

The Face of Hispanic Adventism

By Johnny Ramírez-Johnson and Edwin I. Hernández

In the North American Seventh-day Adventist Church, Hispanics represent 12 percent of the membership. According to Latino scholar Justo L. Gonzalez, this is no small feat. Few if any Protestant denominations have been able to attract Hispanics in such numbers. In most denominations, the percentage of Latino membership is 4 percent or less. The SDA figure of 12 percent equals the percentage of Hispanics in the total population.

*The Hispanic Education Advisory Committee of the North American Division of SDAs commissioned a study of the Church's Hispanic population. Led by Johnny Ramírez-Johnson and Edwin I. Hernández, the research team recently published its findings in the book *Avance: A Vision for a New Mañana*, published by Loma Linda University Press. What follows is the second chapter of this book, which describes the face of Hispanic Adventism.*

Hispanic Adventists and Socioeconomic Indicators

The majority of Hispanic Adventists in the AVANCE sample were on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. Because 42.3% of Hispanic Adventists participating in this study earned less than \$14,999 annually (according to their individual, self-reported incomes), poverty was a real threat. A total of 60% of those earning poverty-level wages were single women with children. In addition to a preoccupation with economic matters, poverty increases stress, discouragement, and family tensions; and limits housing and employment options. Hispanics living in poverty lack adequate education, access to health care, and economic opportunities; and breaking out of this cycle of poverty continues to be a challenge.



AVANCE data—self-reported by respondents—indicated that a total of 23% of Hispanic Adventists annually earned between \$15,000 and \$24,999; 27% earned between \$25,000 and \$49,000; and only 7% earned above \$50,000. *AVANCE* data indicated that 61.1% of poor or lower-middle class households had only one spouse working. This percentage of poor or middle-class households was reduced to 37.2% when both spouses were working. This percentage, however, still leaves more than one-third of Hispanic Adventist families barely able to make ends meet. Another factor related to income level was length of residence in the United States. *AVANCE* data analyses revealed that those who had lived in the United States for one to five years were more likely to be living in poverty than those who had lived in the United States for 16 to 20 years. Those who had lived in the United States for 16 to 20 years were more likely to be considered middle or upper-middle class.

These statistics may support the idea that Adventism encourages economic achievement in its members. It is possible that Adventism may instill values and educational aspirations that lead to an increased standard of living (Bull and Lockhart, 1989). For example, 61% of the adults in the highest income brackets (\$75,000 or above) had been Adventists since their childhood (baptized at 13 years of age or younger). Only 16% of the highest income earners

were baptized in their twenties. Typically, higher education leads to higher wages. In the *AVANCE* data sample, 20% of Hispanic adult Adventists had only a grade-school level education, while 31% had only a high school diploma. Moreover, 24% of adults had some college, 15% had completed a college degree, and 1.5% had a postgraduate degree. Undoubtedly the fact that more than half the sample had a high school education or less contributed to higher rates of poverty. Issues related to education, and their implications, will be explored in later chapters. At this point it is sufficient to note that level of education is related to reported income level.

Another important factor that helped paint a socioeconomic picture of Hispanics was the type and amount of employment in which they were engaged. *AVANCE* research statistics indicated that 60% of the adults surveyed worked full time. Another 18% were unemployed, 17% worked part-time, and 5% were retired. Among the 1,072 women in the study, 48% worked full time, 21% worked part-time, and 26% were unemployed. Among the unemployed women, 42% had only a high school education or less. Emphasizing the need for education among Latinas should be an important priority for families, churches, and schools. Generation was another important aspect of the Hispanic Adventist community. An overwhelming

TABLE 2.1 HISPANIC POPULATION

	U.S. population	U.S. Hispanics	U.S. Adventist Hispanics
Totals	275,617,000	32,640,000	115,244*
Percent of total	100%	11.8%	12.0%*
Median age (years)	35.8	26.6	27.5**
Mean age (years)	36.5	31.5**	
Male population	48.9%	51.1%	45.0%**
Female population	51.1%	49.8%	55.0%**

Source: Census Bureau, September 1, 2000

<www.census.gov/population/www/estimates/uspop.html>

*Total number of Adventists in North American Division is 955,076 (Seventh-day Adventist Secretariat Offices, 09/29/02)

**ADVANCE numbers do not include minors below 12 years of age.

majority (76%) of those surveyed were first-generation immigrants to the United States (i.e., born outside of the United States). Only 15% were second-generation immigrants, and a mere 9% comprised third- and fourth-generation members. Among Adventist Hispanics living in the United States, 26% had lived here five years or less, 17% between six to ten years, and 40% for eleven years or more.

Table 2.1 illustrates how the *AVANCE* sample compared with the population at large. Approximately one-third of Hispanic Adventists were residents but not citizens of the United States (34%); some were citizens by birth (22%) or through naturalization (20%). A typical Hispanic congregation was comprised primarily of first-generation members; second-generation Hispanics tended to be the younger individuals of the congregation.

Women and Young People

Hispanics were younger than the population at large. Women and young people made up a large percentage of the Hispanic Adventist church. The average Adventist Hispanic was a young (less than 41 years old), single female. The *AVANCE* study reported that 55% of the church's Hispanic members were women, and 76% of the church members were 41 years of age or younger. Among the younger people, 30% were between the ages of 13 and 21 years old; and 46% were between the ages of 22 and 41 years old. Families also made up a large portion of the church—with 65.4% of the adults sampled indicating that they were married, 9.2% were divorced and remarried, 11.6% were single, 3.8% were separated, and 5% were divorced.

Intergenerational and Bicultural Tensions

When two cultures meet, change is inevitable. This dynamic process of confrontation and change is called acculturation. Acculturation involves the adoption by one ethnic group of another's cultural characteristics, including worldview, language, values, practices, religion, and diet. Almost always, the minority group takes on the cultural characteristics of the majority group. While Hispanic culture has made an impact on American culture, more often than not the Hispanic community has been modified to a greater extent by the larger American culture. Overall, 71% of the Hispanic Adventists surveyed were, to some degree, resistant to the acculturation process—with only 29%

indicating high levels of acceptance of acculturated characteristics.

Is acculturation really inevitable; and, if so, is it beneficial or harmful? As stated by Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986): "It is possible and acceptable to participate in two different cultures or to use two different languages, perhaps for different purposes by alternating one's behavior according to the situation" (p. 89). LaFromboise and her colleagues (1993) in their review of the literature on acculturation and assimilation suggested that "it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity" (p. 395).

Age seems to be a factor in determining how much a person will be acculturated. The younger one is upon arrival in the United States and the longer one resides in this country, the greater the probability that one will acculturate into society. However, while acculturation allows one to integrate into society, it also brings negative consequences. Education and income levels actually tend to decrease among more acculturated generations. In fact, research showed that Hispanics who were influenced by their traditional culture were more likely to advance socially and economically. Acculturation may strip people of their traditional sources of support while providing few alternatives for social support (Ryder, Alden and Paulhus, 2000; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Reynoso, Felice and Shragg, 1993). Fortunately for Hispanics, the continual influx of new immigrants into the community has helped sustain those cultural resources needed to counter the vicissitudes that accompany acculturation.

Religious faith can help counter these negative effects by instilling aspirations that lead to higher educational and occupational achievements. This observation was corroborated by an ethnographic study done within a Puerto Rican Seventh-day Adventist community in Massachusetts (Ramírez-Johnson, 1993). It was discovered that educational attainment, economic potential, and positive interactions with society were fostered, facilitated, and promoted by active membership in the religious community. *AVANCE* research findings also suggested that Adventism may advance the socioeconomic status (measured by educational attainment and family income) of its members. Highly acculturated Adventists were more likely to be



younger and more educated, to earn higher incomes, and to have been Adventist longer than persons more resistant to acculturation forces. The implications of this finding will be discussed in later chapters.

Adventist Proselytizing Efforts Among Hispanics

An important aspect of the Hispanic membership in the Adventist Church is its phenomenal growth. Is the growth of the Hispanic church in North America due to the immigration of Hispanic Adventists? What attracts people to the church, and what are the characteristics of the most recent converts? The *AVANCE* study reported that 41% of those surveyed were reared as Adventists, with both parents being church members; and 35% were first-generation Adventists. Of those baptized, 63% were baptized in the United States and 33% were baptized outside this country. Analysis of recent converts to Adventism (those baptized within the past five years) showed that 91% were first-generation immigrants, and 9% came from second or subsequent generations. In addition, 52% converted from Catholicism.

The Adventist experience provides Hispanics with powerfully appealing spiritual benefits, material rewards (education and healthful living), and a lifestyle that creates visible separation from the larger culture—thus fostering group solidarity. According to self-reports, what most attracted new converts to Adventism was the beauty of the message and Adventists' understanding of the gospel. What ultimately helped new converts become part of the community through baptism were the quality of church programs and the sense of community experienced. Evangelistic activities and publications also helped new converts become members.

Growth among the Hispanic membership of the Adventist Church was due to proselytizing rather than to the immigration of Adventists from other countries. Most of the new members—drawn from those who were converted in this country—were poor and had low levels of education. Once these individuals were introduced to the community, the hope and security of the gospel were communicated to them through the preaching and teaching ministries of the church—enhancing the chances that they would become members of the community. In this manner, friendships and personal attachments became the key to evangelism.

An Overview of Hispanic Adventist Spirituality

A strong, mature faith and a tradition of fellowship with like believers characterize a growing, vibrant religious community. As discussed by Bull and Lockhart (1989), shared spirituality among Seventh-day Adventists provides a communal atmosphere of safety, security, and cultural affirmation. Ramírez-Johnson (1993) discovered that the spiritual views of Hispanic Adventists of Leominster, Massachusetts, were framed by Adventist doctrine. Both studies (Bull and Lockhart, 1989; Ramírez-Johnson, 1993) supported *AVANCE* findings that for Seventh-day Adventists, spirituality provides a personal sense of meaning and purpose in life. It is also the frame of reference by which Adventists make moral and ethical decisions. In light of the clear importance of spirituality in the experience of Hispanic Adventism, *AVANCE* chose to include faith maturity, denominational loyalty, and other religious measures in its primary focus.

Faith Maturity

One important concept within the spiritual life of the community is faith maturity (Dudley, 1992). In the *Valuegenesis* study (1992), faith maturity was measured and described in terms of how a person integrates twelve core dimensions of faith. Faith maturity is marked by a vibrant, life-transforming experience that comes from having a deep, personal relationship with God and a consistent commitment to serving others.

Two additional subconcepts were also investigated. The first was law orientation, which is the belief that one can earn salvation through good works. The sec-

Among the 76% of Adventist Hispanics who were younger than 41 years of age:

30.1% were 13–21 years old
45.1% were 22–41 years old

Marital status:

65.4% were married
4.8% were divorced
9.2% were remarried
11.6% were single
3.8% were separated

ond was grace orientation, which emphasizes not only the unconditional love of God but also that salvation is an unearned gift (Dudley, 1992).

These concepts were investigated in the *AVANCE* study in order to determine their possible influence on and interactions with other important factors within the Hispanic population.

Religious commitment is more than church atten-

ances through good works (i.e., law orientation).

In an effort to gain greater understanding of this apparent contradiction, *AVANCE* used another measure to tap into the concept of grace. Respondents were given four statements describing the relationship between faith and works and were asked to choose the statement they considered to be most appropriate. This latter measurement led to the conclusion that the

Religious commitment is more than church attendance or agreement with church doctrine.

dance or agreement with church doctrine. It involves many elements that, taken together, enhance Christian growth and maturity. *AVANCE* used the concept of faith maturity as an important indicator of religious commitment. Survey results revealed that for youth, the faith maturity level (in other words those who had a mature faith) was 51.3%; while 58.4% of the adults had mature faith. The overall faith maturity level for both youth and adults was 56.5%.

Devotional Life

Another important element of active spiritual commitment is the devotional life. Personal devotions are private expressions of one's commitment to Christ. Regular time spent in Bible study and prayer was an essential part of life for Hispanic Adventists. More than half (57.4%) of Hispanic members had devotions every day or several times a week. Another 17.6% engaged in devotions up to three times a month.

Gospel and Truth

A fundamental dimension of religious commitment is a person's view of the gospel and his/her understanding of the relationship between faith and works. *AVANCE* received contradictory responses regarding the relationship between faith and works. While there appeared to be an understanding of the unconditional grace of God and an appreciation for the saving grace of Jesus as the only path to salvation (i.e., grace orientation), many respondents subscribed at the same time to views that emphasized the importance of God's law as part of their religious experience and seemed reluctant to give up the notion that they may save them-

majority of Hispanic Adventists (67%) seem to hold a balanced understanding of the gospel, while 23.1% hold a more legalistic view.

Further examination of the responses of the 67% who purported to believe the balanced view of the gospel provided additional clarification: 92.3% felt that in order to be saved, they had to live by God's rules; 66.8% agreed that following Adventist standards will save them; 77.2% agreed that the way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life; and 73.8% agreed that the main emphasis of the gospel is on God's rules for right living.

In other words, the same people who claimed to believe that God's grace alone saves and that His grace alone gives the power to keep His law also overwhelmingly agreed with legalistic statements that placed the burden of salvation on their own shoulders. While these findings might have resulted from measurement peculiarities, *AVANCE* researchers believe they demonstrated a lack of clear and consistent thinking among Hispanic Adventists regarding grace. Hispanic Adventists seemed to need reassurance of salvation and the unconditional love of God, particularly in light of the fact that 77.4% of the youth reported they worried about not being ready for Christ's return; and 65.2% worried about not being faithful during the time of trouble.

Loyalty to the Church

Hispanic members had strong loyalty and commitment to the Adventist Church, according to 89.1% of the youth and 95.6% of the adults. Of the entire sample,



62% held Adventism as a life goal, indicating their commitment to church membership for life. A related question asked the youth whether they would continue to be active in the Adventist Church once they were financially independent. Seventy percent responded that there was a good-to-excellent chance they would remain Adventists.

With such enthusiastic commitment to the Adventist Church, strong adherence to the Adventist message and doctrines was a reasonable expectation for this sample. *AVANCE* researchers used the *Valuegenesis* orthodoxy scale to assess the respondents' commitment to Adventist doctrines, as reflected by fidelity to the traditional teachings of the Adventist Church. The responses indicated strong commitment to distinctive Adventist beliefs. Almost all (95%) respondents reported a high degree of orthodoxy, a majority (63.8%) viewed the authority of Ellen White as being equal in value but subordinate to the Scriptures, and a decisive majority (85%) considered the Sabbath to be very meaningful in their lives. Their responses supported the conclusion that religion was one of the most important things in their life (25.1%), if not the most important thing (66.7%).

Hispanic Adventists were committed to the mission and message of the church. Eighty-four percent (84.2%) had directly sought to encourage someone to join the Adventist Church, and 92.2% of the total sample reported that within the past year they had tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ.

These individual evangelism efforts contributed to the dramatic growth of the Hispanic membership in the North American Division. In 1980 the Hispanic membership was 28,400. A decade later the membership had grown to 64,502—a spectacular growth rate of 127%! As of December 31, 2001, there were 955,076 Adventists in the North American Division of the church. Of this number, 115,244 were Hispanics attending Hispanic identified churches (many attend other congregations). There were 30,550 newly baptized members added to the North American Adventist Church in 2001. Hispanic Adventists in the United States accounted for 32.8% of the membership growth—or 10,041 new members—for 2001, more than double their membership percentage of 12.06%. These statistics showed that Hispanic Adventists were fervently involved in their church, their personal Christian walk, and their relationship with their Savior, Jesus Christ.

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Johnny Ramírez-Johnson is a professor of theology, psychology, and culture, Faculty of Religion, Loma Linda University. Edwin I. Hernández directs the Center for the Study of Latino Religion, Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.

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