ADVENTISTS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

by Steve Currow

How is your church going? Is it alive, vibrant and well? Or is it limping along, with spurts of growth and other times of stress and pain? How vulnerable are we to the context in which we operate? Are we healthy, even though the Pentecost experience doesn't seem to be happening in our congregation?

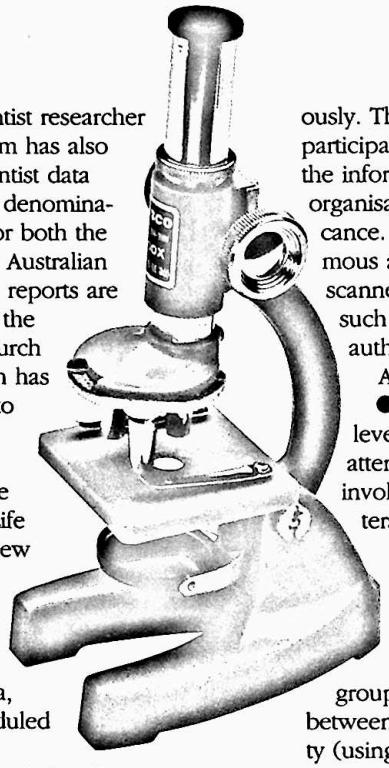
No doubt you know when your church is really struggling, but what signs should you look for before such a struggle? How do we as God's managers keep congregations in His church operating at maximum effectiveness so that it can fulfil the great commission of Jesus?

These and many other questions maybe answered in upcoming Church Life Surveys scheduled throughout Australia and New Zealand. Church Life Surveys have been twice conducted in Australia (1991 and 1996) and once in New Zealand (1997), and included many Christian denominations. The 2001 survey will continue the Australian and New Zealand involvement and, for the first time, include churches within the UK and the USA.

The survey will provide:

- insights into the health of participating churches
- comparisons between Adventist churches
- comparisons of churches with characteristics of the general population (through government census details), and,
- trends within denominations.

Peter Kaldor, director of the National Church Life Survey, has published a number of books outlining trends highlighted by the surveys. These include: *Winds of Change, Shaping a Future* and *Build My Church*. Adventist researcher Dr Alwyn Salom has also analysed Adventist data and published denominational trends for both the 1991 and 1996 Australian surveys. These reports are available from the Institute of Church Ministry, which has just relocated to Avondale College.



Dates for the 2001 Church Life Surveys are: New Zealand, April 28, and Australia, May 26 (except South Australia, which is scheduled for June 2).

It is anticipated that 40-50 per cent of Adventist attenders will be involved in these surveys. Churches will be selected randomly within certain categories. So that longitudinal trends can be studied, it is hoped that many participating churches will be those involved in the earlier surveys.

Initial work undertaken in preparation for the survey highlights some significant trends. Australia-wide during the past five years, the number of Adventist congregations, both churches and companies, increased by 25 per cent, while attendance in these congregations declined 2 per cent. Reasons for this include: general urban drift of the Australian population; the continued expansion of ethnic congregations; and the growth of the Sydney commuter radius into the region of surrounding conferences.

Pastors and church members are encouraged to take the survey seriously. The information it will provide participating churches is valuable. But the information it provides the church organisation is of strategic significance. All answers will be anonymous and processed by computer scanners. However, the value of such research is dependent on the authenticity of answers.

Areas to be surveyed include:

- a profile of attenders—age, levels of education, frequency of attendance, sense of belonging, involvement in small groups, matters of belief
- profile of congregational health and vitality—drawing people in, reaching out, growing in faith, and,
- profile of community—groups in local community, bridges between congregation and community (using survey and census data).

The success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in completing Christ's great commission is dependent upon our willingness to be guided, both individually and corporately, by the Holy Spirit as we address both the strengths and challenges identified through this project. R

For further information, contact Dr Steve Currow, Director, Institute of Church Ministry, Avondale College (phone 02 4980 2228, or email icm@avondale.edu.au), or visit the National Church Life Survey website www.ncls.org.au, or www.clsnz.faithweb.com (New Zealand).

Steve Currow is the director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Avondale College. He has been involved in working on Church Life Survey material in both Australia and New Zealand.