Adventist growth boosted by immigrants

by John Dart in the May 3, 2011 issue

When the 2011 edition of the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* was published in February, the Seventh-day Adventist Church drew special notice for its reported 4.3 percent jump in membership. It turns out, however, that the figure was miscalculated.

The Adventists' climb to 1,043,606 U.S. members in 2009 (the latest year tabulated) was really only a little more than a 2 percent increase. A news-service story put the one-year rise at 2.5 percent, but to be exact, the increase during 2009 was 2.1 percent, according to David Trim, the statistics director for the Adventists' General Conference based in Silver Spring, Maryland.

But any increase is newsworthy these days. Mainline denominations have reported membership declines for decades, and some conservative churches, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, have reported net losses.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, born amid dashed hopes of a second coming in the mid-1800s, has 16.3 million members in over 200 nations. It still works and prays in anticipation of Jesus' return. Renowned for their medical institutions, vegetarian diets and weight-loss programs, Adventists defy easy classification among U.S. churches. Their biblical literalism demands belief in a seven-day creation, but their principles also allow for elective abortion when the life of a woman or fetus is endangered. The cause of women's ordination has advanced very slowly in the SDA, but the issue is coming under review. Court battles over the right to refuse work on the Sabbath from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown have made Adventists strong defenders of First Amendment rights, though their opinions vary on the use of vouchers or tax credits at their parochial schools.

If the church founded by visionary Ellen G. White is posting membership gains, especially at a time when liberal and conservative churches are suffering from a

demographic malaise, it certainly deserves a closer look. But one thing closer scrutiny reveals is that the membership growth is largely attributable to the influx of immigrants from countries where the church's missions have enjoyed great success. This trend is acknowledged by researchers and Adventist leaders in the U.S.

"Adventist growth is much higher in places like Africa and Latin America," said Roger L. Dudley, director of the Institute of Church Ministry at an Adventist seminary in Berrien Springs, Maryland. "Not only do Adventists themselves tend to immigrate here, but these immigrants, being unsettled, tend to be more open to a religious approach."

Sociologist Ronald Lawson of Queens College, New York, observed in a 1998 journal article that demographic patterns contributing to a decline in the number of Caucasian and African-American Adventists were the same as those affecting mainline churches. "Given the evidence of declining fertility and the exit of youth among American-born Adventists," Lawson wrote, "it seems evident that the continued growth of American Adventists will be dependent on a continued influx of immigrants."

Reporting in 2009 at a meeting of sociologists of religion, Lawson said that the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Adventists all have difficulties retaining converts worldwide. Of the three groups, Adventists had the best ratio of success, he said, with a dropout rate of about 35 percent of baptized members.

"The dropout rate among Adventist youth in the developed world is 50 to 60 percent in spite of the fact that in America close to half have attended church-sponsored schools," added Lawson, who cited data from an Adventist sociologist. "The realization that there are probably more former Adventists than currently attending members in America has caused heartburn," he said.

Some anecdotal evidence from a motorcycle-riding Adventist pastor suggests that the typical SDA congregation in America is faring much like other churches. Marvin Wray, 64, a pastor from Napa, California, took a sabbatical in the summer of 2009 to visit 70 typical Adventist congregations. Wray said he wanted "to see for myself" how other pastors were doing from coast to coast.

"I found that the bulk of the churches were aging and struggling to attract and hold young families," Wray said in an interview. "Membership is running about the same for a decade and more. They have some baptisms, some deaths and people moving

away. Of those who just stop attending, it can be some time before their names are taken off the books as missing, inactive or whatever."

Wray's Napa Community Seventh-day Adventist Church has 1,000 members on the books, some 500 or 600 members who attend at least once a month and an average of 350 at any given service, he said. The congregation varies its music—an orchestra one week and praise music, guitar and drums on another, he said.

Wray said he did not visit any ethnic congregations but selected congregations that most Adventists would identify with—and that he could reach on his motorcycle in a day's drive. He talked to pastors or a church representative at each site.

"I don't dispute the figures showing growth, nor am I being negative," he said. "I talk realistically about what's happening. I think it is fair to say that for my generation and one generation younger that we have not done a very good job of holding the people who came out of high school, college and started families." He published his findings in *Journeys,* a book in both print and electronic format.

Bringing in an evangelist for revival meetings, or uplinking by satellite to such rallies, is a common method to attract newcomers. But some traditionalists in the wider church have emphasized restrictions and behavioral changes as a prerequisite to membership, Wray said.

"There is a strong movement among colleagues I associate with to put the gospel first, and once somebody has a relationship with Christ, then let your lifestyle change as an individual and in your relationships," said the pastor.