

Large SDA Churches: Adventism's Silent Majority

If you think most North American Adventists worship in small, rural churches, think again.

by Monte Sablin

WHEN WE THINK OF THE STANDARD LOCAL church experience for North American Adventists, most of us have a picture of a few dozen people gathered for worship. The congregation in our mind has one or two adult Sabbath school classes, meager basement rooms for children, “not enough” teenagers to have a real youth group, no office for the pastor and no organized outreach ministries: a congregation dominated by a small circle of poorly educated, out-of-touch people who are more interested in maintenance than mission.

Actually, more than half of the 775,000 Adventists in North America gather on Sabbath morning in a church with a membership of more than 300. One quarter of North

American Adventists meet in churches with 600 or more members. It is a little known fact that the majority of the 775,000 Seventh-day Adventists in North America are members of the 600 largest churches. Less than half of the membership is found in the other congregations—the nearly 4,000 small churches that have tended to set the norms for church life in North America.

In reality, a typical Sabbath experience for North American Adventists features a congregation of hundreds, professional musicians and pastoral staff, sparkling programs for children and youth, a wide range of adult classes and small group ministries. These large congregations have the resources to address all kinds of needs, organize many meetings throughout the week, and undertake innovative forms of outreach. Most Adventists in the United States and Canada attend these large churches because they enjoy being a part of congregations with the resources to fund and staff significant and even ground-breaking programs of nurture, evangelism, and service.

*Monte Sablin, associate director for adult ministries in the Church Ministries department of the North American Division, has recently written a book entitled *Sharing Our Faith With Friends Without Losing Either* (Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1990). Gail R. Hunt, president of Orchard Hill Market Research Group, and a manager of the Adventist Family Opinion Poll, assisted in analyzing research data for this essay.*

Institutional Cathedrals

The largest congregations in North America can be called institutional cathedrals. Some qualify as what evangelical church growth experts call "megachurches." Certainly the two largest Adventist churches in North America, the 5,500-member University church in Loma Linda, and the 3,200-member Sligo church on the Columbia Union College campus within the Washington, D.C., Beltway, are megachurches. Some other megachurches, like the 2,900-member Shiloh church in the inner city of Chicago, are not affiliated with institutions, but more than 60 of the 75 to 80 largest congregations in North America are institutional cathedrals.

Sixteen of these are located on the campuses of the Adventist colleges and universities in the North American Division. Many of the campus churches enjoy memberships of 2,000 or more, and all have at least 1,000 members. Another 20 or 30 are "hospital churches," located near a major Adventist hospital. They often serve a number of the management personnel and some employees, although the days are gone when a significant number of the staff at any hospital join a single congregation. Most of the other large churches are located on academy campuses, and two are near publishing houses. In most cases, the "hospital" and "academy" churches have memberships of 400 to 1,000.

These institutional churches all have multiple pastors, with associates who specialize in ministries such as youth, music, visitation, family counseling, and outreach. Many have one or more women among the associate pastors. These churches sponsor a variety of small groups such as Bible study, singles ministries, women's ministries, and marriage retreats. They offer a long list of Sabbath school classes and divisions. Any Sabbath you can walk into one of these institutional churches

and find a group of a score or more adults preparing for baptism.

Worship services in these churches emphasize order and dignity, with traditional hymns and music in the classical idiom. Although it is widely believed that these churches are "not very evangelistic," many of them use radio and television to share their Sabbath services with large audiences of nonmembers. A number have even recently shown renewed interest in public crusades. For example, about five years ago Sligo Church pitched a tent on the next-door lawn of Columbia Union College. More recently, Walla Walla College Church invited Roland Hegstad from the General Conference to conduct a series of meetings.

Because these churches have always shown a willingness to experiment, they have been the source of much innovation within the denomination: i.e., the student missionary program, marriage-preparation seminars, stop-smoking clinics, and educational radio and cable television. Although often underfunded compared to churches of similar size in other denominations, they are rich in human services.

Black Basilicas

The largest segment of the churches over 600 members in the North American Division are the black churches in large cities. There are nearly 150 of these congregations, most with memberships around 1,000. Many are located in what would be called "inner-city" neighborhoods, but more and more are moving to the suburbs as African-American Adventists become increasingly middle class.

There are 30 of these churches in New York City alone, many of them tied by history to the 2,000-member Ephesus church on 123rd Street in Harlem. A growing number of these "Big Apple" congregations are made up of immi-

grants from Caribbean nations. For example, the 1,421-member Hebron church in Brooklyn is made up largely of members with a Haitian background. It may be the largest congregation in the North American Division that operates in a language other than English—in this case, French.

The big-city, black basilicas all have strong music programs with multiple choirs. It is more and more common for the volunteer music directors to have graduate degrees from some of America's most renowned conservatories. The experience of participating is rich enough to have recently catapulted the second- and third-generation African-American Adventists in *Take Six* to the top of the charts.

These churches are all very evangelistic. They sponsor public crusades once or twice a year. They expect their pastors to "open the doors of the church" at the close of each Sabbath sermon, making an appeal for non-members to publicly indicate a decision to prepare for baptism. They are equally committed to social concerns.

Craig Dossman, recently appointed pastor of the 1,000-member Brooklyn Temple, is typical of the black Adventist clergy who see no dichotomy between organizing soup kitchens and home Bible study groups. "The church has to be seen as a place that really cares for

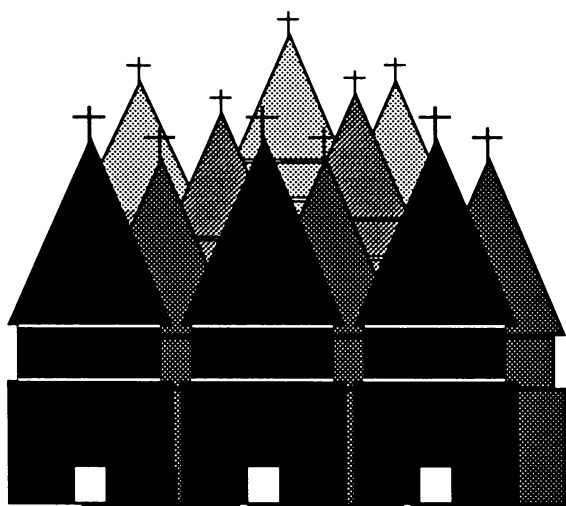
the poor and homeless, and is interested in social justice," he says. "Where else can young people find hope, if not in the remnant church?" In previous pastorates he has sponsored rehabilitation programs for drug users and initiated services for the homeless. In his new assignment he is getting acquainted with community leaders in Bedford-Stuyvesant, one of the most crime- and poverty-plagued neighborhoods in North America.

Suburban Shrines

A cluster of 140 largely white, Anglo churches have relatively new and attractive physical plants in the suburbs of the large metropolitan areas. Most are 400 to 800 in membership. The 1,400-member Carmichael church near Sacramento is probably the largest. The 605-member Markham Woods church near Orlando, the 400-member O'Malley church in Anchorage, and the 304-member Pineridge church in Calgary are more typical.

Significant growth is happening in some of these congregations, such as the Arlington church halfway between Dallas and Fort Worth. Others admit they are somewhat stagnant. Some are very involved in outreach, with a regular cycle of health education, family life, and Bible seminars. Others do not do much more than sponsor a quality church school and provide a high-quality worship service on Sabbath mornings.

A large portion of the 30-something and 40-something Baby Boomers, with their children, worship in these churches. They expect a wide range of high-level programming. They bring to pastors a large caseload of family crises. Privately, pastors of these churches say they are understaffed. Since parents are busy professionals, more and more congregations are resorting to hiring a coordinator for the children's Sabbath school. Significant funding



is being set aside for Pathfinder Clubs and Adventurer Clubs in order to keep them up to par.

Some of these churches are positioning themselves to reap the largest evangelistic potential of the 1990s—the 30 to 40 million babies that will be born to Baby Boomers in this decade. Church growth research shows that most Boomers are unchurched, and many will return to church when they have children of their own. But this can be controversial. Some church members oppose opening daycare at the church school, using more contemporary music in worship, and instituting family communion.

Small-City Temples

Eighty to 90 congregations can be labeled *small-city temples* because they are located in medium-sized and smaller metropolitan areas. Some are located in “big cities,” but not on the scale of Los Angeles, Toronto, Atlanta, and New York. The largest Adventist churches in these cities run from 300 to 600 members each, and a number of them are named “First Seventh-day Adventist church” or “Central SDA church.” Examples include the 600-member First SDA of Tampa, Florida, the 593-member Edmonton Central church in Canada, the 460-member First SDA of Louisville, Kentucky, and the 342-member Albuquerque Central church in New Mexico.

Some 20 or so of these large churches are located in low population centers, many on the West Coast. A good example is Lodi, in northern California, with a population of just 35,000, but with two Adventist churches of nearly 1,000 members each—the English Oaks church and the Fairmont church. Perhaps the greatest contrast is the 875-member Adventist church in 14,000-population Grants Pass, Oregon. These congregations are sometimes the

largest church of any denomination in town and represent the highest ratio of penetration of Adventist membership in the population across the North American Division.

These small-city congregations usually have a wide demographic range of members, but are often more “blue-collar” in self-identity and dynamics than are the institutional and suburban churches. All have a full-time senior pastor, and some have an associate. Almost all of them sponsor a church school and a Pathfinder Club, and many sponsor a community services center. They use seminar evangelism a lot. A major reason is that 40-person Revelation Seminars held three or four times a year have much the same church growth results as one larger crusade, but are much less expensive to conduct in an urban setting.

Urban Parishes

Some 50 highly urbanized, large congregations in large cities have traditionally been “white” churches, but are becoming increasingly multicultural. Examples include 1,700-member Takoma Park church on the state line between Maryland and the District of Columbia, the 961-member Honolulu Central church, the 821-member Miami Temple, and the 355-member Jackson Heights church in New York City.

Among these large urban parishes are 10 or 15 Hispanic congregations, most of them in southern California: for example, the Latin American church in Los Angeles and the La Sierra Spanish church in Riverside. Large Hispanic urban parishes outside California include Central Spanish in Miami, Spanish South church in McAllen, Texas, and Dyckman Spanish church in New York City.

Urban ministry is a high priority for these urban parishes, taking such forms as Miami Temple’s street ministry, which feeds hun-

dreds of homeless each week. Last year, this congregation engaged in a highly publicized confrontation with city fathers.

Black Tabernacles

About 25 large black congregations are in small or medium-sized cities in the South and Midwest. These black tabernacles include congregations like the 496-member Bethel church in Saginaw, Michigan, and the 386-member Berean church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. They are often described as having a "Baptist" flavor and a more rural, blue-collar orientation than the big-city black churches.

Pastor-Centered Churches

A third of the total membership in North America is in the 28 percent of local churches with 100 to 299 members. This "middle third" of the churches have 50 to 150 in attendance on an average Sabbath, and researchers call them "pastor-centered" churches.

This is the kind of smaller church that is the focus of conventional seminary education and much professional ecclesiastical writing. The dynamics of these small churches are dependent on the key role of the pastor. The congregation is too large for everyone to engage in direct, one-on-one informal communication with everyone else as happens in the smaller church. The members expect the pastor to be the "switchboard operator." The pastor is expected to know who is ill, who is in the hospital, who has particular problems and needs, and to provide direct supervision for any volunteer workers. His primary task, in the eyes of the congregation, is to visit all of the members each week and report interesting news to the church on Sabbath, leading them

in intercessory prayer and caring for those in need.

The traditional North American dream includes a single-family home with a lawn, a relatively new automobile, and a full-time pastor with no more than 100 families to care for. The pastor-centered congregation is designed to facilitate this goal. But its nurture-centered agenda is at odds with the mission emphasis of Adventism, and very few Adventist churches of this size have a full-time pastor. The result is considerable conflict, which often makes pastors feel that they are overloaded and caught between the expectations of their members and those of their conference administration.

Single-Cell Congregations

At the other end of the spectrum from the largest 600 congregations with the majority of North American members, are the 2,685 (of 4,552) local churches in the North American Division with less than 100 members. Since average worship attendance equals about 55 percent of the book membership, these congregations have about 50 or fewer people each Sabbath. They are what researchers call *single-cell congregations*. Even though only 19 percent of North American members attend these single-cell congregations, they constitute 60 percent of the churches in the division, and dominate the thinking of many denominational leaders.

Single-cell churches are really overgrown small groups. They operate on a very informal level. Many young pastors learn this the hard way in their first year or two. A typical example is a pastor who presides over a regular meeting of the church board where there is a unanimous vote to paint the Primary Sabbath school room pink. Two or three weeks later, the pastor sticks his head into the

room to find the head deacon and his son painting it green. When he asks why they are doing something different than what was voted, he is informed that "we discussed it on the phone with Sister Jones," who is not a board member, "and she said that we should use up the green paint left over from when we repainted the rest rooms last year."

The pastor can lecture them about the church manual and actions voted in minutes or he can avoid high blood pressure and accept the fact that single-cell congregations make decisions through informal discussion and the influence of two or three local "patriarchs" and "matriarchs." In most cases he is always going to be an outsider of sorts, never holding the recognized authority wielded by members who have been informal leaders for many years.

Single-cell churches almost always stop growing after the first 10 years of their life. It is very difficult for new people to feel at home in the group, since they will never share the long history that undergirds the established relationships. The members like the predictable patterns they have established, and are usually not willing to make the changes necessary to see significant growth.

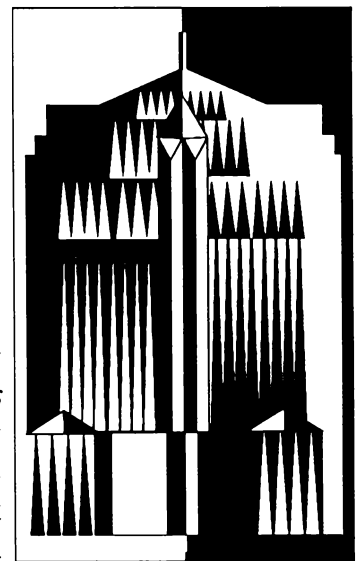
Underrepresentation of Large Churches

Typically, the small churches in the conference have a much lower ratio of members per pastor and their tithe does not cover the cost of their pastoral staffing. The large churches have fewer pastors per capita, and the financial savings are used to subsidize pastoral staffing for small churches, as well as the conference's educational institutions. In other words, the largest congregations are the "cash cows" of most local conferences.

Yet, at conference constituency meetings, a disproportionate number of the delegates represent smaller congregations. Because most conference bylaws prescribe one, two, or even three delegates per church in addition to the delegates apportioned by church membership, there are usually more delegates representing small churches than large churches. This is exacerbated by the fact that large churches typically do not bring to constituency meetings as many delegates as they are entitled to.

This disproportion in representation has been partly compensated by a tradition of placing the pastors of the largest churches on conference committees. But as local conferences sharply decrease the number of pastors on conference committees and increase the number of laypersons, pastors of the large churches are increasingly being left off the conference committee.

Many pastoral staff and lay leaders in large churches feel that resource materials and programs produced by denominational agencies are not designed with them in mind. Ironically, small churches feel the same way! Who are the resources designed for? This dilemma is the reason that the new North American Division Church Ministries Department has pushed for a major reorganization of departmental work over the past five years in order to contextualize resource materials and provide support for local planning. Last year a special *Pastor's Hotline* newsletter was begun. It goes only to the largest congregations and



includes information and lists of resource materials designed especially for their needs.

At a deeper level it is possible that many Adventists are simply prejudiced against large churches. "They are unfriendly," is a common attitude. I have often been told that "people go there who want to hide out and not do anything." "Worldly," is another often-heard description. Yet, recent surveys indicate that members of small churches are as likely to be uninvolved in witnessing or ministry as are members of large churches.* It appears that the common impressions about large churches are simply myths.

Church Growth Depends on Large Churches

Large churches are often looked upon as costly and nonproductive by the denomination's evangelism strategists. The facts are the reverse. Analyses conducted in two local conferences demonstrate that in those fields, the net growth in those conferences came entirely from a handful of the largest congregations. Significant growth rates in some of the small churches were equalled by larger losses in other small churches, with no net effect on growth in membership of these two conferences.

Large churches have more resources for outreach and more contacts in the community. They are better able to absorb prospective members. There is strong evidence that as the Baby Boom generation begins to return to church, they prefer large churches with a

menu of quality programs. Large Adventist churches tend to be located where there is the greatest degree of favorable public awareness of the Adventist message. All of this means that large churches are key to the North American Division leadership's emphasis on a revitalization of evangelism.

The significant church growth in largely black regional conferences has often been contrasted with the slower growth rate in "white" conferences. The average size of local churches in regional conferences is much larger than the average across the division. These larger churches are a key to the higher growth rate in Regional Conferences.

The more than 50 percent of North American Seventh-day Adventists who are members of these large churches are not the ones who are most likely to write scorching letters to conference presidents, cancel subscriptions to denominational periodicals, or send their tithe to private organizations that have a reactionary agenda. They are less likely to stand up and make emotional speeches at constituency meetings or buttonhole speakers at camp meetings. But these large churches provide most of the human and fiscal resources that are so necessary to the Adventist global mission. Even though they are the majority, they are not heard from by denominational leaders as often as are other voices. They are the vital "silent majority" of the North American Adventist Church.

* See *Church Members' Involvement, Witnessing, and Devotions*, NAD Church Information System Report Five, 1991, NAD Church Ministries Department.