

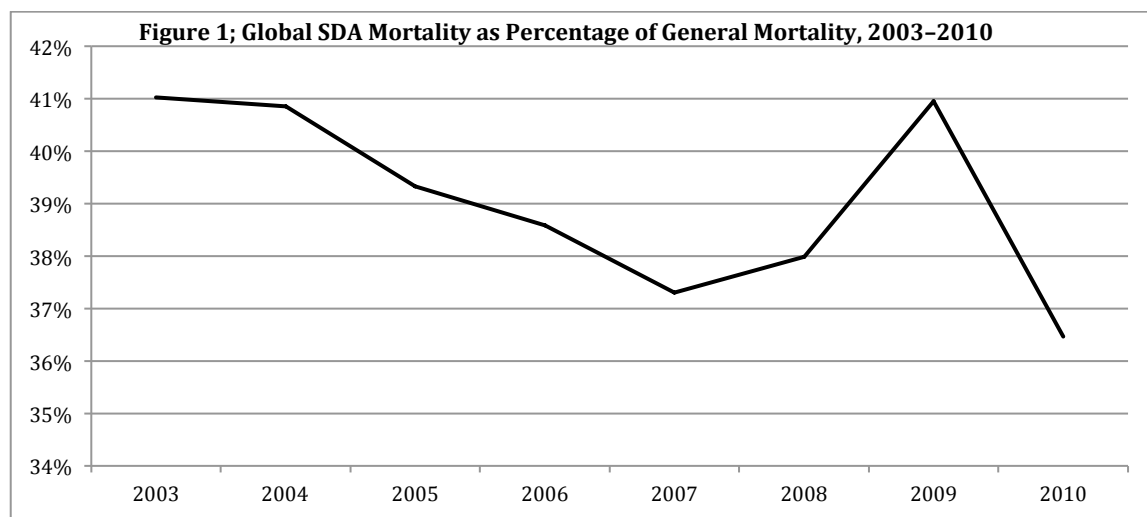
2015 General Conference Session Report: Membership Audits and Losses

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In the past quinquennium the world church carried out a series of far-reaching membership audits. They were initiated after analysis by the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR) indicated that Adventist membership was overstated—in some cases, very considerably overstated. Further research suggested that membership statistics are inflated because of systemic failure to accurately report losses—including both deaths, and the loss of living members that is described in different parts of the world as backsliding, apostasy and so on. Subsequently ASTR supervised survey-based research into why members stopped attending church, and left, or lapsed from, membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I shared data from those studies at last year’s Annual Council and in several divisions.¹ My report today, however, is strictly statistical: the “what” rather than the “why” of membership. It summarizes the results of the membership audits and suggests some implications for the mission and ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This Church collects a wide range of data, but in organizational statistics, often just one key statistic affords vital insight into the accuracy of all other data.² For Adventist membership metrics, that key statistic is the *mortality rate*: the number of deaths per thousand members of a population. It is possible to calculate mortality rates not only for entire national populations but also for groups within the wider populations: for example, infant and child mortality rates are regarded as crucial indicators of the public health in a country or region.

In ASTR’s analysis, Adventist mortality rates were calculated for each division, so that we compared like with like, and then also calculated globally. The Adventist mortality rates were then compared with the mortality rates of the general population in the respective divisions and worldwide. Because one year does not reveal a trend, we carried out this analysis for the period from 1995 through the end of 2010. This revealed that, in this period, the global Adventist mortality rate was always well below the general global mortality rate and especially dipped as the 2000s progressed (see figure 1). Furthermore, in many divisions, Adventist mortality rates regularly were significantly lower than the general mortality rates in the respective territories.



Seventh-day Adventists follow divine principles for healthful living given to us through the Spirit of Prophecy and tend to live longer than average. However, the difference between Adventist and whole-population global mortality rates is so great that healthful living alone cannot explain it. In the twenty-first century, there have been 3.39 Adventist deaths per thousand church members, whereas general mortality was 8.55 deaths per thousand people: that is, our average mortality was only 39.65% of general mortality. Yet Loma Linda University's major study of Adventist mortality shows that "death rates" of American Adventist males and females are 66% and 88%, respectively, of the rates in the non-Adventist population. A study of Norwegian Adventist mortality rates "found that Adventist men were at 82 percent of the expected death rates for the general population, and Adventist women were at 95 percent."³ Similar studies have not been done in the "global South," but Adventist mortality rates in Africa and Asia are unlikely to differ from general rates as much as in North America and Europe. In sum, what scientific studies tell us, including those carried out by scientists who are church members, is that the effect of following an Adventist diet and lifestyle on mortality rates would be, at best, to make them around two-thirds of the general population's.

In other words, our global mortality rate, at slightly less than 40% of general mortality, was not believable, even after taking the Adventist health advantage into account. In eight divisions (including four of the six with more than one million members), Adventist mortality was less than 40% of the general mortality—and in five divisions, it was less than 20%! The logical conclusion is that our reported membership was (and is) overstated—truly larger than life.

I presented ASTR's analysis of mortality rates and membership statistics to the 2011 Annual Council. The world church instituted a series of remedial measures, with the aim of achieving accurate membership statistics. Regular attendance counts have been added to the statistics that all local churches and administrative units are asked to report annually. In 2012, the Office of Seventh-day Adventist Membership Software was created at the General Conference; currently, two entire divisions and unions in five others have adopted or are beginning to adopt approved membership software. The measure with the most impact, however, has been the extensive implementation of membership audits.

In recent years, membership audits have been uncommon, at least in many parts of the world and so they can seem strange and alien. Yet they are actually very Adventist. Let me give you just one example. In 1863, the Michigan Conference Session was held in conjunction with the first, founding, General Conference Session, and it received the following report from the Seventh-day Adventist church in Battle Creek, Michigan. "This church was organized Oct. 24, 1861, with seventy-two members. Admitted since, thirty-six. Removed nine. Deceased two. Membership at present, ninety-seven." So you see, they were keeping meticulous records of their membership, including deducting those who had stopped attending or been disfellowshipped. Friends, membership audit is as old as our church—it is older than the General Conference!

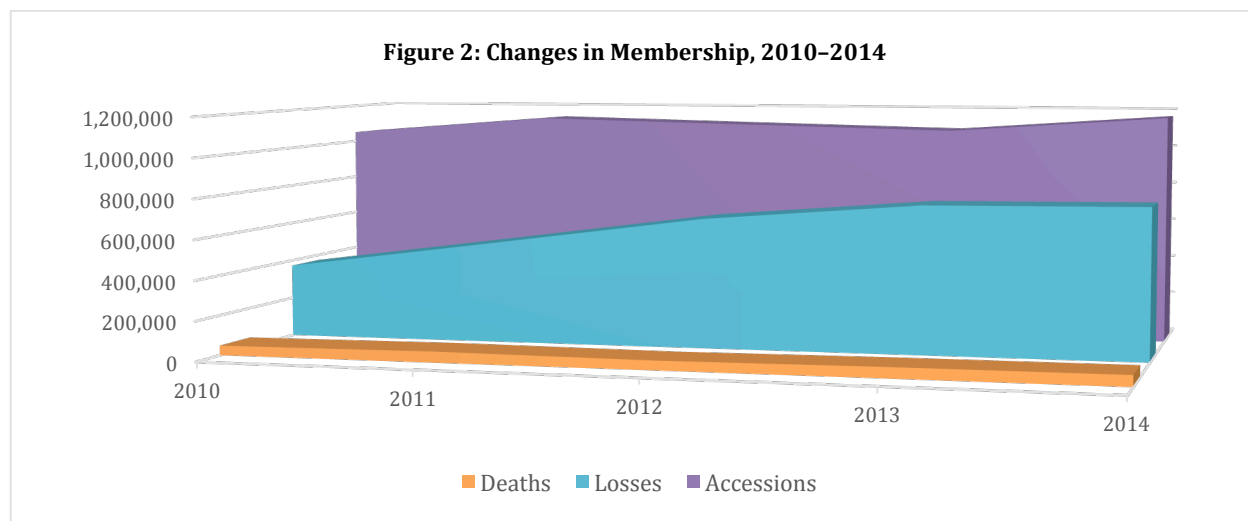
And it is the process of membership audit that the world church has strongly promoted in the past quinquennium. Every division has carried out audits in at least part of its territory and the majority of unions have likewise undertaken at least partial audits. Worldwide, however, the audit process is not yet complete: there is much still to do, and so this report is, in a sense, preliminary.

In 2014, a total of 55,320 deaths was reported, the equivalent of three deaths per thousand Seventh-day Adventists worldwide: up from 2.67 early in the last quinquennium, which was exactly 33% (one-third) of the general global mortality rate—the lowest such percentage in our statistical history. The three deaths per thousand in 2014 equated to 39 per cent of the net global mortality, (which was 7.84 deaths per thousand that year). We still have some way to go, but the accuracy of our records is improving.

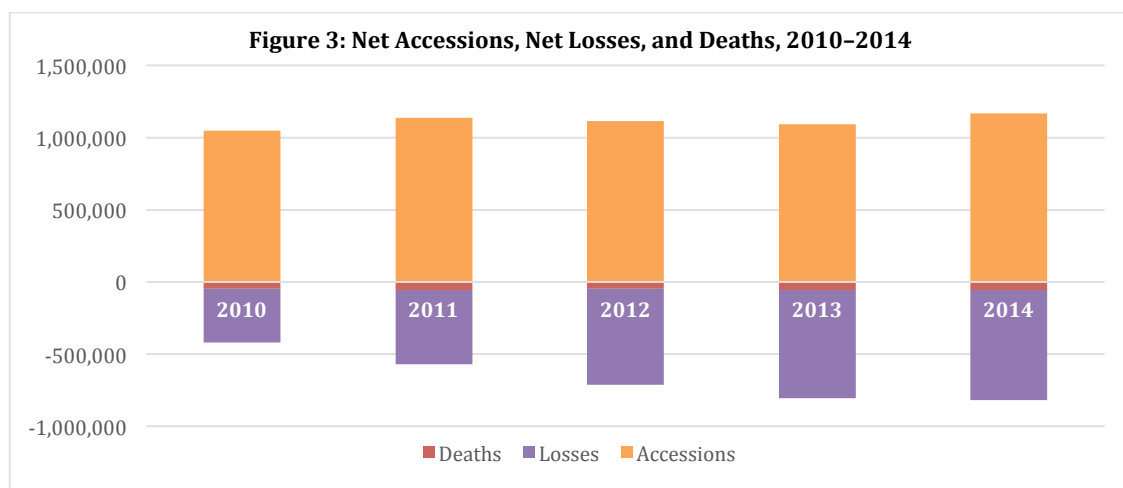
What is striking, however, is that the audits of the last four years revealed major losses. It is not just that deaths have been underreported. So, too, have the numbers of those who have left the church. We currently describe them in official statistical reports in two ways: first, there are the "dropped," a term that has replaced the older term "apostasies". Second is the category of "missing":

that is, people who simply can't be found when an audit is carried out. The result of the widespread audits over the last five years was that a total of 3,068,141 members were dropped or registered as missing, and 261,888 deaths were recorded, while a total of 5,563,377 were added by baptism or profession of faith. The number of reported deaths increased slightly but remained relatively stable, whereas the totals of the missing and those dropped from membership increased steeply (figures 2 and 3).

What are the implications of the audit results?

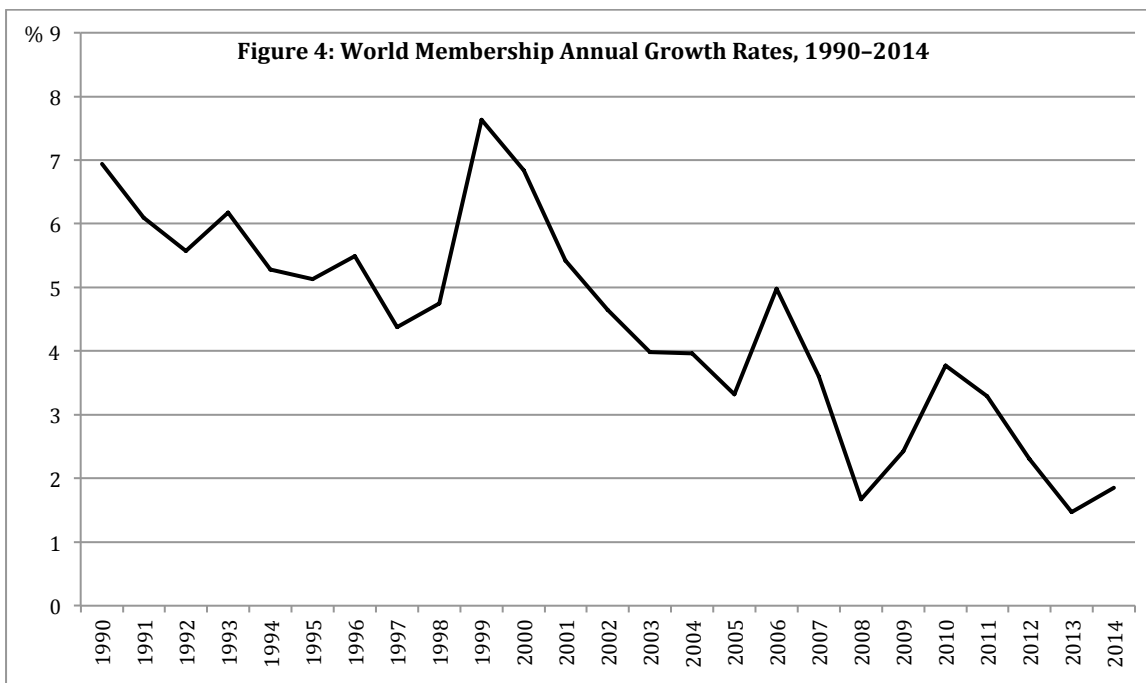


The first implication is that the sheer magnitude of the losses (dropped and missing) that were identified in audits undercuts the considerable numbers of accessions. The huge number of members slipping out the metaphorical back door undercuts the growth that comes in the front door (figure 3). Improved retention is essential, if we are to achieve sustained and dynamic church growth.

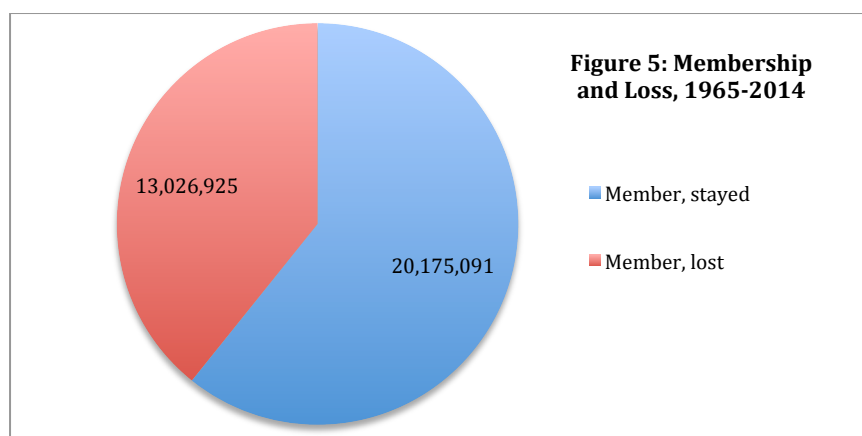


There is a second, important implication. The impact of losses on church growth is not, as it may seem, a phenomenon of this quinquennium. On the face of it, growth has been slower in the last five years (see figure 4), but in fact this is a statistical illusion, since many of those whose

departure was registered did not leave our ranks in the last five years. Our long-term failure to implement membership audits in much of the world means that we cannot know when many stopped attending church or lost their faith in the Adventist message; they could have separated from us at any point over the last 25 years (and in a few cases probably before).



This is a vital point, one that delegates, church members and the Adventist media need to take note of. Some may feel that church growth has stagnated in the last quinquennium, or may even feel there is a crisis, especially when compared with the previous decade or so. Put simply, we are not suffering a church growth crisis; we are simply feeling the effects of a statistical correction. The seemingly stellar growth rates of the 1990s and early 2000s were actually lower than we thought, while our real growth rate in this quinquennium is probably higher than it appears. It is important, moreover, to recognize that losses were not caused by audits; membership audits merely register the departure of those who have already separated from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They reveal the actual magnitude of a problem that already exists and has for many years.



This brings us to the final implication of the membership audits: they have revealed the actual scale of losses not just in the last quinquennium or decade, but the last fifty years. In those five decades, a grand total of 33,202,016 people have been members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—but 13,026,925 of them left the Church (see figure 5, previous page). Our net loss rate is 39.25%: in effect, four of every ten church members have slipped away over the last half-century.

* * *

To conclude. Our analysis of mortality rates indicates that, in several regions, membership statistics are still somewhat overstated. It is vital, therefore, that membership audits continue. But I would like you to think of this not as a threat or a burden, but as an opportunity.

Why do we carry out membership audits? First, as church leaders we aim for transparency and integrity. When we publish membership figures to the world, even though we know deep down that they are wrong, we are bearing false witness. That we are partly deceiving ourselves does not make it less of a lie. Second, to improve strategic planning and stewardship of resources: if church leaders do not have an accurate understanding of how membership is distributed, and where it is strong and weak, it is impossible to plan effectively for expanding God's kingdom, while resources may well be misallocated.

Ultimately, however, we do not conduct audits simply to tidy up the membership books and to get more precise statistics. As the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 indicates, knowing how many sheep are in the fold is foundational for the divine shepherd, who is our example. My brothers and sisters: every one of the 2,983,905 members who were either logged as missing or dropped from membership in the last five years (and every one of the 13,026,925 members who left our ranks over the last fifty years) was a soul precious to Jesus. Regularly monitoring membership is a first step to improving pastoral care. Membership audit should become a permanent part of the way God's remnant Church does mission and ministry, as part of a wider strategy for improving retention and discipling. I make this appeal not only to the church leaders gathered here, but also to church members: for are we not our brother's keeper? Membership care is the business of every believer in Jesus Christ. That means the local church must rally together to nurture, disciple and retain members and not just leave it to the pastor.

Seventh-day Adventists must emulate that Good Shepherd, who laid aside everything to search for just one percent of His flock when it went missing. Accurate statistical records are not an end in themselves, but a foundation for more powerful ministry to the flock entrusted to us by the Savior.

END NOTES

¹ These reports are at <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/Other/ACRep2013.pdf> and <https://www.adventistarchives.org/trim,-annual-council-2014-report-on-retention-research.pdf>

² For two recent and accessible examples see Ryan Gorman, "The most important stat you need to understand California's historic drought," *Business Insider*, April 8, 2015: <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-one-statistic-driving-californias-historic-drought-2015-4>; Jacob Davidson, "Here's one statistic explaining why you haven't gotten a raise lately," *Time*, May 27, 2015 <http://time.com/money/3898701/wage-stagnation/>

³ See "The Adventist Health Study: Mortality studies of Seventh-day Adventists": <http://www.llu.edu/public-health/health/mortality.page?>; cf. "Adventist Health Studies: An Overview" (Sept. 2011), available at <http://www.llu.edu/assets/publichealth/adventist-health-studies/documents/ahs-overview.pdf>. The Adventist Health Study website has citations of peer-reviewed scientific papers.