

7-2015

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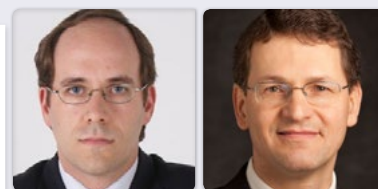
Kuhn, Wagner and Dias, Marcelo, "Adventist Mission: From Awareness to Engagement—Part 1" (2015). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 27.

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Adventist mission: *From awareness to engagement—Part 1*

An invitation to focus and unity around every Seventh-day Adventist's reason for being

More than 140 years have passed since J. N. Andrews left for Europe as the first official Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) missionary. The decision by the General Conference Mission Board to sponsor “the ablest man in all our ranks,”¹ coupled with Andrews’s passion and disposition to face the life-threatening challenges and take a special prophetic message overseas, marked the consolidation of a deep revelation-inspired conviction and established a paradigm for the missionary ethos of the Adventist movement. As we celebrate the past and are challenged by the future, it is time to reflect on the reason for the Seventh-day Adventist presence in this world.

After 100 years

In September 1974, *Ministry* published an article titled “Adventist Mission: After a Hundred Years” by Gottfried Oosterwal. His assessment of the first century of official Adventist mission noted some trends that

included (1) the membership growth (from 6,000 to 2.4 million); (2) the geographic expansion (from exclusively in the United States to 80 percent of the members living in other countries); (3) the ethnic diversity of missionaries (despite no exact numbers, it was supposed that non-American missionaries accounted for 60 percent of those coming from North America); (4) the immense and continuous growth of the Advent movement around the globe (nearly 5.7 percent per year); (5) the large number of institutions (hospitals and clinics, colleges and academies, elementary schools, publishing houses, orphanages, and old peoples’ homes, food factories, 70,000 employees); and (6) the high per capita giving (US\$161.31 per year).

What amazed him, however, was not just that information, as incredible as it was, but a more remarkable aspect of a century-old Adventist mission: its unity. “After a hundred years Seventh-day Adventist mission, universally,” the article says, “is still fervently proclaiming the same message that also moved

its pioneers and founders—namely, that Christ, the Redeemer of all men and the Lord of this world, has now entered the last phase of His mission, the judgment, to bring about the restoration of the kingdom of God in full glory.”²

More than 40 years ago

In 1974, the most striking change in the nature of Adventist mission had been the shift from pioneer evangelism and the planting of churches to the specialized ministries of education, hospital work, technical assistance, and administration. Less than 2 percent of all missionaries were called to work on the ground as *grass-roots* missionaries. The large majority was part of the institutional ministry of service. In many places in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, that was the natural result of a growing church, which had then developed a support system through its institutions.

Besides the need for a continuous fostering of the true nature and mission of the church and a clear theology to guide that enterprise, two trends of the

mid-1970s were listed as limitations: “one is the all-too-exclusive emphasis of our overseas missionary movement as an intrachurch program, with its lack of evangelistic outreach to all the peoples on earth; the other is the concept that missionaries should return home as soon as there are indigenous workers and leaders prepared, able, or willing to take over their specialized ministries.”³

Whatever the challenges after 100 years of mission, the overall assessment was optimistic due to the fact that the church’s diversity had not affected its unity. The writings of Ellen G. White were cited as one of the causes because they had given “the church not only a

of 2013, the Adventist Church had more than 18 million members⁶ (18,143,745), while an estimated 25 to 30 million men, women, and children attend weekly Adventist worship services in 76,364 churches and 68,845 companies around the world.⁷

Sabbath School membership continues a trend of being higher than actual church membership.⁸ The last 40 years witnessed a membership increase of 659 percent⁹ with an average annual growth of 4.76 percent.¹⁰ In the last ten years, more than a million people have joined the church every year.¹¹ Adventism, it turns out, is the fastest-growing denomination in countries like Australia and the United States.¹²

percent of membership) contributed 56.5 percent of world tithe in 2010, the membership of the Global South has become a more significant world contributor in recent years. In 2010, the Global South contributed \$885 million (43.5 percent) of the world tithe.¹⁶

Another trend in the last few decades is an increase in the number of Adventist institutions. By 2012, the church had more than doubled the number of secondary and tertiary schools, reaching a record high of 2,128 institutions. The number of orphanages, nursing homes, and retirement centers also more than doubled since 1980.¹⁷ When including food industries, hospitals, clinics, and

While the church has rejoiced in its advance in many fronts, both internal and external challenges remain.

common authority but also a common principle of hermeneutics on almost every aspect of church life and theology.”⁴ Common polity, theology, and brotherhood were other important elements of a dynamic that maintained the unity of the church. Despite the challenges, one thing certainly was evident in 1974—the missionary era had not ended.

Today

A close look at the annual statistical reports of the General Conference and other recent information should help describe Adventist mission after 140 years. The Adventist work has been officially established in 208 of 232 countries (recognized by the United Nations). From the seven billion people who live in the world, only about 155 million live in countries without any Adventist established work.⁵ At the end

A study of the reality of the church today will underline interesting trends. In the last four decades, there has been a clear shift in the world Adventist presence. Following the general trajectory of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South, the majority of Adventist members today live in what were once missionary-receiving areas: 6.6 million in Africa, 5.8 million in Latin America, and 3.4 million in Asia.¹³

Membership has also increased in the 10/40 Window.¹⁴ Following the growing membership, tithes and offerings also increased in the last 40 years. In 2012, there was a record high total in tithe and offerings (\$3,276,600,259): 70.6 percent from tithes, 4.1 percent from world mission (including Sabbath School and other GC and ingathering funds), and 25.3 percent from intradivision and local church funds.¹⁵ While the Global North (approximately 8.5

publishing houses, the total number of institutions hit a record setting 2,841 (besides 5,714 primary schools). The 14 media centers account for a new category created since the 1980s.¹⁸ The same trend is identified in terms of administrative organizations. In 2012, there was a record high number of union conferences and missions and local conferences and missions. Consequently, the number of general and institutional employees more than doubled since 1980.¹⁹

A more missiological reading of the reports may give clues to the outreach approach the Adventist Church as a world denomination has employed.

1. The traditional group of literature evangelists seems to have been steady from 2008 to 2011 at around 7,000 (credentialed and licensed) around the world. In 2012, 13,543

- full-time literature evangelists were listed under publishing.
2. Media ministries also continue to be part of the outreach strategy following general tendencies of society. Compared to 1980, the church owned and operated only one-seventh of the radio stations in 2012, and more than doubled the television stations.
 3. The creation of Women's Ministries (in the 1990s) has helped local churches focus on the needs and interests of that particular segment of the population. In 2012, they reported 129,320 persons baptized as a direct result of ministry by women, 63,180 reclaimed members, and 100,933 non-SDA women attending their meetings.
 4. Children's Ministries are another example of segmented outreach. In 2012, 138,630 evangelistic outreach programs around the world were put on for children.
 5. The main evangelistic thrust of the church, however, remains at the local level by the laity involved in Bible schools. In 2012, 716,162 baptisms (compared to 193,783 in 1980) were reported as being a direct result of that outreach. Interestingly enough, Bible school enrollments have decreased. In 2012, only 545,374 enrollments (down from 700,777 in 1980) and an unusually high number in 2012 of lay campaigns/seminars with 1,198,968 (compared to 251,691 in 2010 and 52,877 in 1980).²⁰

While the church has rejoiced in its advance on many fronts, both internal and external challenges remain. Internally, the issue of membership retention, which has received attention lately, has led the church to emphasize the study and implementation of intentional discipleship processes and encourage global programs of

auditing. In 2013, the membership increase (262,254) was lower than the number of those who left the church (the total of persons who joined the church was 1,091,222).²¹ Some have pointed out that the process of institutionalization has not been efficiently connected with the purpose of the church they serve, instead making it even harder to fulfill the Adventist mission. Others have been concerned about the laity commitment to mission. Even though mission offerings hit a record high \$85,254,154 in 2012, it has reached a record low percentage of total tithes and offerings—2.6 percent in 2011 (compared to 8.67 percent in 1980²²). The number of lay Bible studies has also decreased: 6,759,370 in 2012 (down from 9,184,988 in 1980). Finally, the number of missionaries has fluctuated: around 1,700 new missionary arrivals (including interdivision employees [IDEs], Adventist Volunteer Service, and Global Mission pioneers).



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In 2012, there were 2,260 missionaries serving (IDEs and Global Mission pioneers).²³

That reality seems to have been reflected in the lower average annual growth in the last ten years (3.3 percent). Traditional Adventist areas have plateaued,²⁴ including southern Germany, Poland, Japan, Hungary, Switzerland, New Zealand, Austria,

raised in the two regions: while the Global North has been actively discussing women's ordination, the Global South seems to have dismissed that in preference to staying focused on mission. Analyzing this current panorama, David Trim, director of the Office of Adventist Archives, Statistics, and Research, commented that "we are excited at this growth at a time when,

will the church accomplish the almost impossible task of reaching the world with the gospel? What more can be done (and in better ways) towards this overarching goal? How could the church channel its enormous "mission energy," especially with the youth? How can the church provide mission opportunities for people who want to serve in the mission field? Can new structures and



Portugal, and Australia. Three unions in North America are also part of this list: Pacific, Lake, and North Pacific Unions.


However, the 15 fastest-declining unions are in Euro-Asia, Trans-European, and Inter-European Divisions.²⁵ As G. T. Ng points out, "Membership [has] increased in tandem with baptisms, rather than merely reflecting demographic factors. In 1960, the baptisms in the Global North represented 31 percent and in the Global South, 69 percent of world baptisms, respectively. By 2010, baptisms in the Global South increased three fold to an extraordinary 96.2 percent of all baptisms that year."²⁶

These dissonant realities are also confirmed by the different concerns

globally, many religious groups are no longer growing. We thank God that, in the face of challenges such as political oppression, religious persecution, and increasing materialism and secularism, this movement, which emphasizes hope and wholeness, is continuing to grow."²⁷

Tomorrow

Opportunities and challenges during the last 40 years, and especially in the beginning of the twenty-first century, have led the Adventist mission to learn, emphasize, and develop specific missionary dynamics. As the Adventist Church faces the future, some old questions remain and some new ones also demand an answer: How

platforms for mission be created so that more missionaries will serve in unentered areas (10/40 Window, etc.)? How will the church reach the urban masses and the urban poor, and not neglect the urban rich? Can we create more service opportunities on the continuum between IDEs and Adventist Volunteer Service/tentmakers? We will address these important questions in part 2 of "Adventist Mission: From Awareness to Engagement" in the September 2015 issue of *Ministry*. 

1 Ellen G. White, Letter 2a, 1878 (To "Dear Brethren in Switzerland," August 29, 1878., *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 5, 436.

2 Gottfried Oosterwal, "Adventist Mission: After a Hundred Years," *Ministry*, September 1974, 24–27.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

- 5 "Established work" is officially defined as a country or area of the world where one or more of the following criteria have been met: (1) an organized church meets regularly; (2) a mission station, health care facility, or school is functioning regularly; or (3) a regular full-time denominational employee is based in the country or area carrying on outreach or soul-winning activities through such units as a Sabbath School, an organized company, or a language school.
- 6 Mark A. Kellner, "Adventist Church Membership Passes 18 Million Member Mark" *Adventist Review*, December 17, 2013, www.adventistreview.org/church-news/adventist-church-membership-passes-18-million-member-mark.
- 7 *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 27. documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2014.pdf.
- 8 In 2011, it represented 107 percent compared to 119.07 percent in 1980. *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, revised August 11, 2014, 7, documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2014.pdf.
- 9 There were 2,390,124 members at the end of 1973. Numbers used to calculate percentages are from *111th Annual Statistical Report of Seventh-day Adventists 1973* <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR1973.pdf> and *2014 Annual Statistical Report*.
- 10 The average annual growth rate was based on the table found at www.adventiststatistics.org/stats_y_ga.asp?fieldID=G10001&view=y_ga&StartYear=1973&EndYear=2013&submit=Build+Table.
- 11 Andrew McChesney, "Church Membership Reaches 18.1 Million," *Adventist Review*, October 12, 2014, www.adventistreview.org/church-news/church-membership-reaches-18.1-million.
- 12 Edwin Manuel Garcia, "Membership Nears 18 Million, Secretary Highlights Regions of Growth, Decline," October 13, 2013, *Adventist News Network*, news.adventist.org/all-news/news/go/2013-10-13/membership-nears-18-million-secretary-highlights-regions-of-growth-decline/; G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Adventists' Back-to-Basics Faith Is Fastest Growing U.S. Church," *USA Today*, March 17, 2011, usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-18-adventists_17_st_n.htm.
- 13 Garcia, "Membership Nears 18 Million."
- 14 Fewer than two million members lived in the Global North at the end of 2011. Middle East numbers have been audited. Membership in the 10/40 Window increased from 250,000 in 1992 to over 2.5 million in 2012, but the proportion to the population has only marginally increased, thus, not following what has happened in other parts of the world. *2013 Annual Statistical Report*, 2, 4, and *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 80.
- 15 In 1980, for example, tithes represented 62.1 percent, world mission 11.2 percent, and intradivision and local church 27.1 percent of total tithes and offerings. *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 4. An important observation is that more of what members are giving goes to tithe rather than world mission.
- 16 Compared to 1960, this was an increase of 1,171 percent in real terms, as opposed to the 131 percent for the Global North. G. T. Ng, "Seventh-day Adventist Mission: The Shifting Landscape," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 43.
- 17 Summary of Institutions (table 7), *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 4.
- 18 Secondary and tertiary schools: more than doubled since 1980, 882 schools; orphanages: from 80 in 1980 to 170 in 2012; total institutions: from 1,451 in 1980. *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 4-6.
- 19 Union Conferences and Missions: 124, a 55 percent increase from 80 in 1980; local conferences and missions: from 377 in 1980 to 601 in 2012; and, general and institutional employees: in 2012 there were 255,982 active employees compared to 85,839 in 1980. *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 4, 5.
- 20 Literature evangelists were 7,073 in 1980 and 5,315 in 2012. In 2012, radio stations were 455, down from 3,328 in 1980, while TV stations owned and operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church amount to 918 in 2012, up from 343 in 1980 with a peak in 2004 of 2,252. In terms of Children's Ministries, vacation Bible School attendance by Adventist families and non-Adventist families peaked in 2005. *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 5-7.
- 21 *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 27.
- 22 *2014 Annual Statistical Report*, 88, \$34,564,983 (mission offering) divided by \$398,880,407 (tithe).
- 23 IDE appointees are down from 1,497 in 1980 to 92 in 2012. Active IDEs are down from 1,388 in 1980 to 839 in 2012. There has been an overall downward trend since the 1980s. David Trim, *2012 Annual Council Report*, figure 4, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/Other/ACRep2012.pdf>
- 24 "Plateaued" is defined as having membership growth rate of less than 12 percent in a ten-year period.
- 25 The reason given is the population loss in the Eastern European nations that have been set back by a major economic crisis and high unemployment in and around the former Soviet Union.
- 26 G. T. Ng, "Seventh-day Adventist Mission," 38.
- 27 Kellner, "Adventist Church Membership."

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