

Arizona Anti-immigration Law Exposes Adventist Paradoxes

| BY RUBÉN SANCHEZ

Recent figures on church membership growth in the U.S. show that the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is the second fastest growing denomination in North America, just a bit behind the Jehovah's Witnesses. Adventist membership in the U.S. climbed to 1,043,606 in 2009 (the latest year tabulated), a one-year increase of 2.1 percent, according to official Adventist sources.

Growth, however, was not equal across the spectrum of ethnicities. Ron Clouzet, Director of the North American Division Evangelism Institute at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, admitted to a reporter that, actually, the church does not feel it is growing very much. Hispanic Adventists are "the one group that is growing very well," Clouzet said, and "if we didn't have that group, we would look even more dismal."

If Adventists have something to celebrate, it is this clearly identified group. Yet when Arizona passed the anti-immigration law SB1070, which targeted unlawful de-facto Latin Americans, the SDA church did not stand up for their members without papers. Even though Adventist churches in Arizona can have as high as 85 percent undocumented members, the North American Division (NAD) published a statement that affirmed it prayed only for its lawful flock. (See sidebar on page 34.)

Behind the scenes, that statement sparked a furor within the NAD and among Hispanic Adventist leaders. Some of them had expected an open and bold condemnation of a law that makes illegal immigration a state crime. Their hopes were based on the fact that the NAD Hispanic Committee had previously drafted a declaration in much stronger terms.

"It [the statement] accurately reflected the concern of the church for the situation," said Fred Kinsey in a recent e-mail conversation. At the time the statement

was drafted, he was in charge of the North American Division Communications Department.

According to sources familiar with the matter, however, an Adventist Hispanic leader felt the statement "was a slap in the face" to the Hispanic Adventist community at large, a feeling also expressed by some other leaders. The president of the Arizona Conference, Tony Anobile, informed the Hispanic leadership that tithe had suddenly dropped \$144,000 in April and that pastors consistently reported that their members were leaving the states. Anobile acknowledged that "all this as a very real problem for us" and asked for God's help. However, the majority of Hispanic leadership remained silent and some even downplayed the whole matter.

The official Adventist position appeared to be closer to the opinion of the majority of U.S. citizens about the Arizona law. When Arizona's Governor Jan Brewer signed the bill last year, polls conducted by different organizations showed that an average of 60 percent of U.S. citizens were in favor of legislation that allowed police to question and detain anyone they suspected of being illegal immigrants, even if the person interrogated was not suspected of committing another crime.

This law, the strongest in U.S. history against immigrants, has never been upheld to its full extent. A U.S. District Court judge provisionally suspended its most controversial parts after reviewing the White House's arguments, which claimed that immigration policy is exclusively a U.S. government matter. If that had not been the case, not only would police have been allowed to check anyone's documentation, but also it would have been a crime in Arizona to be undocumented and to work without papers.

This law drew strong resistance from different religious groups in Arizona. The Catholic Church called

the law “draconian,” the United Methodist Church said it was “unwise, short-sighted and mean-spirited,” and the National Council of Churches declared that it was “contrary to biblical teaching.” Notwithstanding, as a study by the Pew Research Center showed in 2006, even though many religious leaders claim to be pro-immigration, 60 percent of white evangelicals, 51 percent of mainline Protestants and 48 percent of white, non-Hispanic Catholics consider immigrants a threat to U.S. customs and values, and slightly higher percentages appeared for white persons who believe immigration to be a threat to the U.S. economy. In keeping with the majority opinion, the SDA Church expressed its concern for those legal Adventist residents who might be questioned by the police, and said nothing regarding any Adventist or other undocumented immigrants.

Why didn’t the SDA official statement condemn the Arizona anti-immigration law SB1070? Were not there demographic and economic reasons to stand up for its undocumented Hispanic members? Why is it that our Adventist Christian denomination did not challenge the SB1070 while other Christians firmly rejected it?

“When it comes to standing up for [undocumented immigrants] in a political situation, they usually fall silent, compared to other Christian churches,” said Lourdes Morales, chair of the World Languages Department of La Sierra University in California. During the Civil Rights movement, for instance, *The Adventist Review*, the official journal of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, editorialized against it.

Samuel London, writing in *Seventh-day Adventists and the Civil Rights Movement*, points to an editorial written by Raymond Cottrell, “a Seventh-day Adventist minister and associate editor, in *The Review and Herald*, (the official periodical of the church), who condemned clerical participation in the 1963 march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom....His statement exemplifies Adventist’s opposition to political involvement. Commenting on this political demonstration, Cottrell declared; ‘When the church appeals to the strong arm of the state to enforce its opinions by law, it goes far beyond the example and the commission of its Founder. It abdicates its heaven appointed task and takes up a work God never gave it to do.’”¹

Adventist historian George Knight notes the SDA

Church did not take a firm stand in South Africa against segregation either.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially born in 1863. One hundred fifty years later, it has 16.3 million members and is present in over 200 countries and territories. Even though the founders expected to see Jesus’ return long before now, today Adventists still work and pray with the hope of the second coming. They are also very active in defending the right to refuse work on Saturday and work hard for religious liberty. Socially speak-



ing, the church tends toward conservatism. Women can be ordained as elders but not as pastors, and beliefs allow elective abortion only when the life of a woman or fetus is endangered.

In contrast, the Adventist pioneers were more akin to social activists. In a book published last year by Ronald E. Osborn titled *Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence and Theodicy*, Osborn “explores the politically subversive and nonviolent anarchist dimensions of Christian discipleship in response to dilemmas of power, suffering, and war.” Osborn writes that early Adventists were “political dissenters,” that their “apoliticism” was similar to the kind of “anarchy” for which Noam Chomsky is famous today.² They even challenged U.S. imperialism.

London sees early Adventists as socially progressive, but “during the 1950s and 1960s, some white Adventist leaders used certain theological and philosophical concepts within Adventism to discourage political activism among church members.”

To get an idea of the contrast between the social attitudes of current Adventists and their predecessors, former Andrews University theology professor Herold Weiss uses the example of bearing arms. He explains that “in terms of [SDAs’] relation to the military, the strong attitude against the bearing of arms has evaporated. When the draft existed, Adventists who were drafted sought to be classified as conscientious objectors. Today they volunteer to go in to the army and are happy to bear arms.”

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—George Knight

Knight agrees that the Adventist movement stemmed from a social action movement, but that is not the whole picture. Ellen G. White, whose visions and writings still inspire Adventists around the world today, placed great emphasis on preaching the gospel. The present U.S. conflict between conservative churches defending conservative social policies and liberal churches promoting social justice was resolved very effectively by Ellen White. According to London, “Recent scholarship indicates that holistic theology motivated the work” of White. For her, preaching the gospel without empowering the people was not God’s will.

“Sure she had a holistic view, but she also had priorities,” says Knight, “and those priorities were not just pragmatism, or what works the best. Those priorities dealt with a deep theological issue: the nature and meaning of the church as the church relates to social or political issues.” Nevertheless, Knight admits that Adventist founders managed to put mission and social reform together in a way that the contemporary church has not.

“To what extent does the church get involved in the political discussions of a nation?” asks current NAD president and Canadian citizen Dan Jackson in a conversation about the context of the SDA’s statement on the Arizona immigration law. “I don’t think the church has ever clearly answered that question.” For Jackson, the church should avoid all politics on principle. “I don’t think Jesus ever got involved in politics. I don’t

think the apostle Paul ever got involved in politics,” he says.

In London’s book various beliefs are presented which uphold this view. The primary belief seems to be sectarian ecclesiology, “the belief that Christians should not conform to the secular world.” According to London’s interpretation, such ecclesiology prompts Adventists to evangelize and discourages them from getting involved in sociopolitical reform. Therefore, it is

Statement on Hispanic Concerns

From the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Contact: Fred Kinsey,
Assistant to the President for Communication
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The leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America is aware that a recently enacted law in the State of Arizona is causing significant concern within its Hispanic membership. The Hispanic Advisory Committee, representing Hispanic leadership from across the United States, recently expressed its concern for the potential unintended impact on Hispanic members who are lawfully within the borders of the United States.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes the principle of treating every individual with dignity and fairness. We also recognize that the immigration issue is complex and that solutions are not easy to discern. It is our prayer that enforcement of the new law in Arizona will not cause hardship on those legally in the United States of Hispanic origin.

Our prayer is that God will guide those who make and enforce the laws of the United States to do so with compassion, justice and respect for human dignity. We also ask for God’s peace to prevail on all those affected by this difficult situation.

easy to “imply that issues of discrimination and social injustice are not questions of morality but are purely political, and therefore, outside the jurisdiction of the church.”

“If you say nothing about Arizona, you are supporting the status quo, even though I don’t think that the church has consciously thought about that,” Knight says. For him, in the case of Arizona, “the church is maintaining a consistent position that is in keeping with the mission.”

While the black churches have separate conferences and unions within the SDA Church, the Adventist Latinos have no history of an organized church within the North American Division of the SDA Church. According to Knight, it is just in the last fifteen years that they have begun to organize themselves, “to create a separate, you might say, identity as a special interest group” within the church. Statements such as the one the Hispanic Committee drafted for the NAD are recent phenomena, according to Knight.

Ronald Lawson, emeritus professor of sociology at Queens College in New York, has studied the influence of race and culture in worldwide Adventism. He says, “White Adventists in America have risen socially as a result of the Adventist education system. They prospered and they tend to have attitudes in keeping with the religious right, especially in social issues.” For Lawson, watering down the Hispanic draft was just an answer to their personal feelings about it. “They were acting like knee-jerk Republicans.”³

White Adventists aren’t the only group with conservative attitudes. When Morales was asked about the Adventist Hispanic leaders who reacted against the Adventist statement, she said they are “notable exceptions because leaders and church members within the Hispanic community in the United States tend to be quite conservative.”

U.S. Hispanics are so conservative that two-thirds of them support any kind of punishment to unauthorized immigrants, according to a survey by the Pew Hispanic Center published last October. Bearing in mind that according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 74 percent of the undocumented immigrants are Latin American, it is surprising that less than a third of Hispanics in the U.S. are against punishment of unauthorized immigrants.

These attitudes against new immigrants show “perceptions that recent immigrants may be in competition

with Latinos who have been here in this country lawfully,” Edwin Hernández, researcher at the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame, explained.

“The [Adventist] church became upset about it, in part, when it affected their numbers. In my view, it was not necessarily or entirely brotherly concern about the condition of these people. It was, you know, ‘Look! We are losing these people, and they are going back to Mexico, What shall we do?’” Morales said.



When this journalist contacted NAD’s president recently, he acknowledged that he was barely acquainted with the disagreements regarding the SDA’s statement on the SB1070. Jackson knows there is a sentiment of having been insulted among Hispanic leaders. “I have met with the Hispanic Committee, but that issue was never raised,” he stated. Nor was a request from the Hispanic leadership demanding a new statement presented to the new president of NAD.

When Jackson started his term, he said he had an agenda in mind with the goals he wanted to pursue. None of them had to do with immigration. This is why the NAD has not worked on building a position on immigration so far, even though the immigration debate has been going on for years in the U.S. “I have not heard one word from the Hispanic leadership that says, ‘Let’s build a position on this,’ [so] I was not aware that we needed to at this point,” Jackson said. “Do we need to for the future? Probably...we need to have a discussion about that now.”

This discussion is now more relevant than ever. Not only Christian mainstream denominations and conservative churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod are seeing their pews emptier every year, but also the small growth reported by the SDA Church in North America is largely attributable only to the influx of immigrants from countries where the church’s missions have enjoyed great success.

This discussion, however, seems to have been largely ignored during the last decade. In 1998 sociologist Lawson explains in an article that the same demographic patterns contributing to a decline in the number of Caucasian and African-American members were present both in the SDA and mainline churches. “Given the evidence of declining fertility and the exit of youth among American-born Adventists,” Lawson writes, “it seems evident that the continued growth of American Adventists will be dependent on a continued influx of immigrants.”

This influx of immigrants has been greater than many experts’ predictions. According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, the Hispanic population grew 43 percent from 2000 to 2010, accounting for more than half of the overall U.S. population gain. States like Arizona saw a sharp increase in the numbers of the Latino population. Now, more than 50 million people—or one in six Americans—are Latino. This trend will continue. Current predictions point to 2042, eight years sooner than previous estimates, as the year in which white people of European descent will no longer be the majority in the U.S.

If these predictions are to become a reality, the SDA Church will continue to grow in the coming 30 years at least. But in Arizona, SDA growth based on immigration might be threatened due to the state’s ongoing legislation against immigration. According to a report by the Pew Hispanic Center, in addition to the exodus of Latinos from Arizona, the annual inflow of unauthorized immigrants to the United States was nearly two-thirds

smaller in 2009 compared with 2000.

Arizona has contributed to this decrease with a series of anti-immigration laws started in 2004 that, step by step, has been reducing undocumented persons’ rights. First, undocumented immigrants were denied the right to vote and access to public benefits; later, their access to adult education was banned; and in 2008, the Legal Arizona Workers Act imposed penalties to employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers. The last Arizona anti-immigration law passed one year ago; the SB1070 acted as a coda to this trend.

“Approximately 40 percent of the Adventist Hispanics have left. Some have remained, but under a lot of pressure,” reported Abimael Escalante, pastor of a Hispanic SDA church in Phoenix, AZ., last November.

Escalante also explained that even before this massive exodus, Adventist Hispanic members had been moving out of Arizona because of harassment by the police. “About two or three years ago, police started to carry out raids with the excuse of looking for criminals. If you had no papers, you automatically became a criminal,” Escalante explained.

A study made last year by Mexican BBVA Bancomer Research suggests that around 100,000 Hispanics could have fled Arizona since the debate over the new immigration law started. Citing Mexican government figures, the study says that 23,380 Mexicans returned to their country of origin between June and September 2010. These are important figures for a state like Arizona in which 30 percent of the total population is Hispanic and in 2008 had 500,000 undocumented immigrants, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

This data explains why the 2010 U. S. Census found more Hispanics than expected in 28 states, while in Arizona it counted almost 1.9 million Hispanics, 8.7% or 180,000 fewer than estimated. But the same census showed that Latino immigration to the U.S. is not decreasing. In 2010, the census counted 600,000 more Hispanics in the U.S. than estimated.

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—Pastor Abimael Escalante

The impact of the population loss on the Arizona economy has not yet been quantified, but the negative image of the state that such a harsh immigration law puts forward has hurt the convention and conference business, the backbone of Arizona's tourism industry. A report published last year in November by the Center for American Progress says that the state has lost \$141 million so far, and it will lose \$253 million in economic output and \$87 million in lost wages in the next two or three years.

"Tithes and offerings have fallen between 40 and 60 percent in my church," said Escalante. Last year, he wanted to split the church into two groups, but because of the law, 250 undocumented members left, and he had to cancel his plans. In that church, 85 percent of the members had no papers. Escalante thinks that approximately 60 percent of the Adventist Hispanic members in Arizona are undocumented.

These demographic and economic losses have not gone unnoticed by Arizona senators who last March voted against another anti-immigration law that threatened healthcare and education. Moreover, in an effort to restore its image, Arizona invested \$250,000 in the tourism industry. Behind all this is the Arizona Chamber of Commerce, which estimates a maximum of \$150 million losses in tourism.

For the Adventist church leaders, however, future actions in this regard are not going to be easy to take. "The church will never be politically active, but the church ought to be proactively involved in the major issues that confront the nation...I see a difference there," said Jackson regarding future decisions on immigration.

In the event that another state would pass such a law, Jackson said "the NAD would certainly support our members. Anything that we would do, would be with legal counsel. Wherever our members are in need, if they are mistreated, if injustice is perpetrated against them, the church will stand for them."

Jackson advocates for a case-by-case approach and seems open to different means to protect his flock. "Should the church jump into every political issue? I am not sure. Should the church work behind the scenes and even publicly in a proactive way to assist its constituents? Absolutely," affirmed Jackson.

The immigration debate seems to be far from over

in the U.S. What Jackson may want to end is future disappointments for Adventist Hispanic leaders. "Being inclusive of all peoples is one of the preeminent goals of our NAD administration and staff. We are determined to draw close to our Hispanic brothers and sisters in order to provide them with our moral support and encouragement in all situations—including immigration issues. We desire to empower their zeal and enthusiasm for Christ and the gospel, within our territory." ■



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