

Membership Audit

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A membership audit is the examination of the local church record book to monitor church growth and account for missing members. People become members of the church only after baptism or profession of faith, preceded by instruction from the Bible on the “Church’s fundamental beliefs and practices and the responsibilities of membership.”¹

Need for the Audit

Counting the people of God has its antecedent in the Bible. The first enumeration of God’s people was to tax each eligible person the half-shekel tax needed for the erection of the tabernacle (see Exod. 30:12; 38:26). “The second numbering was less a census than an organizational procedure—a mustering of men of military age by tribes and smaller units, with a leader (Num. 1:4, 5).”² In the two instances, knowing the number of people was needed for effective planning. The church today also needs to know its membership for several reasons.

Being our brother’s keeper: In the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-6), the shepherd counted his sheep in order to know if any were missing. He left 99 sheep and went looking for the missing one. This is the first reason for the membership audit. A member who is not seen in the church for some time should be sought for. In Cameroon, a woman was absent from church for almost a whole year and no church member went looking for her. She was absent because she was sick. When she recovered, she went to church and told the congregation that it was not a caring one and that they had not shown Christian love to her. She left the church in annoyance and never went back.³ A membership audit is a way of being our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers!

It makes for good planning: There is no way good planning can be done for a local church or conference without knowing how many members there are. For instance, how many Sabbath School lesson books should be ordered for the local church? How much tithe should be expected this year if we know the average tithe for last year? Knowing how much offering will come in, given last year’s average, will also depend on knowing the membership. These are just a few examples of how planning needs accurate membership.

Measuring growth: Accurate measurement of growth in the church in terms of membership can only be done when the membership figure is correct.

Assessing the effectiveness of the evangelistic method: Retention of members may depend on how they are brought in. If, after an evangelistic effort, almost all the converts backslide, then the method of evangelism should be re-examined and properly evaluated. Without a membership audit, we assume that our method is good, whereas it may need a critical evaluation.

Not all converts stay after baptism: Even if the method of evangelism is very good, and everything is done to minimize losses, it is still possible that some converts will go back into the world after their baptism. In the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-8, 18-23), Jesus illustrates four types of hearts that may receive the gospel: the wayside, the stony place, the thorns, and the good ground. The wayside hearer is the person who hears the gospel but does not understand it. Satan snatches it from the mind, so this person does not seem to make any profession of faith. The stony heart represents those who receive the message with gladness and are baptized, but they backslide as soon as they meet trials and persecution because they are not well-rooted. The thorny heart receives the gospel, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the attraction of wealth, possibly after baptism. The good ground represents those who hear and understand God's word, are well established in the faith, and produce fruit. For now, these are the only ones that remain in the church long after the evangelistic campaign that brought them in. After every evangelistic effort, the question people ask is how many people were baptized, but never does anyone ask how many have left the church after some time. Ellen White writes:

Many who make a profession of religion are stony-ground hearers. Like the rock underlying the layer of earth, the selfishness of the natural heart underlies the soil of their good desires and aspirations. The love of self is not subdued. They have not seen the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the heart has not been humbled under a sense of guilt. This class may be easily convinced, and appear to be bright converts, but they have only a superficial religion.⁴

It takes a good periodic membership audit to know the real number of members in the church.

How Membership Audit Is Done

Members' names are written in the church record book as they are baptized, transferred to the local church, or accepted by profession of faith. Members' names are dropped from the book only if they are deceased, transfer their membership to another church, or by the vote of the church at a business meeting. A name is dropped when a person is disfellowshipped for gross offenses like sexual abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable adults, fornication, and incest.⁵

When the offense committed is not considered very serious by the church, censure is the punishment. Censure is the suspension of the member for a period ranging from a minimum of one month to a maximum of 12 months. Censure does not lead to removal of the name of the offender from the church record book.

Names are dropped when members are transferred to another local church. While a name is dropped in the local church, it is sent to the new church where it is entered into the record book.

Another category of names that are dropped are those that are declared missing. Before a member is declared missing, the church must spend a minimum of one year looking for the person. It is the responsibility of a member who is traveling and, for that reason, will not be in church for some time, to inform the church about his or her absence. If such a member will stay in the new place for more than six months, he or she should apply for the transfer of membership through the clerk of the new church.⁶ However, if a local church does not see a member in the church, the members are to spend at least one year looking for the member. It is the Christian duty of the local church and should be done seriously and effectively. If, at the end of this period, he or she is not found, the church at a business session will take a vote to declare him or her missing, whereupon the name is dropped from the record book.

By subtracting the number of names dropped because of death, transfer, disfellowship, and missing from the number of members in the church, we get the actual membership of the church. This exercise is what is called a membership audit, and it should be done at regular intervals by the church, the church clerk being the principle officer in charge of this.

Obstacles to Membership Audit

There are two main obstacles to membership audit: 1) Possible inefficiency of the church clerk; and 2) The non-cooperative attitude of some church leaders.

The church clerk is the principle officer in charge of the membership audit, for it is he or she who keeps the church record book. Thus, if he or she is not efficient, the work is either not done at all or poorly done. The solution to this is to get competent people who are well trained as church clerks.

Perhaps the greatest hindrance to a membership audit is the reluctance of some church administrators (at the local church, conference/mission, union, and division) to conduct it. Some would not like to do it because of fear that the exercise will reduce membership. In a situation where success is measured by the number of members in a church, conference, union, or division, a leader becomes reluctant to do anything that may drop the number. Yes, the number does reduce after a good audit for, as said above, it is very rare that 100 percent of those who join the church will remain. The West-Central Africa Division embarked on a division-wide membership audit from 2011 to 2014. By the end of the audit in the fourth quarter of 2014, Southern Ghana Union Conference, for instance, had its membership reduced from 382,915 in 2011, to 107,351 in 2014. Its growth rate in 2011 was 4.02 percent, but after the audit in 2014, the growth rate was -24.1 percent.⁷ This is why many administrators are very reluctant to do a membership audit.

But judging from God's response to David taking a census of all the tribes of Israel towards the end of his reign (2 Samuel 24), the reluctance to carry out the audit because membership will be reduced displeases God. Ellen White explains the motive behind David's census: "It was pride and ambition that prompted this action of the king. The numbering of the people would show the contrast between the weakness of the kingdom when David ascended the throne and its strength and prosperity under his rule. . . The prosperity of Israel under David had been due to the blessing of God rather than to the ability of her king or the strength of her armies.⁸ Thus it is clear that the motive behind the census was to promote David's self-glory. God hated this and He showed it. For the punishment, David was to choose one of three calamities: 1) Seven years of famine, 2) three months of being chased by his enemies, or 3) three days of a plague in the land (2 Sam. 24:13). He chose the last one and that resulted in the death of 70,000 people (2 Sam. 24:15).

The corollary is that if church administrators refuse to carry out membership audits because their membership will drop, it means they are deliberately keeping a membership figure they know may be incorrect, but for self-glory they are maintaining it. Since God does not change, His wrath is provoked and He will not bless such a church. This may be one of the reasons why the long-expected revival that will precede the second coming of Christ is delayed.

Why Membership Drops After Audit

After an evangelistic effort, the number of the people baptized is added to the local church membership and sent to the conference, which sends it to the union, and the union to the division. Finally, the figures go to the General Conference. As explained above, some of those baptized may be stony-heart hearers, while others are represented as having hearts with thorns. The stony-heart hearers leave the church after baptism the moment they face trials or persecution, while the hearts with "thorns" are those who leave the church because of worries and other factors. When time is not taken to prepare souls for baptism, the chances are high that they will leave sometime after baptism.

But most churches do not subtract the number missing from the church membership. The result is that after many years the recorded church membership becomes unrealistic. This became obvious when the West-Central Africa Division conducted the division-wide membership audit from 2011 to 2014. The point is reiterated that to get accurate membership of the church, a membership audit is a must. It should not be made optional, just as auditing financial records is not optional.

Just as an unaudited financial statement is unacceptable to an executive committee when the treasury presents its report, so an unaudited membership report from the secretariat should not be acceptable to any executive committee.

adventiststatistics.org.

Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual. The Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 18th Edition.

Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962-2000.

White, Ellen G. *Christ's Object Lessons*, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941.

White, Ellen G. *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1890.

NOTES

1. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 18th Edition) 44-45.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, 826.
3. This story was told by Gilbert Wari, former president of West-Central Africa Division, a Cameroonian.
4. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 46.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 62.
6. *Ibid.*, 52.
7. www.adventiststatistics.org, Southern Ghana Union Conference, 2011-2014, accessed April 10, 2019.
8. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1890), 748.

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