

Who is the Average American Adventist?

Comparing Two Demographic Profiles of Seventh-day Adventists

| BY RONALD E. OSBORN

In March 2011, an article by religion writer G. Jeffrey MacDonald appeared in *USA Today*, *Christian Century*, *the Kansas City Star*, and other news outlets, calling attention to the Seventh-day Adventist church's high growth rates relative to other denominations in the United States. With an annual increase in new members of 2.5 percent, largely among Latinos, MacDonald reported, Adventists are now the fastest growing denomination in North America. MacDonald did not say in his story where his figures came from, but in reply to a letter I sent him he indicated they were based upon the church's self-reporting for the year 2009 (the most recent year for which data was available), which he then simply compared with the self-reported figures of other denominations in the National Council of Churches *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. This is a highly problematic basis of comparison since different groups might follow very different counting methodologies and also have greater or lesser incentives for monitoring and reporting growth. In addition, David Trim of the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics reports a more accurate growth figure for Adventists is 2.1%. MacDonald's article does, however, focus attention on the rapidly changing demographics of Adventism in the United States, and on the need for more accurate statistical reporting about the church.

Perhaps the most important recent source of statistical information on Adventists in the United States is a 2008 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (a subsidiary of the Pew Charitable Trust).¹ If accurate, the Pew data reveals some surprising details about Adventists that have not been widely publicized by church leaders and that challenge the findings of studies conducted by the North American Division (NAD). The Pew survey indicates, among other things, that Seventh-day Adventists in the United States are significantly: less educated; less

economically well off; more economically unequal; and less likely to be married when compared with most other Christians as well as with the U.S. population as a whole. What should Adventists make of these unsettling findings? And just how representative is the Pew sample as far as Adventists in the United States are concerned? In this article I will analyze what the Pew study tells us about Adventist demography. I will discuss the survey's methodological limitations and explore possible reasons for the great disparity between its findings and those of a 2007–2008 Center for Creative Ministry survey sponsored by the NAD.

The New Demography of American Adventism?

In a landmark 2008 study of religious life in America conducted by the Pew Forum, a startling picture of Seventh-day Adventists emerges that greatly complicates longstanding narratives of the denomination as a vehicle of upward social mobility and faith community uniquely committed to higher education. The survey was based upon phone interviews of a nationally representative sample of the total adult population. Out of 35,556 persons interviewed, 135 self-identified as Seventh-day Adventists. The margin of error for Adventists, given this small sample size (or "small N") out of an estimated Adventist population of more than one million, Pew calculated, is approximately 10.5 percentage points with 95% confidence.² In layman's terms, what this means is that if the Pew study were repeated any number of times following the same methodology, 95 out of 100 times we would see the same results plus or minus 10.5% for any given question about Adventists (compared, for example, with a margin of error of 1.5% for Catholics, 10.5% for Muslims, 4.5% for Jews, and 0.6% for questions related to the total population). The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey reports the following demographic facts about adult Adventists (those aged 18 and above):

Education: Adventists are significantly less educated than the general population and than most other Christians, Pew found. Despite the church's great emphasis on education (which includes operating 14 fully accredited colleges and universities in the United States), more than three quarters (80%) of adult Adventists have not graduated from college compared with 73% of all Americans. Approximately one quarter (24%) of Adventists have not graduated from high school compared with 14% for the nation as a whole. Only 5% of Adventists have earned postgraduate degrees. By contrast, 11% of all Americans have postgraduate degrees, including 9% of all Protestants and 10% of all Catholics. Out of 27 Protestant denominations included in the Pew survey, only two, both in the Pentecostal tradition, have a higher percentage of members without high school degrees and only four have a lower percentage of postgraduates. The most highly educated Protestant groups are mainline Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Anglicans (57% of Episcopalians have earned college degrees). The most highly educated religious group of any kind in America, the Pew Forum reported, is Reformed Judaism, with 66% of its members having graduated from college (including 35% having earned postgraduate degrees).

Income: Adventists, Pew found, are significantly poorer than the general population and than most other Christians. Whereas 31% of the country as a whole has

Educational Level by Religious Tradition

	Less than High School %	High School Grad %	Some College %	College Graduate %	Post-Graduate %	N %
Total Population	14	36	23	16	11	35,298
Total Protestants	14	38	24	15	9	18,825
Members of Evangelical Prot. Churches	16	40	24	13	7	9,411
Members of Mainline Protestant Churches	9	34	24	20	14	7,429
Members of Hist. Black Prot. Churches	19	40	25	11	5	1,985
Catholic	17	36	21	16	10	7,990
Mormon	9	30	32	18	10	578
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	8	30	33	18	10	555
Jehovah's Witness	19	51	22	6	3	211
Orthodox	6	26	22	28	18	362
Greek Orthodox	2	33	21	25	18	168
Other Christian	12	22	27	20	20	129
Jewish	3	19	19	24	35	676
Reform	1	17	17	31	35	315
Conservative	4	18	21	23	35	218
Muslim*	21	32	23	14	10	1,031
Buddhist	3	23	26	22	26	408
Hindu	4	12	10	26	48	253
Other Faiths	7	25	28	18	21	448
Unitarian and Other Liberal Faiths	3	16	30	22	29	296
New Age	13	38	25	13	11	118
Unaffiliated	13	34	24	16	13	5,009
Atheist	8	28	23	21	21	509
Agnostic	5	22	29	23	20	825
Secular Unaffiliated	10	35	24	17	13	1,995
Religious Unaffiliated	21	40	22	11	6	1,680

Adventist Educational Level

	Less than High School %	High School Grad %	Some College %	College Graduate %	Post-Graduate %	N %
Seventh-day Adventist (Evangelical Tradition)	26	30	26	16	5	134

* From "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, 2007
 Due to rounding, rows may not add to 100.
 Question: What is the last grade or class that you completed in school?

an annual income level below \$30,000, 46% of Adventists in America do—a higher percentage than any non-Christian faith and equal to or higher than any Christian denomination with the exception of the historic Black wing of the Independent Baptist Church. While 31% of Americans have an annual income above \$75,000, only 18% of Adventists do. Nearly three quarters of Adventists (72%) earn less than \$50,000 annually, compared with 53% of the country as a whole. In terms of broad religious traditions, only members of the historically Black Protestant churches and Jehovah Witnesses have comparably low incomes (members of the Black churches earning slightly less than Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses slightly more according to Pew).

Income Level by Religious Tradition

	Less than \$30,000 %	\$30,000– \$49,000 %	\$50,000– \$74,000 %	\$75,000– \$99,999 %	\$100,000+ %	N %
Total Population	31	22	17	13	18	29,435
Total Protestants	32	23	17	12	15	15,741
Members of Evangelical Prot. Churches	34	24	18	11	13	7,943
Members of Mainline Protestant Churches	25	21	18	15	21	6,142
Members of Hist. Black Prot. Churches	47	26	12	7	8	1,656
Catholic	31	20	16	14	9	6,565
Mormon	26	21	22	16	16	512
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	26	21	22	16	15	493
Jehovah's Witness	42	23	17	9	9	178
Orthodox	20	24	16	13	28	290
Greek Orthodox	17	22	18	13	30	138
Other Christian	29	21	13	13	23	111
Jewish	14	11	17	12	46	520
Reform	11	8	14	12	55	251
Conservative	12	14	17	14	43	162
Muslim*	35	24	15	10	16	868
Buddhist	25	19	17	17	22	357
Hindu	9	10	15	22	43	220
Other Faiths	28	25	16	13	18	378
Unitarian and Other Liberal Faiths	19	25	16	13	26	243
New Age	39	23	17	12	9	106
Unaffiliated	29	23	16	13	19	4,279
Atheist	21	20	16	15	28	439
Agnostic	18	22	19	16	25	730
Secular Unaffiliated	25	24	17	13	21	1,686
Religious Unaffiliated	40	24	15	10	12	1,424

Adventist Income Level

	Less than \$30,000 %	\$30,000– \$49,000 %	\$50,000– \$74,000 %	\$75,000– \$99,999 %	\$100,000+ %	N %
Seventh-day Adventist (Evangelical Tradition)	46	26	10	7	11	115

* From "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, 2007

Due to rounding, rows may not add to 100.

Question: Last year, that is in 2006, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes? Just stop me when I get to the right category. (READ IN ORDER) Less than \$10,000, 10 to under \$20,000, 20 to under \$30,000, 30 to under \$40,000, 40 to under \$50,000, 50 to under \$75,000, 75 to under \$100,000, 100 to under \$150,000, \$150,000 or more.

Income Inequality: Not only are Adventists less well off economically than the country as a whole, the Pew study indicates, they are also more unequal. Although the Pew survey did not discuss unequal distribution of wealth, it is possible to use its dataset to generate conservative Gini coefficients (a widely used statistical measure of income inequality) for both religious and nonreligious groups. The gap between the rich and the poor within Adventism is greater than for any other group in the survey with the exception of the historically Black Protestant churches (47% of whom earn less than \$30,000 annually) and Reformed Jews (55% of whom earn more than \$100,000 annually). The most egalitarian religious groups in America in terms of

income distribution include Mormons, Buddhists, agnostics, and mainline Protestants, which are as a whole both more prosperous and more economically equal than Adventists, as are also Catholics by a significant margin.

Marriage: Adventists according to Pew are less likely to be married than most other people in the United States and than most other Christians. While 54% of all Americans, including 58% of Catholics and 55% of all other Protestants, list their current status as married, fewer than half of those who self identify as Adventists (48%) do. Of unmarried Adventists, the Pew data suggests, 10% are currently living with a partner—the highest percentage recorded of any Christian group, Catholic or

Protestant (although this figure cannot be taken at face value for reasons I will discuss in part two of this article below). The only other groups in the Pew Survey who reported double-digit figures for cohabiting out of wedlock were Unitarians, atheists, agnostics, and the secularly and religiously unaffiliated. The number of Adventists whose current status is divorced or separated (11%) is meanwhile on par with the national average (12%). One quarter (25%) of Adventists have never been married, compared with 19% of the total population and 17% of other Protestants. The Protestant group with the highest percentage of married members is nondenominational evangelicals (68%), while those exhibiting the greatest commitment to marriage in the United

States today are Hindus: 79% are married and only 5% are divorced, the highest and lowest figures respectively of all groups in the survey. Despite being less likely to be married than others, the Pew survey indicates, Adventists are more likely to have children. While 35% of Americans have at least one child under the age of 18 living in their care, 38% of Adventists do.

Gender: Some of these figures might be related to the fact that Adventists appear to have one of the most imbalanced gender ratios of any religious group in the United States, with 60% of the church being female and 40% male (exactly the same ratio as Jehovah Witnesses and the historically Black Protestant churches). Only a small cluster of mostly fundamentalist churches have a gender imbalance greater than 10%, and Adventists are one of only seven Protestant denominations with a gender disparity of 20% or higher in the Pew study (the difference is 4% for the nation as a whole, with 52% of the country being female). By far the most gender-imbalanced group, however, is atheists, who are 70% male.

Ethnicity: Adventists are by far the most ethnically diverse religious community of any kind in the United States today with the exception of Muslims. They are the only Christian group in which no single ethnicity comprises 50% or more of their membership. More than a quarter of all Adventists in the U.S. today, the Pew

Race by Religious Tradition

	Non-Hispanic				Latino %	N
	White %	Black %	Asian %	Other/Mixed %		
Total Population	71	11	3	3	12	35,101
Total Protestants	74	16	1	3	5	18,753
Members of Evangelical Prot. Churches	81	6	2	4	7	9,380
Members of Mainline Protestant Churches	91	2	1	3	3	7,383
Members of Hist. Black Prot. Churches	2	92	0	1	4	1,990
Catholic	65	2	2	2	29	7,987
Mormon	86	3	1	3	7	571
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	87	2	1	3	7	547
Jehovah's Witness	48	22	0	5	24	212
Orthodox	87	6	2	3	1	358
Greek Orthodox	95	3	0	1	2	167
Other Christian	77	11	0	8	4	126
Jewish	95	1	0	2	3	671
Reform	95	0	1	1	3	309
Conservative	96	1	0	1	2	218
Muslim*	37	24	20	15	4	1,030
Buddhist	53	4	32	5	6	405
Hindu	5	1	88	4	2	255
Other Faiths	80	2	1	13	5	436
Unitarian and Other Liberal Faiths	88	2	2	5	4	291
New Age	84	1	0	10	5	113
Unaffiliated	73	8	4	4	11	4,955
Atheist	86	3	4	2	5	499
Agnostic	84	2	4	4	6	817
Secular Unaffiliated	79	5	4	4	8	1,971
Religious Unaffiliated	60	16	2	5	17	1,668

Adventist Racial Demographics

	Non-Hispanic				Latino %	N
	White %	Black %	Asian %	Other/Mixed %		
Seventh-day Adventist (Evangelical Tradition)	43	21	5	4	27	134

* From "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, 2007

Due to rounding, rows may not add to 100.

Question: Are you, yourself, of Hispanic origin or descent, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some other Spanish background?

[IF HISPANIC ASK:] Are you white Hispanic, black Hispanic, or some other race? [IF NON-HISPANIC ASK:] What is your race? Are you white, black, Asian, or some other?

Forum reports, are Latino (27%) and more than one fifth are Black (21%). A smaller number (5%) are Asian or are of mixed race (4%). Whites comprise 43% of the denomination (compared with 71% of the total population, 74% of other Protestants, and 65% of Catholics). Jehovah Witnesses have the most similar racial composition to Adventists but with a slightly higher percentage of Whites (48%), lower percentage of Latinos (24%), and no recorded Asians in the Pew sample. Muslims, the most ethnically diverse religious community in the U.S., are the only group with double-digit percentages for at least four racial categories: 37% White, 24% Black, 20% Asian, and 15% of mixed race.

Region: When compared with the total population distribution of the United States, Adventists according to Pew are slightly overrepresented in the South (where 38% of Adventists live compared with 36% of all Americans) and West (26% compared with 22%). They are most underrepresented relative to population size in the Midwest (where 17% of Adventists live compared with 23% of all Americans and 25% of all Protestants). Nearly 20% of Adventists live in the Northeast where the denomination historically began. Among all Christian groups (not including Mormons), only two denominations have a higher percentage of their members concentrated in the West: the Church of the Nazarene (28%) and nondenominational evangelicals (38%).

Age: Adventists are slightly younger than the general adult population in America and younger still than Catholics as well as most other Protestants. Twenty percent (20%) of adult Adventists are between 18 and 29 years old, Pew reports. Only three other denominations (two in the historically Black tradition) have a higher percentage of adult adherents under the age of 30. The greatest percentage of Adventists, though, are between the ages of 30 and 49 (44%), making Adventism in the United States an essentially middle-aged religion. With 64% of its members under the age of 50 (compared with 59% for the general population, 55% for all Protestants, and 58% for Catholics), Adventists are among the ten youngest religious groups in the country alongside the historically Black Protestant churches (60%), Buddhists (63%), and Mormons (66%). They are not as young, though, as nondenominational charismatic and Evangelical Christians, more than 70% of whom are under 50, Hindus (76%), and Muslims (77%). Atheists are overwhelmingly young; 37% are under 30 and 73% under 50. The youngest group in the United States—with approximately the same number of self-identifying adherents as Adventists—is the New Age movement, with 43% being under the age of 30 and 86% under the age of 50.

Representation: The Pew data helps to shed light on another important fact about the church: Adventist demographics are very poorly reflected in church governance structures. While 60% of Adventists in the United States are female according to the Pew survey, only 20% (three out of 15) of its officials at the North America Division are female. And while 20% of adult Adventists in the United States are under the age of 30, the NAD sent a single person under

the age of 30 to the 2010 General Conference Session in Atlanta among its 237 delegates. Despite 64% of adult Adventists in the U.S. and an even higher percentage overseas being under the age of 50, the average age of newly elected GC officials in Atlanta in 2010 was 60, as estimated by journalist Keith Lockhart (for Spectrum Online). At the time of his election, by comparison, President Obama was 47 and Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain 43. When the Adventist church was formally organized in 1863, James White was 42 years old and Ellen White was 36.

Retention: Among Protestants, Adventists according to Pew have one of the highest retention rates in the country alongside Baptists and Lutherans. Fifty nine percent (59%) of those raised in the Adventist tradition remain Adventist compared with 52% of other Protestant denominations (and only 37% of Jehovah Witnesses, the group with the lowest retention rate). This single fact from the Pew survey inspired a long article in 2008 in the *Adventist Review* by Mark Kellner (“Adventists Score High in Membership Retention”). In the story, Kellner quotes NAD Vice President for Ministries, Debra Brill, praising Adventist education for keeping members in the church. No mention is made in the piece, however, of the Pew data on Adventist education rates. Kellner also devotes a paragraph to the fact that Catholics, according to the Pew study, have experienced the greatest net loss of members: 31% of Americans say they were raised Catholic while only 24% of the population now identifies as Catholic. What Kellner omits from his article is the fact that Catholic retention rates according to Pew are nevertheless significantly higher than those of Adventists, and that the Catholic Church has held a stable percentage of the total population for at least the past 40 years (in 1972, studies showed that 25% of Americans were Catholics, essentially the same as today). According to the Pew report, Catholics actually have among the highest retention rates of any religious group in the nation with 68% of those being raised Catholic remaining Catholic. Other traditions with higher retention rates than Adventists include Mormons (70%), Eastern Orthodox (73%), Jews (76%), and Hindus (84%).

The Catholic Church’s losses, the Pew researchers note, have been largely offset through immigration—a conclusion that applies even more strongly to Adventists, who have managed to maintain high growth rates despite higher losses than Catholics among those raised in the church. As a percentage of the total population, Adven-

tists, as well as Catholics, have in fact seen no significant change in membership over the past several decades. In 1990, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) found that Adventists comprised 0.4% of the total population in the United States. In 2001, ARIS found that this percentage had declined to 0.3%. The 2008 Pew study found, once more, that approximately one million or less than one half of one percent (0.4%) of Americans self-identify as Adventists.

Margins of Error: How reliable are the Pew Survey's results compared with the NAD's study for the same year?

It is important to avoid picking and choosing which parts of any study to accept or reject on the basis of its margins of error. The *Adventist Review* reported on Pew's relatively positive findings about Adventist retention rates (when compared with other Protestant denominations). But these figures are no more or less accurate than Pew's figures on Adventist education levels or income inequality, raising the question of why the *Review* did not report on the study in its entirety. There is a sense, however, in which some Pew results are more reliable for Adventists than others.

The small sample size of Adventists in the Pew survey yields a 10.5% margin of error. This means that for some of its findings it is impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions. The number of Adventists living out of wedlock in the survey, for example, was 10%; but if we were to repeat the study using the same methodology 100 times, 95% of the time the number would range anywhere between 0% and 20%. This is clearly too high a margin of error for us to make any strong claims about Adventists relative to other groups for this particular question other than that more research needs to be done to see if the 10% figure holds. The same problem arises for many of Pew's other figures on Adventists where the differences between religious groups are less than 10%. But other Pew figures for Adventists cannot be lightly dismissed.

The safest approach to any statistical study is to identify its 95% confidence interval, which gives a clear sense of minimum and maximum possibilities. For example, the Pew survey finds with 95% confidence that between 17% and 38% of Adventists in the United States are Latinos; between 38% and 59% of Adventists are married; and between 10% and 30% of Adventists have earned a college degree. Figures lower and higher than these cannot be

accepted unless we are able to offer a critique of the Pew survey's methodology that goes beyond its sample size and identifies other sources of bias or error. (All surveys can include responder bias, problems with question wording, and inaccurate reporting on the part of interviewers.) Following this conservative approach, it is clear that the Pew survey's results cannot be reconciled with the results of a 2007–2008 survey sponsored by NAD Secretariat and conducted by the Center for Creative Ministry (published under the title "Seventh-day Adventists in North America: A Demographic Profile," and available through the CCM website at a cost of \$14.95).

The NAD survey, authored by Monte Sahlin (who provided generous information and critical feedback as I was writing this article), was based upon phone interviews of 931 Adventists across North America with a reported margin of error plus or minus four percentage (4%) points. Both the Pew and the NAD studies reported similar frequencies of church attendance, similar age demographics, and virtually identical income levels for Adventists (within three percentage points of agreement, showing that 69 vs. 72% of Adventists earn less than \$50,000 annually and 15 vs. 18% earn more than \$75,000). However, even allowing for the most generous margins of error in the two surveys, their reports differ sharply when it comes to their figures on ethnicity and education.

According to the 2008 NAD study, the percentage of Latino/Hispanic Adventists is 12%—that is, less than half the percentage of Blacks in the church (27%) and lower than the percentage of Latinos in the population as a whole (in 2006, the U.S. Census Bureau found that 15% of Americans were Latinos). This extremely low percentage of Latino Adventists seems to be plainly contradicted by the NAD's figures on Adventist immigrants in the same report. NAD found that the "percentage of immigrants in the Adventist Church is more than double the rate for the general population in the United States and significantly greater than the percentage in Canada." The question therefore arises: If Adventism in the United States is as heavily comprised of immigrants as NAD reports, but they are *not* Latinos, where exactly are they coming from? The NAD 95% confidence interval says that the actual number of Latinos could be between eight and (at most) 16%. The Pew survey, however, puts the figure of Adventist Latinos anywhere between 17% (at the least) and 37%. The high end of NAD's margin of error and the low end of Pew's do not overlap. (Similarly,

the percentage of married Adventists in the NAD survey is between 59% and 67%, while the Pew figures are significantly lower, between 38% and 59%.)

More glaring problems arise when we compare Pew's and NAD's figures on Adventist educational attainment. According to the NAD study, the percentage of "members with a college degree is more than double that of the general population." Fully 46% of Adventists, it reports, have earned a bachelors or associates degree, while another 15% have earned graduate degrees. These are astonishingly high figures. If 61% of Adventists in the United States possessed a college degree or higher, Adventists would be the most highly educated Christian group in the nation. Their college graduation rate would be triple the rates of most other evangelicals and on a par with Episcopalians (57% of whom have at least a college degree according to the Pew survey). Adventists would in fact be the third highest educated group of any kind in the country, only slightly less educated than Reformed Jews (66% of whom have a college degree or higher with a margin of error plus or minus 4.5 percent).

These figures are extremely hard to believe in the light of the Pew data on the income levels of other groups. More than one-third (35%) of Episcopalians and more than half of Reformed Jews (55%) have incomes above \$100,000 annually, compared with only 11% of Adventists. Adventists (both the Pew survey and the NAD survey agree) are almost 50% in the bottom half of income earners in the country, and more than 50% non-White (ethnicity and income being two key predictors of educational attainment). For Adventists to achieve a college graduation rate above 60% as the NAD found would, therefore, not simply be a major accomplishment. It would be close to a sociological and statistical miracle.

There are additional reasons to question the NAD's 2008 estimation that 61% of its members have earned college degrees or higher. The 2001 ARIS study (based on interviews with more than 50,000 people) found that 29% of Seventh-day Adventists in the U.S. have earned a college degree, while the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey also place the number at approximately 30%. These figures are within the 10.5% margin of error of the Pew study. And previous studies conducted by Sahlin's Center for Creative Ministries also support an Adventist college and graduate degree figure in the range of 30%.

In its 1998, report, "Trends, Attitudes, and Opinions," Sahlin noted that there had been no statistically significant

change in the general level of education among NAD members during the past decade. In 1997, as in 1989, about "a third [of Adventists in North America] have completed higher education and two-thirds have not." Sahlin did, however, report disconcerting changes at the low and high ends of the Adventist educational spectrum: the percentage of members who had not completed high school had increased from 18% in 1989 to 22% in 1997, while the number who had completed graduate degrees had declined from 13% in 1989 to 10% in 1997. "If this trend were to continue over several decades," Sahlin warned, "it would have the effect of eroding the present character of the Adventist community as one that is highly educated and values education."

How is it, we must therefore ask, that the NAD should report in 2008 that these trends had been so dramatically reversed? Why did it find that the percentage of its members with graduate degrees, instead of continuing to decline, had suddenly leaped in a 10-year period from 10% (in 1997) to 15% (in 2007-2008)? How could it conclude that the percentage of North American Adventists with college degrees or higher had doubled in a single decade? Can we assume that the 2008 NAD figures are more accurate than the Pew data simply because they were based upon a larger number of interviews and so a smaller reported margin of error? Unfortunately, the 2008 NAD study contains significant methodological problems, which means its figures should be viewed with even greater caution than the Pew Forum's findings.

The NAD survey, Sahlin told me in a telephone conversation in April, was based upon a randomized list of church members drawn from 200 church telephone directories obtained from the pastors of churches across the country. This means that the NAD survey in contrast to the Pew study excluded all persons who might self-identify as Adventists and regularly attend church but without being official members. This fact, together with the fact that about 10% of NAD membership is Canadian, might explain a significant part of the difference between NAD's findings and Pew's. They were in fact measuring different things and so are not fully comparable. There are two major potential sources of bias, however, in the NAD methodology. First, problems might easily arise in the process of selecting which churches are most representative of Adventism as a whole. Second, church phone directories do not include valid phone numbers for a high number of members.

The NAD has for several years maintained an electronic

directory of all conference membership records, including phone numbers. This “eAdventist” dataset is kept strictly confidential by the NAD’s Information Technology Services Department. It was not even provided to Sahlin for his research, he told me, despite the fact that his studies are conducted for the NAD and released under its name. The NAD’s IT offices responded to an initial email I sent them asking if they might provide some figures from their dataset but then abruptly told me they could not be of help in response to some additional questions I sent them. The NAD’s response to my initial letter, however, revealed an important fact: in 2010 the eAdventist directory included telephone numbers for barely 70% of all members (719,210 out of 1,032,232 persons listed). Of these numbers listed in the church directory, many would in all likelihood be disconnected or invalid.³ Immigrant Adventists whose official memberships might still be in home countries other than the U.S. would not be included in the NAD phone directory at all. Further, baptized Adventists who are undocumented with the U.S. government and permanently living in the United States might be very reluctant to provide personal contact details to church offices to be entered into a computer database.

These facts suggest that at least one-third of Adventist members in the United States, if not more, were simply not represented in the NAD study in 2007-2008. A very high percentage of these excluded Adventists whose phone numbers are not included in any church database might be Latino, poor, and/or less educated than the general population. U.S. Census data shows that Latinos earn approximately 30% less than the average American and are less than half as likely to earn a college degree. This would go far to explain why the 2008 NAD figures on Adventist educational attainment are so implausibly high—and why the Pew Forum’s low figures are entirely credible. The Center for Creative Ministry based its work upon an unrepresentative sample of all Adventists in North America, potentially capturing only what we might call “high commitment” or “traditionally rooted” Adventists who have made sure to provide valid, up-to-date phone numbers to church offices.

The Pew study, by contrast, is a truly randomized survey that does not include such clear sampling bias. Its major weakness is simply the small number of Adventists interviewed, but this can be taken into account by paying careful attention to its margins of error. Even taking the NAD study’s margins of error for sampling size into consideration,

however, it is very hard to know how accurate its findings are given the fact that such a high number of members are not included in church phone directories. We must also note that the NAD’s survey makes no attempt to include non-official or lapsed members who continue to self-identify as Seventh-day Adventists.

It must be noted that Sahlin’s research methods—selecting a randomized sample of Adventists from a randomized selection of membership directories—may be the only feasible method available. What the very evident problems in the education figures in the 2008 NAD study point to is the fact that the best available membership directories may not be representative of Adventism in North America today. In order for the church to have more accurate statistical reporting and analysis, more information must be collected on all of its members. The data from the NAD’s eAdventist dataset should also be made available at least to its own researchers.

The demographic picture of Adventism that emerges in the Pew study can perhaps best be summarized with reference to the words of the Apostle Paul: “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26). I leave it to others to wrestle with the possible institutional as well as missional implications of what the Pew study suggests: that Adventism in the United States today is a faith of the poor, the uneducated, and quite possibly the undocumented, and these trends will probably increase in the future. ■

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References

1. The complete report may be accessed online at: <http://religions.pewforum.org>
2. For some questions, Pew collected answers from fewer than 135 Adventists, although this does not significantly change the margin of error.
3. As a general rule, random digit dialing surveys require that at least three times the number of phone numbers needed be called since two-thirds of any randomized list of phone numbers will be disconnected or unassigned. See Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, 9th edition (Boston: Wadsworth, 2006), 95.