

I WILL GO

Since 2018, the world Church's strategic plan has been Reach the World: I Will Go. The I Will Go strategic focus has been widely embraced. As a result, the draft strategic plan for the next quinquennium is entitled I Will Go. What is proposed is to do some restructuring of the I Will Go strategic focus, but we are proposing considerable continuity in the goals of I Will Go. But before we share the outline of the draft plan for 2025-2030, it is appropriate to reflect on a key question: How did we do this quinquennium? How did we do in accomplishing the objectives and key performance indicators of the I Will Go strategic focus? First, let's remind ourselves of how that strategic focus was structured.

There were three areas of emphasis, ten objectives, and 59 key performance indicators.

The first area of emphasis was mission.

The second was spiritual growth.

The third was leadership.

And there was actually a fourth area of emphasis: but it was left open, to be filled by the Holy Spirit's leading, or as a result of contingency. And that we did this may well have been the Holy Spirit's leading since only a few months after the strategic focus was approved by the 2019 Annual Council, the pandemic struck – and many new plans had to be devised. But nevertheless, work continued on the plans that had been laid. So, in the last few years, the world Church has invested in several major research projects, to assess how the church is doing in certain key areas.

The most major research project was the third Global Church-Member Survey; it followed the first Global Church-Member Survey in 2013, and the second in 2017-2018. The first survey had a total of 26,809 responses – that is what, in research,

is called the “n”. It was only conducted in nine divisions. The second survey was conducted in all thirteen divisions and had a much larger n of 63,756. This was almost two and a half times larger than the 2013 n.

The third global church-member survey was implemented in all thirteen divisions and two of the unions attached to the General Conference; and it was implemented in 2022 and 2023. The total n is 146,821, which is again almost two and a half times larger than the previous survey. This means the margin of error is actually less than plus or minus one percent. It is thus tremendously powerful data, and we are very grateful to church leaders around the world who made efforts to encourage church members to actually take the survey.

The second research project that was undertaken was a survey of workers at church institutions – all kinds of institutions. This was carried out around the world and, as you see, has an n of 13,669. This is a very good result, reflecting the very large numbers of employees that work in denominational institutions. Because the institutional sector is complex, with multiple kinds of institutions as well as the geographical range, this survey took some time – first to build support from stakeholders and then actually to implement. Work on the survey began in 2016 and it was completed in 2023.

The third survey carried out was a survey of church administrators, down to the union level. This was global, too, and has an n of 3,756.

The final survey was a global survey of pastors – we previously had surveyed pastors in 2013 but not in 2018. The survey undertaken this year has an n of 12,760. This is actually more than 50% of the total pastoral work force, so we have tremendous confidence in the results of this survey.

The reports on all four surveys will be publicly released, as happened ten years ago and five years ago. We hope many scholars, church leaders, and church members, too, will download these reports and dig deeper into the results. All

four will be published in January on the website adventistresearch.info – that’s adventistresearch.info.

But what has all this research revealed? What are key five- and ten-year trends? As you may imagine, given that there are four very extensive research projects, there is only time to touch on certain areas, but I will pull out and share with you results in certain vital areas, and ones that I reported data on, to Annual Council in 2013 and 2018, based on the first and second global church-member surveys.

First, let’s look at some data relating to spiritual life practices.

And let’s begin with something foundational: reading the Bible. You can see that in 2018, 76% of survey respondents read the Bible multiple times per week, of which 48% read the Bible daily. There was virtually no change in 2023, though there is a slight drop in several times per week to 75%, but a slight uptick in daily Bible reading to 49%. But what is the longer-term trend?

When it comes to Bible reading, we actually have survey data going back to 2002, though the methodology was not as robust as for the global church-member surveys so the margin of error was relatively high, but in broad terms the data was clear and quite disturbing. The data from both the 2002 and 2007 surveys suggested that only 33% of church members read their Bibles daily. The percentage who read their Bible weekly or more frequently was just 57% in 2002 and 56% in 2007. As a result, the world Church established the Revival and Reformation initiative, which actively promoted Bible study. By 2013, daily Bible reading was up to 42% and weekly Bible reading was up to 83%. In 2018, daily Bible reading increased again to 48% and weekly Bible reading went up again to 89%. However, in the last five years, daily Bible reading has effectively plateaued, while reading several times per week and once a week have both declined, so that weekly Bible reading has dropped since 2018 from 89% to 85%. Thus, we could reasonably infer that whatever the world Church was doing to promote Bible reading from 2010 to around 2020 was effective; but that in the last three to five years, it has ceased to be so effective. I don’t think any of us would be

satisfied with the current situation in which only three quarters of Seventh-day Adventists read the Bible several times per week, with less than half reading every day. After all, we think of ourselves as people of the Book. We would want to see much higher percentages of church members engaged in regular Bible study. So we need to find new ways to encourage that.

What about reading the writings of Ellen G. White? You can see on this chart that in 2023, 17% of church members read the Spirit of Prophecy daily. And you can also see that there has been no change since 2018.

What about the ten-year trend? You can see that in 2013 the percentage reading Ellen White's writings daily was 16%. It rose one percentage point in 2018 and remained the same in 2023. But the percentage reading her several times a week, though not daily, has fallen in the ten years from 21% to 18%. Since the margin of error of both the last and the current church-member survey is less than 1%, a reasonable conclusion is that that decline of three percentage points is real. Note, too, how even weekly reading of Ellen White has declined from 19% to 14%. This means that reading of the Spirit of Prophecy on a weekly basis or more often has declined in ten years from 56% of church members to 49%.

Let's turn now to family worship. The research in 2013 identified that there was a problem with family worship. In 2023, the proportion of church members having either morning or evening worship with family members on a daily basis was only 33%, down from 37% in 2018.

To look at the ten-year trend is even more disconcerting because we see that there is a sharp trend, and it is downward. While daily family worships are down four percentage points, the several times per week response has gone down from 23% in 2013 to 16% now. And those who reported **never** having family worship in the preceding 12 months were only 14% in 2013 whereas they are 22% now. This is despite family worship being the subject of key performance indicators in both the last two strategic plans. The back-to-the-altar initiative is urgently needed.

Let us turn now from practices to beliefs – to doctrines.

And let's start with two doctrines where there is overwhelming support. The statement "Salvation is through Christ alone" received strong agreement from 81% of survey respondents in 2018, and while that is down two percentage points in 2023, the agree is up two points, so the total of agree and strongly agree is 95% in both surveys.

"The true Sabbath is the seventh day (Saturday)". 83% of respondents strongly agreed and 14% agreed both in 2018 and in 2023. The total of agree and strongly agree is 97%. There has been no improvement in acceptance of these two beliefs, but this isn't necessarily a concern, because acceptance is so high that there isn't much room for improvement. But I also want you to note how high the strong agreement is. For both these doctrines, it is in the 80th percentile. Now, in most survey research, agree and strongly agree are simply totalled without much attention to the difference between the two types of agreement. However, what we have learned from ten years of doing Adventist research is that one has to pay attention to the difference. Because in many cases, church members know what the "right" answer is. And they are reluctant, even in an anonymous survey, to disagree with a church teaching. So they choose agree instead of strongly agree. So, at one point, we will consider the proportions of strongly agree versus agree.

The next belief we are looking at is about the Holy Spirit and the statement is "The Holy Spirit is God's power in the world, not a person." Now, Fundamental Belief 5 specifically states that the Holy Spirit "is as much a person as are the Father and Son." So it is very disturbing to find that 56% of survey respondents worldwide agree and strongly agree with this statement. We can't compare this data because this was the first time we have asked the question. But it shows considerable work needs to be done to educate our members about the Holy Spirit – which is the source of spiritual power, so understanding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is essential.

Next we will look at two belief statements about creation. Here is the first: “I believe God created the universe.” This drew 80% strong agreement in 2018 and 79% strong agreement in 2023, with agree and strongly agree totalling 94%.

But contrast this with the results for the second statement, which is, “I believe God created the world in six literal days in the relatively recent past.” This is asking about agreement with a Genesis account of creation! First note that we had similar results in 2018 and 2023: agree and strongly agree are the same and total 86%. Second, note the disparity, with strong agreement 65% instead of the 80% for “I believe God created the universe”, 15 percentage points lower. Even the total of agree and strongly agree is eight points lower than for the first belief about Creation.

Further, note the ten-year trend of acceptance of this statement. In 2013 there was 72% strong agreement. It has dropped seven points. It is interesting that agree has risen by eight points in the same period. But this means, I suggest, that there has been a diminution of acceptance, with strongly agree switching to just agree.

Now let’s look at the Gift of Prophecy, the subject of Fundamental Belief 18, and let’s look at acceptance of the statement “Ellen G. White was a prophet.” This question was posed a little differently asking whether respondents “Embrace it wholeheartedly”, “Accept it because the church teaches it”, have questions about it, have major doubts about it or do not accept it. In 2023, embrace wholeheartedly was 70%, two points down on 2018.

But let’s look at the ten-year trend. In 2013, 76% of respondents embraced this teaching wholeheartedly, but it went down to 72% in 2018, and down again in 2023. With this longitudinal data, we can say that there is a downward trend. This is concerning.

Now let’s look at two church teachings about the sanctuary doctrine, which is Fundamental Belief no. 24. First is the teaching “Christ is acting as our advocate

before God in the heavenly sanctuary right now.” 81% of respondents said they embraced this wholeheartedly in 2018, down a little to 79% in 2023. But “embrace wholeheartedly” is still very high. Contrast that with the second Sanctuary teaching.

This is “The investigative pre-Advent judgment began in 1844.” And here embrace wholeheartedly is 14 percentage points lower at 65%. The Sanctuary doctrine has two parts: that there is a sanctuary in heaven, in which Christ ministers; and the investigative judgment. What we see is that the first part has very wide acceptance, whereas the second, though still embraced by a majority, is not nearly as well accepted.

Let us turn now to our beliefs on the state of the dead, the subject of Fundamental Belief 26. Because we discovered in 2013 that there was evidence of some heterodoxy on this core doctrine, we asked more than one question in 2018, in order to better get a sense of the views of church members, and we asked the several questions again in 2023. The first question statement is:

“When people die, their bodily remains decay and they have no consciousness or activity until they are resurrected.” You can see that not only do 72% of members strongly agree with this statement, but that strong agreement is up by three percentage points from 2018.

However, the strong agreement in 2023 is actually seven points down from 2013. In those ten years, there has been a transition from strong agreement to mere agreement, as you can see, with “agree” rising 12 percentage points, though strong disagreement has fallen by eight points. If we had asked only this question, we would say there was no problem with belief in our teachings on the state of the dead. But this question is only about the physical remains of a person.

If we look at this question, we get a different picture. Here the statement is “The soul is a separate, spiritual part of a person and lives on after death.” And here, as you see, the results are disturbing. One-third of survey respondents agreed or

strongly agreed with this statement in 2018, and there has been no improvement since then. Thus the data suggest that one in three church members are dualists, believing in the separation of soul and body, though the Adventist Church rejects this.

What we have seen is that acceptance of some core Adventist doctrines is not as high as we would ideally like. We can all agree that this is unfortunate, and that there is work to be done when it comes to the doctrines of Creation, the Sanctuary, the Gift of Prophecy and the state of the dead.

However, there is a positive side to some of the church-member survey findings about Adventist beliefs. We are having these problems partly because the church is growing! We are having new believers joining our ranks, and they are not as familiar with our beliefs as are those who are more well established. And in some parts of the world, where there is rapid growth, it is among non-Christian people, who sometimes accept our doctrines on the surface but take time to have a thorough going change in underlying worldview. So if we continue to grow, we will continue to face some heterodoxy of belief and practice.

Not that we should simply accept that. No, we have to do more work in discipling those who have been baptized, so that they have a full conversion experience.

Thus far, I have shared about the current I Will Go strategic focus, and given some examples of key data that come out of worldwide research. But one point of that global research was to help craft a new strategic plan. So let us now turn our attention to the proposed plan for the next quinquennium. It is based on data from church members around the world, and from assessments shared by each division.

As I already noted, we will continue to call the world Church's strategic plan "I Will Go". While there has been some restructuring, there will be continuity in goals between Reach the World, I Will Go, and the new I Will Go. What I am sharing now is only a draft, and you can find it in your agenda supporting

documentation, so I will not go into it in detail. But I will share now the broad outline.

Instead of four themes, there will be four strategic priorities of the world Church. These are:

First, communion with God.

Second, identity in Christ.

Third, unity through the Holy Spirit.

And fourth, mission for all.

Each of these priorities has a number of measurable goals that come under it. In total there are twenty-one. We have adopted the language of “measurable goals” instead of “key performance indicators” and you may wonder why. While members of this committee understand very well the terminology of Key performance indicator, or KPI, it is a term used only in certain circles. Even among many conference and mission leaders, around the world, there is uncertainty about what a KPI is; and among church members at large, it is a term that is largely meaningless. We would like this plan, with its four memorable priorities to go far and wide in the Church, and we want it to be easily understood – by church members as much as high-level church leaders. “Goal” is very widely understood, and easy to translate. But we did not want to only use the term “goal” – measurable goal signifies that the goals are not simple aspirations, not just pie in the sky. We will do research again in four- and five-years’ time to establish, once again, how did we do in meeting goals. So they are measurable goals.

In 2013 the Reach the World strategic plan had 81 KPIs. That was too many. In 2018, we reduced them to 59. That was better, but we heard from the world field that it was still too many. Now we have reduced them to 21 measurable goals. This is a plan that is simple in structure, and with not too many moving parts, and

so we do feel that it can be shared widely, among church members as well as church leaders.

But that is once the full plan is approved, which will not be this year. First the plan does need to be shared with church leaders. We won't be voting anything at this Annual Council. Instead, we are asking you to take the draft plan back to your divisions and unions, and to share it with the wider division and union leadership groups and with conference and mission officers. Use it as you start to do your strategic planning for next quinquennium. And as you receive feedback, please share with us any suggestions for improvements. We do not claim that the plan, as it is at present, is perfect. If we can improve it, we will. Please submit any suggestions within the next ten months. The General Conference strategic planning committee will look at them and come up with a final draft of the plan which will be presented to the 2024 Annual Council for approval.

We want a plan that is a good fit for the worldwide Church of which we are all proud to be a part, and that will help us in our collective mission to reach the world, looking towards the imminent return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.