Survey of Adventist ‘opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns’ coming to local churches

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Church researchers say a major survey of the opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns of Adventists worldwide will help shape more effective ministry and mission.

Feb. 24, 2012 Silver Spring, Maryland, United States....Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN

More than 60 percent of Seventh-day Adventists worldwide are women. Less than 40 percent of American Adventists study their Bible once a week.

Regularly cited at Adventist board meetings and business sessions, these and other so-called church statistics are not actually known to be factual. Many familiar "facts" might better be classified as "anecdotes, hunches and instincts," says Adventist researcher David Trim.

Trim, who directs the world church's Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, wants to see anecdotal evidence replaced by "actual data." Beginning this year, his office will oversee a major research project to survey the opinions, attitudes and spiritual life patterns of Adventist pastors, church members, institutional employees and college and university professors worldwide.

"We need to know what is actually happening in the church, not just what we'd like to be happening," Trim says. That knowledge can equip church leaders to use money and resources more judiciously and effectively, he says.

"We're doing this because we want to do ministry and mission better. We want to be better stewards of what God has given to us, and we want to be more effective in discipling and winning souls," Trim says.

It wasn't until last year that top church officials first voted to establish an ongoing budget for Adventist research meant to inform the church's strategic plan. Previously, Adventist research was conducted sporadically, with limited focus and funding, and almost exclusively in North America, Trim says.

This time around, the plan is for a "rigorous" survey carried out in each of the church's 13 world divisions, Trim says. Using the new research budget, his office has contracted with research teams at Adventist universities in North America, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia and Australia. Each team has demonstrated research "expertise and experience," Trim says. While much of the anonymous polling will take place this year, some surveys may continue into early 2013, with full results due back at world church headquarters by June of 2013.

Survey questions will go beyond age, gender, ethnicity and other statistics-based research to ask about attitudes and opinions on spiritual life, fundamental beliefs and values, church leadership, Adventist institutions and fellow members, among other topics.

"The Adventist Church is committed to a strategic planning process that provides direction based on a body of evidence," says Michael L. Ryan, a world church general vice president and vice-chair of the church's Strategic Planning and Budgeting Committee.

"All strategic planning is really only for one reason: How do we better advance the mission?" Ryan says.

How beneficial the results are depends largely upon whether Adventists worldwide fully engage in...
Adventist researcher David Trim wants to see "actual data" replace "anecdotes, hunches and instincts" about the church. Here, Trim reviews files in the Office of Archives, Statistics. There's no way to track survey results back to individual respondents, so researchers are hoping members will feel confident in giving honest answers -- "not what you think we'd like to hear," he says.

"We understand that people will not always be doing what we wish they were doing. We understand that people are not necessarily believing what we want them to believe. And we understand that often they won't be feeling very happy with us," Trim says. "There's going to be what will be perceived as bad news. But we want to know this so we can do a better job."

In some cases, survey results might spur church leaders to launch programs that would "modify our behavior and practices," Trim says. Other results may prompt better communication between leaders and members.

"If people are unhappy with an area that's fundamental to our faith, then we can educate and explain to members why this is essential," Trim says.

While he expects that much of the research will be published by Adventist scholars, Trim says some of it will remain confidential.

"My hope is that in fact we would not only get answers to really important questions, but as a side product we would also increase the research capacity of the church," Trim says.

Many Adventist researchers have demonstrated that they can produce "good, rigorous research," and Trim is keen to see them given "time and space" to benefit the church.

"I think at times we have made decisions based on who can give the best speech at a [church business meeting]. Somebody who gets up and has a burden on his heart and says, 'Brethren, I feel we should do thus and so,' and he's eloquent, he's impassioned, and he uses all the right Adventist buzzwords and everybody says, 'Amen, vote the money.' And often nobody asks, 'Is this really reflecting a need wider than this one person's perception?'" Trim says.

More and better Adventist research will equip leadership to use church money and resources in the best possible way rather than the most immediately appealing way, Trim says.

He also hopes the church's growing commitment to research will help boost member confidence in Adventist leadership. They'll know that research is steering leadership toward better informed decision-making and, ultimately, better methods of spreading the Adventist hope.

Church leaders expect the first wave of surveys to begin by the end of April.