

2024 Annual Council Statistical Report

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This year's statistical report has Mission Refocus as its emphasis. Before I move into the report, however, council members and viewers of the livestream should know that if they want to find out more about the subjects covered in this report, then they can access historical and current church statistics at adventiststatistics.org, that's adventiststatistics.org. And soon after I sit down, my report will be available online at adventistresearch.info.

First let's look at our latest membership figures, from June 30, 2023, and compare them to statistics for the mid-year point of each year over the last eight years.

Now let's focus in on net accessions – these are for each calendar year, rather than the twelve months ending June 30. We see that accessions have now fully rebounded after the challenging circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is even more apparent if we pull back and look at the last 15 years. In fact, with 1.465 million people added to the church, 2023 saw the

highest number of net accessions of any year in church history, exceeding the 1.383 million added in 2018.

But church growth is the function both of accessions and of losses.

This next graph shows losses also over the last five years. These statistics exclude deaths. With a total of 836,905 living losses, 2023 was the third highest year for net losses after the 1,107,514 of 2019. Again, we can pull back and see the longer-term trend by looking at the last fifteen years. We see that the four highest years for losses have all been in the last five years.

This next slide compares gains and losses over the last five years, and shows how accessions alone do not count for church growth. We have to find ways to disciple more members if we want our net growth to become more explosive.

In *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 187, Ellen G. White writes of the divine Good Shepherd in the parable of Luke 15:

“No sooner does the sheep go astray than the shepherd is filled with grief and anxiety. He counts and recounts the flock.”

In the spirit of that quotation, of counting and recounting the flock, I will share now slides on cumulative total losses, which I have shared every year since 2017, updating the figures each year.

Starting in 1965, church statistical reports provided data on losses as well as baptisms, so that, through 2023, we have 59 years of data on accessions and losses.

We know that in those nearly six decades, a total of 45,117,980 people have been members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Of those, at least **19.392 million** have chosen to leave.

This means that **our net loss rate is slowly *rising*, and this year is 42.98% — in effect it is 43%** up from 42.5%.

Thus, more than **4 of every 10** church members are slipping away. The world Church rightly continues to address this challenge, but it is a challenge not

only to the leaders gathered in this room but also to every church member – to every disciple of Jesus – to be their brother’s keeper, and their sister’s too.

Nevertheless, praise the Lord, the Church continues to grow, thanks to the large numbers of accessions, which are themselves due to the great efforts made by pastors and by church members around the world. What is the effect?

As the next slide shows, the world church in 2023 achieved an average of more than 4,000 accessions every day—around the world, someone became a Seventh-day Adventist every twenty-one and a half seconds.

What does that mean for how our global membership stands in comparison to the world population? After all, if we were growing but the population were growing faster than us, our growth would be deceptive—it would be like trying to go up a down escalator.

However, as this next slide shows, that is not the case. This graph shows the population-to-member ratio in the world—the number of people for every

Seventh-day Adventist. In this case, therefore, the lower the number the better. And we can see that throughout our history, the ratio has dropped, and that, as of December 31, 2023, there were 350 people to every Seventh-day Adventist. As recently as the year 2000, the global ratio was 519 people to every member and only in 2011 did the ratio drop to 400 to 1, but in the last twelve years it has come down by fifty.

The population-to-member ratio is one that I have shown in some previous reports, but there is another ratio that is significant in missiological terms. That is the members-to-accession ratio. Let me ask a question: how many church members does it take to produce each baptism? This is a key statistic, because it tells us how effective our church is in reaching people. And the answer to that question for 2023 is 30 to 1. So, it takes 30 church members to produce every accession.

But that is a global figure. What are the equivalent figures around the world? This allows us a different way of identifying areas with high mission challenge. We cannot simply look at net membership or even at population-to-member ratios, because some divisions and unions in the world have very high

populations, reflecting social and political circumstances. So while the population-to-member ratio in the Middle East and North Africa Union is very sobering, at 94,663 persons for every one Seventh-day Adventist, and this accurately identifies where the world Church's greatest mission challenge is, membership totals or population-to-member ratios don't tell us which unions in divisions have the greatest mission challenge, since in some cases those figures are the way they are because, for sociopolitical reasons, a union only covers one country, so that its membership is lower than unions which include more than one country; or it covers one huge country, so the ratio is challenging.

All this matters because, at this Annual Council, the Secretariat report is looking at Mission Refocus in a new light. In the last two years, the Secretary, Pastor Köhler, and Secretariat Reports have focused on divisions with mission challenges, and have challenged church leaders, in turn, to send missionaries from their divisions to other divisions, which are mission fields. But every division has its own mission fields. And Secretariat wants to challenge each division to spread its resources to the mission fields in its own territories. But how to identify which unions within divisions are mission fields, given the

situation as far as membership totals or population-to-member ratios go? The answer, I suggest, is to look at the members-to-accession ratio. This way of looking at things highlights unions that face missional challenges, irrespective of the population in a union. So, the rest of this report highlights the union in each division that has the most challenging member-to-accession ratio.

In the East-Central Africa Division, the union with the greatest challenge is the West Congo Union Mission, with one accession for every 29 church members. Here the challenge may come because of conflict and war in society at large.

In the Euro-Asia Division, the union with the greatest challenge is the East Russian Union Mission with one accession for every 65 church members.

In the Inter-American Division, the most challenging union is the French Antilles-Guiana Union Conference with each accession taking 72 members. In contrast to much of the division, this is a highly secular territory.

In the Inter-European Division, where we are in post-Christian territory, the

most challenged union is the South German Union Conference, where it takes 76 members for each accession.

In the North American Division, the union facing the greatest challenge is the North Pacific Union Conference, with 52 members required for every accession. Again, the Pacific Northwest may be the most secular region in North America.

In the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, the Korean Union Conference faces the greatest challenge, with 97 church members to every accession.

The union that is most challenged in the South American Division is the Argentina Union Conference, with a member-to-accession ratio of 31 to 1.

In the South Pacific Division, the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference is the most missionally challenged of the four unions, probably reflecting the highly secular population of the chief country in the union, New Zealand. This union's ratio is 45 members to each accession.

The whole of the Southern Asia Division is highly challenged, with its vast populations of Hindus and Muslims, but the union with the greatest challenge is the South-Central Indian Union Section with 231 members to every accession. This is the highest ratio of any union we are looking at today.

In the Southern-Asia Pacific Division, the union with the greatest challenge is the Malaysia Union Mission, with 36 members to every accession.

In the post-Christian Trans-European Division, the Adriatic Union Conference is the most challenged, with a member-to-accession ratio of 73 to 1.

And in the West-Central Africa Division, across much of which evangelism is flourishing, the union with the greatest challenge is the Northern Ghana Union Conference, with 24 members to every accession.

What about the three attached unions? In the Chinese Union Mission, there are 84 members for every accession. Strikingly, in the Middle East Union Mission, despite its huge challenge in terms of the Islamic population, such evangelism as can be carried out is effective, with only 17 members to every

accession. And in the Ukrainian Union Conference, the ratio is 36 members to every accession.

This exercise in considering member-to-accession ratios has helped to remind us again: each division has its own mission fields.

But it also has highlighted for you how different divisions and attached unions face different levels of mission challenge in contrast to other divisions and attached unions. What is a challenging member-to-accession ratio in one division would stand out as a positive ratio in another division. This reminds us that, in the apostle Paul's words, we need to bear and forebear with each other in the world church, acknowledging the different difficulties we face in different regions. This highlights again the huge need for Mission Refocus, with missionaries and resources deployed within divisions but also between divisions, if we are to reach the world with the third angel's message.