

Statistical Report 2021: The impact of COVID-19

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For this year's statistical report to Annual Council, there can be only one topic: the impact on the church of the COVID-19 pandemic—what has happened; and what the statistics suggest might happen in the near future.

First, though, if you are interested in knowing more, whether simply having more detail on church statistics or in seeing analysis of recent trends, you can find out more by going to adventiststatistics.org. A file with the slides that I will be showing will be posted to adventistresearch.info soon after the conclusion of this report; you see the URL on the screen.

Where do things currently stand? The latest statistics we have are as of June 30 this year; and this slide gives comparative figures over the last quinquennium. Let me stress that, because a comparison of June 30 with December 31 would not be comparing like with like, this slide shows the June 30 figures since 2015 rather than the end-of-year figures.

Let us move, then, to the impact of COVID and initially consider net accessions. The first year that accessions totaled more than one million was 1999. Before last year, there had been more than one million accessions in eighteen of the last twenty-one years, and every year for sixteen years in a row. You see this in the next chart, which shows accessions for the three previous quinquennia. But as you see, in 2020, accessions were less than a million, for the first time since 2004. In the next slide we zoom into these statistics showing the figures since 2015. As I reported to last year's Annual Council, accessions were leveling off in any case but as you can see in 2020 they were not just below the one million mark, but well below at a trifle over 800,000. Here is the most distinct impact of the corona virus pandemic. We see, statistically, I suggest, not only that there was a marked decrease in public evangelism, which we know to be the case, as churches all around the world were obliged to cease in-person meetings. But what also occurred was undoubtedly a decline in personal witnessing. New approaches to outreach were tried all around the world, including cell phone witnessing and Zoom evangelism, but these statistics show, I suggest, the crucial importance of interpersonal contact, even in the success of public evangelistic meetings, attendance at which often draws on prior personal contacts. We should be surprised, not that accessions declined, but that more than 800,000 people joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2020.

What about losses? These are far more variable and less predictable than accessions. This chart that you see now shows, again, a 15-year trend for *living losses*: that is, church members dropped from membership or registered as missing. What we see here is that while 2020 losses were lower, the decline does not stand out as much as that for accessions. The 564,000 losses last year are in fact the median figure for the last 16 years. If we zoom in to compare 2020 to the previous quinquennium, we see that while losses were down compared to 2018 and 2019, they were still relatively high. It is natural that the pace of audits should have dropped during the pandemic year; that they still continued perhaps suggests that, with COVID affecting their flocks, pastors became more focused on where their members were and what had happened to them.

Accessions and losses are two of the three key metrics affecting church growth. What about deaths? The figures for deaths in 2020 are surprisingly low. As you see here, they were more than in 2019, but only up by 175; and fewer deaths were reported than in 2018. I wish we could leap to the conclusion that God had miraculously spared His people but anecdotal evidence overwhelmingly suggests that many Seventh-day Adventists contracted COVID and that there were also many deaths. So what explains these year-end figures for 2020?

The answer, I think, can be found by looking at the figures for the first two quarters of 2021. Now, one has to be cautious with first and second quarter statistics, because we know from experience that in some parts of the world, accessions, losses and deaths get mostly reported at the end of the year. That is one reason I normally share year-end figures. However, if we compare this year's first and second quarters to the equivalent figures for the previous quinquennium we can see interesting trends. Again, we'll look at accessions, living losses, and deaths.

You will see in this slide that second quarter accessions regularly exceeded first quarter in the previous quinquennium. In 2020, this trend was reversed—this of course reflects the fact that the pandemic spread and worsened as the year went on. In many parts of the world, things were normal up to March 31st but then declined sharply. But I also want you to look at the numbers for this year. To be sure, both the first and the second quarter figures are lower than their counterparts each year during the 2015-through-2019 period. However, they are significantly up on 2020, and you will note that the trend of second quarter exceeding first quarter is restored. What is this telling us? First, it may confirm anecdotal reports of people converted during 2020 but being obliged to postpone their baptism until 2021—if a church can't meet, how can a baptism take place? Second, though, what it suggests is that, as COVID conditions improve, churches are losing no time in returning to outreach. We thank God for that. We anticipate that accessions will continue to rise in comparison to 2020.

The first- and second-quarter comparison for losses, which you see here, is not as meaningful — figures for losses are far more contingent than accessions, because they reflect the process of membership audit. However, you will note that both quarters in 2020 were the lowest in four years, which surely is because the spread of the pandemic turned minds to other subjects.

But when we turn back to deaths from 2015, we see a very interesting development. You will note from this chart that usually first and second quarter deaths are about the same or that second quarter is slightly higher. There are two exceptions. One is 2015, and, since the same was true in 2010, it appears that, when they focus on the impending GC Session, church leaders stop actively encouraging collection of local statistics. But the other exception is last year, where you see that second quarter is much lower than the first, despite the spreading pandemic. However, you'll see that this year's first quarter is the highest of the last six years and the second quarter is much higher again. I hypothesize, therefore, that with congregations not able to meet, deaths were *not always* recorded by the local church clerk or pastor, and that we are seeing in 2021 a rectification of the low figures for 2020 — that we are seeing deaths from both years reported this year. Thus, I suggest that the death figures for 2020, which were surprisingly low, are *too*

low, because not all deaths were reported. I don't doubt that we are also seeing in 2021 the impact of the COVID-19 variants and especially the delta variant which has caused high mortality in Brazil, India, and elsewhere. The full number of Adventist deaths caused by COVID remains indeterminate and is likely to rise.

Accessions, losses, and deaths—these are the key elements in church growth. After 2020, where do we stand in terms of membership attrition, about which I've reported at every Annual Council? We now have 56 years' worth of detailed statistics on accessions and losses. Including 2020, since 1965, exactly 42,225,021 people have been members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Not considered joining—been full members of this Church. Of those, a total of at least 16.8 million have left in the same 56 years. Thus, our net loss rate has ticked up slightly to 41 percent. In other words, four out of every 10, two of every five, members slip away. We continue to need to do much better in this regard.

There are two other metrics that I will touch on in this year's report. The first relates to church planting. Now, in this chart you see the effects of COVID but also the decline in planting of new companies that I addressed in last year's report. In 2019, there were 2,422 new local churches organized, but a net decrease of 236 in the number of companies. In 2020, only 1,736 new churches were organized while there were 43 fewer companies. This drop of 686 in the number of new churches surely reflects the impact of the pandemic. We must hope that planting of new companies, as well as of new churches, becomes a priority again in 2022.

There is a final area which the corona virus affected and that is church finances. After all, if one loses one's job and has no income, one has nothing on which to return tithe. It would be zero. Assessing growth or decline in *global* figures for tithes and offerings is difficult because they are influenced by varying exchange rates. However, it is very striking that, as we see in this chart, while 2020 net world tithe was down it was only down slightly from 2.4 billion US dollars to 2.39 billion. And we know that in two key areas, the United States and Brazil, tithe was stable. This speaks very well, I suggest, of the work of our Stewardship Ministries directors at every level of church structure; they have plainly done well at instilling in church members the biblical concept that we *return* tithe, we do not give it—it is not optional. But in contrast, look at this chart. It shows that the mission offering worldwide went down by exactly 25 percent. We need to encourage church members to think of giving generously to mission as something else that God commands.

However, as we reflect on how many people worldwide had work hours cut or lost their jobs completely, the figures for tithe and mission offerings seem almost miraculous. We praise God for the faithfulness of church members.

In closing this report, what we can say of the past tumultuous months? The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic certainly affected the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It undoubtedly had a negative impact on accessions, on church planting, and on giving to missions. The full impact in terms of deaths is, I suggest, still becoming apparent.

Yet there is much for which we can and should give thanks to God: the faithfulness of pastors and of church members, who continued to reach out, to witness individually and corporately, about their beliefs; and who continued faithfully to return tithe. And we can be grateful that the church was spared more deaths.

In conclusion, however, we know, as global conditions start, as we hope, to ease, that there is much we still need to do, and much we need to renew doing, much we need to take up with renewed effort, as we look towards our blessed hope of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. I pray that this report stimulates us all to renewed effort.