

2-7-2019

Adventist researcher reports drop in black, Hispanic church numbers. HE blames national immigration debate.

Estefania Sanchez-Mayorquin

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/interactivejour_blog

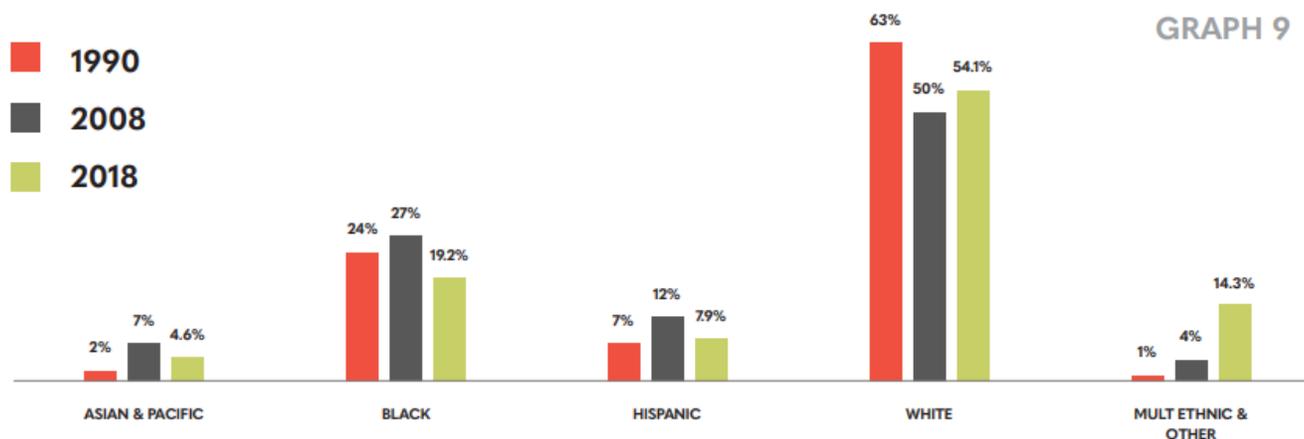
 Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

INVESTIGATING DIVERSITY

Exploring Race, Gender, and Unity in the Adventist Church

FEBRUARY 7, 2019 BY ESTEFANIA SANCHEZ-MAYORQUIN

Adventist researcher reports drop in black, Hispanic church numbers. He blames national immigration debate.



The graph above indicates the racial composition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1990, 2008, and 2018, as reported in the 2018 North American Adventist Demographic Report.

Monte Sahlin, director of the Center for Creative Ministry, recently completed a 2018 North American Adventist Study commissioned by the SDA North American Division Office of Education.

In the survey, 2,146 respondents reported household data, which led to information on 4,920 individuals. The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percent.

On Jan. 24, 2019, Sahlin presented the results — collected and analyzed by a team of researchers — to our Interactive Journalism class at Southern Adventist University.

One statistic that immediately jumped out was the drop in the percentage of black and Hispanic members between 2008 and 2018, and the increase in the percentage of white membership during that same period.

From 2008 to 2018, the black percentage dropped from 27 to 19 percent, according to the study, and the Hispanic population dropped from 12 to 8 percent. The white population jumped from 50 to 54 percent during that same time period, and the multiethnic population jumped from 4 to 14.3 percent.

Sahlin said the percentages are inconsistent with those in previous studies that he conducted over the decades, which showed a steady increase of minority SDA members within the United States, many of them Latin American and Caribbean immigrants.

The numbers also differ from those in a 2014 Pew Research Center Religion Landscape Study, which found the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be the most diverse in the nation.

In that study, 37 percent of adults who reported being Adventist were white, 32 percent were black, 15 percent were Hispanic, 8 percent were Hispanic and 8 percent were of mixed or another race.

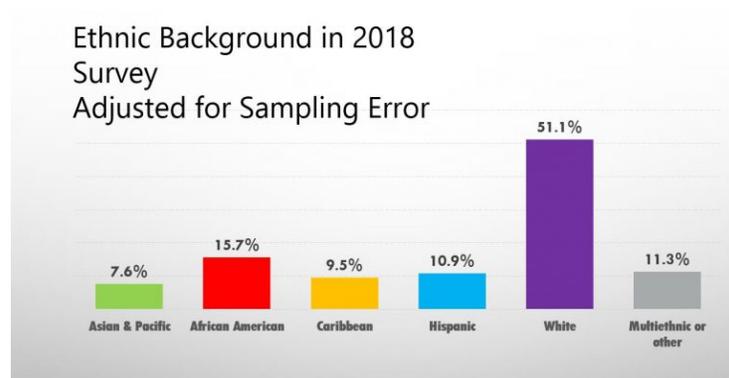
Sahlin said from studies he conducted in 1990 and 2008, “you would see that the tendencies from 1990 to 2008 is for the minority membership in the Adventist population to increase to the point that in 2008 half the Adventist population was from a minority background, half was from a white background.”

“So, when in 2018 the white background jumped up to 54 percent, our instinct is to say, ‘That’s, likely, not true; something’s not (right) here. Something is wrong,’” he said.

Why does Sahlin think the 2018 minority percentages are so low in his report?

“I believe the reason why is that we had great difficulty getting input from immigrants last spring,” he said. “And if you think about the political environment in the United States last spring, you can understand why lots of Adventists who are immigrants did not want to answer any survey about information about themselves and their families, even though it’s anonymous.”

Adjusting the numbers for the 3 percent sampling error, Sahlin said the numbers would be closer to about 51 percent white, 16 percent African American, 9.5 percent Caribbean, 11 percent Hispanic and 11 percent multiethnic or other.



Though Sahlin thinks those numbers are closer to reality, he believes there has been at least a slight dip in ethnic minority numbers.

“It probably is true that there has been a slight decrease in ethnic minority Adventists,” he said. “One study that I did in the interim period with one local conference, they discovered a significant number of immigrants who, during the recession, actually went back to Latin American countries that they had come from because the economy that they had come from was better there than their circumstances in the United States.

“How much of this is immigrants hiding? how much of this is actually immigrants returning? We don’t know.”

After his presentation, the class had a chance to ask questions and collect more information that would help further our research. Here are a couple of the questions and answers that were provided.

Q: Do you think that a possible factor for the decreasing number of diverse members in today’s church has anything to do with people feeling discriminated against?”

A: “I’ve never heard anyone say that, and I discuss these issues regularly with a very diverse circle of friends. As you probably saw in my research, one of the reasons why there is not more conflict over these is that the ethnic groups within the Adventist community tend to have relatively little contact with each other. For your generation that’s changing. For one thing, colleges and universities are far more integrated than they were 20 or 30 years ago. Local churches are becoming more integrated, particularly with congregations that attract young adults.”

Q: Do you have a similar study for the Seventh-Day Adventist world church?

A: “Yes, there are surveys of the world church. They now do them every 5 years. I directed the first one in 1994. We found that all over the world the percentage of Adventists who are immigrants is higher than the general population in almost every country.”

RESEARCH PROGRESS