Faith Communities Today

Seventh-day Adventist Congregations in North America

FACT 2020 National Survey of Congregations

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Introduction

This report highlights findings from a sample of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) churches as part of the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) study. The FACT study is a major interfaith survey of religious congregations in the United States conducted by a coalition of religious denominations every five years since 2000. Thus, FACT provides a snapshot of US religious institutional life, which reveals trends that increase our understanding of congregational trajectories.

The Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University administered the sampling and data collection among Adventist congregations using the questionnaire developed by the interfaith FACT steering committee. Because the North American Division of the Adventist denomination includes Bermuda, Canada and some Pacific island nations along the United States, a few congregations from those nations were included in the sample.

From a random sample of 1227 Seventh-day Adventist Churches, 313 local congregations responded to the FACT survey. The local church leadership decided who would complete the survey which could include any of the following: the pastor, first elder, church clerk, church treasurer and/or other church officers.

Study Findings

A Bit of History

How Congregational Origins Make a Difference

Nearly half of the Adventist congregations in North America (48 percent) were originally organized by 1950. Another third of the congregations were planted from 1951 through 1990, and 20 percent since 1990. The formation of new local churches has slowed principally in the most recent decade.

- Churches that began before 1915 since 2000 are more likely to be located in urban neighborhoods.
- Churches starting in 1915 to 1950 are primarily situated in small towns and rural areas.
- Churches planted from 1971 through 1990 are more likely to be in suburban communities.
- The congregations that opened prior to 1915 are generally the larger congregations and have a typical attendance of over 150 on Sabbaths.
- The small town and rural congregations are smaller with a typical attendance of 50 or less.
- Congregations started since 1990 are less likely to own their own building and those begun since 2000 are more likely to share space with a congregation from a different denomination.
- Congregations that started since 1970 were more likely to describe their worship style as contemporary.

Adventist congregations vary according to when they originated in several ways. These include geographical location, size of congregation, whether they own or share their space, and how they describe their worship style.

Congregational Location, Facilities, and Technology

Adventist congregational location and facilities are similar across North America. The majority of Adventist local churches (63%) report that over the years since the congregation was first organized, it has moved to a different location. Now, the vast majority (98%) enjoy a stable location for worship. Only 2% of the congregations reported that they do not have a permanent location for their services. By far the majority (84%) of these locations are owned by the local congregations. Only a small minority either rent a facility or have arranged to use it free of charge.

Nearly a third of Adventist churches in North America share their facilities with another congregation. About half that many in each case share their building with a nonprofit organization that serves the local community or a school. One in ten make their facilities available for the meetings of one or more support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and about an equal number allow a local government to use their facilities for community meetings, voting locations, or with a childcare center. Thus, the facilities for a substantial minority are often used for the common good.

When Adventist churches share their facilities with a congregation of a different language or ethnicity, they almost exclusively are sharing with an Adventist congregation. In most cases where an Adventist church is sharing its building with a congregation of another denomination there is a rental paid, so a significant amount of income from these arrangements is coming into the Adventist Church. There is one report of an Adventist church sharing its facilities with a Muslim congregation.

Most (94%) Adventist churches provide worship for their congregation only. Just six percent of the surveyed churches offer Sabbath worship in multiple locations. The median size of the churches' seating capacity is 200, with less than one in ten local churches reporting a seating capacity over 500. Thus, most Adventist churches in North America are relatively small. In this sense, little has changed compared to the 2010 FACT survey with similar percentages in these various categories.

Adventist worship facilities support at least the basic technology needs of their congregants. A large majority (85%) provide Wi-Fi access in the church building, use email (93%), have a Web site (84%), and use online giving (88%). The use of online giving is more likely in congregations started before 2000.

Most Adventist congregations (90%) use a video projector on Sabbath for some aspect of the services and two thirds (67%) report that they provide online live-streaming of their worship service or a sermon. More than three out of four congregations (77%) hold meetings online for

various groups and committees, using systems such as Zoom, Skype or GoToMeeting. The same number maintain an online archive of video or audio recordings of sermons and worship services.

Looking at social media use, 83% of congregations have a Facebook page, while the use of other social media on the Internet is much more limited. Just 21% use Twitter and 23% use Instagram. All three social media are more likely to be used by larger congregations with a typical attendance of more than 150.

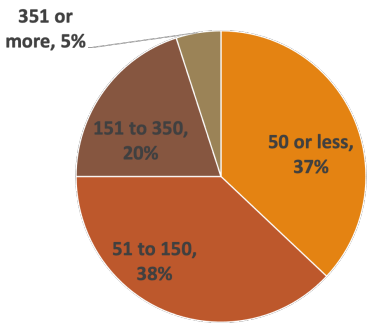
The majority of Adventist congregations (83%), use texting in their communications. Fewer congregations use other types of communication such as texting (16%), podcasting (21%), blogging (40%).

The use of digital media by Adventist congregations has grown significantly over the last decade. While the majority of congregations in 2010 reported the use of email and a website, this has grown to be almost universal. The largest growth has been in the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. The production of podcasts as more than doubled.

Church Attendance, Congregational Growth, and Typical Attendees

Local churches were asked to report their average attendance in 2019 instead of 2020 because the COVID-19 public health crisis has resulted in worship attendance being ended or shifted to digital arrangements in most places in North America. The following offer a description of the functional size of Adventist churches in North America prior to the pandemic of 2020.

Average Worship Attendance	
50 or less	37%
51 – 150	38%
151 – 350	20%
351 or more	5%



Although reported differently, we asked the same question about the average attendance on Sabbath in the 2010 survey. The data indicate that over the past decade the denomination has not seen a significant increase in the percentages of large churches.

Church growth was measured by comparing the typical Sabbath attendance reported for five years previous to the typical Sabbath attendance reported for 2019, prior to the disruptions of

the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 40 percent of the congregations reported growth and a growth rate was calculated for these.

About one in eight Adventist congregations in North America have had an exceptional growth rate over the past five years. The largest number of congregations reported decline or no change in the typical Sabbath attendance over the past five years among congregations reporting these figures. However, 39 congregations in this study did not provide the data needed to calculate a growth or decline rate. It is also important to understand that the data above are based on attendance, not membership counts.

Age of Congregants

Looking at the demographics of the congregants, the data reveals the following facts.

Children as regular attendees are scarce. The vast majority (79%) of churches have fewer than 30 children as regular participants.

Teens in the congregation are rare. A substantial minority (41%) stated having no teens, while 40% reported 1 to 9 teens in attendance.

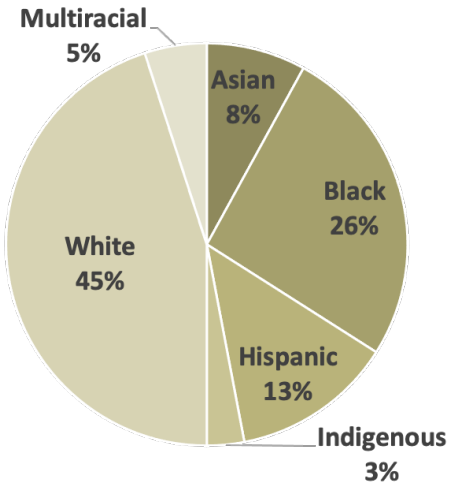
The attendance picture for young adults (ages 18 – 34) improves with the majority of churches (51%) having 1 – 9 young adults, a third with 10 – 29 in attendance, and 11% having 30 or more young adults as regular participants.

Middle-aged adults predominate in Adventist congregations with 51% reporting 1 – 16; 41% with 17 – 99; and 8% with a 100 or more middle-aged participants.

Older adults also represent a majority of congregants in Adventist churches. Half of the churches reported that they had 1 – 10 older adults, one-third had 11 – 40 attendees, and 14% had 41 to 99 older adult participants.

Ethnicity, Gender, and Education of Congregants

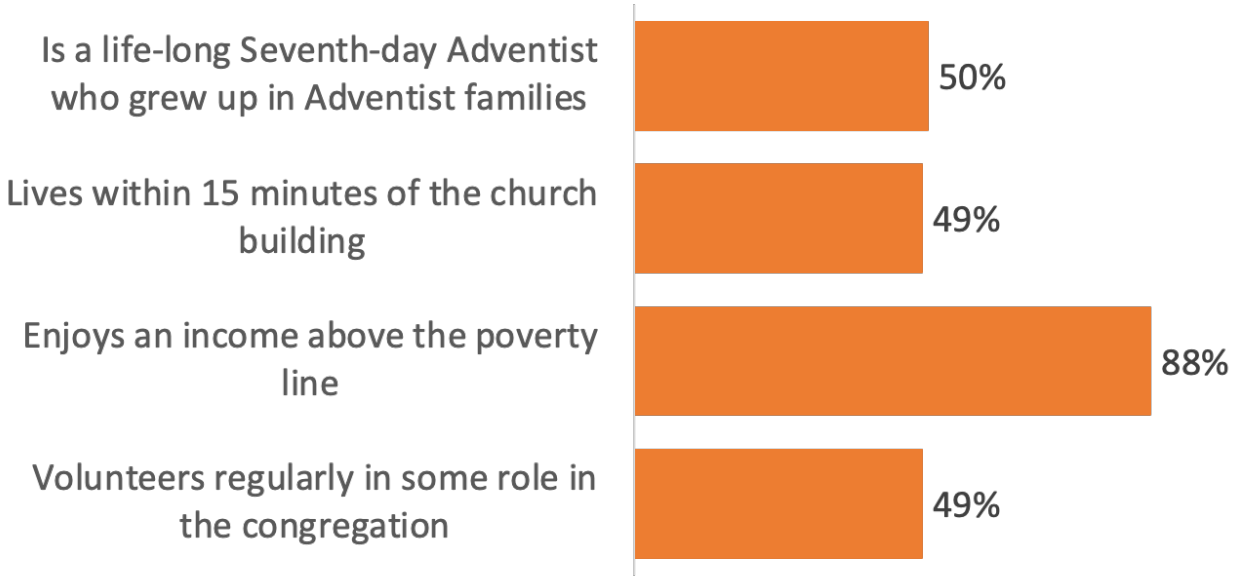
- The largest ethnic group representation is (45%) white or Caucasian.
- Black or African American congregants make up the next largest group at 26%.
- Hispanic church members provide 13% of overall attendees.
- Asians represent 8% of individuals in congregations.
- Multi-racial (5%) and Indigenous (3%) people are much fewer in numbers of attendees.



The majority of congregants are women (53%) and 54% of the churches reported having more than 53% female attendees.

An average of 40% of the regular, adult participants in Adventist congregations in North America are college graduates. This represents a significant increase from a decade ago with 25% college graduates attending.

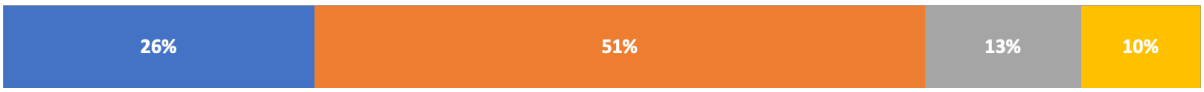
As the chart below shows, about half of the congregants are life-long Seventh-day Adventists who grew up in Adventist families, about half of the congregants live within 15 minutes of the church building, almost nine in ten enjoy an income above the poverty line and close to one in two volunteers regularly in some role in the congregation.



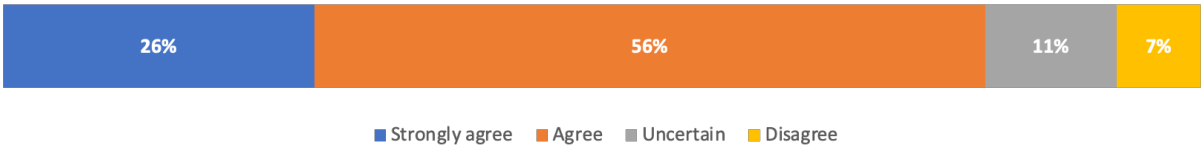
Congregational Mission, Vitality, Spiritual Practices, and Activities

The majority of Adventist congregations (76%) state that they have a clear mission and purpose and report strong indicators of vitality. For example, more than three out of four (77%) of congregational respondents claim their churches are spiritually vital and alive. One aspect of vitality is willingness to change to meet new challenges and two thirds of Adventist congregations stated their willingness to change to meet new challenges. The vast majority (82%) of the sampled congregations reported that they are good at incorporating new people into the congregation, with 77% of the congregations actively looking for new members. This figure is down from 93% in 2010. However, seven out of ten congregations report efforts to diversify their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup.

Congregation is Actively Looking for New Members



Congregation is Good at Incorporating New People



Looking at spiritual growth activities as part of congregational vitality, nearly all (97%) Adventist congregations hold weekly Sabbath School classes. Nine out of ten congregations (91%) also have one or more prayer groups. For most of these congregations this takes the form of the traditional mid-week prayer meeting, but for a growing number it may include multiple small groups meeting in homes or other locations.

Adventist congregations generally emphasize spiritual growth practices such as attending worship regularly, keeping the Sabbath and engaging in personal devotions. However, in contrast, congregations place little emphasis on fasting. About two-thirds (65%) reported placing no emphasis on fasting as a spiritual exercise. These trends have been remarkably stable over the past decade.

In addition to personal spiritual practices, Adventist congregations place a high value on sharing their faith. Congregations report placing much emphasis on living out one's faith in all of life (81%), talking about faith with non-members (64%) and parents talking about faith with their children (58%).

As part of a global denomination, it is not surprising that nearly half of Adventist congregations (46%) helped sponsor mission trips or other world mission activities. However,

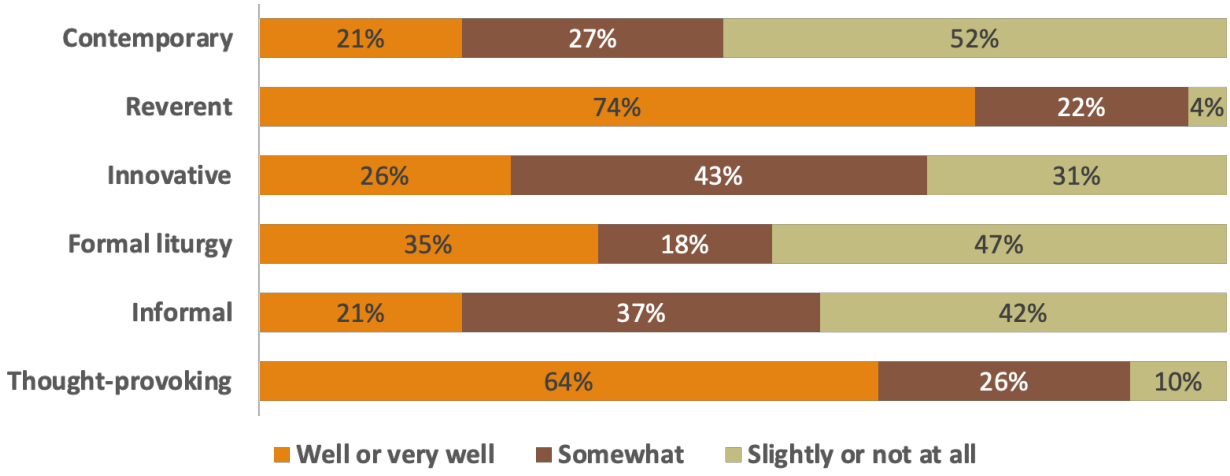
"local missions" such as participating in social justice advocacy is far less typical. Less than one in five congregations (17%) participate in social justice advocacy groups and less than one-quarter (22%) have a special needs ministry with help for physically, mentally, or emotionally challenged individuals. Although, these activities are more likely to be found among the larger congregations with a typical Sabbath attendance of more than 150.

Adventist congregations in North America reported relatively little interdenominational or interfaith involvement. A little over one-third (37%) of congregations reported involvement with other Christian groups in community service activities and only 20% reported educational or social events with other Christian groups. A small minority (13%) reported joint worship services with other Christian congregations.

Trends in Worship Style

The majority of Adventist congregations in North America reported having a worship service that is reverent, thought-provoking, and not contemporary. However, congregations started since 1970 were more likely to have a contemporary worship style. Congregations agreed far less about how formal, or informal or innovative their worship service was.

The presence of women in a congregation seemed to contribute to variation in how "informal" and "thought provoking" they reported their service to be. Congregations with more women were more likely to report that their worship was "informal" and "thought-provoking" in contrast with congregations with proportionally less women.



There is remarkably little difference in the respondents evaluation of the dominant descriptors of the Sabbath worship service in 2020 as compared to 2010. However, congregations saw their services as less innovative and less thought-provoking in 2020 than in 2010.

Adventist congregations characteristically feature children in their services. The majority (72%) of Adventist congregations reported that young people and children sometimes or often read or performed in Sabbath worship services. This involvement varies by congregational

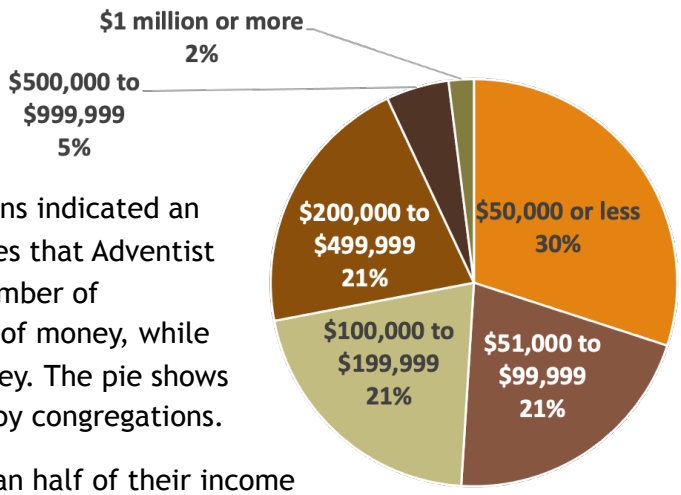
attendance. Worship roles for children are more likely in congregations with a typical attendance of 51 to 350, while the involvement of teens is more likely in congregations with a typical attendance over 150.

Organ music is typically a part of an Adventist worship service. Organs were used at least sometimes in the majority (55%) of Adventist congregations in our sample, but its use varied by when the congregation began, the typical number of attendees, and the church's growth rate. The congregations most likely to use organs were those started before 2000 and experienced little or no growth. Conversely, an organ is less likely to be found among growing congregations with an above-average growth rate.

Adventist congregations seldom experience having choir music as part of worship and even fewer use electric guitars. However, congregations with a typical attendance of more than 150 are more likely to use each organ, choir, and electric guitar. Over the past decade there has been decline in the use of an organ during Sabbath worship, and marginal increases in choirs, electric guitars, and children performing during worship.

Congregational Finances

Two thirds of Adventist congregations (67%) report that their financial health is excellent or good. The average total income from all sources reported by Adventist congregations was $406,660. A little over one-third (35%) occurred through online giving with an average of 32% of their givers using online mechanisms. Although the statistical average is around $400,000, 72% of the reporting congregations indicated an amount less than the average. This indicates that Adventist congregations include a relatively small number of congregations which handle large amounts of money, while most handle much smaller amounts of money. The pie shows the total annual expenditures as reported by congregations.



For most Adventist congregations, more than half of their income is from giving to the Tithe Fund. A smaller portion of the income comes from giving designated by donors for the local church budget, and relatively few Adventist churches have other sources of income.

On the other side of the ledger sheet, 72% of the congregations reported total annual expenditures of less than $200,000 in their most recent fiscal year. Conversely, a small number of large congregations reported total expenditures of $1 million or more.

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of congregations handling total funds in the smallest category and in the largest category, and a decrease in the number

of congregations with total fiscal operations in the mid-range categories. This most likely represents long-term trends indicating a decline in congregational life except among the largest congregations.

Congregational Expenditures

Staff salaries and benefits – 48% of congregations spent nothing, 23% spent one tenth or less of their total annual expenditures

Buildings and operations – 57% of congregations spent less than a third of their total annual expenditures

Program support and materials – 78% of congregations spent less than a third of their total annual expenditures

Mission and benevolence – 59% of congregations spent less than a tenth of their total annual expenditures

Other expenditures – 70% of congregations spent less than a quarter of their annual expenditures

Conflict, Safety, and Political Activism

Adventist congregations report little internal conflict. In fact, half of respondents (50%) indicated that they had no conflicts or that if they did the disagreements were not serious. For the congregations reporting conflict, the conflict was serious enough to result in people leaving (32%), withholding donations (11%), or a pastor leaving (7%). This is a significant increase from the 2010 FACT study; however this could be due to the change in methodology and/or wording of survey questions.

In looking at safety issues, 51% of the congregations indicated that they are somewhat or very concerned about personal safety and security when they come together on Sabbath. To address this concern, half of the congregations reported that they have a security team of volunteers in place. One percent indicated they have contracted with a paid, professional security firm. Additionally, 38% have installed security cameras and almost as many (37%) have alarm systems. Larger congregations (with a typical attendance above 150) are more likely to have alarm systems, security cameras and a volunteer security team.

Reporting on child safety issues, 89% of the congregations reported that they do background checks on volunteers who work with children. A denominational policy mandating this has been in place for more than a decade. Additionally, 21% report the use of check-in procedures for infants and children coming to Sabbath School, children's church and childcare provided on Sabbaths. Two thirds of congregations conduct training for volunteers who work with

children and almost as many (59%) provide general training on safety and security issues. These safety measures are more likely to be in place among larger congregations.

Adventist congregations are not prone to engaging in political action. In fact, 59% of the congregations avoid discussing political issues Less than 10% of the sample reported that over the last year they had organized groups, meetings, classes, or events designed to influence political issues in their community. Registering people to vote, participation in a march and meetings to discuss politics are more likely to have occurred in larger congregations. The data reveal that the majority of Adventist congregations are not unified in their views on political issues and only one congregation in ten is politically active.

Pastoral Staffing of Congregations

The majority of Adventist congregations (56%) in North America have one clergy person assigned to serve as their pastor. However, for more than half of those congregations, (58%) the pastors serve two or more congregations. About one in four congregations have a senior pastor plus one or more associate or assistant pastors serving as the pastoral staff. The comparative data from the 2010 survey indicate pastoral staffing has shifted toward more team situations and fewer solo assignments over the last decade. The median tenure for pastors in Adventist congregations in North America is three and half years and that has not changed significantly over the last decade.

Pastoral Demographic Information

Pastors are predominantly men. Women represent only five percent of the solo or senior pastors in the Adventist denomination in North America. However, the percentage of women serving as pastors in North America has increased significantly over the past decade.

Pastors are well-educated with 73 percent holding a seminary degree.

Pastors are middle age and higher. Half of Adventist pastors in North America are in their 40s and 50s. Another third are 60 years of age or older, and half of those are over 65.

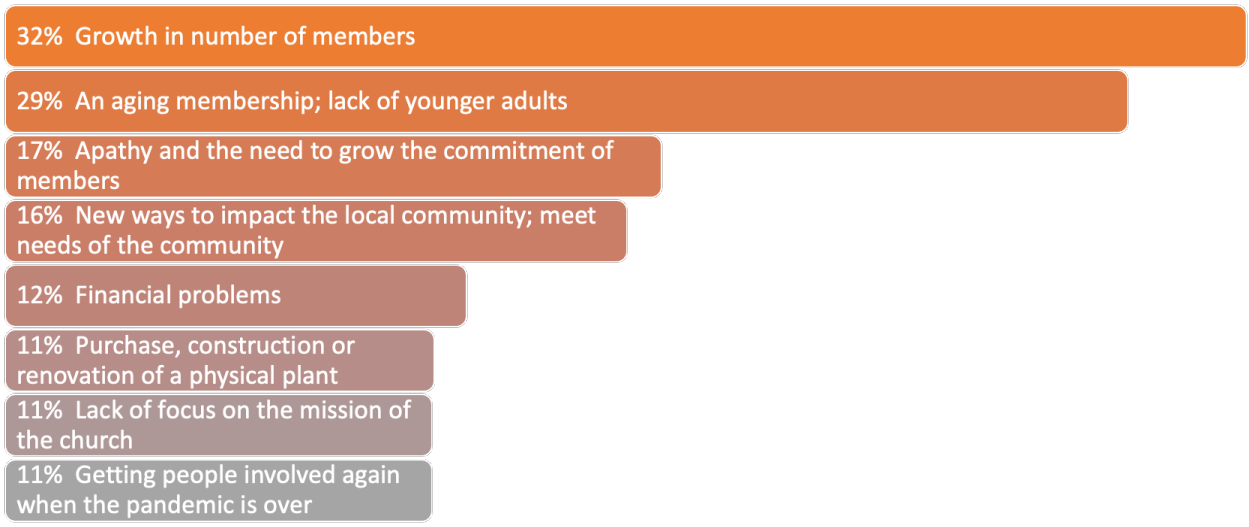
The majority (58%) of Adventist pastors are white/Caucasian, with 17% African American, 10% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 3% Indigenous. Six percent identified as “other.”

More than one in four (27%) of the pastors are immigrants.

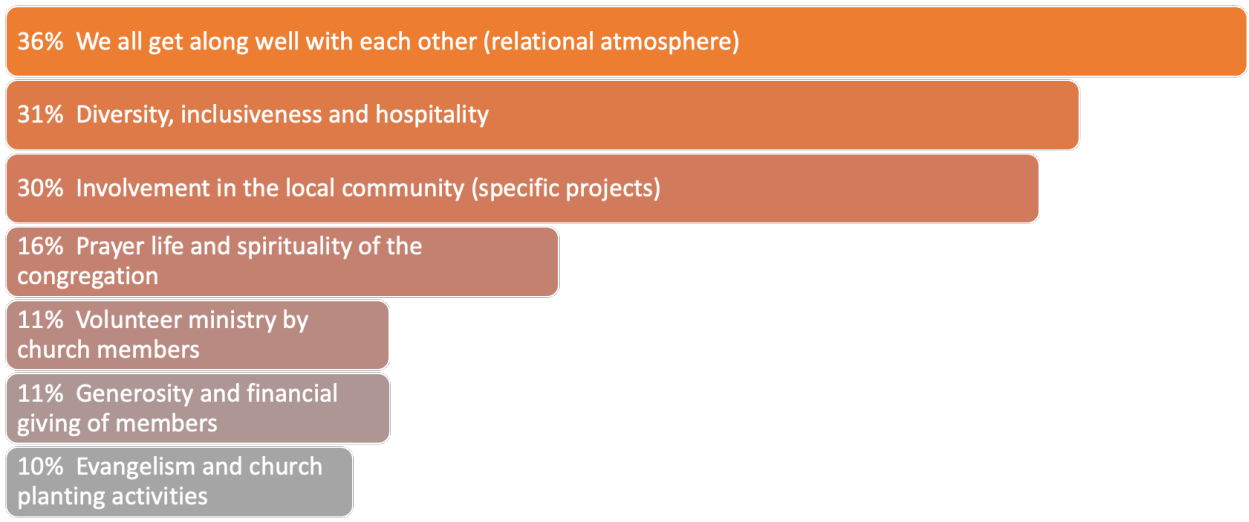
Conclusions

While Adventist congregations in North America have some concerns about the future of their congregations, they also reported many areas of pride as the following two charts show.

The Areas of Concern



The Areas of Pride



Given the similarities between the 2010 study and the 2020 results, Seventh-day Adventist Congregations present a stable picture of healthily congregational life.