

REACH THE WORLD

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We have come together from all around the world and so, for some of us, it is springtime. But here in North America, it is the beginning of autumn: the leaves have started to color and soon they will start to fall. That means those of you from cooler climes will be spared the worst heat and humidity of a Washington DC summer! But while we have gathered at the waning of the year, we also know that we meet at the waning of the world. A harsh winter lies ahead, if not in the next few months, then soon, when the powers of darkness are unleashed in the days before Jesus returns. Of course, we have this hope—this certainty indeed—of a bright and glorious eternal spring that will follow. As Seventh-day Adventists we have long believed and taught that before this can happen, there is much for us to do. “For this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations. And then the end will come.” But *only* then (Matt. 24:14). So our task now, in the metaphorical season of fall, in the waning days of earth’s history before the dark winter of the world, is to reach the world.

Reach the World is why we are here; this is true at two levels. First, it is the reason the Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized and exists—to reach the world with the “everlasting gospel” of Our Lord, Creator, Savior and High Priest, Jesus Christ. Second, *Reach the World* is of course the title and theme of our global strategic plan for 2015-2020. As you have heard, our focus this weekend, at this unprecedented, start-of-quinquennium special consultation of all General Conference and division officers and General Conference departmental directors, is how to implement what we have mutually agreed should be implemented. We are going to establish just how we—all of us, working together rather than hunkered down in silos, acting collaboratively rather than in parallel—can, indeed, by God’s power, reach the world.

Some of you are new to your positions and may not have been very involved in the process of data gathering, discussion and debate that led the 2014 Annual Council to adopt *Reach the World*. So where did it come from and what does it involve? What have we as a world church committed ourselves to achieve?

The ancient Greeks believed that Athena, the goddess of wisdom, simply sprang forth, fully mature, from the forehead of Zeus, their chief deity. I can assure you that the *Reach the World* plan did not just spring forth and certainly not from just one man’s mind; any wisdom it has reflects that it is the product of both a prolonged and collaborative gestation. There was an extensive process of deliberation, research and consultation, which was overseen by a planning group at the GC made up of the three executive officers, several general vice presidents and other officers, and lay representatives.

It all began with the mission statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Scripture. The very language of the plan, *Reach the World*, is drawn from Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and Acts 1, Christ’s commission to His followers to go unto the uttermost parts of the earth. It is drawn from the prophecies of Revelation 10:11 and 14:6 that foretell of a movement whose destiny, indeed whose divinely ordained task, is to proclaim the everlasting gospel to many nations and peoples. So *Reach the World* is an outflowing of our collective self-understanding of our purpose as a people and of the mission statement of this prophetic movement.

The Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research directed five major research projects, conducted in 2012 and 2013. In the course of that research, 35,000 Seventh-day Adventists from all around the world were interviewed, or received and completed questionnaires, about their beliefs, attitudes, experiences in the church, and spiritual-life practices. The data generated is unparalleled in its richness—both in breadth and depth. There was a separate study of over 4,000 pastors, one quarter of our total work force, drawn from every division, over 90% of our unions and more than two-thirds of our conferences and missions; a separate survey of 1,500 recent graduates of Adventist colleges in North America; and yet another separate study of one thousand former church members.

So, in terms of the subject matter and the number of respondents, the research carried out in the past quinquennium was unprecedented. In addition to this quantitative data, the GC-based planning group requested every division president and GC departmental director to submit their own analysis, based on their experience, of important global trends, opportunities, and challenges. As a result, the planning group also had qualitative data on which to draw: the considered views of knowledgeable and experienced church leaders, about what is happening in their areas. The *Reach the World* that was drafted by the GC-based planning group was based on this collection of quantitative and qualitative data, drawn from across the globe and every part of the world church. Even then, there was a twelve-month consultation period, in which the draft plan was shared with PREXAD, GCDO, and the Executive Committee twice, at the 2013 Annual Council and 2014 Spring Meeting. Division input was requested and received, and the plan revised, before finally it was voted at the 2014 Annual Council.

So, when the *Reach the World* plan identifies key issues and sets priorities for the world church, it is based on something substantial, rather than merely anecdote or hunch. Indeed, the major initiatives that are already in place for this quinquennium reflect what the data revealed.

For instance, we discovered that only 42% of church members worldwide study the Bible daily (and only 74% study it more than once a week); furthermore, while 74% of church members worldwide say they “wholeheartedly embrace” confidence in Ellen White’s prophetic gift, only one out of six read the Spirit of Prophecy daily—and just 47%, less than half, read Ellen White even once a week. One in five have never read Ellen White’s writings. So we now have not only a Bible-reading program, as we did last quinquennium (*Revived by His Word*); but also a program to encourage church members to read the Spirit of Prophecy and the Bible, *Believe His Prophets*.

We also found that one quarter of Seventh-day Adventists said they strongly agreed with the statement “Although I am religious, I don’t let it affect my daily life”; thankfully one third say they strongly disagree, but it became clear we needed to get our church members involved. *Total member involvement*.

In addition, statistical research that ASTR undertook revealed that only one Seventh-day Adventist in six lives in large cities: that the ratio of people to church members in urban areas of more than one million is around 550 to 1, in contrast to 390 to 1 in the world as a whole. Thus we knew at the 2013 “It’s Time” conference that we needed to prioritize mission to the cities—and we know that we will need to keep prioritizing the world’s great cities.

There were many other insights, and I reported on some of these at the 2013 Annual Council, but one more I will mention now is that a very large percentage expressed strong skepticism about the imminence of Christ's second coming—so large, in fact, that we concluded many must have misunderstood the question. But also so large that even if that were the case, it is clear that a sense of the urgency of Christ's return is dwindling. That is something that can't be acceptable for people who call themselves *Adventists*.

So, colleagues, the plans that are outlined in *Reach the World* are based on a wealth of data, information and analysis. I'll draw to a conclusion now by reminding this group that we have committed ourselves, as a world church, to working towards 21 objectives, which reflect the reality we discovered by the process of research and reflection.

They are divided, as you know, into three categories:

- *Reach Up to God*, which focuses on our relationship with God and our need to be spiritually in communion with Him.
- *Reach In with God*, which deals with nurturing each other, feeding Jesus's sheep (as He bade Peter), and the Christ-commissioned process of discipling.
- *Reach Out with God*—once we have been spiritually empowered by being connected to God and have put things right in the Church, we have a solid foundation for outreach: for bringing new sheep into the fold, and for growing God's kingdom on earth, even as we look forward to the heavenly kingdom.

Reach Up to God

1. To involve Adventist members in daily Bible study
2. To engage all members in doctrinal study, as essential for spiritual maturity
3. To make all members better acquainted with Ellen White's counsel and prophetic ministry
4. To increase the engagement of church members in biblically authentic spiritual practices
5. To foster among pastors, teachers, members, and students in denominational institutions, greater appreciation for and insight from a study of Scripture that uses the historical-grammatical method and historicist approach to interpretation, including the understanding of prophecy
6. To encourage church members to adopt regular patterns of worship

Reach In With God

7. To enhance unity and community among church members
8. To nurture believers in lives of discipleship and to involve them in service
9. To increase the engagement of young people in the life of the church
10. To affirm the administrative role of pastors in organizational leadership
11. To improve leadership practices in order to enhance the credibility of, and trust in, the church organization, its operations, and mission initiatives

Reach Out With God

12. To enhance Adventist outreach and presence across the 10/40 Window
13. To enhance Adventist outreach and presence in large urban areas worldwide
14. To make planting new groups of believers a priority in all parts of the world

15. To substantially reorient our understanding and methods of mission
16. To engage all church members, pastors, and leaders in full partnership
17. To increase the involvement of young people in the mission of the church
18. To encourage local churches to take the initiative in communicating the three angels' messages and carrying out the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church
19. To raise the profile of mission to non-Christian religions and belief systems
20. To strengthen the world church's global resources for mission
21. To optimize communication plans and methodologies so as to empower the work and witness of the church

Each of these 21 objectives has a series of associated Key Performance Indicators (or KPIs). We will test the progress we have made in meeting those 21 goals and achieving the KPIs through research. The research we did last quinquennium was not a one-off; it will be repeated again in this coming quinquennium. We need your assistance to do that—we cannot do it without you.

I will close by returning to where we began: we have gathered at the waning of the year. As you know, most of the first Seventh-day Adventists were farmers and a hugely important part of our pioneers' year was making plans for getting through each winter; by the start of fall, the time for plans was past, it was time (and indeed past time) to start implementing the plans. So it is for us today. We are in the autumn of the world and of human history, at least for humanity in its sinful, corrupt form. We know that it is time to be implementing plans, for a harsh winter lies ahead, but we know, too, that at the end of the winter of the world there will be not just spring and summer, but the eternal summer that will come because, in the words of Revelation, God's people "will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be [our] light and [we] shall reign [with Him] forever and ever." May the plans we have made and the way we carry them out hasten that day when "night will be no more." (Rev. 22:5.)