
Hispanic Americans in the North American Division

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Abstract

The author reports descriptive data gathered through surveys collected by mail and when speaking to Hispanic groups around North America. In addition, personal interviews with those who have left the church provided additional data and insights. Hispanic Americans face a challenge with second and third generation Hispanic Americans due to the changes that take place as they assimilate into their new culture while their churches continue to attract new immigrants. Hispanic churches in North America tend to retain immigrants and lose their second and third generation young people. The data doesn't indicate whether those who leave the Hispanic churches transition to English speaking Adventist churches or if they stop attending Adventist churches altogether.

Introduction

Three separate studies were conducted by the investigator to uncover reasons why the Seventh-day Adventist church is having difficulty attracting and retaining Hispanic Americans. The study, conducted from 2008 to 2011, retrieved information on the opinions and preferences among Hispanic Americans regarding church, language, and culture. One investigation consisted of an email research among 52 North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists' Hispanic leaders on questions regarding Hispanic Americans membership. The second was a survey investigation among several hundred active Hispanic American church members on their opinions about various religious questions. The final investigation consisted of 20 in-depth interviews with baptized Seventh-day Adventist Hispanic American young people, from 20-30 years of age, who no longer attend church. The investigator selected this convenience sample as he traveled, lecturing and preaching around the U.S. The two main research questions for the last research were: "Name reasons why you no longer attend the Seventh-day Adventist church on Sabbath" and, "What can the church do to attract and retain young Hispanic Americans?" The results are discussed on the following pages.

Hispanic American Seventh-day Adventist membership in the United States

An email survey with four questions was sent to most Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist Conference leaders of the NAD inquiring about their Hispanic membership, the number of baptisms in 2010, the percentage of Hispanic American pastors employed in their fields, and the percentage of members from poor, middle, and upper classes. Twenty responses were received and tabulated for analysis. One of the responses included the tabulated input of 28 pastors from the Southern California Conference. Alfredo Lee, the vice-president for Hispanic Ministries applied the survey to 36 ministers at a general pastors' meeting and obtained 28 responses.

The results show a proportionate approximation of Hispanic American baptisms, compared to membership. It also reveals that approximately three-fourths of Seventh-day Adventist Hispanics in North America or first generation Hispanics. Table 1 presents an overall picture of the survey results.

Table 1

Seventh-day Adventist Membership by Generation and Hispanic American Baptisms in the NAD

Variable	Membership %	Baptisms %
First generation	74.4	77.4
Second generation	25.6	22.6

An Immigrant Church. With such a high percentage of both membership and baptisms coming from first generation Hispanic Americans, one has to wonder if Hispanic immigration is a new thing. That hardly seems possible. Hispanic growth in Adventist Churches throughout North America has been persistent for decades. Then we need another explanation for these percentages. Perhaps the convenience sample shows a bias towards responses from first generation Hispanic Americans. Maybe the first generation finds itself over represented in Hispanic churches as second and third generation Hispanic Americans migrate to English speaking churches. If second generation Hispanic Americans aren't in Hispanic Adventist churches, where are they?

U.S. Poverty Rate and Seventh-day Adventist Baptismal Rate. The 2010 U.S. Census revealed a poverty rate among Hispanics of 23.2 percent in 2009, up from 21.5 percent in 2008. According to my email survey, the poverty rate among Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist churches is much higher (68.1 %). An explanation of this high poverty rate among Hispanic churches is associated with the high rate of baptisms among first generation immigrants who generally come to the U.S. in poverty and tend to be very receptive to the gospel. Table 2 illustrates baptisms by social class in the NAD during 2010.

Implications for ministry

Data analysis revealed that the baptismal percentage among Hispanic Americans is very close to their membership percentage; however, as the Hispanic American Seventh-day Adventist population leaps ahead of their immigrant parents' population, church leaders should devise strategies to maintain a proportionate baptismal growth among this group. It should be noted that most Hispanic American baptisms reported are among younger Hispanic Americans who are generally more receptive to the gospel than those who are college age and other adults.

Comments from study participants indicate that Hispanic Americans are financially better off than Hispanic immigrants. Retaining and reaching young, receptive Hispanic Americans can also provide higher financial support for the church in years to come. Although financial gain should not be a motivational factor for evangelism, the church cannot exclude affluent social groups from the great commission.

Studies by Sánchez (2006) indicate that there is a need for more Hispanic American pastors who know their own kind of people and are trained to reach them. Considering the fact that by 2020 Hispanic Americans in the U.S. will surpass the Hispanic immigrant population,

Table 2

Baptisms by Social Class Among Hispanics in the NAD, Based on Personal Recollection

Variable	%
Lower class	68.1
Middle class	25.4
Upper class	6.4

it is important to train and hire more Hispanic American pastors for ministry, and ministry that includes second and third generation Hispanics.

Hispanic Americans: Opinions About Religion

Two methods were used to identify and recruit the 116 Hispanic Americans that participated in the study. One method was requesting pastors to apply the survey to their Hispanic American church members and mail

Demographic Information about Hispanic Americans

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	43	36.5
Female	73	63.5
Marital Status		
Single	67	57.8
Married	36	31.0
Divorced	6	5.2
System	7	6.0
Education		
Elementary	23	20.5
High School	40	35.7
College	21	18.8
University	25	22.3
Trade school	3	2.7
SDA elementary	46	58.2
SDA High School	36	45.6
SDA College	15	19.0
SDA University	10	12.7
Students to date	36	39.1
Religion		
SDA	110	96.5
Non-SDA	4	3.5
Parents denomination when arriving to U.S.		
SDA	31	26.3
Catholic	77	66.4
Other	15	7.3

Sample Size (N=116)

them back to me for analysis. However, I collected most of the surveys as I served as a guest speaker at different Spanish speaking churches and convocations in the country. During the meetings, I recruited volunteers 18 years and older to participate in the study. I distributed surveys during the meeting and ushers collected them at the end of the service. Of the several hundred surveys distributed in this manner, only 116 were collected. I attributed the low number of returns to the length of the questionnaire—86 questions.

Survey questions covered six areas: a) personal information, b) religious experience, c) information about the church, d) information regarding language, e) information regarding culture and acculturation, and f) reasons why Hispanic Americans have left the church. We inputted the data collected into the Statistical Survey Package Software and analyzed it for descriptive results.

Regarding education, 21 percent completed college (15 percent in Seventh-day Adventist institutions) and 25 percent reported having completed graduated studies (not quite half of these in Seventh-day Adventist institutions). Regarding the religion of their parents when they arrived in the U.S., 66 percent of the respondents indicated their parents were Catholic, compared with 26 percent whose parents were Seventh-day Adventists.

Information About the Person

The vast majority (96.5 percent) of participants who responded identified themselves as members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Most participants were female (63.5 percent) and a smaller majority (58 percent) were single. About half of participants (50.6 percent) occupied a leadership role in their churches and 14 percent were church elders.

Religious and Social Experience

All participants reported having a similar number of friends among Hispanic Americans, Hispanics, and White Americans. Regarding religious background and habits in reading the Bible, 55 percent were born in an Seventh-day Adventist home and 30 percent of all interviewees read the Bible on a weekly basis. This is an amazing figure that could explain why participants were still attending church services. Most of the participants (93 percent) believed the Seventh-day Adventist church is the true church of God and attended church on a

weekly basis. Attendance was excellent considering that four participants were not even church members.

Information Regarding Language

Cultural assimilation is associated with assimilation of the language of the land. This research shows that 68 percent of immigrants speak both languages at home and 17 percent of Hispanic American parents go to English speaking churches. An important statistic from the study revealed that 63 percent of Hispanic American children speak and understand both languages well and 80 percent visit their parents' country of origin. On the other hand, 63.8 percent of Hispanic American parents continue to keep their native culture. However, 78 percent of Hispanic Americans participants believe immigrants should not bring their culture to the U.S. When asked about their preferred language for church services, 64 percent indicated they prefer both languages.

Information Regarding Culture and Acculturation

Approximately half of participants, 48 percent, believe that reconciling cultural differences between Hispanic immigrants and Hispanic-Americans is difficult. However, a slightly higher percentage, 53 percent, believed that reconciling differences between Hispanic-Americans and Anglo-Americans is more difficult.

Why Hispanic-Americans Leave the Church

The survey instrument asked respondents to choose from 14 options regarding why Hispanic Americans leave the church. The five highest options selected were that the "church services are too boring" (50 percent), "family problems not related to the church" (48 percent), "sin" (43 percent), "church members are not friendly" (40 percent), and "having to work on Sabbath" (also 40 percent). Next, in descending order, were "church norms are too strict" (39 percent), and "no opportunity to express themselves in English" (33 percent). "Cultural barriers" (28 percent) and "rejection by Hispanic immigrants" (23 percent) were other reasons why some Hispanic Americans no longer come to church.

In-depth interviews with 20 non-attending youth from California, Florida, Illinois Michigan, and Maryland, revealed that once they begin college and gain a degree of independence, they no longer feel the need to go to church. "If I go," one of them said, "it would be to meet

with friends.” Once they no longer find friends at church, their attendance stops. At a younger age they “went to church because they had no choice but to go where their parents took them.”

Immigrant leaders are more sincere than diplomatic. One interesting comment made by two interviewees was that Hispanic churches are mostly led by first generation immigrants who tend to be “more sincere than diplomatic.” From the podium and in one-to-one communication, some of these leaders tend to be harsh, impolite, and boldly impose their particular view of religious behaviors and Christian norms. “I’d rather stay home than go to church and listen to those people,” said one respondent.

Disassociation, not desertion. When asked about their affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist church, most interviewees who no longer attended church services responded that they still considered themselves Adventists. They believed going to church does not make them “feel overly enlightened or benefited.” When they return to church from their parents’ insistence or to listen to a high profile preacher, they confessed they left the service “the same as they came in.” This is an alarming revelation and shows how irrelevant the church can be for some of our young people. This stupor about the church is not unique among Hispanic Americans. One interviewee claimed, “Our feelings as Hispanic Americans about going to church is no different from the feelings of my White Seventh-day Adventist friends at college (Seventh-day Adventist colleges).”

Required chapel attendance at Seventh-day Adventist colleges is not helping. Some Seventh-day Adventist colleges require students to attend a certain number of devotional services during the week. Penalties for not attending chapel can add up to several hundred dollars a semester. To avoid penalties, a number of boarding school students attend required chapel during the week and sleep late during the weekend, missing Sabbath morning worship, a service in which attendance is not required.

Retaining Hispanic Americans. When asked about what the church can do to attract and retain Hispanic Americans, many suggested fostering English or bilingual dialogue during Sabbath School so youth can speak in their preferred language. Some suggested creating new structures of participation rather than only giving Bible studies. Some youth feel adult, first generation immigrants don’t trust them, as demonstrated when these adults assign leadership positions which to older, immigrant members.

Most of the reasons uncovered by the research on why Hispanic Americans left the church are similar to the reasons why other ethnic groups leave. However, there is much the church can do in the retention of Hispanic Americans by facilitating more English usage during the church services, accepting cultural differences, and becoming more accepting of others

References

Sánchez, D. (2006). *Hispanic Realities Impacting America: Implications for Evangelism and Missions*. Church Starting Network.