

2022 GC SESSION REPORT

D J B Trim

ASTR

Thank you, Pastor Köhler.

This Secretariat report is structured around the three themes of data, mission, and people. My entire report is, of course, *data* – but it's also about *mission* and *people*. Because ASTR is also a place where the heart of mission is beating.

Statistics show that, if we conceived of the Adventist Church's mission simply as outreach, then it would be flourishing. **This chart** shows eighteen years of data on *accessions*: that is, the net total of all the baptisms and professions of faith. 2004 was the first of sixteen years in a row of one million-plus accessions, globally. But then came the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2019 to 2020, accessions declined by more than half a million, from 1.32 million to 800,000, the lowest number of global accessions since 1997. In 2021, however, despite the ongoing effects of the pandemic, accessions increased by more than 200,000 so that they once again topped one million. This included 230,970 rebaptisms of people who had once been members and had left the Church, but have been restored. Some divisions have dedicated programs in place for reaching former members and we hope all divisions will emulate their example. In all, a total of 1,069,234 people were added to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2021. We praise God for this rebound in Adventist outreach and acknowledge the role of our pastors and members in achieving it.

If, however, we conceive of the Church's mission as *keeping* as well as *adding* members, then the Adventist Church faces a challenges, for we experience significant, heavy losses, and we know that there will be *more* to come, as membership *audits*, which we are now calling membership *reviews*, are implemented around the world. **This chart** shows annual membership *changes* over the last five years – 2017 through 2021. The lines of green dots show the net accessions. Despite the last two years of pandemic, in the five years represented by this chart a total of 5.9 million people joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The black dots show the number of deaths. The lines of purple dots represent living losses: that is, the net total of: persons dropped from membership, missing members, and negative adjustments (the latter a category often used for the results of membership reviews). As you will see, the downward purple line in 2019 is particularly steep: this was the first ever year in which there were more than one million living losses. Accessions, deaths, and losses together affect church growth. As a result of their interplay, the Church's reported membership at the end of last year was some 21.91 million. Yet, even though, during the five years illustrated in this chart, a total of 3.6 million *people* left the Church, even this has positive implications for *mission*. For, in certain parts of the world, church leaders now have an accurate sense of their membership, and that means they can plan better both for outreach and for nurture and retention. And that means, in turn, that both outreach and inreach can be done more effectively and impactfully.

Church growth is one sign of successful mission. But we often think of church growth only in terms of congregations or church members, whereas, as the Adventist Church grows, so, too, do

its numbers of *organizations* and institutions. By *organizations* I mean local conferences and missions, and the different kinds of unions. **This next slide** shows the growth in these *organizations* over the last fifty years—I show fifty years because it provides valuable perspective. You will see that from 75 union conferences and union missions in 1970, unions have grown (adding two more *kinds* of union) to a total of 138 unions in 2020—an increase of 84 per cent. When it comes to the local conference or mission, growth has been even more dramatic, from 379 in 1970 to 731 missions and conferences at the end of 2020: a growth rate of 93 per cent. From 2015 to 2020, conferences and missions increased by 76, or 11 per cent, while three new unions were added. **[next slide]**

There are some church members who see the increase in the number of organizations and view it as evidence of the Church becoming more bureaucratic and thus as a *bad thing* for the Church's *mission*. But in many parts of the world, new conferences and missions power growth. *These* organizations provide leadership that is close to the local church level and therefore responsive to both challenges and opportunities, and they also provide training, resourcing, and equipping of pastors and church members. *Unions* train and equip conference and mission leaders and provide regional direction. The growth of organizations in Latin America and Africa, in particular, is associated with dramatic growth rates in congregations and membership in those regions. An increase in the number of organizations can thus be a *good thing* for *mission*. Furthermore, as the Church grows numerically and expands into regions where it once had no or minimal presence, the number of organizations is bound to grow, serving the increasing and spreading population of Seventh-day Adventists.

Another way in which the Adventist Church has grown in the last fifty years is in numbers of *institutions*. **This slide** shows the growth since 1970 in the numbers of *educational* institutions broken down into the three categories of primary or elementary schools (shown in blue), secondary schools, shown in green, and colleges or universities, shown in gold. While tertiary institutions have only increased a fraction over the last half century, primary schools have increased by 64 per cent and high schools by 570 per cent. Schools are a vital engine for church growth in many parts of the world, so this is an important, positive trend.

What of all kinds of medical institutions? **They have grown** since 1970 from 329 to 1,976, and while the spike you see in 2020 is artificial, because we had greatly improved *reporting* from the fields in that year, the overall increase in the last half century is still profound, representing growth of exactly 500 per cent. **This chart** compares the overall growth in both educational and medical institutions over the last fifty years.

How has the Church's workforce grown? **This next slide** shows the increase in the Church's core group of workers: its pastors. In 1970, the Church had 13,870 pastors worldwide. At the end of 2020, there were 33,530 pastors: an increase of **142** per cent. As we think in this Secretariat report about people, these pastoral people, fulfilling their divinely called vocation to ministry, are crucial to the mission of the Church.

In contrast to pastors, the total of all other employees increased by **159** per cent in the last half century. This is slightly more than the growth rate in the number of pastors, and it highlights that, as the Church grows, it faces the danger of institutionalization, which tends to be harmful to mission. Yet the difference in the two growth rates is relatively small across fifty years, which suggests that institutionalization is not currently as much of a challenge as some church members and leaders fear, though it is something we must be on guard against. It must be remembered, too, that our 75,000 teachers in schools and colleges are almost like pastors, for in many places schools drive dynamic church growth. Also important to note is that, **as this slide** shows, the number of members and the total number of pastors have increased in step with each other. More pastors would always be welcome, but the total pastoral workforce appears to be increasing appropriately.

In conclusion, as we look back over the last quinquennium in the perspective of the last half century, the fundamental impression is of a growing Church. This is grounds neither for complacency nor for self-congratulation. There are trends we need to be aware of, and there are areas in which we *can* - and *need to* - do better. But the *data* show us how God has led and prospered the efforts of His *people in mission*.

The data I have shared is crucial for strategic planning. Next, you will hear from GC Undersecretary Hensley Mooroooven, about Secretariat's strategic plan.