Adventist Church membership passes 18 million member mark

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, one of the fastest-growing Christian denominations in the world, has recorded more than 18 million baptized members. There were 18,028,796 Seventh-day Adventists worldwide as of September 30, according to the church's Office of Archives, Statistics and Research.

An estimated 25 to 30 million men, women and children attend weekly Adventist worship services. The church does not baptize infants or very young children, thus the gap between attendees and baptized members.

In October, Adventist Church Executive Secretary G. T. Ng noted the continuing growth in church membership: “On any given day, 3,052 people join the church. Every hour 127 people are baptized. Every minute, two individuals are baptized, and we praise God for that,” he told church leaders during his report at the 2013 Annual Council in Silver Spring, Maryland.

David Trim, director of Archives, Statistics, and Research, commented on the milestone: “We are excited by this growth at a time when, globally, many religious groups are no longer growing. We thank God that, in the face of challenges such as political oppression, religious persecution, and increasing materialism and secularism, this movement, which emphasizes hope and wholeness, is continuing to grow and has now passed this statistical milestone.”

Formally organized in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist Church operates 112 colleges and universities, more than 1,900 secondary schools and nearly 6,000 primary schools, with a total enrolment of more than 1.75 million, along with 172 hospitals, treating more than 16 million people annually. The church’s commitment to serving humanity includes the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), as well as evangelistic campaigns and broadcast ministries designed to share the Three Angels’ messages with a world in need of Bible-based answers.
Thousands of Seventh-day Adventists from all 50 United States and 60 other countries heard a clarion call for holiness and dedication to the movement’s core message on the morning of Sabbath, January 4, as the annual “Generation. Youth. Christ.” (GYC) event reached its zenith in Orlando, Florida. Morning worship attendance was recorded at 6,200.

“As Seventh-day Adventist young people in service to God before men and angels, you are called to proclaim the Advent hope with the need for revival, repentance and reformation through the power of the Holy Spirit,” declared Pastor Ted N. C. Wilson, president of the Adventist world church, who, moments earlier, was named “President of Adventist young people” by outgoing GYC president Justin McNeilus. A smiling Wilson responded by saying the latter accolade “was an even better title than being president of the General Conference.”

The veteran church leader then turned serious in his call for evangelism by the Church’s young people, many of who had both attended training sessions on outreach during the annual four-day GYC event, and had participated in a day of outreach in Florida’s fifth-largest city, with a 2012 population reported at nearly 250,000.

According to GYC officials, 2,800 people participated in canvassing. The volunteers knocked on 22,622 doors; left 15,517 tracts; gave out 2,238 copies of The Great Controversy to individuals and prayed with 2,089 people, recording 216 requests for follow-up Bible studies.

“My first GYC experience was great because we did outreach and that was a blessing for me because I was able to [reach] people within a couple of minutes,” said Nishele Adams, a 19-year-old Lehman College student from New York City.

Mario Sanchez, a 22-year-old from Oakland, California, added, “It’s been great to meet people from all over the world, different backgrounds, different ages but [all] excited about doing the Lord’s work.”

Citing the account of Paul’s proclamation of Christ to the intellectuals of Athens’ Mars Hill as recorded in Acts 17, Wilson said Seventh-day Adventists today are confronting their own “Mars Hill” when their faith and values collide with an increasingly secular world. “Everywhere we see idolatry in full swing—self-centered secular and post-modern attitudes that are in opposition to God’s Word—independent, self-serving attitudes that need to be softened by submission to Christ,” he said.

Describing “spiritual complacency and apathy” as one of four major concerns facing the Seventh-day Adventist movement, Wilson urged his hearers to move forward in bringing the Church’s message to others as an antidote.

“Holy Spirit-led involvement in your local church and in your outreach to the community is the answer to apathy,” he said. “If you want to be spiritually alive, get involved. If you want a vibrant prayer life, get involved. If you want to appreciate the Word of God more, get involved. If you want
to have a deeper love for others, get involved. If you want to see souls won to Jesus, get involved. If you want to see Jesus come soon, get involved. Join the hundreds of thousands of Seventh-day Adventist young people, leaders and members around the world who are actively involved in the mission of the church.”

Wilson said another source of concern is “the challenging danger of disunity” within Adventism: “God has given to Seventh-day Adventists a divinely inspired church organization and mutual agreements called church policies, which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are part of what holds us together as a worldwide family. To discard or ignore these mutual agreements violates a sacred trust and creates unnecessary discord,” he said.

But Wilson’s first two concerns regarding the denomination centered on both the self-identity of members with Adventism’s doctrines and a rise in worldliness among church members.

“Too many either have failed to recognize or have forgotten the divine prophetic calling God has given this church. There is a growing tendency to minimize our differences with other denominations. Much of this comes from a neutralization of the Bible as God’s Word,” Wilson declared.

He later added, “We have a life and death message to present to the world. Seventh-day Adventists have been raised up like Noah to prepare the world for its final hours. I am absolutely confident that, guided by Jesus and faithful to our prophetic heritage, this movement will triumph.”

On the subject of worldliness, Wilson said a neglect of traditional Adventist counsels on diet, dress and behavior has a cost: “Standards once cherished by Seventh-day Adventists in the areas of diet, dress, recreation, amusement and Sabbath-keeping are fast becoming things of the past. When members are adorned like the world, dress like the world, love the world’s entertainment, listen to the world’s music and are captivated by its Hollywood productions, genuine spirituality erodes and the devil makes inroads into the soul,” he said.

Wilson added, “Millions all over the world are aching for something different. They long for genuine, authentic Christianity. We will never reach them by compromising our standards to come down to their level. We must ‘lift up the standard.’ This is no time to flirt with the devil’s dress, diet, amusement, and worldly influences.”

Also in his message, Wilson said, “Young people, leave this convocation knowing that God has called the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a prophetic people to be a prophetic movement with a prophetic message and a prophetic mission.”

While noting advances in spreading the Adventist message and the church’s growth, Wilson said he was concerned about the loss of some young adults, and other members, along the way. To help keep young adult Adventists connected, he announced the world church’s Youth Ministries department would “assign a full-time associate director” dedicated to public campus ministries, reaching Seventh-day Adventists and those interested in the message who attend non-Adventist colleges and universities.

Before the morning worship, several Adventist leaders joined Wilson onstage for an hour-long question-and-answer session to address various subjects related to young adults.

That Sabbath School panel included a group of Adventist thought leaders, each with a message for the largely young adult congregation: Mark Finley, a special assistant to Wilson as well as editor-at-large for Adventist Review and Adventist World magazines; James Black, North
American Division youth ministries leader; Bill Knott, Adventist Review and Adventist World editor and executive publisher; and Paul Ratsara, Southern Africa-Indian Ocean division president, who spoke movingly of the loss of three close relatives in the last year, including his wife, Denise, who died of cancer in October. They were interviewed by Israel Ramos, a pastor in the Michigan Conference and former GYC president, Justin McNeilus, GYC president for the last six years, and Natasha Nebblett, incoming GYC president.

Asked what message he had for young people, Wilson said, “Get involved in your local church. Be a part of what’s happening. Don’t just throw your hands up and sit in a corner.”

The church executive concluded with a statement from church co-founder Ellen G. White: “Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard.” (Acts of the Apostles, p. 12)

—Additional reporting by Mark Paden

2014 Adventist world budget: mission, administrative support, expanded auditing

The 2014 budget of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s world headquarters funds mission work and administrative support outside of North America, as well as the operation of the headquarters building.

The Adventist Church’s world budget this year of nearly $180 million allocates:

- $46.2 million for operating costs, salaries and programs of the world headquarters building
- $44 million in appropriations to the fields outside of North America.
- $33 million in subsidies to institutions.
- $29.3 million for missionaries and employees serving in other divisions.
- $14.6 million in headquarters administered funds.
- $12 million for the General Conference Auditing Service.

An Adventist Church finance officer underscored that the world budget of $180 million only includes items relating to the denomination’s world headquarters and appropriations to world fields. The world budget does not include the reported incomes or budgets for its 13 divisions or respective local administrative units and congregations (The Adventist world church receives more than $2 billion in tithe annually). Many local administrative units may choose to report their own budget in a similar way.

Operating costs for the denomination’s headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States, is limited to 2 percent of world tithe, and it is again expected to operate significantly under that cap.

“We have been running under that cap for decades, making more resources available for world fields,” said Juan R. Prestol, undertreasurer for the Adventist world church.

Prestol said the 2014 budget represents a “holding pattern” due to the adjustment in tithe percentages from North America, a decision that was approved by the denomination’s Executive Committee in 2012.
Until 2012, the North American Division contributed 8 percent of its tithe to the GC World Budget, while the other 12 divisions each contributed 2 percent. The 2012 vote reduced North America’s tithe percentage contribution down to 6 percent, which would be implemented over several years. North America’s tithe is nearly $1 billion, and the 2014 continuing adjustment means an approximately $10 million reduction, Prestol said.

Recipient divisions other than North America are allocated appropriations between $1.3 million and $4.9 million. The 2014 world budget also includes a 2 percent increase over 2013 appropriations levels.

“Every year we have never ceased to give modest increases in appropriations to the divisions and institutions,” Prestol said. “Even in 2008 when we faced the world recession, which we are altogether not out of, the budget of the General Conference represents a modest increase and measured approach to continue with the programs.”

In 2008, the Executive Committee voted that the Inter-American Division, South American Division and Loma Linda University would receive decreasing appropriations from 2010 to 2014, with the remaining amounts going to other regions and institutions.

The $12 million allocated to the General Conference Auditing Service represents an expanded service to cover audits not previously conducted in certain regions, said GCAS Director Paul Douglas. Subsides will be provided at a rate of 80 percent for the audit cost of a tithe-based type entity and 20 percent for the audit cost of a non-tithe based type entity. The portions not covered by subsidies from the General Conference will be passed on to the respective divisions, which for the first time will share in the costs of audits being performed in their territory.

For the first time, the North American Division in 2014 will receive an appropriation—$279,000 to help administrate the Guam-Micronesia Mission, which until two years ago was part of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

Other major appropriations identified within the 2014 General Conference world budget include:

- $7.6 million for Loma Linda University
- $5.5 million for Adventist World magazine
- $5.3 million for Andrews University
- $4.9 million for Hope Channel
- $2.5 million for the Ellen G. White Estate
- $2.4 million for Adventist World Radio
- $1.5 million for subsidies to publications
- $1.4 million for the 2015 General Conference Session
- $1.3 million for Oakwood University
- $1.2 million for the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
- $1.2 million for the Geoscience Research Institute
- $1.1 million for the Adventist University of Africa

To see a complete copy of the 2014 General Conference world budget as an Excel spreadsheet, please send a request to the ANN editor at adventistnews(at)gc.adventist(dot)org.

Missing Canadian Adventist missionary confirmed dead, media reports say
A Seventh-day Adventist missionary missing in Belize for a week was confirmed deceased on January 2, media reports indicate. Brian Townsend, a missionary living in the Valley of Peace area of Belize, went missing on December 24, 2013. A body found in neighboring Guatemala has been identified as Townsend, who was 64, according to a report by CBC Edmonton.

"We have made formal identification," Belize Commanding Officer Dinsdale Thompson told the CBC in a story posted on their website. "We do know that, for sure, that it is a homicide and we are looking [in] that direction as well of the motive, of why they have killed him." The Canadian news report says police in Belize have identified two suspects and are working with Guatemalan authorities in a search.

Writing on Facebook the morning of January 3, Mark Johnson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada, said, "Our thoughts and prayers are with Brian's family and the many lives he touched both in Belize and here throughout Canada. He threw all his considerable energy into the project in Belize. He will be sorely missed."

On Christmas Eve, Townsend's cook and neighbor saw his truck drive by with a mattress and rolled-up rug, heading out of town. The following morning when she arrived at the house for work, she discovered Townsend's truck was missing. Upon entering his single room house she discovered the place had been ransacked. Outside, approximately fifty feet from the house, "there was blood, there were two machetes in the place where they struggled" says Juan Arias, Vice Chairman of Valley of Peace who was on the scene soon after Townsend was noticed missing. Arias also stated, "It's like they hailed him to open the door and he did it. Because there was no forcing."

Police had also worked with the Canadian consulate and Kory Townsend, Townsend's adult son, who traveled from his home in Western Canada to help search for his father.

Townsend moved to Belize from Canada to build the Valley of Peace Seventh-day Adventist High School and ended up staying after it was finished. "He was doing a lot of things, he had a couple projects. He built a school, towards his later years he was doing a vocational school, things like gardening and a wood shop," said Kory Townsend. "There are few people who can live a dream or live a goal, and embrace it with the passion he had." Kory also acknowledged his father's commitment to his Seventh-day Adventist faith and community. "This was a lifestyle for him, it was not just a project or a mission, he lived here."

According to Dennis Slusher, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Belize, "Townsend came to work in the Valley of Peace Community, helping build a school and church which now has about 50 members. He stayed on after the construction was finished, continuing to work for the betterment of the local community."

On December 30, Kory Townsend, accompanied by Patricia St. Jean and the Belize Disaster and Rescue Response Team visited Townsend's house in Belize and joined the search efforts. While at the house, neighbors and local Seventh-day Adventist church members kept dropping by and sharing what Townsend meant to them.

"Brian has been a role model for me, he has shown me a lot about mission work" said Miguel Ico,
a local elder. "Through his efforts the Valley of Peace Seventh-day Adventist high school has been built."

Enrique Depaz was also a beneficiary of Townsend's kindness. He lived in Townsend's single-room house, but was out of town when Brian went missing. Enrique describes him as a "very positive man, very intelligent, he was always telling people how to live that Christian lifestyle." He recalls Townsend as a strong man who trusted in his faith completely: "He never showed that had fear of anything, because he always believed in God." Others told similar stories. Kory Townsend shared the story of a neighbor who told him that they had just named their newborn child in Townsend's honor.

On the evening of January 2, Ian Townsend, Brian's son-in-law who organized the family's efforts on Facebook, wrote, "With grieving hearts we inform you that the body found in Guatemala is Brian Townsend. We want you to know how much it meant to us, the support and prayers we received from all of you."

—Additional reporting by Tim Wolfer

Cyber criminals target Adventist Church funds

The world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventists Church has been the victim of cyber theft which has defrauded the church of approximately U.S.$500,000. The theft involved funds that were being transferred on behalf of a denominational entity.

Church officials are cooperating with federal authorities in the ongoing investigation and working with the banks and insurance companies to determine what recoveries may be possible. Although it cannot be ruled out at this time, indications do not suggest any insider involvement.

"No personal information such as private information, personal donor records or internal accounts were accessed or compromised in the scheme," said Adventist world church treasurer Bob Lemon. "We are modifying procedures to do our best to prevent this from happening again."

Seventh-day Adventist Church membership officially reached 18 million members last month and is represented in more than 200 nations.
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