

Who Are North American Adventists?

We're middle class, have above-average educations, live half in metropolitan areas and half not, use our credit cards a lot, and are growing increasingly gray.

by Monte Sablin

THE NORTH AMERICAN ADVENTIST COMMUNITY is a community in change. It has always thought of itself as a blue-collar church, but it must now come to terms with its middle-class character. The mission and message of the Adventist Church remains what it has historically been, but the social conditions within which it must work continue to change rapidly. Will the hundreds of decisions that are made each month in church boards, conference constituencies, and denominational committees successfully relate that eternal mission to the changing situation?

The total picture of the Adventist community in this revealing survey is that of a solidly middle-class church. Two out of three Adventist men hold professional, managerial, and white-collar jobs, or are in school preparing for such positions. Only a third are blue-collar workers. The percentage of Adventists

who have completed some level of higher education is almost double that of the general population. Adventists own as many VCRs and TVs as the general public. They make more use of credit cards.

The profile of North American Adventism in this essay is drawn from one in a series of reports published by the North American Division Church Information System. It presents information collected by the Adventist Family Opinion surveys conducted for the North American Division by the Review and Herald Publishing Association's Office of Research and Development. The survey consists of 1,675 households selected by stratified probability sampling from among the mailing lists of the union conference papers.¹

Where Do They Work?

Half of the Adventists in North America live in small towns and rural locations. This is in marked contrast to the general urbanization

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of United States and Canadian society. It reveals a significant gap in Adventist penetration of the large cities, especially the suburbs surrounding North America's largest urban centers. Nearly half of the general population lives in these suburbs, while less than a third of the Adventist community is present there. This may be a contributing factor to the large number of white Adventist churches experiencing little or no growth in membership.

For the purposes of this report, "white-collar" occupations are defined as technical, sales, and service positions and "blue-collar" occupations are defined as farming, forestry, craftsman, artisan, and laborer jobs.

Only a third of Adventist men are blue-collar workers [see Fig. 1]. This is true for all ethnic groups, but less true for Adventists living in rural areas, where one in six Adventist men works in farming and forestry, and one in four is a craftsman. Ethnic minority men are twice as likely as white men to be employed in the military.

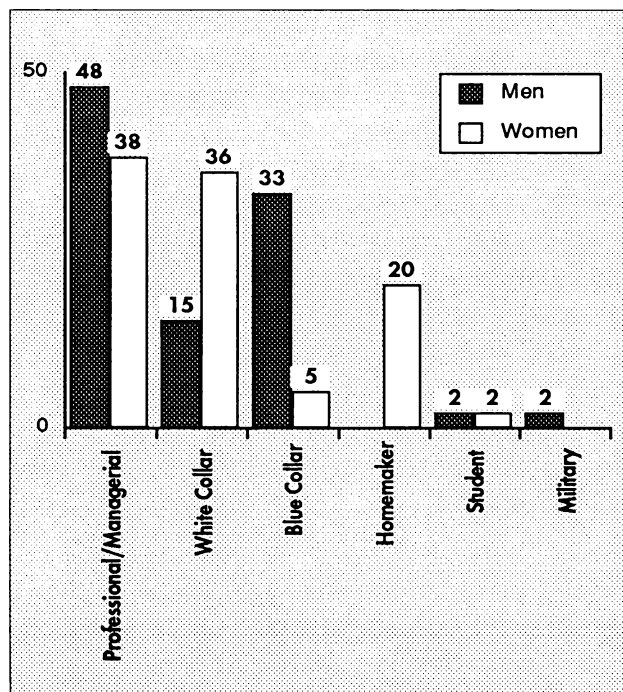


Fig. 1 Occupational profile of NAD members

How Much Education Do They Have?

The emphasis on Christian education in Adventist faith and practice has resulted in a very significant level of educational attainment among Adventists in North America. The percentage of Adventists with less than a high school diploma is half that of the general population in the United States and Canada. Two out of five Adventist males and a third of the females have college degrees. The majority have spent some time in postsecondary schools.

A comparison of generational cohorts indicates that the dominant majority of educated adults is a recent phenomenon. Among Adventist men born before 1925, only 29 percent have college degrees, while among Adventist men born from 1946 through 1964, fully 50 percent have college degrees.

The percentage of highly educated church members is significant in all ethnic groups. In fact, the percentage of males with college degrees among black and Hispanic Adventists may be slightly greater than among white Adventists.

This highly educated membership is likely related to some of the changes underway in the local church in the North American Division: the leadership role of the pastor, the kind of outreach and nurture activities that receive support, and the decision-making processes of congregations.

What Do They Earn?

There are fewer poor people and more households with high incomes among Adventists than in the general population in North America [see Fig. 2]. The majority are above the median household income. Most are middle class in socioeconomic status.

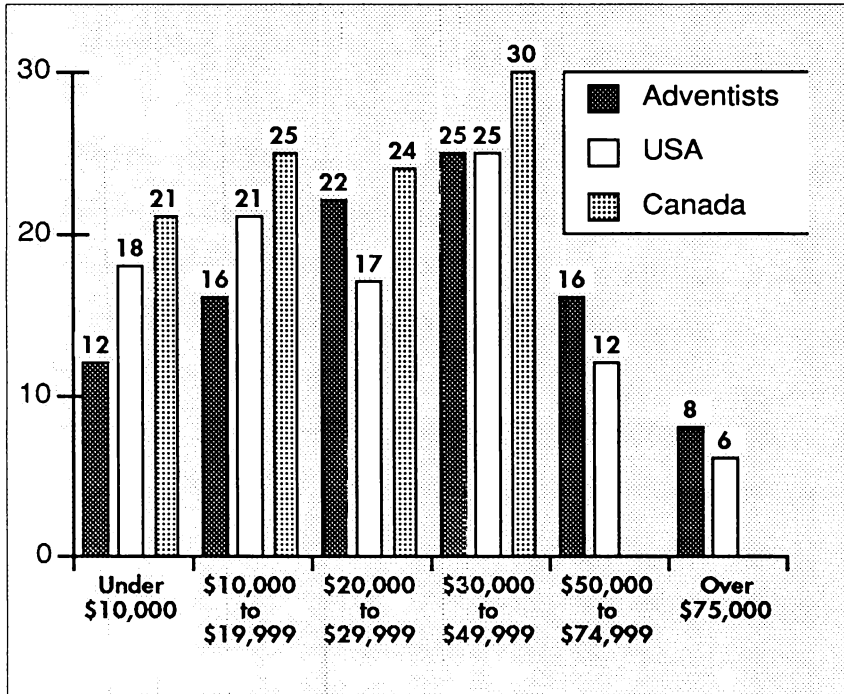


Fig. 2 Annual household income in the NAD

Black Adventists are as solidly middle class as are white Adventists. Asians are even more likely to be middle class. Hispanics and other minorities are more likely to have lower incomes. The Adventist Church has been particularly successful among the black population of North America. The proportion of blacks in the Adventist community is twice that in the general population. Among Asians, Hispanics, and the smaller ethnic groups, the number of Adventists is proportionate to the profile of the general population.

Congregations with less than 100 members have more low-income families, and congregations with 600 or more members have more middle- and higher-income families. From compiled membership statistics, we know that only 19 percent of the total North American Division membership meets in congregations of less than 100 members. Conversely, 24 percent of the total North American membership belongs to congregations of 600 or more members.

What Do They Buy?

Adventists are more likely to be homeowners and to live in single-family dwellings than is the general population. This is especially true for white and Asian Adventists, but it is also true, to a significant degree, among black and Hispanic Adventists. Even low-income Adventist families are likely to be homeowners.

The middle-class nature of North American Adventism is especially illustrated when the use of credit cards among church members is compared to usage among the general population in the United States. Adventists are significantly more likely to have bank cards

such as Visa and MasterCard, charge cards at retail stores such as Sears, and gasoline company credit cards. They are twice as likely to have travel cards such as American Express. Retailers to the Adventist market will be interested in the fact that Visa is the single most-used credit card.

Personal computers are present in a quarter of the Adventist homes in North America, while only 3 percent have satellite dishes

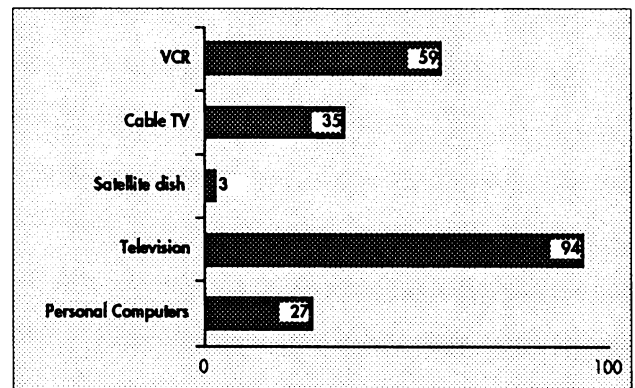


Fig. 3 Technology in Adventist homes in the NAD

[see Fig. 3]. This indicates that a computer bulletin-board service might have greater utility than a satellite communications network.

More than 9 out of 10 Adventist homes have a television set, almost as many as the general population in the country [see Fig. 4]. Adventists are significantly less likely to be subscribers to cable television services, but perhaps a little more likely to own VCRs than the average American. This may indicate a pattern on the part of some Adventists to exert control of the medium, since cable includes many of the more objectionable elements of television pro-

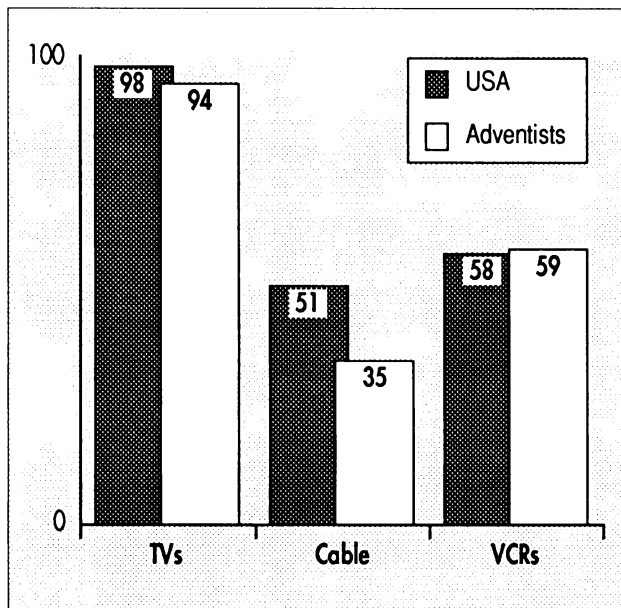


Fig. 4 Penetration of television in Adventist homes

gramming, and video cassettes are the major source of programming of a Christian nature.

The panel was asked about its purchases of Christian books during the last year, including those from all publishers, both Adventist and non-Adventist. Doctrinal books, children's books, and those by Ellen White had the largest market. Books on Christian living, health, inspirational topics, and music—the practical subjects—also had a good market. The smallest market share is among books for teenagers, church how-to books, and historical topics.

What Kinds of Families Do They Have?

Married couples make up the dominant majority of Adventist homes in North America [see Fig. 5], and only one in five includes a nonmember spouse. A third of Adventist families are couples with children,

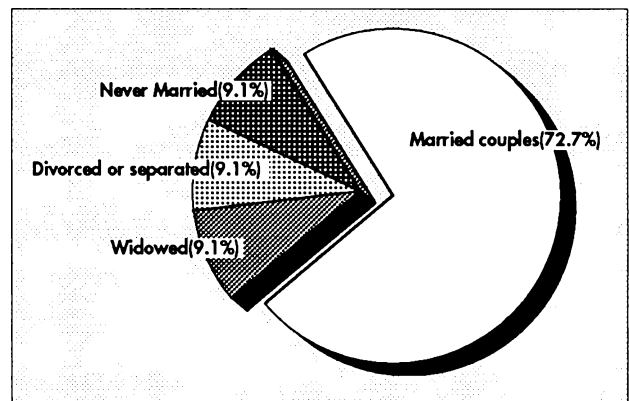


Fig. 5 The Adventist family in North America

but nearly two out of five are couples without children in the home. Most of these are “empty nesters” whose children have grown up and left home [see Fig. 6]. This is reflected in the fact that the average household size is smaller among Adventists than it is in the general

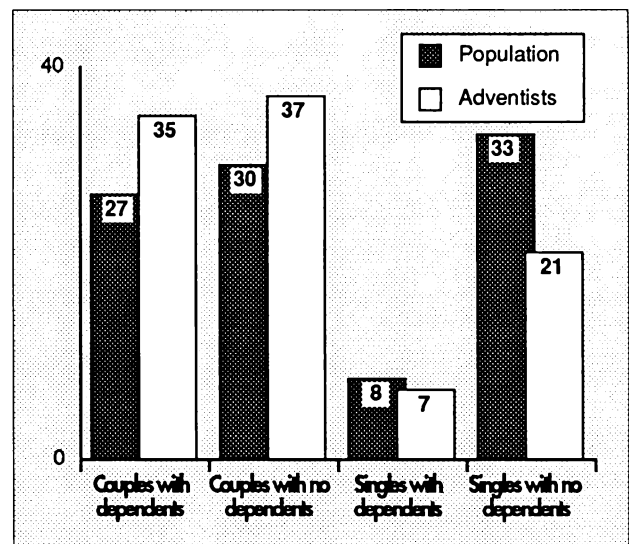


Fig. 6 Households by type

population in both Canada and the United States. There are more "empty nesters" among whites, and more couples with children among minorities.

The proportion of single-parent families in the Adventist community is the same as in the general population. So is the proportion of divorced individuals. Never-married adults and still-single widows and widowers account for the "undersupply" of singles. One explanation for this is the known tendency of young adults to drop out of the church. Another possible factor is that more widowed Adventists are remarrying due to the longer-than-average lifespan of Adventist males.

The role of women has changed within North American Adventism, as it has in the society at large [see Fig. 7]. Three out of four Adventist women who are not retired work

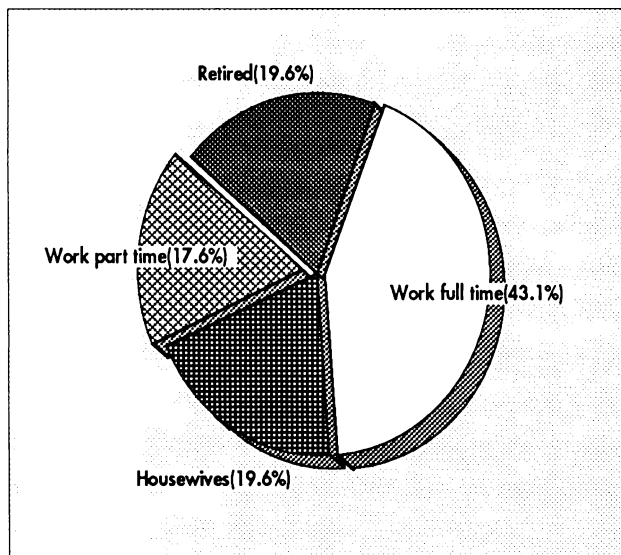


Fig. 7 Adventist women in North America

outside the home; two-thirds of these work full time. Only one Adventist woman in five considers herself a full-time homemaker. This could be why volunteer programs in the local church are hurting, since these programs have relied on the donated time of housewives.

The Adventist church in North America is aging; there is an overrepresentation of the

middle-aged and a rapid decline in the youngest age cohort of children.

How Do They Help the Church?

However, it is encouraging that a little more than half of the Adventist members in North America hold some office or responsibility in the local congregation. This is a very wide and significant base of participation compared to mainstream Protestant denominations. It must be acknowledged that Seventh-day Adventist participation in local congregations is probably less than that among Mennonites and other small Anabaptist denominations. One household in five includes a denominational employee, including 17 percent of the male heads of households, and 12 percent of women, with some households in which both spouses are employed by the denomination. As in North American churches generally, men are somewhat more likely than women to be a non-member spouse in a church-related household.

In summary, North American Adventists are middle-aged, middle-class, multiethnic, above average in education, work in professional or white-collar jobs, with half living in metropolitan areas and half not. Perhaps the most important single demographic fact for projecting changes in the future of Adventism in North America is the significant underrepresentation of Adventist children in the youngest age groups (birth to fifth birthday). Through the years, this could affect everything from cradle roll Sabbath schools to graduate school enrollments. Undoubtedly, the single most hopeful fact is the continued high participation by members in their local congregations. With that sort of commitment, North American Adventists can yet meet the challenge of change with the wisdom and creativity of diverse perspectives.

Notes and References

1. Local conferences that do not participate in distributing their respective union papers provided membership lists.

The sample size and technique is comparable to those used by the most respected public polling organizations in the United States and Canada today. To arrive at these numbers, the total sample of completed interviews was first weighted to bring the ethnic characteristics of the final sample into alignment with the known ethnicity of the total membership of the North American

Division, based on the 1988 statistics supplied by the North American Division Office of Human Relations. Also, because about 16 percent of the sample households were unbaptized children under 13 years of age, the official membership of the North American Division, of 708,616 on June 30, 1988, was increased by 16 percent to project the probable number of unbaptized children, bringing the total Adventist population to 843,361. In using this table, remember that any cell in it has an error factor of 2 or 3 percentage points.