

## 2015 GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION

### Secretary's Report

**G T Ng, Executive Secretary**

#### **Membership**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church began with a handful of Millerite Christians trying to make sense of the Great Disappointment in 1844 when Jesus did not return as expected. This small band of faithful members refused to give up their faith. They shook off their despondency and resolutely obeyed the biblical injunction to prophesy “about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings” (Rev 10:11). From the ashes of history, an end time movement arose, and over the succeeding decades, this small Adventist group grew into a global, prophetic movement of more than 18 million members. They can be found in 216 out of the 237 countries and areas of the world recognized by the United Nations, and operate 148,023 congregations, 173 hospitals, 2,164 secondary and tertiary schools, 21 food industries, 15 media centers, and 63 publishing houses. From an unorganized group to a global church, the transformation is nothing short of a miracle!

At the first General Conference Session in 1863 in Battle Creek, Michigan, 20 delegates representing 6 local conferences were in attendance. At that time, we had a membership of 3,500 in 125 churches with 22 ordained ministers and 8 licensed ministers. In contrast, the 60<sup>th</sup> General Conference Session in 2015, has 2,571 official delegates in attendance. They represent 18,479,257 Seventh-day Adventists from every continent. They come from 132 unions with 633 sections/missions/conferences. What God has wrought for the “little flock” has grown exponentially in 152 years!

In 2010, the world membership stood at 16,923,239. Three years later in 2013, Adventist membership hit a record 18 million mark for the first time in history. As of December 2014, there were 18,479,257 Seventh-day Adventists worldwide. Compared with the membership in 2010, we now have 1,556,018 more members than we had at the beginning of the quinquennium.

This membership number does not include unbaptized children, or the many others who also consider themselves as Seventh-day Adventists. In Papua New Guinea for instance, the membership on the books is around 250,000, but a recent government census revealed that close to a million people regard themselves as Seventh-day Adventists. Many who have left the church still consider themselves Adventists. In Jamaica, the books record 262,000 members; government census, however, reveals 323,000 people who claim to be Seventh-day Adventists. In Chiapas, Mexico, the situation is similar.

Historically, the year 1955 was significant because that year marked the first time in the denomination's history that we reached a membership of one million believers. It took 92 years to go from a membership of 3,500 in 1863 to one million in 1955. The second million-member mark was realized in 15 years, the third in 8 years, the fourth in 5 years, and the fifth in 3 years. Thereafter, it took about two years to reach each additional one million believers. Praise be to God!

This remarkable church growth is especially significant given the prevailing membership decline among mainline Protestant denominations. According to a recent report in *Christianity Today*, the Adventist Church is now the “fifth-largest Christian communion worldwide, after Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and the Assemblies of God” (*Christianity Today*, Feb 22, 2015).

Many church historians have observed that for the past 50 years, or so, the center of Christianity has shifted from North America and Europe (Global North) to Africa, Asia, and Latin American (Global South). The Christian heartlands of Europe are shrinking, and African, Asia, and Latin America are expanding with breakneck speed. The Global North is comprised of the industrialized, traditionally missionary-sending continents, while Global South is recognized as the mission fields.

This significant shift in membership from north to south has fundamentally changed the landscape of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well. In 1960, the Church in the Global South had a membership of 675,000 (54 percent of the world membership). Half a century later, its membership reached 16.9 million: 91.43 percent of the world membership. The Global North, on the other hand, had 570,000 members in 1960 and by 2014 had reached almost 1.6 million, or 8.5 percent of the world membership.

### **Baptisms**

This dramatic redistribution of membership from the Global North to the Global South is also reflected in the baptismal statistics. In 1960, the baptisms in the Global North represented 31 percent, and in the Global South, 69 percent of world baptisms, respectively. By 2014, 97 percent of world baptisms came from the Global South and 3 percent from the Global North, an epochal development indicative of extraordinary church growth on the one hand and decline on the other.

Statistics from the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research indicate that in 2014, a record 1,167,796 people joined the worldwide Adventist faith community, exceeding the 1,091,222 in 2013, or the 1,050,785 in 2010. What is the significance of more than a million people joining the church? It means 3,199 new believers join the church every day, or 133 every hour, or 2.2 every minute.

The year 2004 was the first time in the history of the Adventist Church that more than a million were baptized in a single year. The momentum has kept up through the years; 2014 was the tenth consecutive year in which more than a million members joined the church. In this quinquennium alone, 6,618,689 people joined the worldwide Adventist faith community through baptism and profession of faith.

### **Congregations**

Church planting is a priority in the mission endeavor of the church. The latest figures show that we had 78,810 churches and 69,213 companies in 2014. Compared with 2013, a record 2,446 new churches opened their doors to worshipers in a single year, or 6.7 new churches each day. Every 3.58 hours, a new church is planted. The previous record was

attained in 2002 with 2,416 new churches planted. The year 2014 goes down in history as the best church-planting year ever.

Last year was an exceptional year in the Church's 152-year history. It was the year with the highest number of baptisms, and the highest number of churches planted. It was also the tenth consecutive year in which more than one million were baptized, as well as the twelfth consecutive year in which more than 2,000 new churches were organized in a single year.

Overall, the 148,023 churches and companies that the church had in 2014 represent an increase of 12,678 over the total five years ago. It is remarkable that on average, 2,536 new churches and companies were added each year since 2010.

### **Growth Rate**

The average growth rate in 2014 was 1.85 percent worldwide. In 2006, the growth rate was almost 5 percent, making 2006 one of the best years in terms of membership growth. At a growth rate of 1.85 percent per annum, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is considered one of the fastest growing churches in the world.

Looking at this picture of growth is not complete, however, without reviewing attrition. In the five-year period 2010 through 2014, 6,212,919 people were added to the church. During the same period, 3,717,683 members left the church. Apart from those church members who fell asleep in Jesus, the net loss rate for the quinquennium is 60 lost per 100 converts.

This terribly high percentage is partly due to membership audits, a process that identifies and removes from membership totals people who have left the church over the years. Even looking at the past 15 years pre-dating the recent round of thorough audits, however, the equivalent losses are 48 per hundred gained. Whether those losses are individuals who have left in this quinquennium, or their absence was only acknowledged in this quinquennium, these are tragic figures that the church cannot afford.

Membership audits began in the previous quinquennium and have picked up speed during this quinquennium. The audit process has confirmed that honesty is still the best policy. A bloated membership is no longer acceptable in world statistics.

On a positive note, the Netherlands discovered to their joy during a recent membership audit, that they actually had more church members than they had thought.

### **Mission Challenge**

We pride ourselves on being the most widespread church in the world, established in 91 percent of the countries and areas of the world recognized by the United Nations. We congratulate ourselves for having been true to our prophetic mandate of prophesying "about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings" (Rev 10:11). We have been rather successful in implementing the Great Commission to go and "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt 28:19 and Luke 24:47).

When we think of “nations,” most of us think of countries like Mali, Egypt, or Brazil. However, the words in Greek are “*panta ta ethne*” which goes beyond geo-political entities. They more realistically point to the ethno-linguistic people groups within every nation. Jesus was not saying the gospel must be proclaimed within the borders of every politically definable country, but rather in every cultural grouping within those countries. Jesus’ command was not merely a mission to enter as many countries as possible, or to reach as many people as possible, but to reach all the peoples of the world.

Given the enlightened understanding of “*panta ta ethne*,” we may deduce that the fulfillment of the Great Commission is not measured by the number of countries we enter, important though that may be, but by the extent we disciple all people groups and establish congregations in all nations.

Kenya is a case in point. Kenya has always been the backbone of our work in Eastern Africa. The country has a mammoth membership of more than 824,000 in two union conferences. Most of the members come from just 4 tribes, whereas there are altogether 42 tribes in the country. It is estimated that 70 percent of the Seventh-day Adventist membership in Kenya belong to two tribes, the Kisii and the Luo, and only about 25 percent belong to the four largest tribes (Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, and Kamba). This situation clearly shows that the largest tribes in Kenya are the least reached despite the huge membership with almost 10,000 churches and companies.

Another example is the disparity between rural and urban mission. Many countries enjoy phenomenal growth in islands and villages. Tens of thousands are baptized annually. While we applaud the bountiful harvest in the countryside, we must be mindful of the teeming millions of city dwellers who need the Three Angels’ Messages as much as the rural folks. A better understanding of “*panta ta ethne*” should guide our mission strategy to encompass all people groups and not just certain segments of the population.

The phrase “*panta ta ethne*” also implies that the Great Commission is not limited to foreign mission. Foreign mission is certainly a critical component in the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Four-fifths of the non-Christians in the world will never be reached unless we intentionally send them cross-cultural missionaries, but the Great Commission is not all about foreign mission. Each believer should have a “*ta ethne*” focus beyond his or her door to the community where they live. There are people groups of every kind who exist near us. They may live next door, down the street, or across town. Everyone has a part in the mission of the church. All God’s people may engage in mission.

*“God expects personal service from every one to whom He has entrusted a knowledge of the truth for this time. Not all can go as missionaries to foreign lands, but all can be home missionaries in their families and neighborhoods.*

– Testimonies, vol. 9, p. 30.

**Conclusion**

The story of the Adventist Church in the past five years is one of relentless growth, from 14 million members in 2005, to 17 million in 2010, to 18.5 million in 2014. The onward progress of the Adventist Church would have been unimaginable to our pioneers in 1863 when the General Conference was organized with just 3,500 members.

Despite our successes, however, large swaths of the earth remain unreached. The 10/40 Window contains 60 percent of the world's population, but only 10 percent of all Adventists. Of the 500 world cities with a population of more than 1 million, 236 are in the 10/40 Window. What are we to do?

Some of these challenges appear to be insurmountable from a human perspective, but God is able. His promises are sure. Ellen White's assurance is unmistakable when she says, "When we think of the conflict before us and the great work that we must do, we tremble. But we may remember that our Helper is almighty. We may feel strong in His strength. We may unite our ignorance to His wisdom, our feebleness to His might, our weakness to His unfailing strength. Through Him we may be 'more than conquerors.'" Review and Herald, July 9, 1901.

We have the confidence to believe that even the least evangelized countries and peoples shall soon see the fulfillment of God's promise through the prophet Habakkuk, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14). This is our hope. This is our dream. Only the Sovereign God can quickly make it happen!

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