health practices historically taught by the Adventist Church, this aspect of the Church seems to have slipped from public view as a unique identifier for Seventh-day Adventists.

## ***Negative Attitudes***

About 15% of the respondents who say they have heard of the Adventist Church actually connect the name “Seventh-day Adventist” with “Mormons” (the Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints) or Jehovah’s Witnesses or describe it as “a cult.” This includes respondents who say, “no blood transfusions” or “Michael Jackson is one.” (The pop singer Michael Jackson grew up with parents that belonged to the Jehovah’s Witnesses.) The number of respondents giving this kind of response has increased significantly from the previous surveys.

Nearly 6% of the respondents who are aware of Adventists know them as “people who knock on your door ... pushy.” The primary reaction of this segment seems to be related to what is now widely seen in North America as the inappropriate behavior of knocking on the door of a home to which one has not been invited. This is expressed by those who added, “I don’t want to have anything to do with them.”

Just 4% of the aware group express some of the classic prejudices against the Adventist Church by North American Christians. This includes respondents who say, “a religion very different from others ... not mainstream ... strange ... fundamentalists ... strict lifestyle ... no movies ... no jewelry ... radicals; they need prayer ... church of the Old Testament ... Jewish Christians ... go to church every day.” Some of these respondents are quite judgmental in a religious way, associating “blasphemy” with the Seventh-day Adventists. “They blaspheme the name of Jesus because they do not do what Jesus did,” one respondent stated vehemently. “They do not believe in Jesus as



their Savior,” asserted another. “They do not celebrate Christmas or other holidays like other religions,” say a few others. Yet another is negative because, “They think they have a prophet.”

A few respondents seem to express a more general, anti-religious attitude. The largest number in this cluster made comments about “they want money” or “religion is a business.” Two say they are “confused” when they hear the name Seventh-day Adventist. Another says it is “a silly name for a church.” Yet another thinks of “the Devil” when the Church is mentioned “because God did not create so many religions.”

## ***Other Attitudes***

A few of the comments made in response to the open-ended question are not clearly positive or negative. One in six of the aware group (15%) say only, “It is a religion.” About 2% of the aware group simply identify the name “Seventh-day Adventist” as a Christian group. This includes the respondents who say when they hear the name, they think of “born-again Christians ... Bible people ... prophecy ... [or] the Ten Commandments.”

A few of the responses cannot be clustered with any other comment. These include one respondent in each instance who mentioned “foot washing ... missionaries ... well published.” It also includes an individual, clearly negative in attitude, who said, “My son almost got into prison because of an Adventist.” And it includes one respondent who evidently does not see door-to-door visitation as always negative. He or she said, “They came door to door after 9/11 to comfort the people.”

## ***The Adventist Segment of the Population***

Just three-tenths of one percent of the respondents in the 2003 survey told interviewers, “I am an Adventist.” There is a small possibility that others are Adventist adherents and did not identify themselves because no one was asked directly, although it seems with the range of questions included in each interview anyone associated with the Church would identify themselves.

This statistic compares favorably with the known data. The 2003 edition of *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* reports 963,042 members in a population of 318,900,000 in the North American Division. This is three-tenths of one percent, the same result in the survey. The recognized “census of religion,” published in *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States—2000*<sub>2</sub>, also reports that adherents to the Adventist Church make up three-tenths of one percent of the population. These are indicators of the quality of the data in this study.

## ***Awareness of Media Ministries***

Respondents were asked about six of the major, international radio and television ministries conducted by the Adventist Church in North America. Lifestyle Magazine, the television program produced by Faith For Today for the secular media, has the largest response. (See the top graph on the next page.) Nearly one in five of the general public (19%) say they are acquainted with this television program. That is twice the percentage of any other media ministry. Younger adults born since 1964 are more likely to recognize this program than are adults born before 1965.

About one in ten of the general public (9%) say they are aware of the It Is Written television program. Older adults, born before 1946, and African Americans are more likely to be acquainted with this ministry.

Almost as many people (a little less than 9%) report that they are acquainted with the Voice of Prophecy radio broadcasts. Again, older adults and African Americans are more likely to know about this ministry.

About one in twenty people in North America (6%) indicate that they have seen or heard about the Breath of Life television program. African Americans are twice as likely to give this response, and the same is true for the African American response to It Is Written and the Voice of Prophecy.

Just 3% of the general public has heard of the new television program produced by Faith For Today entitled The Evidence. Because this program has been distributed on cable and broadcast channels for only a short period of time, it is not surprising that this rates the lowest share among the media ministries. African Americans are nearly three times as likely to be aware of this television program.

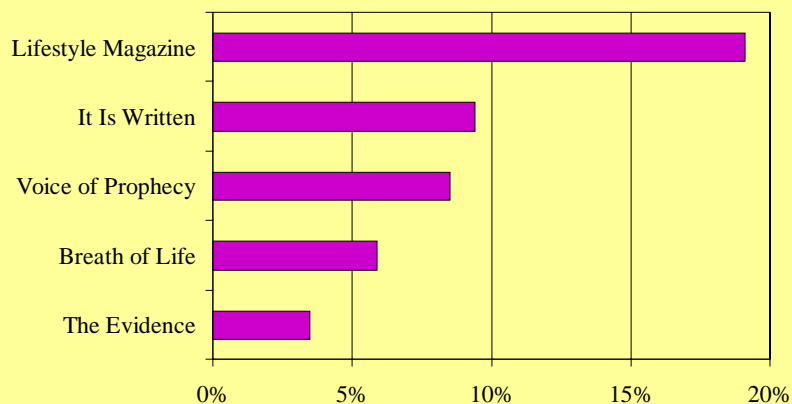
## ***Awareness of Adventist Publications***

In general, Adventist magazines are less widely known than are the radio and television ministries conducted by the Adventist Church. In part, this is an indication of how North American society has moved toward the electronic media and away from print publications. (See the graph at the bottom of the next page.)

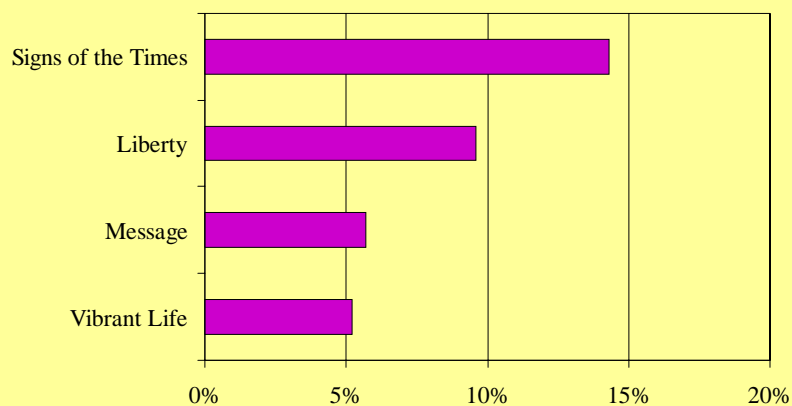
About one in seven of the general public (14%) have seen the outreach magazine *Signs of the Times* published by Pacific Press. African Americans are significantly more likely to report having seen this magazine than are other ethnic segments.

About 10% of adults in North America have seen *Liberty*, the journal published by the Religious Liberty Association and sent to large numbers of elected officials, judges, attorneys and civic leaders. Older adults, those born before 1946, and African Americans are more likely to have seen the magazine.

## Name recognition of Adventist media ministries



## Name recognition of Adventist publications



One in nineteen people (6%) say they have seen *Message* magazine published by the Review and Herald Publishing Association. African Americans are nearly twice as likely to know about this journal which means that in the African American community *Message* has greater penetration than do the publications produced for a more generic audience.

*Vibrant Life*, the health journal published by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, has the lowest circulation of the four periodicals included in this study and the lowest name recognition. One in twenty respondents (5%) say they have seen *Vibrant Life*. African Americans are twice as likely to know about this journal than are Hispanics and whites.

## ***Awareness of Health and Service Ministries***

Respondents were asked a series of questions about specific Adventist ministries and their awareness of these organizations. Adventist hospitals are clearly the most visible of these ministries. (See the top graph on the next page.) About one in fifteen of the general public say that they know of an Adventist hospital in their community and more than 4% report that they personally or one of their relatives has been treated in an Adventist hospital at some time. Adults in the Baby Boom generation (born from 1946 through 1964) are more likely to report that there is an Adventist hospital in their local community.

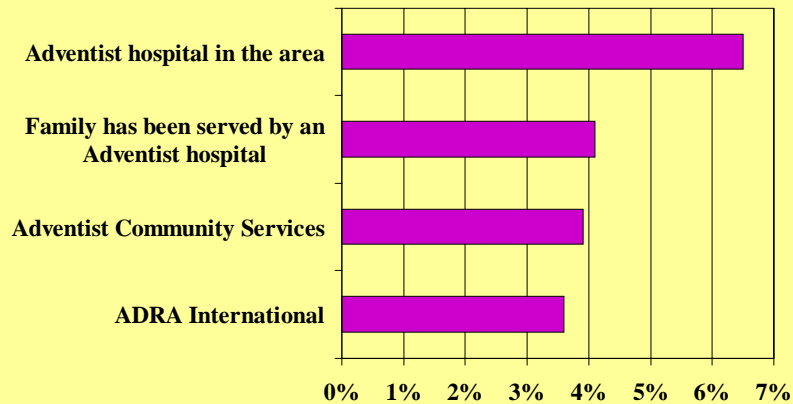
Adventist Community Services (ACS) is known to nearly 4% of the general public, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is identified by a slightly smaller percentage. ACS is better known than ADRA among ethnic minorities, while the percentage of white respondents who say that are acquainted with each organization is the same. These ministries have great potential for increasing the visibility of the Church as they expand into more and more communities.

## ***Personal Contact***

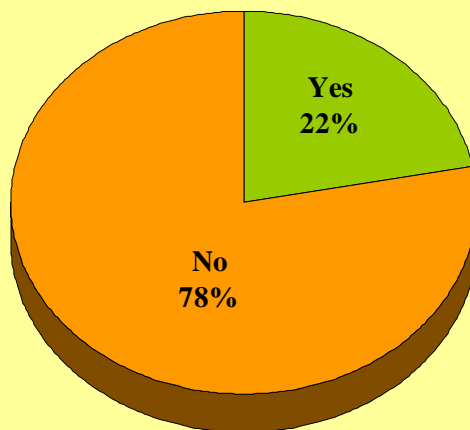
Nearly 22% of the general public in North America have an acquaintance, work colleague, neighbor, friend or relative who is an Adventist. (See the lower graph on the next page.) This is a larger percentage than those who are acquainted with any ministry or publication of the Church. This fact underlines the strategic importance of relational approaches to evangelism and church growth for the Adventist Church.

About 7% of the adult population have visited an Adventist Church at least once in their lives. (See top graph on page 12.) This includes attendance at seminars, public events and other meetings as well as attendance at worship on Sabbath. African Americans are twice as likely to have attended some activity at an Adventist Church than are people from other ethnic groups.

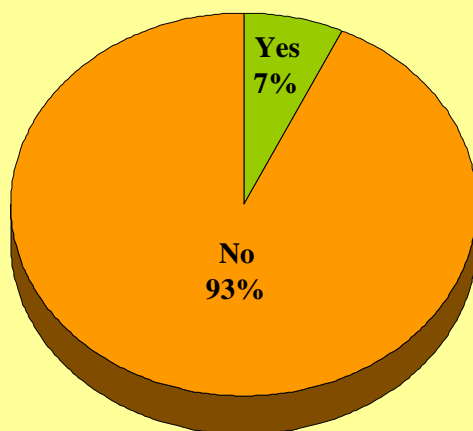
## Name recognition of Adventist health and service organizations



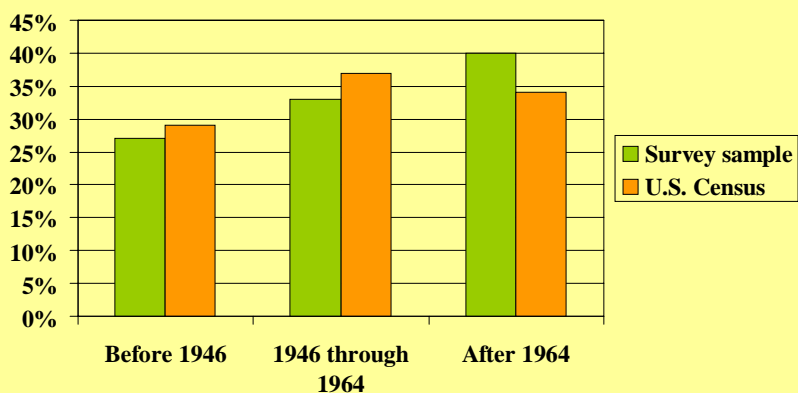
## Do you know anyone who is an Adventist?



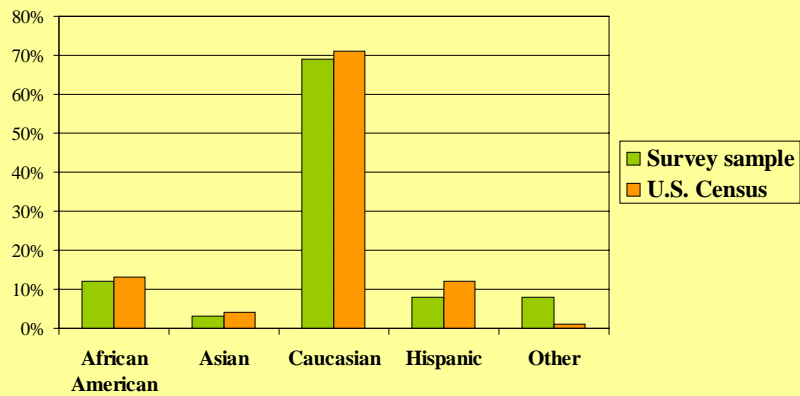
Have you ever visited an  
Adventist church?



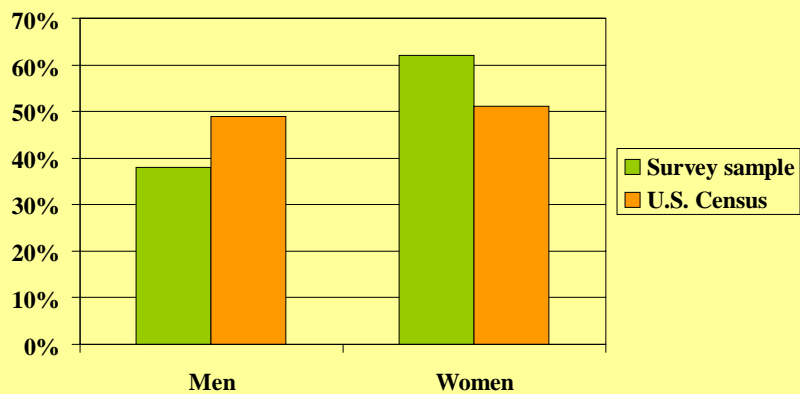
Year of Birth



## Ethnic Self-identification



## Gender



## ***What do These Data Mean?***

Clearly the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America has lost ground in the public mind since the first awareness survey was taken in 1970. Hopefully it is beginning to turn a corner in 2003 and regain lost public awareness. Unless larger percentages of North Americans become aware of the Adventist Church and its ministries, it continues to risk being marginalized and largely invisible. Other recent research has clearly demonstrated that community involvement is key to church growth.<sup>3</sup> What can denominational leaders do to keep the Church from withdrawing so completely from society that no one hears its vital message?

This study demonstrates the key role of personal contacts. The 22% of the general public who report having an Adventist acquaintance are more likely to know something specific about the Adventist Church. They are also more likely to be aware of most of the Adventist ministries asked about in this survey. Only two of these ministries—*Liberty* magazine and The Evidence television program—have the same level of name recognition among respondents who have an Adventist acquaintance and respondents who do not.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America has had particular success in the African American community. In this study African Americans are more likely to express positive attitudes toward the Church and are more likely to have been touched by many of the ministries sponsored by the Church. They are also much more likely to have visited an Adventist church and more likely to know an Adventist. In fact, Adventist membership among African Americans is at nearly four times the level of penetration among whites. About four-fifths of one percent of African Americans are members of the Adventist Church, while only one-fifth of one percent of whites are members of the Adventist Church.<sup>4</sup> What can be learned from the African American churches that can be used in other ethnic groups?

## ***Sample Skew***

Most survey samples, although randomly selected, have some skewing from the known demographics of the total population. The graphs on pages 12 and 13 show that the sample in this study comes very close to the age and ethnic profiles of the recent U.S. Census. It does have a definite skew in gender. Nearly 62% of the respondents are women as compared to 51% of the general population in North America.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Arlene Fink, *The Survey Handbook* (1995, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks); David K. Hildebrand and Lyman Ott, *Statistical Thinking for Managers, Third Edition* (1991, Duxbury Press, Belmont)

<sup>2</sup>Dale E. Jones, et al., *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States—2000*, (2002, Glenmary Research Center, Nashville)

<sup>3</sup>Monte Sahlin, *Adventist Congregations Today* (2003, Center for Creative Ministry, Lincoln), pages 18-20.

<sup>4</sup>Statistical Report of Ethnic Groups by the NAD Office of Human Relations; Cheryl Russell, *Racial and Ethnic Diversity* (1996, New Strategist Publications, Ithaca)



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Mark Baldassare, *Needs Assessment and Market Analysis for the Fullerton Seventh-day Adventist Church* (1987, Mark Baldassare and Associates, Irvine)

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Gallup Associates, *U.S. Public's Awareness of and Attitudes Toward the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (1986, Gallup Organization, Inc., Princeton)

Carole Kilcher and Paul Richardson, *Public Awareness: The perceptions and attitudes of the general public toward the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (1994, Center for Creative Ministry, Lincoln)

Frank Magid, *Attitudes and Opinions Toward the Seventh-day Adventist Church and It's Media Ministry* (1987, Frank N. Magid Associates, Inc., New York City)

## ***Appendix A – Survey Method***

This survey used telephone interviews with individuals who answered the telephone at randomly selected homes. This is the same method used in the 1994 study, but differs from the 1970 and 1986 studies which used face-to-face interviews with individuals who answered the door at randomly selected homes. Those two surveys were each part of a Gallup Poll omnibus study in which the questions about the Adventist Church were only one section of a longer interview containing segments for other client organizations.

The Center for Creative Ministry contracted with Genesys Sampling in Philadelphia for assistance in determining how many interviews would be needed to have a valid sample and to provide a panel of randomly selected phone numbers. Genesys Sampling compiles and provides to survey researchers lists of randomly selected telephone numbers weighted to represent populations.

Genesys Sampling developed a panel of phone numbers from the 48 contiguous states (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) which was pulled randomly amongst all available numbers within the geographic area. The rough draw of randomly generated numbers was processed by *ID+* software which removes about 75% to 80% of the numbers that are not currently working, are not assigned to homes or are used in automated Fax and computer connections. This removes about 35% of the original draw of numbers.

Genesys Sampling obtained a panel of phone numbers from Canada through SM Research located in Ontario. The Canadian numbers were randomly pulled from a data base representing the residential telephone listings or “white pages” for Canada because (unlike the U.S.) about 95% of the nation has listed home numbers. Because it is known that these are currently working home phone numbers, SM Research does not use software to “clean” the sample as was necessary for the U.S. panel.

A total of 11,535 telephone numbers from the United States and 750 phone numbers from Canada were in the panel from which the Center for Creative Ministry interviewers randomly selected numbers to be dialed using the Nth name select method. A total of 7,454 numbers were dialed. Of these, 1,538 were found to be non-working numbers, not residential numbers or connected to automated electronic systems such as Fax machines and computers. A total of 1,284 interviews were completed out of the 5,916 remaining numbers. The other phone numbers were never answered after three to six attempts at different times of the day and different days of the week.

The Center for Creative Ministry has a team of experienced telephone interviewers who have participated in a number of surveys conducted by the Center for various client organizations. They conducted the telephone interviews from April 28 through September 5, 2003. Each worked from a standard script of survey questions which is included on the next page. The data from the completed interviews were computer coded for analysis.

## **Appendix B – Interview Questionnaire**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am working for BBMRC Research Services and we are conducting a public opinion survey that would take just 1 minute of your time. May I have this minute?

1. Have you ever heard or read about the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Yes      No

*If the answer is “No,” skip to Question 3.*

*If the answer is “Yes,” continue with Question 2.*

2. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the name “Seventh-day Adventist”?

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3. Are you acquainted with Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)? Yes      No

4. Are you acquainted with Adventist Community Services? Yes      No

5. Is there an Adventist hospital in your community? Yes      No

6. Have you or any of your relatives been treated in an Adventist hospital? Yes      No

7. Are you acquainted with the radio program Voice of Prophecy? Yes      No

8. Are you acquainted with the television program It Is Written? Yes      No

9. Are you acquainted with the television program Lifestyle Magazine? Yes      No

10. Are you acquainted with the television program The Evidence? Yes      No

11. Are you acquainted with the television program Breath of Life? Yes      No

12. Have you seen the magazine *Signs of the Times*? Yes      No

13. Have you seen *Message* magazine? Yes      No

14. Have you seen *Liberty* magazine? Yes      No

15. Have you seen *Vibrant Life* magazine? Yes      No

*If they answered Question 1, “No,” then skip to Question 18.*

16. Do you know anyone who is a member of the Adventist Church? Yes      No

17. Have you ever visited an Adventist Church? Yes      No

I just have two demographic questions to ask, and then we are done.

18. Were you born ... *[Check only one answer.]*

\_\_\_ before 1946?      \_\_\_ from 1946 through 1964?      \_\_\_ or, after 1964?

19. Which of the following categories best describes your ethnic background? *[Circle only one answer.]*

Asian or Pacific Islander    African American    Hispanic    Caucasian    Other

This completes the survey. Thank you for your time!

*After hanging up, circle your impression:*    The person was ...    Male    Female

## ***Appendix C – Probability Sampling Statistics***

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**

Size of Sample ....	1,500	1,250	1,000	750	500	250	100
Percentages near 10	2	2	2	3	3	5	7
Percentages near 20	3	3	3	4	4	6	10
Percentages near 30	3	3	4	4	5	7	11
Percentages near 40	3	3	4	4	5	8	12
Percentages near 50	3	3	4	4	5	8	12
Percentages near 60	3	3	4	4	5	8	12
Percentages near 70	3	3	4	4	5	7	11
Percentages near 80	3	3	3	4	4	6	10
Percentages near 90	2	2	2	3	3	5	7

**Table B**  
**Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference**  
**In Percentage Points for Percentages near 50**

Size of Sample ....	1,500	1,250	1,000	750	500	250	100
1,500	4						
1,250	5	5					
1,000	5	5	5				
750	6	6	6	6			
500	6	6	7	7	8		
250	8	8	9	9	9	11	
100	13	13	13	13	13	14	17

**Table C**  
**Recommended Allowance for Sampling Error of the Difference**  
**In Percentage Points For Percentages near 20 or Percentages near 80**

Size of Sample ....	1,500	1,250	1,000	750	500	250	100
1,500	4						
1,250	4	4					
1,000	4	4	4				
750	4	4	5	5			
500	5	5	5	6	6		
250	7	7	7	7	8	9	
100	10	10	10	10	11	12	14