From its beginning, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has measured progress. After all, if you aim to accomplish something but do not measure your progress toward that something, how will you know if you are actually making progress? Therefore, most of us agree we need to make some sort of measurements, which in this paper I refer to as metrics. However, what should we measure, and why?

This article will focus on comprehensive metrics. To be sure, there are many more categories and types of metrics, but having a clear understanding of the purpose and place of comprehensive metrics will help us bring our mission into clearer focus.

Mandate

A mandate typically outlines a task and any parameters associated with that task such as the scope of the task. The governing board of a company may decide that the scope of its marketing territory is just the 50 states of the United States and it communicates this to its executives. Those executives need not concern themselves with what is happening in Canada, Mexico, or Brazil. However, they certainly need to concern themselves with what is happening in the United States. That is their mandated scope and they definitely need one or more metrics to assess progress within that territory. For such a company, a comprehensive metric must measure the entire United States.

Undoubtedly, they will want to have metrics that relate to only portions of their entire territory (certain states, top sales regions, cities of a certain size, etc.), but for sure they need to know what their comprehensive progress is within their entire mandated territory.

The scope of the church’s mandate is clearly the entire world and every living person in it (Acts 1:8; Mark 16:15). Therefore, while the church
unquestionably needs metrics dealing with portions less than the whole, it certainly needs comprehensive metrics dealing with the entire scope of the mandate, the inhabited earth.

Geopolitical Nations as Comprehensive Metric

From the time of its official organization in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has collected data such as the number of members, the amount of giving, book sales, and more. Understandably, to begin with, the church gathered this information and monitored progress only from those areas where it was active.¹ Later, the church began to track where it was established and where it had no presence throughout the world in terms of geopolitical nations, thus developing a truly comprehensive metric.³ This metric helped both leaders and other church members to be more aware of the church’s progress and more easily see the remaining task.

Figure 1. The percentage of countries with and without established work of the Seventh-day Adventist church has varied little since 1950. Much of the variation that does exist is due to changes in numbers of countries recognized by the United Nations. Percentages are shown in 5-year increments except for 1985 and 2013. No statistics of entered and unentered countries appear in the 1985 Annual Statistical Report, so the numbers from 1986 are used instead. Data from 2013 are used because it is the most recent available information.
However, by 1950, the church had work established in 84% of the geopolitical nations recognized at that time (Annual Statistical Report 1950:28). That percentage has changed very little since then (see figure 1). When the church nears universality based on a metric, that metric ceases to be useful and it is time for a new metric.

**Population Segments as a Comprehensive Metric**

The Church, however, did not adopt a new comprehensive metric until it introduced the Global Mission initiative at the 1990 General Conference session in Indianapolis. This new comprehensive metric was based on what the church called “population segments” defined as “non-overlapping geopolitical territories of the world, each occupied by about 1 million persons as of 1988” (Annual Statistical Report 1989:42fn). Elsewhere, it was explained that a population segment was “a geographically defined territory occupied by between 500,000 and 1.5 million people” (2). The world field was divided into more than 5,000 population segments that were listed and published in the Global Mission Databook.

The church then assigned each population segment to one of three categories: (1) the church’s presence (meaning the population segment had at least one organized church), (2) the church’s outreach (no organized churches, but at least one company), and (3) the church’s mission (no organized churches or companies). The idea was to track the progress of establishing the church in unreached population segments (category 3) as well as the progress of companies becoming organized churches.

This reporting format lasted just four years until 1992. It is not clear why it was changed, but a perusal of the 1992 Annual Statistical Report suggests that reporting and progress may have been slow in coming. The majority of line items show no change, unavailable information, or even a decline in the number of churches for the church’s “presence” column.


In 1995, the Annual Statistical Report adopted yet another format that has remained up to the present. Those conferences and missions having a church-to-population ratio of more than 1 million population per church are listed. The core idea of 1 million population is preserved and the term “population segment” was used for two additional years, making its last appearance in the 1996 Annual Statistical Report. In 1997, “population segment” became “presence,” and the population segment metric essentially passed into history after a short tenure of just seven years. Nevertheless, in a report to the 2000 General Conference Session...
in Toronto, Mike Ryan stated that in 1990 the “church identified 2,300 groups of 1 million people in which there were no Seventh-day Adventists, and it was hoped Global Mission would reach each group by 2000.” He went on to say, “Since 1990 world population growth has added another 600 groups, making the total 2,900. We rejoice that today more than 2,000 have an Adventist presence, but some 900 remain a challenge” (2000:11). Then in 2005, G. T. Ng, an associate secretary at the church world headquarters at the time, indicated that by 2001 “only 460 groups [population segments] remain in which there is no Adventist presence” (2005:56). However, Abraham Guerrero rightly observes in his recently completed doctoral dissertation that “if the 1-million-population-segment approach is still going to be used, it is necessary for accountability to track and report where the church is in relation to the segments identified in 1990” (2013:172). That is, for accountability, the church needs to indicate what the population segments were that were identified in 1990, precisely which ones were reached by 2001, and what the current status of the work is in each of these areas.

It should be noted that neither Mike Ryan nor G. T. Ng indicated what they meant by “Adventist presence.” It may not be synonymous with “established work” as defined by the church and referred to earlier in this article (see note 2). Nevertheless, if within 11 years the church was able to put an “Adventist presence” in nearly 2,500 previously unreached population segments, it is a testimony to what can be accomplished within a short time when there is focus and intentionality. That would be an average of slightly more than 200 new segments reached per year.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of the Population Segment Metric**

The population segment metric made positive contributions to the church’s mission. It was more granular than geopolitical nations and thus better pointed out the remaining unreached and the remaining task. While in 1990 the geopolitical nation metric revealed just 28 of 218 countries (12.8%) without Seventh-day Adventist work, the population segment metric revealed 2,248 of 5,257 areas (42.8%) without Adventist work.

On the downside, the metric was based on a unit that was entirely proprietary to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the “population segment.” This unit could not readily interface with metrics in use by any other Christian denomination or agency, any government, or NGO. Thus, the denomination could not leverage information developed by others for its own use.

**The Remaining Need for a Comprehensive Metric**

With the passing of the population segment metric, the church
effectively has had no comprehensive metric for nearly 20 years now, but urgently needs one. How can the church assess its progress toward fulfilling its mandate without such a metric? How can the church develop meaningful evangelism strategies without this kind of information? How can the church appropriately prioritize and allocate resources without such data?

**Defining a New Comprehensive Metric**

A comprehensive metric must include the entire inhabited earth and every person in it. The gospel mandate makes clear that the scope of the mandate is “all nations.” It is widely known that an examination of the Greek for this phrase reveals that the Bible is not referring to geopolitical nations as we know them, but rather something more akin to what we call “ethnic groups.”

To “par” with what the Matthew expression of the gospel mandate says, our metric should be related to “ethnic groups.” The gospel commission in Rev 14:6 supports and expands this idea when it says the everlasting gospel is to be proclaimed “to those who live on the earth—to every nation [same Greek word as used in Matt 28:19], tribe, language and people (NIV). It is as if the apostle is breaking down the earth’s population into various targetable units for the discipling process. Notice one thing about the terms the apostle uses. All of them are sociological in nature rather than geographical. It is not that geography should play no part in our metrics. Clearly, it should. However, it should not serve as the only attribute of our metrics, and in many cases should not be the primary aspect. This was another weakness of the population segment metric, which used “geopolitical territories” or “a geographically defined territory” as the basis for the metric. Part of the effect of this geographically defined territory metric was to miss significant numbers of unreached groups.

For instance, at the time the population segments were defined, Adventist Frontier Missions was exploring the possibility of a new project among the Maguindanao, a Muslim ethno-linguistic group concentrated on the east coast of the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. The Maguindanao numbered approximately 1 million, qualifying as an unreached population segment with perhaps just one or two baptized members. Yet, because Adventist churches existed in the geographical territory of the Maguindanao (filled with Filipino migrants originally from elsewhere in the country), the population segment (or segments) that was constructed to include the Maguindanao territory was classified as reached.

This is probably the main weakness of a geographically defined unit for a metric. It is blind to non-geographical differences. However, the Scriptures suggest sociological attributes should be considered when looking at the world to assess our task and progress.
Language Groups as the New Comprehensive Metric

The church has had the needed comprehensive metric unit for decades, and it was available in the 1950s when the geopolitical nations comprehensive metric ceased to be useful. That unit is languages or language groups.

From very early, the Adventist church has tracked and published in its annual statistical reports the languages (or at least the numbers of languages) in which it was publishing materials. The 1910 Annual Statistical Report provided a summary of the number of languages in which literature was published for specified years beginning in 1850 (see table 1).

With just a little adjustment, the church could have tracked, and still can track, the progress of its work using a metric based on language groups. Consider its abundant suitability:

1. It is comprehensive. Everyone has at least one language by which they communicate. Therefore, tracking the progress of the advance of the Everlasting Gospel among all language groups comprehensively tracks the church’s progress.

2. Its primary attribute is sociological. Rev 14:6 says the eternal gospel is to go “to every nation, tribe, language, and people.” Because this metric...
is primarily sociological in its outlook, it does not suffer from the same limitations as does a primarily geopolitical metric such as countries or cities. People of a language group can be identified wherever they are found and the progress of the gospel tracked.

3. Its granularity is appropriate. Typically smaller than most geopolitical areas, tracking progress based on language groups readily reveals the church’s status inside most geopolitical nations. At the same time, it is useful to identify language groups within a major urban area making it possible to focus on unique groups in a particular geographically-oriented unit and make the language group a flexible unit upon which to base a comprehensive metric.

Abraham Guerrero (2013) indicates the church considered a people group approach at the time the Global Mission initiative was being launched but opted for the 1-million population segment approach instead. One of the reasons rumored at the time for this decision was that there are too many very small people groups. It is true there are many small people groups and there are many small language groups. However, it should be noted there are a good number of very small geopolitical nations, but this has not prevented this unit from being used as a basis to track progress. Of the 24 geopolitical areas of the world listed in the 2013 Annual Statistical Report as still having no Adventist work, at least two-thirds of them could be considered very small. These geopolitical areas includes places such as San Marino, a tiny 24-square-mile sovereign country of 32,000 people situated on a mountainside in northeastern Italy. Also included is Tokelau, a tiny island nation of 1,000 people in the South Pacific. The list includes other very small geopolitical areas such as Monaco in Europe, Comoros off the coast of Africa, Saint Pierre and Miquelon in North America, and Brunei Darussalam in Asia. The fact that a class includes very small members does not mean it is not an appropriate and useful class for a metric.

4. Language groups are a well-known, widely-used feature. In contrast to population segments, which was a totally proprietary unit created by the church, language groups are known and widely used as a basis for decisions and activities by governments, NGOs, some mission agencies, and other groups. Most such groups generate useful information on the basis of languages. Thus, the church can readily leverage this information for its own use. The church has already begun doing this to a limited degree by using the Ethnologue, a publication of the linguistics arm of Wycliffe Bible Translators, to identify languages in which the church has publications and/or in which the church conducts oral work. The Joshua Project (joshuaproject.net) maintains an extensive database of information about the status and progress of Christianity among people groups around the

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world and links this information to language groups, thereby making it easy to leverage that information for our use. Some governments are developing information on the basis of language groups making it possible to also leverage their information. With language groups, the Adventist Church would not be starting from zero and would not be alone in developing very useful information.

**Examples of Progress Assessments Based on Language Groups**

For a number of years, GFI Consulting has been working with church entities to assess the status of Adventist work among language groups found in a church entity’s territory. Assessments have been carried out in the East-Central Africa Division, the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, and in a few unions and local conferences in other parts of the world. A few of the primary findings are described below.

**Much Better Granularity**

Using the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) as an example, figures 2 and 3 show the comparison between tracking the unreached by geopolitical countries and by language groups. Clearly, figure 3 provides church leaders with much more helpful information from which to prepare evangelism strategies and plans. This is a simplified map for illustration purposes. An actual union level map, as shown in figure 4, shows where individual language groups are found, gives the names of language groups, and indicates the status of Adventist work using one of seven status categories from entirely unreached (black) to well-established and growing (white).

**Most Language Groups Unreached**

As figure 5 shows, the great majority of language groups in the ECD are unreached. This is true in all places where GFI Consulting has researched thus far. Typically, from two-thirds to nearly 90 percent of language groups are found to be unreached. However, while there are exceptions, usually the population found in the unreached language groups is less than the population found in the reached language groups as figure 6 shows for the ECD. Not surprisingly, the church usually begins work first in larger language groups so reached groups typically have more population than unreached groups.

Nevertheless, the population found in unreached groups is very substantial with nearly 100 million people found in unreached language groups in the ECD. Figure 7 shows what a map of reached/unreached for the 48 contiguous states of the United States might look like if the number
Figure 2. East-Central Africa Division showing reached countries in white and unreached countries in black.

Figure 3. East-Central Africa Division (ECD) showing reached language groups in white and unreached language groups in black. Areas with few or no inhabitants or for which GFI Consulting has no data are in gray. The assessment in ECD was done prior to South Sudan being added to ECD territory. The assessment conducted by GFI Consulting classifies language groups into seven different categories based on the status of Adventist work. This map is simplified to show just the two categories of reached and unreached.

Figure 4. This illustration from the West Congo Union Mission in the East-Central Africa Division shows all language groups in the union, labeled by name and color-coded to indicate the status of Adventist work. The lighter the color shade, the more established the Adventist work. The darker the color shade, the less reached the language group. The cross-hatched areas have few or no inhabitants or GFI Consulting has no data for the area.
of people in unreached language groups in ECD were concentrated in the U.S. All states in black would have very few or no known SDA believers.

Furthermore, least it be thought all unreached language groups are small, ECD has 17 unreached language groups that number 1 million or more. Figure 8 reveals there are 40 unreached language groups in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division that number 1 million or more with several of them numbering 10 million or more and with one of them having more than 80 million people.
Figure 7. If the same number of people in the 48 contiguous states of the United States were unreached as in the East-Central Africa Division, a map of the unreached in the U.S. would look something like this in which about half of the territory is unreached.

Figure 8. The Southern Asia-Pacific Division has 40 unreached language groups that number 1 million or more. The largest unreached language group has more than 80 million people an has no known Adventist believers.
Adventist Work Concentrated in a Few Language Groups

Historically, Adventist work typically began in larger language groups. This was logical and appropriate. However, there has been a tendency for work to remain concentrated among a few language groups rather than progressively reaching out to surrounding language groups. In the work GFI Consulting has done thus far, this phenomena is most clearly seen in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division where in two-thirds of the unions, 90% or more of Seventh-day Adventist membership is concentrated in three or fewer language groups. Perhaps the most dramatic example is found in the South-Western Angola Union where 98% of Adventist membership is found in a single language group (see figure 9). This language group is the largest in the union and thus we would expect to find a majority of members in this language group. However, while this language group represents about 65% of the total general population found in the union, it has 98% of church membership, reflecting a 33-point spread. Another 26 language groups remain unreached.

![Figure 9](https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jams/vol10/iss1/12)
Strategy and Cooperation Needed

A metric based on language groups more clearly reveals the remaining challenges, but also reveals new strategic possibilities. Figure 10 shows a language continuum area stretching from southeastern China down into northern Vietnam. A language continuum or language chain is a group of languages where neighboring languages differ only slightly. Thus, neighboring language groups can readily understand one another. However, as you move along the continuum or chain, the differences accumulate so that language groups that are more distant along the chain cannot understand one another. This phenomena suggests a strategy that might involve starting at one “end” of the chain and working progressively along the chain toward the other “end.” Or, perhaps one might choose to start in the “middle” of the chain and work in two directions toward the two “ends.” In any case, an understanding of this feature of language groups can make reaching a significant number of language groups and people easier.

Figure 10. In a language continuum stretching from southeastern China into northern Vietnam, GFI Consulting research shows that virtually all language groups found in northern Vietnam (part of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division) are unreached. No assessment has been done in the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, therefore no data is available for the language groups found in China. Due to the nature of a language continuum, an effective strategy to reach these language groups calls for close cooperation between these two divisions.
In addition, this particular example of a language continuum crosses the boundary between two divisions of the church. It is very common for a language group to cross conference, union, or division boundaries. This calls for a higher degree of cooperation between church entities rather than suffering from the tendency to silo.

**Conclusion**

The Adventist Church has not had an operational comprehensive metric by which to effectively assess its progress for at least 18 years, and perhaps as much as about 70 years. Without such a metric, effective strategic planning for the comprehensive task of making disciples of all nations (ethne) is not possible. With relatively small adjustments, the church can turn data it has been collecting for more than 150 years regarding languages into an exceedingly useful comprehensive metric. This paper shows examples of this usefulness and articulates a few of the many possible strategic implications. Armed with such a comprehensive metric, accompanied by intentionality and focus, and powered by the Holy Spirit, the Seventh-day Adventist Church can make unusually large advances in taking the Everlasting Gospel “to every nation, tribe, language, and people.”

**Notes**

1 For instance, the statistical report for 1900 provides information from those areas of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and 27 other countries, islands, or places where the church had some degree of activity. [http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR1900__B.pdf#view=fit](http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR1900__B.pdf#view=fit) (accessed on 11 February, 2014).

2 The 1946 Statistical Report stated “It is generally considered that a country or political section has been entered by Seventh-day Adventist interests when regular medical, educational, or other mission activities are being conducted among the people of that particular area, or when there is in the territory one or more groups of persons connected in an organized way with the denomination, such as in Sabbath School or church fellowship. A new field is not considered as entered when only itinerant preaching or colporteur work has been done, or when there are only a few scattered believers” (p. 16). [http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR1946__B.pdf#view=fit](http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR1946__B.pdf#view=fit) (accessed on 4 April, 2014). With refinements, this definition of established work has been used since then up to the present.

3 A list of countries with Adventist work and without Adventist work first appeared in the 1919 Annual Statistical Report on page 22. [http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR1919__B.pdf#view=fit](http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/ASR/ASR1919__B.pdf#view=fit) (accessed on 11 February, 2014). It cannot be determined if this listing of countries was from a standardized list. Subsequent statistical reports did not necessarily list either entered or unentered countries, but typically would at least give the total number of countries entered. For example, the 1940 Annual Statistical Report lists neither entered nor unentered
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