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Adventist world church approves urban focus; New York City is first launch site

Posted: 08 Oct 2011 09:00 PM PDT

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Adventist Church membership audits planned, revised figures contemplated

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Top leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church today endorsed a plan to evangelize the world's cities, beginning in 2013 with New York City. The vote came as a practical response to world church President Ted N. C. Wilson's call yesterday to prioritize outreach to large urban centers, where half of the world's population now lives.

Historically, rural areas have responded to the Adventist Church's message of hope more than cities, said world church Secretary G. T. Ng. "We are a church of islands and villages," he told more than 300 delegates at world church headquarters on October 9 for Annual Council business meetings.

"Urban evangelism can be overwhelming," Ng added.

An estimated 19 million people who speak some 800 languages live in New York City.

Outreach to cities weighed heavy on the minds of even the first Adventists, Ng said. Church co-founder Ellen G. White wrote that she spent many sleepless nights thinking about evangelism to big cities. "It is distressing to think that they have been neglected for so long," she wrote.

Even today, "most of the church's resources are going outside the cities, even though most of the needs are now inside cities," said Gary Krause, director of the church's Office of Adventist Mission. Echoing a well-known statement from White, Krause said the church must follow Jesus' New Testament example of outreach -- He mingled with people, showed care and compassion and met physical needs before calling anyone to follow Him, he said.

The plan that delegates endorsed today hinges on both corporate and personal evangelism. Between 2012 and 2015, church leaders will equip pastors and lay members alike to launch outreach efforts in more than 650 of the world's major cities. To better reflect the "cultural diversity and unique character" of the church's thirteen world divisions, regional administrators will choose the outreach cities and craft an approach that will best connect with their respective communities.

Adventist evangelist Mark Finely compared the nine-page blueprint on urban evangelism to the U.S. Declaration of Independence. "This will be looked on as one of the most significant turning points within the modern-day Seventh-day Adventist Church," Finley said. "This document is more than paper; it can be a north star in modeling comprehensive care and compassion to big cities."

While delegates demonstrated collective support for the plan, several offered suggestions on how to strengthen it. Many said it should acknowledge the work of Adventist evangelists and laypeople already ministering in New York City.

Leslie N. Pollard, president of church-run Oakwood University, said such people should be recognized in the document. "We would like to see these people affirmed for sticking with the city, not abandoning it. We don't want to invalidate them because now the big boys from Washington are coming in," Pollard said.
Adventist Church membership audits planned, revised figures contemplated

The General Conference leadership is urging the world church’s divisions to carefully audit membership rolls and remove the names of those no longer active in the movement or who have passed away, said David Trim, director of archives, statistics and research at the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Silver Spring, Maryland, world headquarters.

“The stones can cry out, but so can membership statistics if we have ears to hear. [The numbers] are telling us they are not entirely accurate,” Trim told delegates to the church’s 2011 Annual Council meetings. “I believe that inaccuracies have not crept in through a desire to deceive, but by not keeping proper records. Have we overstated gains and understated losses?”

The proposed audits and reviews are expected to take place over the next few years, Trim said, and likely will result in a lower overall membership number than the recent claims of between 16.5 million and 17 million baptized members worldwide. Although it has been estimated by church officials that as many as 25 million to 30 million people worldwide attend Adventist worship services weekly, the church only counts as members those who have been baptized. Traditionally, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has only baptized those old enough to make a conscious decision to unite with the church, and does not baptize infants.

The call for greater scrutiny of membership statistics reflects a desire for accuracy and transparency, Trim said. As servants of God and of His church, the first need is to be open and above-board in representing its membership numbers.

“This doesn’t mean that God hasn’t blessed the church or is not blessing,” Trim said before his report. “It’s just that we’re being honest.”

Ng told Annual Council delegates on October 9, “The numbers game is not about numbers. It’s about people -- souls that are lost twice. If these souls had not been lost, we would have a membership of 24 to 25 million.”

Such losses may only be for a season, however. On October 7, Jairyong Lee, president of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, acknowledged the loss of tens of thousands of names from the rolls during a recent audit. However, new evangelistic efforts in China and other nations in the division have replenished those numbers, and new members are being disciple and nurtured so they remain active.

Another division president voiced support for the move: “I really want to appreciate the Secretariat for this bold move,” said Paul Ratsara, president of the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, one of the world church’s largest regions. “This is a test of accountability and transparency for all of us. I believe we really have to do this.”

Organized in 1863, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is the top administrative body for the church, which is active in 203 countries and territories worldwide. The Annual Council meetings are designed to inform the movement’s world leaders of current trends and needs, as well as to take actions necessary to carry forth Adventism’s mission.