The Adventist adaptation

by Philip Jenkins in the September 30, 2015 issue

A pastor baptizing a young man in Mozambique. Photo by Adventist Mission via Creative Commons license.

In recent years, some Christian denominations have discovered that their membership rolls are growing mightily in the Global South. Often those growing Christian communities are quite conservative on issues of gender and sexuality. We are now seeing such conflicts among the Seventh-day Adventists, which has passionately debated the ordination of women. A church that was once regarded as a purely U.S. phenomenon has become one of the world's fastest growing and most diverse.

The Adventists grew out of the millenarian fervor that swept the United States in the 1840s. In 1844, William Miller warned of the Christ's imminent return and the world's destruction. In fact, he did so twice, and the double failure provoked what is termed

the Great Disappointment. A remnant of Millerites then reconstructed their movement under the visionary leadership of New England–born Ellen G. White.

The new Adventism displayed many characteristics of the American sectarian world of the 19th century, not least the belief in charismatic prophetic leaders. The Seventh-day movement regards Saturday as the true Christian sabbath. Adventists follow older sectarian practice in avoiding meat, alcohol, and tobacco. These puritanical habits gave them a cranky image in the *Mad Men* era—until a series of longitudinal studies from the 1950s onward showed just how highly beneficial those lifestyle practices were. Much of what we know today about the linkage between diet and health grows out of Adventist health and mortality studies. We also owe to Adventist dietary theories the notion that cereal is an ideal breakfast food.

In the mid-20th century, Seventh-day Adventists stood on the far fringe of the North American religious spectrum. Some evangelicals even challenged their Christian credentials, worried by what was seen as their excessive veneration for Ellen White and her writings. By the late 1950s, the church celebrated the fact that it had surpassed the milestone of a million adherents, the vast majority of whom were in the United States. No scholar of religion picked the church as destined for any major growth spurt.

How shortsighted such secular prophets were. Sixty years later, Adventists constitute a global church that plausibly claims 18 million members, only 7 percent of whom live in the United States. The transformation is in fact even greater than these rough figures suggest, as so many Adventists within the United States have ethnic roots in Africa or the Caribbean. Most of this change has occurred since about 1980.

The SDA Church includes some 75,000 churches spread over 200 countries. Latin America and the Caribbean account for almost 6 million believers, almost a third of the church’s strength. Brazil is the country with the largest number of SDA members. Growth in Africa has also been spectacular. The church’s East-Central Africa division reports 2.5 million members worshiping in 11,000 churches.

Apart from the numbers, the church has developed its rich network of educational institutions and media outlets around the world. Among its many colleges and universities, the largest in numerical terms is Northern Caribbean University, based in Jamaica. Medical schools and hospitals abound, which follows naturally from the

long-standing Adventist commitment to health care.

When I meet an Adventist, I sometimes ask a semi-joking question as to how many relatives he or she has working in the medical professions. The answers are often lengthy. Adventist humanitarian and relief efforts are celebrated for their reach and efficiency.

The health and medicine theme goes far toward explaining Adventist successes worldwide. Any plausible account of emerging Global South churches stresses the importance of healing activities, commonly framed in terms of spiritual warfare.

That does not mean that ordinary believers reject scientific medicine if they are given access to it. As part of their basic teachings, Adventists show believers how to improve their lives in physical terms as well as spiritual, and that practical message carries enormous weight in societies overwhelmed by disease and substance abuse. Faithfully following Adventist principles promises a major improvement in life chances and in longevity.

Any church has its share of scandals and controversies, and the Adventists are no exception. By far the worst blot on the movement’s recent history was its experience in Rwanda, where some Adventist clergy were prominent in the genocide of the 1990s. This horrible experience raised critical questions about the depth and sincerity of conversion, in this country at least, and the need for fundamental Christian instruction.

Numbers alone, obviously, do not measure the growth of Christian faith. What they can tell us powerfully, though, is how churches adapt to the massive opportunities and challenges of globalization.