

**Society for the
Scientific Study of Religion**

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**Vital or Vapid?
How Do Seventh-day Adventist
Congregations Compare on Vitality
Indicators?**

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Simple Research questions: Is SDA church in USA and Canada growing? How?
Is SDA Vital? What are the strength and weaknesses?

Research Data

Faith Community Today (FACT)

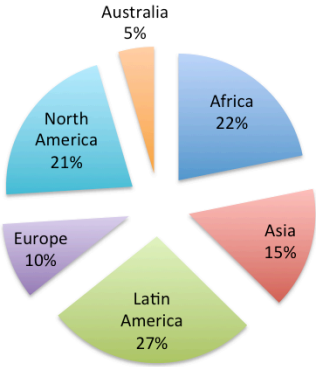
- As part of the 2015 inter-denominational Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey in the United States, a random sample of Seventh-day Adventist local churches was administered by the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University.
- A total of 324 Adventist local churches completed the six-page questionnaire. In most cases this was done by the pastor with the help of other church officers and in some cases by one or more elders.

Natural Church Development (NCD)

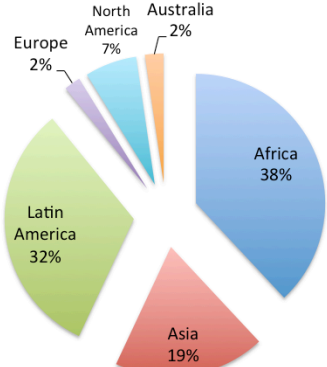
- As part of the ongoing church assessment, data have been collected from actively involved members (typically 30 members per church) in two periods between 1995 and 2016.
- Across various denominations, total of 347,849 surveys between 2008 and 2016 (including 28,811 SDA) was collected and analyzed

Trend in Worldwide Expansion of SDA Membership

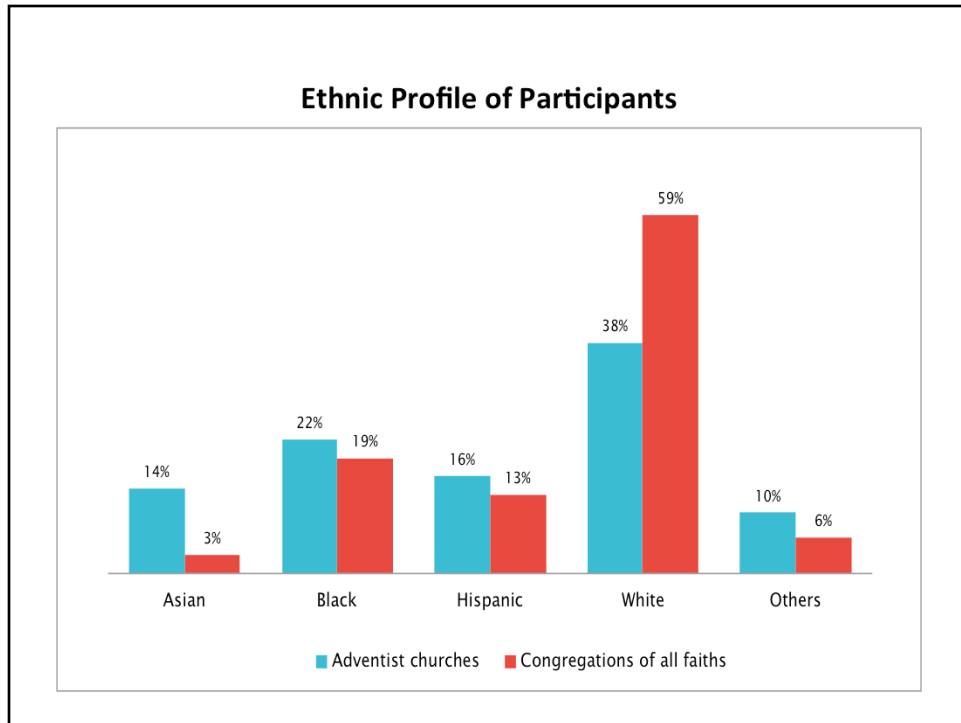
1970: 2 millions



2015: 18.5 millions



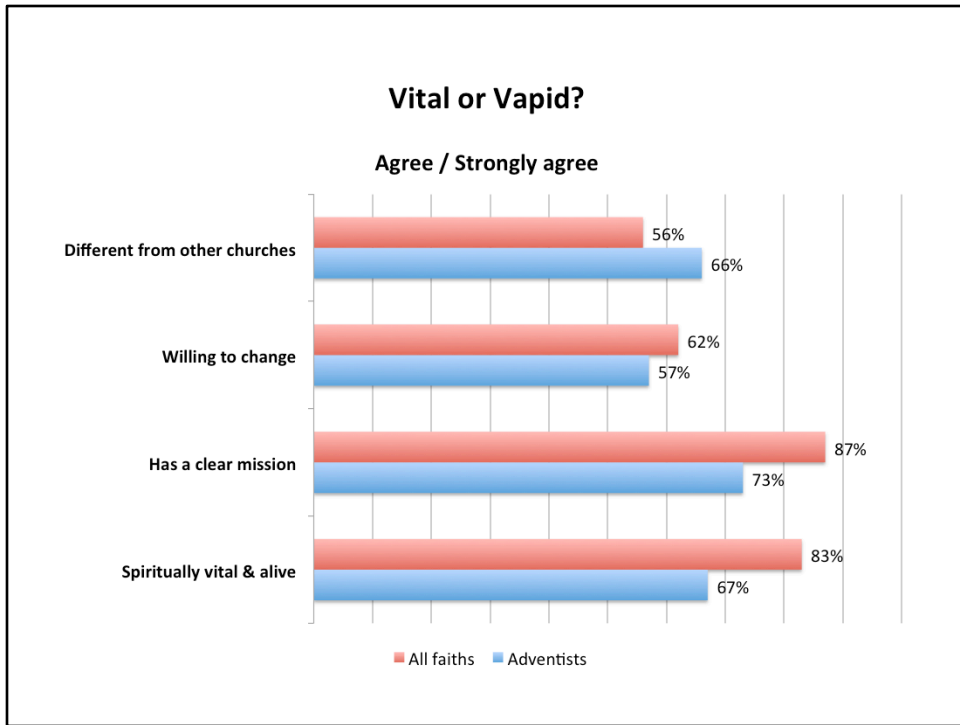
SDA grew for the last 5 years 8.5% in USA and Canada



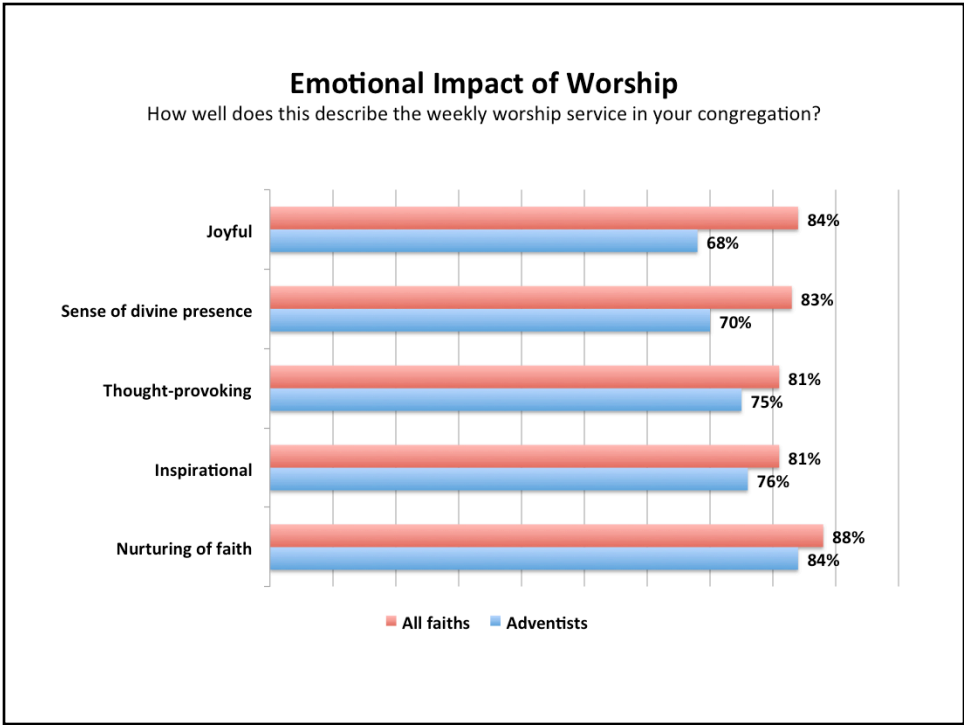
Note (New SDA Report on Ethnic Distribution of SDA: 40% White, 37% Black, 17% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 2%)

Respondents were asked to “estimate the number” in major ethnic categories among the people (including children) who “regularly participate in worship or other religious activities.” These data were cleaned to remove a few responses that mistakenly entered a percentage instead of a number. From the remaining data an average number was calculated for each category and then a percentage of the total was calculated based on the average in each category. The result is a set of data about the ethnicity of the people who attend church in America. This is generally described by pastors in the NAD as “active members.” It includes a very few in most congregations who are unable to attend worship on Sabbath either due to handicaps or they are away in the military or at boarding school, but maintain regular contact.

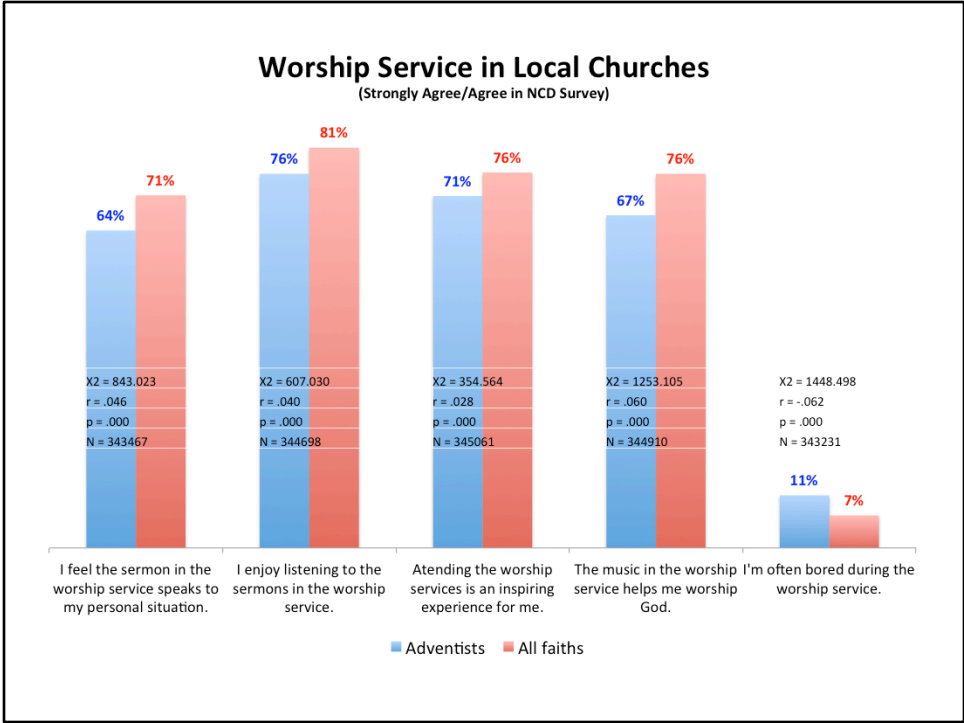
It is important to be clear that the data displayed above is about individuals, not congregations, unlike most pages in this report. In 2015 a national survey in the United States conducted by the Pew Research Center resulted in news reports about the Seventh-day Adventist Church being “the most diverse religion in the nation.” About three fifths of the participants in NAD local churches were identified in the present study as from an ethnic minority group. The study of NAD demographics done by the Center for Creative Ministry for the NAD Secretariat in 2007-2008, found



Leaders of Adventist local churches are more likely than most local religious leaders in America to see their congregation as “quite different from other congregations in our local community.” They are less likely to agree that their local church “has a clear mission and purpose, and is spiritually vital and alive. The uncertainty about mission and spiritual vitality is not overwhelming, but does indicate that there is a marginal group among pastors and elders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America who feel that there is some weakness in these dimensions.

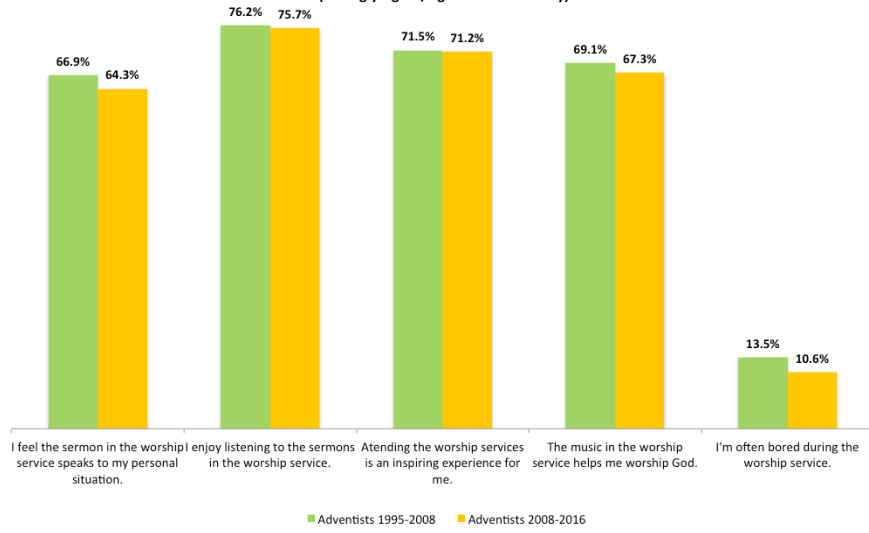


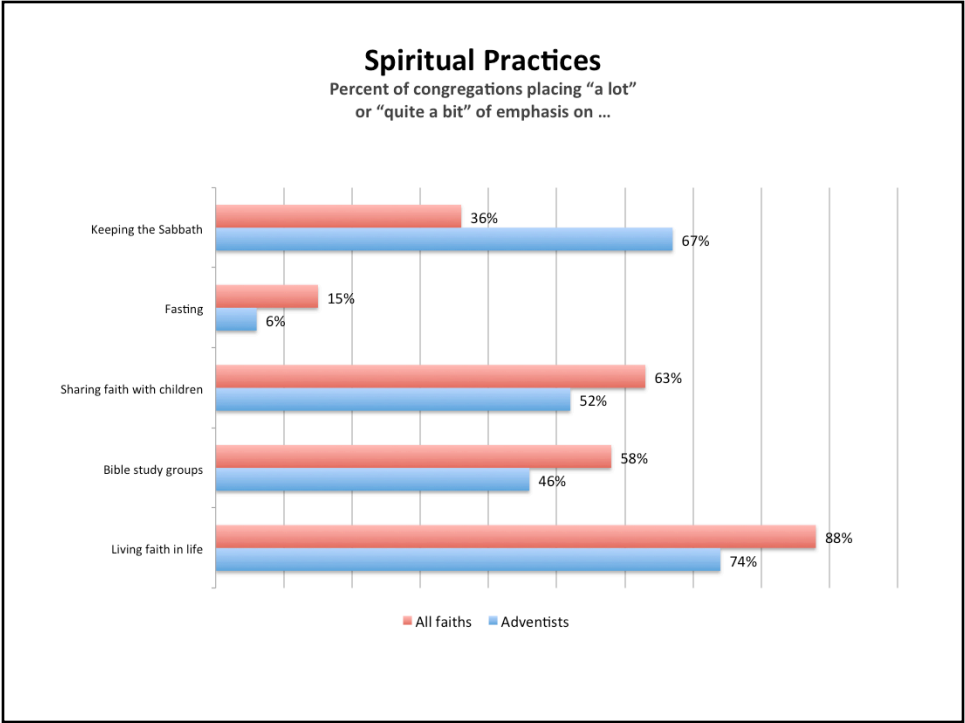
The percentages displayed above combine the “very well” and “quite well” responses for each quality. The Adventist local churches gave somewhat more conservative responses on each item than the overall, interfaith sample of American congregations, although for most of the items the difference is not statistically significant. Only two dimensions have a significant difference: Adventist churches are less likely to report joyful worship services and a sense of God’s divine presence in worship. It is possible that the more restrained atmosphere in Adventist congregations results in this difference in the emotional impact of worship.



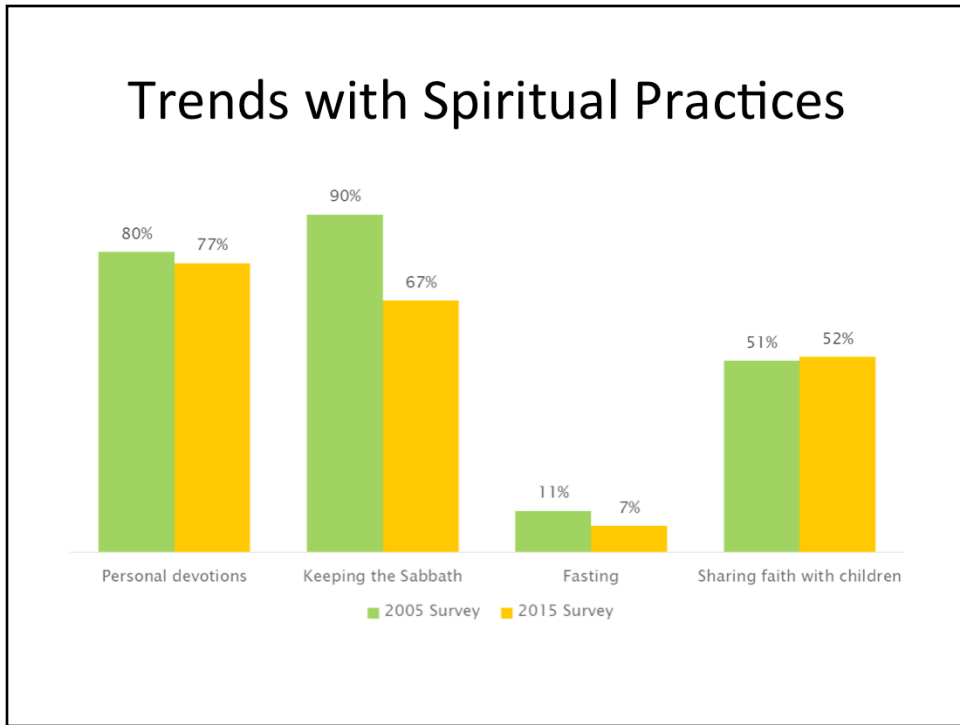
Eleven percent of Adventist respondents actively involved in church indicated that they are bored during the worship service, compared with only 7% of respondents of other Christians. Two thirds (67%) consider the church music helpful in worshipping God, more than seven out of ten (71%) active Christians consider attending worship as an inspiring experience, over three in four (76%) enjoy listening sermon, and nearly two out of three (64%) find sermons relevant.

Worship Service in Local Churches (Strongly Agree/Agree in NCD Survey)

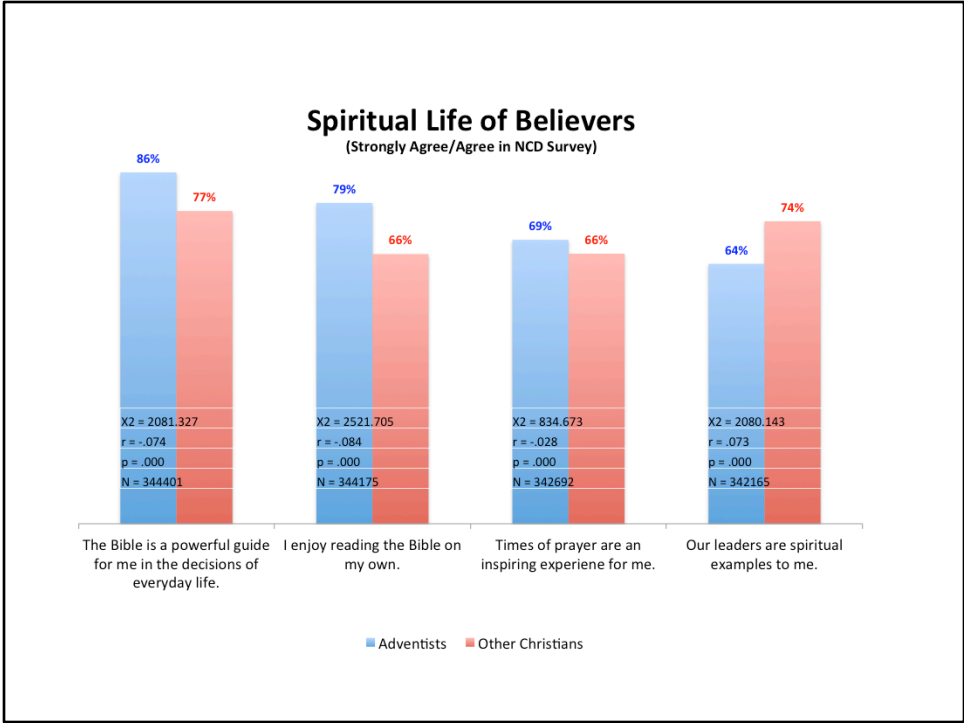




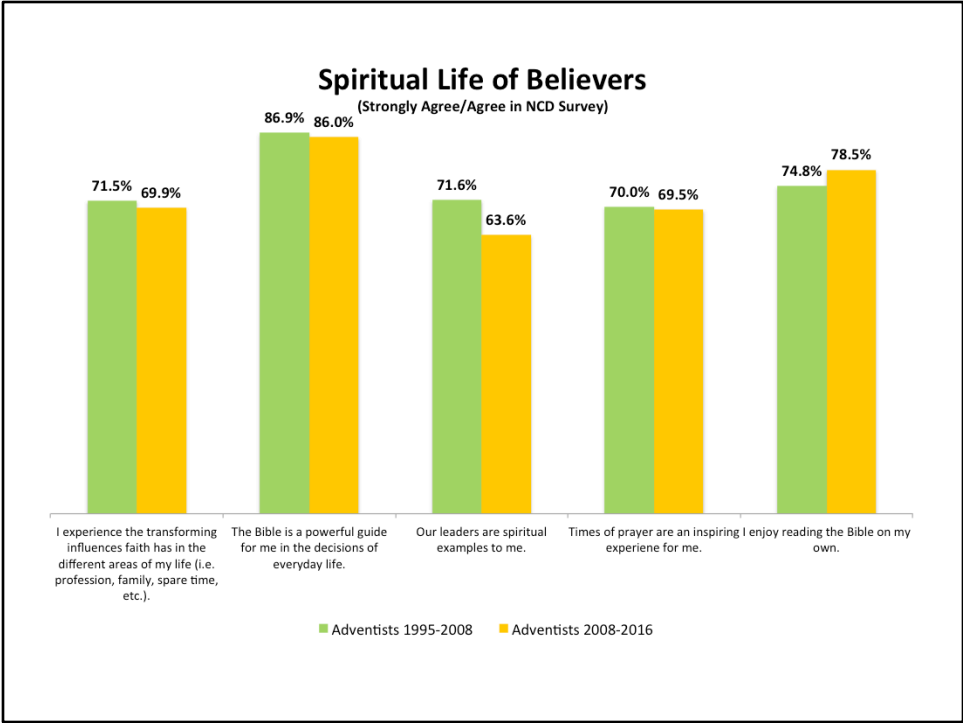
Respondents were asked how much emphasis their congregation gives to each of six spiritual practices with five possible responses for each item; a lot, quite a bit, some, a little or not at all. Adventist local churches in North America were significantly more likely than the overall sample of religious congregations in the United States to indicate greater emphasis on “Keeping the Sabbath day holy,” but significantly less likely to emphasize “fasting, living out one’s faith in all aspects of one’s daily life (work, family, civic engagement, etc.) and parents talking with children about faith.”

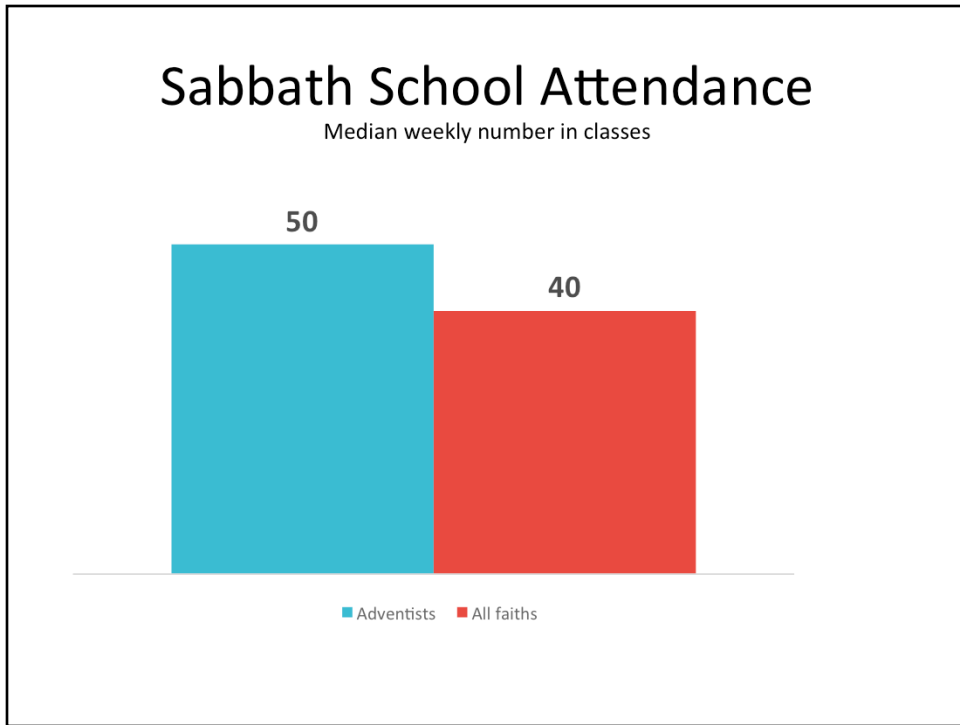


Four of the spiritual practices included in the question about how much emphasis their congregation places on these things were included in the same question in a previous survey. The graph above compares the combined percentage of respondents indicating the two most affirmative responses; “quite a bit” and “a lot” of emphasis. For three of these items the differences over the decade are not statistically significant. There was significantly less emphasis on keeping the Sabbath. Those seeking a negative view of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the NAD will likely point to this as a decline in adherence to one of the most important doctrines of the denomination. A more likely explanation is that as the membership has become increasingly older with “the graying of Adventism” (as pointed out in demographic studies) and some congregations have fewer non-members attending, there is less need to give emphasis to this practice.



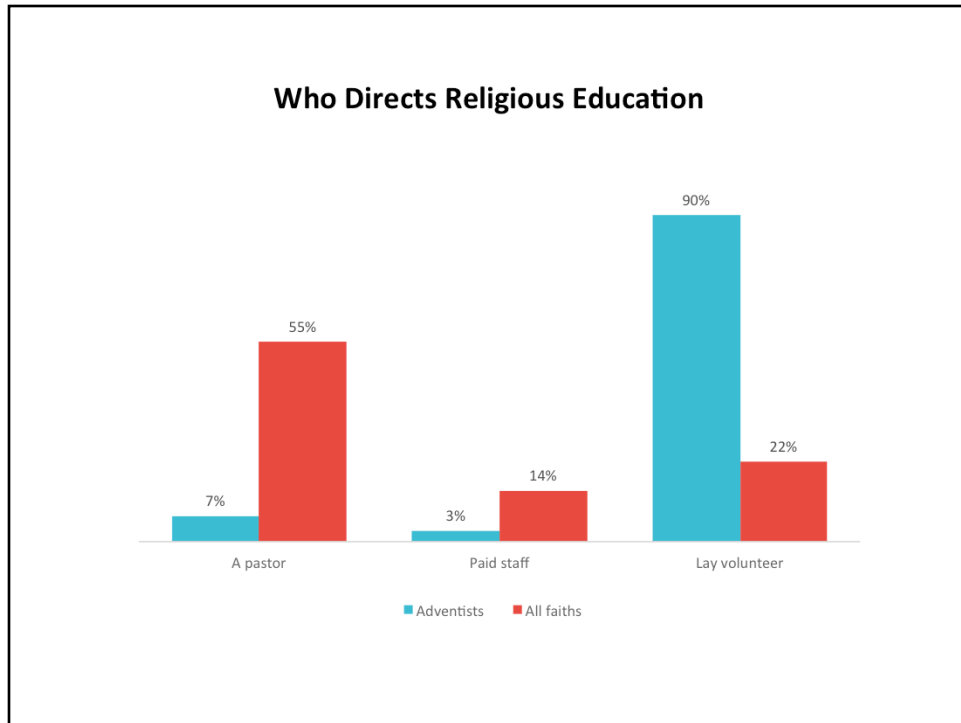
Seventh-day Adventists also place a large value in spending time in the Word. Over four out of five (86%) of congregations reported that they view the Bible as a powerful guide in the decisions of everyday life; for those outside of the Adventist faith, only 77% of congregations placed the same value on the Bible as a guide. Also, nearly 80% of Adventist respondents indicated that they greatly enjoy spending time reading the Bible on their own. Only two-thirds (66%) of respondents of other faiths indicated that they enjoy reading the Bible on their own.



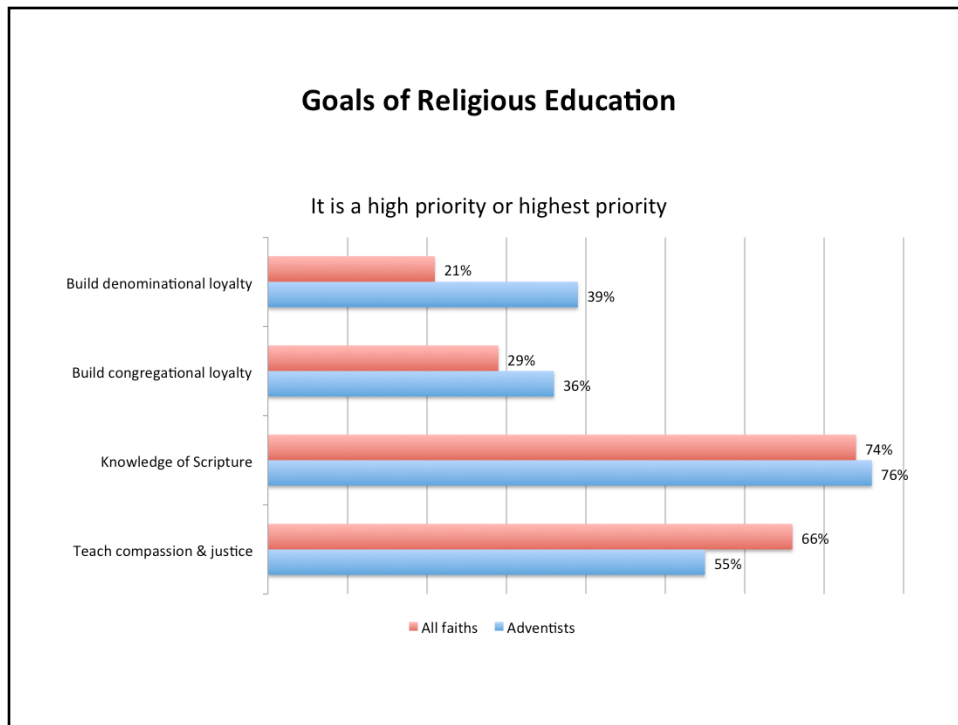


Adventist local churches in North America report significantly greater attendance at Sabbath School than do all faiths in America at Sunday School and similar religious education activities. The median weekly Sabbath School attendance total (including all age groups) for half of Adventist congregations is less than 50 and for half it is more than 50. This is 25 percent greater than the median attendance for all denominations and religions in the United States. Clearly Sabbath School is a stronger program than the religious education activities across all faiths in the United States.

Of the median group of 50 in Sabbath School each week, 35 are adults and 15 are children and youth. The number of children and youth out of each median group of 40 in congregations of other faiths is also 15, but the number of adults is only 25. This suggests that, on the whole, Adventists do better are involving adults in religious education than do other faiths.



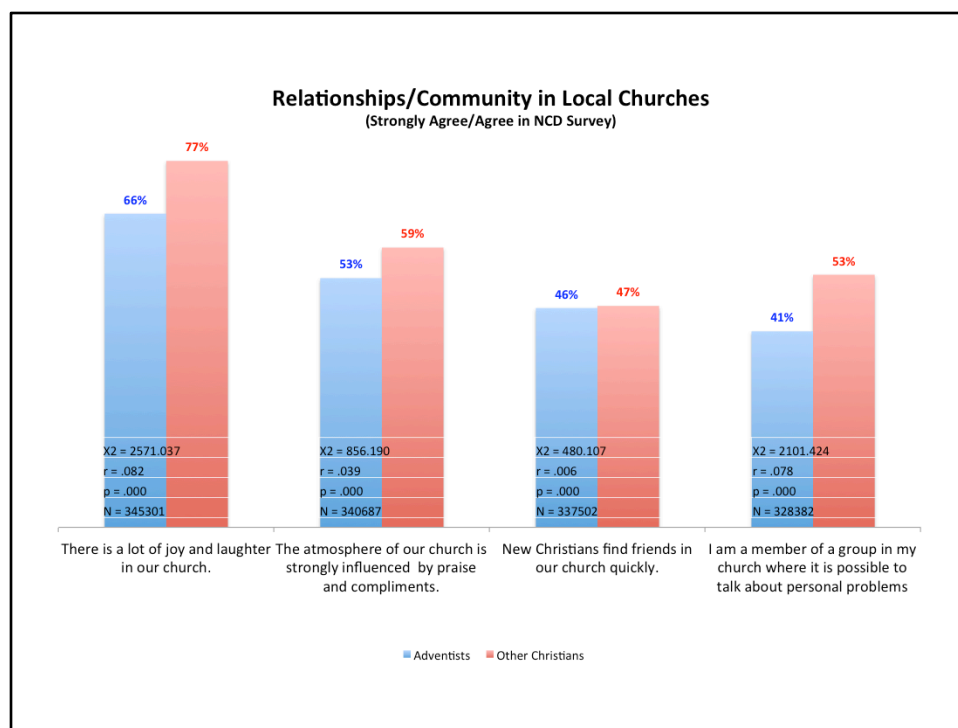
In Adventist local church the Sabbath School is primarily managed by a lay volunteer with the traditional title of Sabbath School Superintendent. Only in a few large congregations is there an associate pastor or other paid staff member who directs the Sabbath School, and in most cases this staff member is responsible only for the children's and youth divisions, not adult activities. This is markedly different from the situation in many congregations of other faiths where about two thirds of congregations have clergy or paid staff (some of them part-time) who direct the Sunday School or similar religious education classes. In fact, the contrast is largely between the conservative Protestant denominations and other religious groups, including both Christian denominations and others religions. This contrast is rooted in the history and theology of the Anabaptist Reformation but it also speaks to practical differences in the curriculum and methods used in congregations.



The number one goal of Sabbath School in Adventist local churches in North America is “to nurture belief and trust in Jesus Christ” based on the 84 percent of local leaders who reported that this was either the “highest priority” or a “high priority” for their congregation. The second-ranking goal is “to acquire knowledge of the Scripture,” indicated by three out of four local leaders (76 percent). About two thirds of the respondents gave similar responses for three other goals: 68 percent for “inspire members to express their faith in life,” 63 percent for “relate your faith’s beliefs and practices to each age-level,” and 62 percent for “engage members in nurture and fellowship.” A majority (55 percent) also indicated that it is a priority to “teach about love and justice toward others.”

Two goals were not reported as a priority in most Adventist churches: only 39 percent indicated that it was a priority to “develop denominational loyalty” and just 36 percent said it was a priority to “develop congregational loyalty.” This suggests that matters of personal faith are more important to most Adventists than are organizational relationships.

The priorities expressed in the interfaith sample of United States congregations is not much different than those identified by the Adventist congregations. Adventists are much more likely to say that developing denominational loyalty is a priority, and significantly less likely to say it is a priority to inspire members to share their faith, teach about compassion and justice toward others, and relate faith to all age groups.



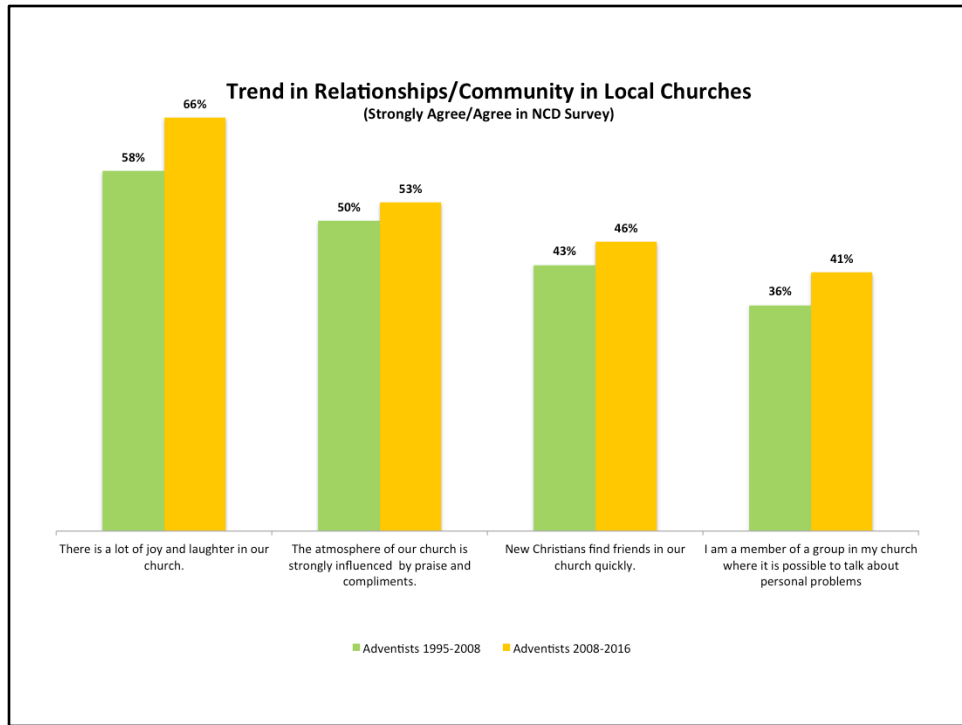
When compared to other denominations, Adventists ranked lower in all relational areas than did their counterparts.

66% of Adventists indicated they felt there is a lot of joy and laughter in their church, while 77% of other denominations felt the same.

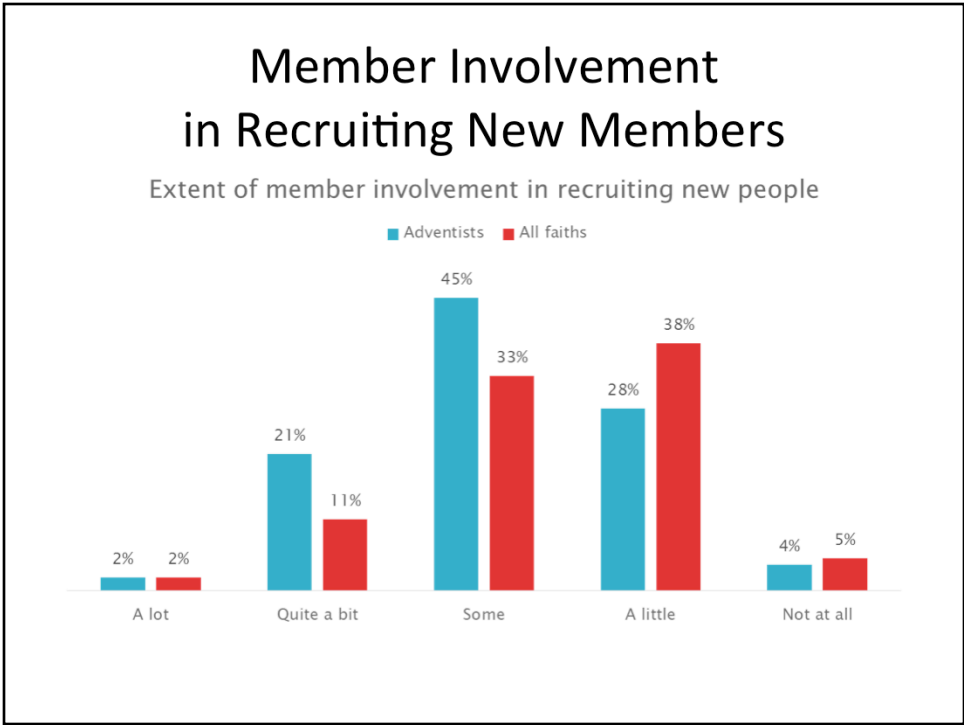
53% of Adventist respondents indicated the atmosphere of their church is strongly influenced by praise and compliments, while 59% of non-Adventist respondents indicated the same.

41% of Adventists indicated that they are members of a group in their church where it is possible to talk about personal problems, while 53% of other denominations reported the same.

The only area in which Adventist respondents ranked their relational experiences close to that of non-Adventists is in the area of new Christians quickly finding friends in their church.



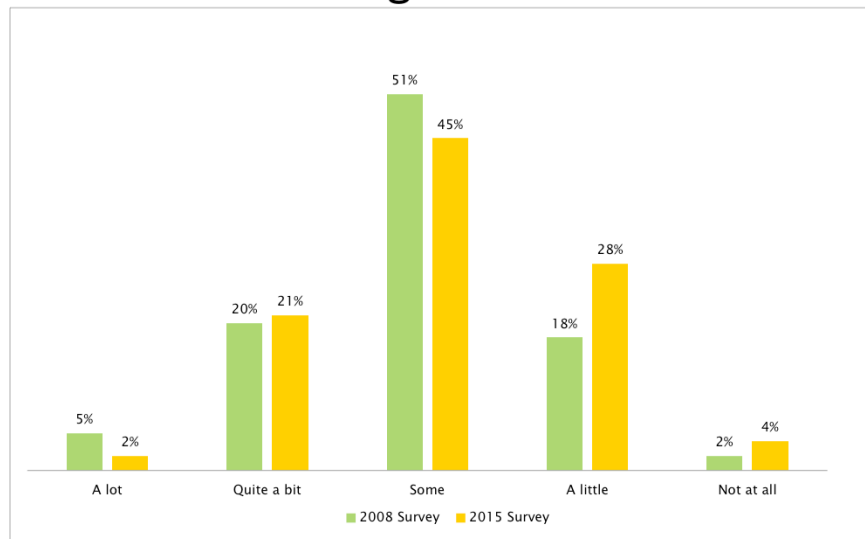
However, there is some good news in this area! The surveys of active Adventists collected in 1995-2008 ranked all areas lower than the surveys collected 2008-2016. While there is still much room for improvement in interpersonal relationships within the church, it appears that churches are making positive changes in the right direction.



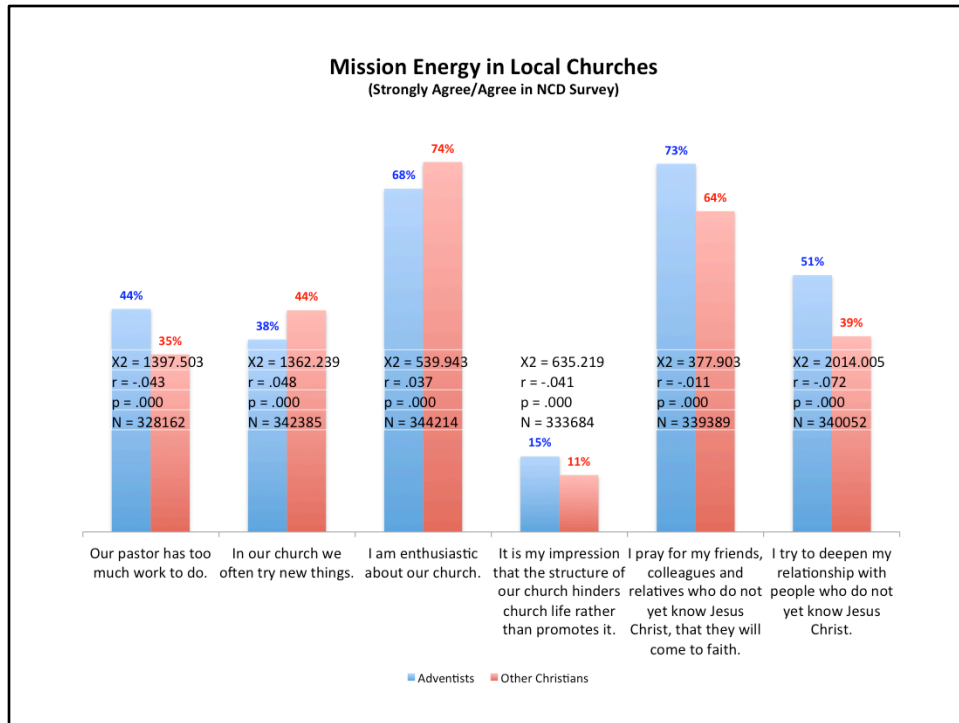
Respondents were also asked to describe the extent of involvement by “participants” in “recruiting new people.” Again, it is important to recall that “participants” include people who attend at least once a month regardless of their membership status, although we used the word “member” in the headline above. Again, respondents could select from five responses parallel to the previous question about involvement in the overall programs and groups of the congregation. This question focuses on recruitment of new participants in the congregation, which Adventists would tend to understand as making converts to the Adventist faith or moving people in that direction while some other faiths would define entirely in terms of getting people to attend the regular worship services or religious activities of the congregation.

On this item there is a definite difference between Adventist local churches in the North American Division and the overall sample of all religions in the United States. There are twice as many Adventist congregations reporting “quite a bit” of involvement by members in recruiting new people and significantly more who report “some” involvement by members as well as significantly fewer who report only “a little” involvement. Clearly, the people in the pews in Adventist congregations are more involved in personal outreach and bringing new people into the life of the congregation than are many other religions in America.

Trend in Member Involvement in Recruiting New Members



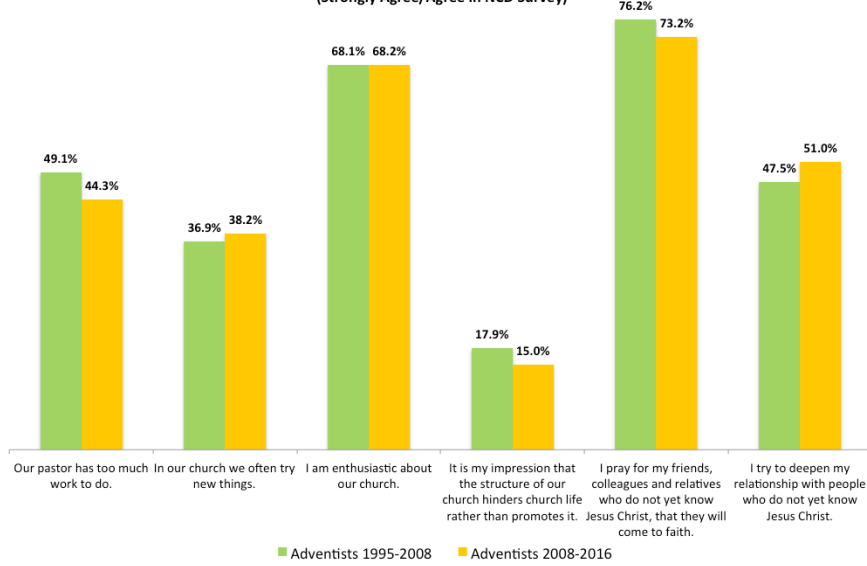
Overall, there is no statistically significant change in the involvement of church members in the recruiting of new members from a comparison of the same question in the 2008 survey and the most recent survey. There was some difference in the 2005 survey but it is largely due to the fact that the question was structured differently with only four possible responses instead of five.

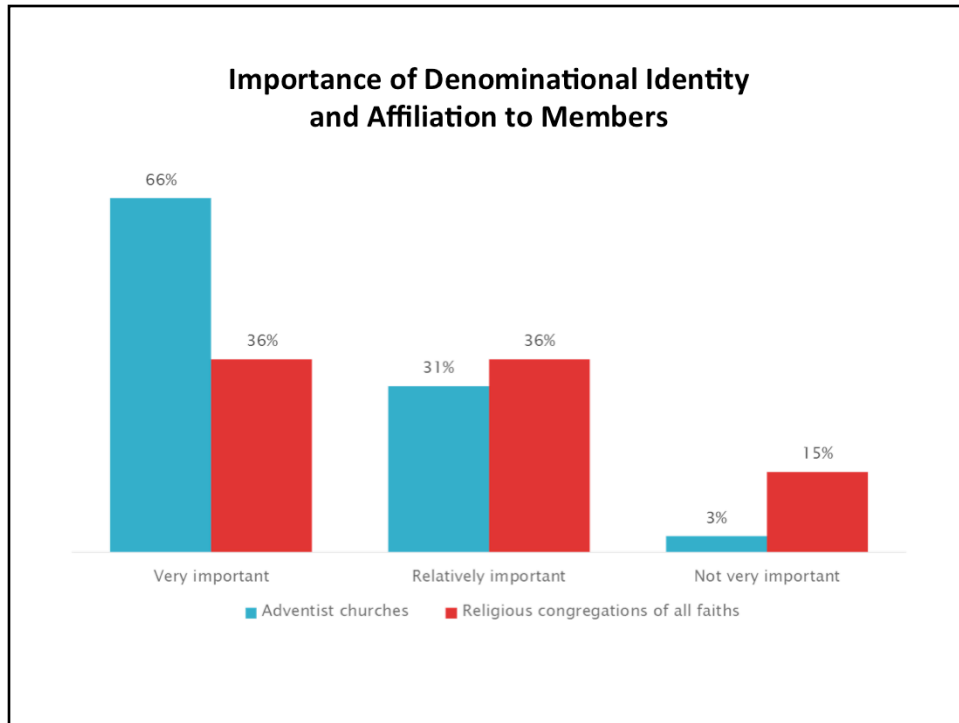


A cornerstone of the Adventist faith revolves around the importance of evangelism and reaching out to those who do not yet know Jesus. When Adventists were asked if they pray for friends, relatives, and colleagues who do not yet know Jesus – specifically praying that they will come to faith – almost three-fourths (73%) indicated that they do; this is compared to less than two-thirds (64%) of respondents of other denominations. Similarly, over half (51%) of Adventist respondents indicated that they try to deepen their relationship with people who do not yet know Jesus, while only 39% of non-Adventist respondents indicated the same.

Mission Energy in Local Churches

(Strongly Agree/Agree in NCD Survey)

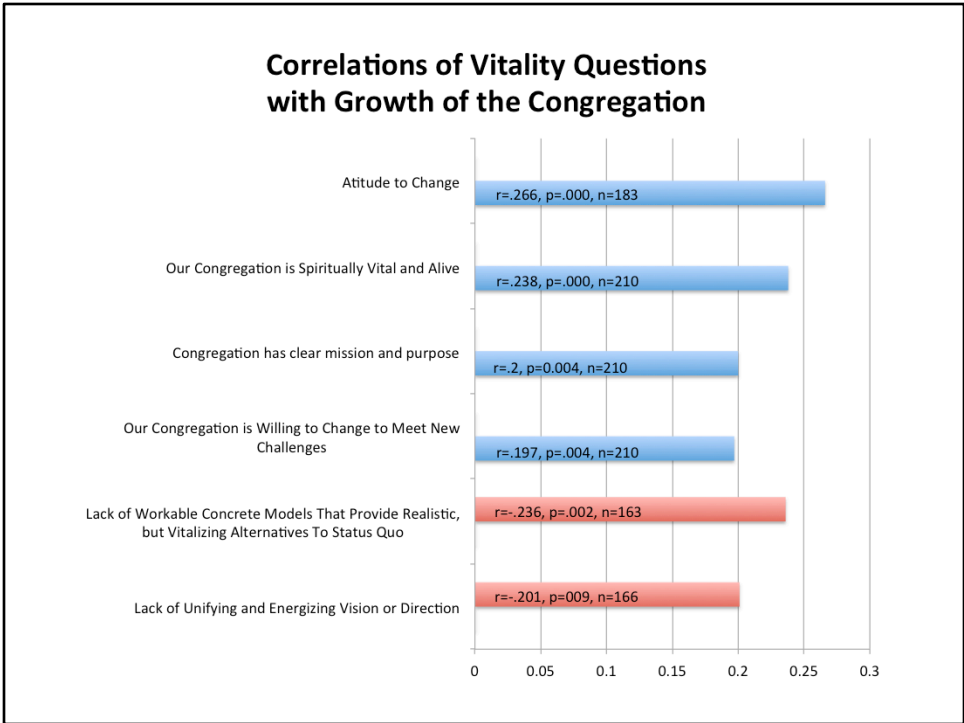




Denominational identity and affiliation is much more important to members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church than to many other religious groups in America. Two thirds of the local churches in the NAD indicated that denominational identity is very important to the majority of their members. Almost another third said that it was relatively important. Only three percent of NAD local churches say that is not very important.

NAD local churches are roughly twice as likely as the average religious congregation in America to report that denominational identity is important to its members, and much less likely than other faiths to say that it is not important to most members. Only the middle option has a similar response. That middle option may well include some of the largest local churches in the NAD. It is important to keep in mind that these data reflect responses from congregations, not individual members.

It is also important to know that 12 percent of the congregations in the national interfaith sample reported that they have no denominational affiliation; they are independent groups and not reflected in the graph above. Other research has shown that this is the fastest-growing segment of religious groups in America in recent years.



Churches with positive attitude to change are more likely to grow than churches resistant to change.

Churches that report to be vital and spiritually alive are more likely to grow

Churches that report to have clear mission and purpose are more likely to grow

Churches willing to change to meet new challenges are more likely to grow

Churches with lack of workable concrete models... are less likely to grow

Churches with lack of unifying and energizing vision or direction are less likely to grow.

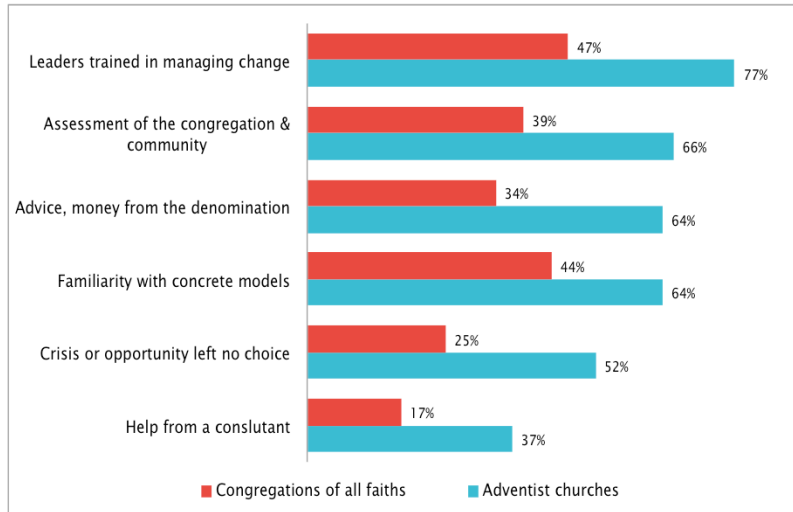
Cross Tabulation of SDA Dealing with Change with Vitality / Growth Rate of Congregations

Dealing with Change	My Congregation Is Spiritually Vital And Alive			Number of Congregations	Growth Rate
	Strongly Disagree / Disagree	Neutral / Unsure	Agree / Strongly Agree		
We pride ourselves on our embrace of and success in constantly changing to improve and adapt.	0%	8%	93%	n = 13	71.6%
We are doing pretty well making the necessary changes.	0%	0%	100%	n = 58	37.4%
We are slowly changing, but not fast enough nor significantly enough.	8%	28%	64%	n = 108	16.7%
We are where we need to be and do not need to change.	100%	0%	0%	n = 2	8.3%
We need to change to increase our vitality and viability, but the congregation does not seem to realize it and/or doesn't want to make the necessary changes.	27%	33%	40%	n = 58	3.6%
We are fortunate enough to be doing pretty well without having to think about significant changes.	6%	0%	94%	n = 16	3.3%
Total (100%)	11%	20%	69%	n = 255	21.3%

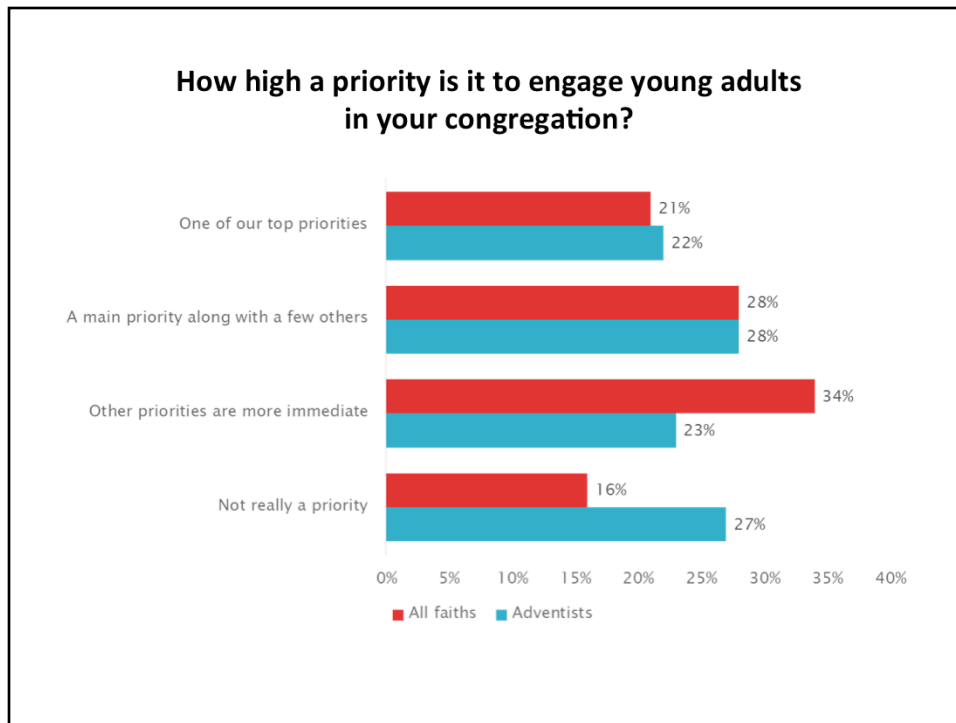
X²=108.496, p = 0.000, r = .475, n = 255

Crosstabulation showing the various responses related to dealing with change and various answers related to vitality of churches as well as reported growth rate.

What Would Help the Congregation Deal with Necessary Change



Local churches in the NAD are significantly more likely to agree to the usefulness of various kinds of assistance in dealing with change than are congregations of all faiths in the United States. All six of the strategies to help congregations deal with change that were included in the survey show a significantly higher level of positive response by Adventist churches than the overall sample of all religious congregations. This may simply be a reflection of the degree to which Adventist congregations have a closer relationship to the local conference than is typical for American denominations. It may also indicate that the NAD needs to give greater attention to the need to help local churches deal with change.



What priority do local churches in the North American Division assign to young adult ministry? About one congregation in five (22 percent) reported that “It is one of our top priorities.” More than one in four (28 percent) indicated that “It is a main priority, along with a few other main priorities.” Together, that means the pastors and local elders in half of the local churches in the NAD see young adults as an important priority.

Another one in four local churches (23 percent) indicated that “It is a priority, but other priorities are more immediate.” This option really confesses that it is not much of a priority. More than one in four (27 percent) either reported that “It is not really a priority” or skipped this question, in effect indicating that it was not enough of a priority to even deal with the topic.

The half of NAD local churches that see young adults as a priority is the same proportion as in the general sample of all religious congregations in the United States. The differences in response to the two lower-priority options are statistically significant, but likely result from the fact that at least some other denominations have fewer clergy willing to give up on the subject.

SDA Strategy of Youth Retention

Which of the following best describes your congregation's strategy for engaging young adults (18-34)?		
n = 266	Percent	Growth Rate
Strategy is totally geared to involving young adults in the general life and worship of the congregation.	13.2%	35.8%
Strategy is more geared to creating special opportunities and programs specifically for young adults.	6.8%	35.4%
Strategy is a pretty even balance of both general involvement and special opportunities/programs.	19.9%	33.6%
Strategy is totally geared to creating special opportunities and programs specifically for young adults.	3.8%	18.8%
Strategy is more geared to involving young adults in the general life and worship of the congregation.	26.7%	14.7%
We don't really have an intentional strategy.	29.7%	9.1%
Total	100.0%	

Conclusion

- Some growth (public and personal evangelism, ethnic minorities, recent immigrants)
- Spiritual passion for knowing God through Scripture (head knowledge)
- Evangelistic endeavor, strong sense of identity/loyalty
- Lower slowly increasing relational cohesiveness and sense of/for community
- Some dissatisfaction, semi-openness to change