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## **10. Perceptions of the Mission of the Church Outlined by Teachers in North American Seventh-day Adventist Schools**

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Many organizations have well-defined mission statements that function as a means of communicating the goal or overriding purpose of their organization. These statements are believed to impact the strategy and performance of the organization (Darbi, 2012). Studies suggest that mission statements have a variety of other important functions. Bartkus, Glassman and McAfee (2004) reported on their value in changing the behavior of employees or group-members by motivating and inspiring them. Mission statements can also form the basis for a collective identity, and even attract people to the organization (Desmidt, 2015). In the church, it is hoped that the mission statement will influence all four of these areas.

However, the mission of the church is not some push for success driven by the thoughts of key influencers. Rather, it derives from the foundational document of the church, the Scriptures. It is the scriptural focus for mission which undergirds the official mission statements of the church and is expected to inform the understanding of mission held by its membership.

According to the Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving

witnesses and proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels' Messages in preparation for His soon return (Matt 28:18–20, Acts 1:8, Rev 14:6–12)” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018-2019).

But do teachers employed in Adventist schools know this? It is important to ask this question given the tendencies of organizations to gradually drift away from their original purpose and identity. While it might seem inconceivable that the Adventist Church would ever lose sight of its mission, mission drift in organizations is almost inevitable unless careful steps are taken to prevent it (Greer & Horst, 2014). The causes of mission shift are many, from poorly defined or communicated mission statements (Greer & Horst, 2014), to organizational change (Burtchaell, 1998), social and cultural demands placed on the organization (Comforth, 2014), or decisions which result in compromises due to misalignment of values (Childress, 2019). To reduce the tendency of mission shift, an understanding of the mission of the organization must be deeply embedded at every level of the organization (Greer & Horst, 2014). Thus employees of the church need to know and understand the mission of the church.

Much effort is put into measuring the success of mission statements, but there appears to be limited research into the perceptions of these statements by employees or members of organizations (Desmidt, 2015). This chapter addresses this gap in research by discussing the perceptions of the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church held by teachers employed in Adventist primary and secondary schools in the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### **Methodological Notes**

Two survey questions are considered in this chapter. The first, question 4, was an open-ended question in which educators were asked to write one or two sentences in response to the following: “If I were asked, ‘What is the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?’ I would say:”. The qualitative responses from this question have been analysed using thematic analysis. This form of analysis enables clear organization and communication of the variety of ideas expressed by participants (Boyatzis, 1998). An inductive approach

to the thematic analysis was chosen to allow the themes to emerge from the data itself rather than imposing pre-conceived themes upon it (Rapley, 2016). NVivo software was used to assist the process of analysis as it provides a set of tools which help manage large amounts of qualitative data. These tools include the ability to sort, link query and visualize data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The information from this analysis is presented by theme in the next section of this chapter. The words of the participants are presented in italics throughout the discussion.

The second question discussed in this chapter is question 5. This question presented respondents with a series of statements that described various things the Seventh-day Adventist Church could be doing, firstly asking the educators to find the two they thought were most important and then getting the participant to note for each statement how they rated its importance as a goal of the Church.

### **What is the Mission of the Church? (Question 4)**

This section addresses Question 4 which focused on what individual teachers thought about the mission of the church. The question read, “If I were asked, ‘What is the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? I would say:”

Question 4 was placed in all branches of the survey and hence there was potential for a total of 1,021 responses. Seventy-two individuals who completed the paper surveys did not answer question 4, while 112 individuals who completed the survey online failed to complete the question. Thus, a total of 184 subjects (18%) either failed or chose not to answer the question. One individual noted that they did not know how to answer the question, and one provided an off-topic answer. Together the total number of missing responses is significant in comparison to the number of responses to most of the main themes outlined below.

From the responses which were provided, ten themes with twenty or more supporting statements emerged. These themes are outlined in Table 10.1 below and then discussed individually.

**Table 10.1: Themes from the NAD responses to Question 4:  
Goals of Church**

Theme	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Share the good news about Jesus Christ	332	33
Leading people to Jesus	221	22
God's love	153	15
Preparation for the future	138	14
Reflecting and Representing Christ	64	6
The Three Angels' Messages	57	6
Make disciples	56	5
Service	42	4
Teaching biblical truth	31	3
Baptizing / increasing church membership	20	2

### Object of the Mission

Before examining the themes that emerge from the data supplied in this question on the mission of the Church, it is important to highlight who the educators considered the target of the mission of the Church. The most frequently mentioned target was the world (176) or variations on this such as *all nations* (13), *every nation* (4), *everyone* (35), *all people* (10) and *every corner of the earth* (2). This is unsurprising given the words “all nations” are at the center of the great commission in Matt 28, and the phrase “every tribe, and language and people” is at the target identified in the Three Angels’ Messages, both of which undergird the mission of the Church. The next biggest group were simply listed as *people* (151) or *others* (24). *Us*, or *ourselves* accounted for 15 responses. Other responses included the *community* (8), *students* (6), *hurting/broken/suffering* (5), the *lost* (5), *children* and *youth* (4), *friends and neighbors* (2), *those close to us* (1), and *those in my corner of the world* (1).

These findings suggest that there is a clear grasp of the worldwide scope of the mission of the church. Nevertheless, there is a danger in focusing predominantly on this broad goal, in that it enables individuals to separate themselves from the mission and their role in it. It is therefore pleasing to see some respondents have brought this closer to their own sphere by considering each member’s role in relation to their friends, neighbors and local communities.

## Sharing Good News about Jesus Christ

The most common understanding of the mission of the Church expressed by teachers in the NAD was that it involved sharing of the good news about Jesus Christ. Evangelism was clearly uppermost in their thinking and this aligns well with the mission statement of the Church noted in the introduction. There were three main expressions of the theme each of which was largely intellectual in its focus. The first major expression was the idea of spreading the gospel. One hundred and seventy-three teachers suggested the mission of the church had to do with *spreading the gospel*. Key approaches to the gospel were to *spread* (63), *share* (43) *preach* (22) *teach* (9), *take* (8), *tell* (8) and *proclaim* (7) it. One individual believed that the gospel needed to be shared *through the lens of our education and health messages*. Some statements about spreading the gospel provided no further information. Others took the time to describe what they meant by the term gospel. For most this had to do with a message about *Jesus Christ* (135). Few people who chose this expression noted what they meant by the message about Christ. The highest-scoring characteristics were his *second coming* (32) and *love* (15). Twelve people associated the gospel with the three angels' messages and four with salvation. The most comprehensive description of the gospel was found in this statement: *Lovingly share the complete gospel of Jesus Christ - His life, His death, His resurrection, and His soon return*.

The second most-common expression of this theme was the need to *share Christ* (124). People in this group focused on the person of Christ without using the word gospel. Respondents who chose this form of expression used words such as *share* (53), *spread the message* (13), *tell* (12) *teach* (8) and *introduce* (5) in relation to the message of Christ. They were much more likely than the first group to describe what needed to be shared about Christ. The concept of love topped the list, appearing in twenty-one responses. Some of the other things this group of teachers felt needed to be shared were his *teachings* (2), his *death* (6), and his *second or soon coming* (13). Others focused on sharing what Jesus does for us by highlighting him as *Saviour* (9), *friend* (3), *healer* (2), the source of *hope* (3), *grace* (3) and *forgiveness* (2). More comprehensive responses included the following: *To share the good news of redemption, Jesus lived, died to redeem us. He lives now. He lives in our hearts, transforms and will return for us.*

Another wrote: *To tell others about Jesus and that He loves them and be forgiven. That He has a plan for them that involves heaven and eternal life with Him.*

The third expression of this theme considered the concept of *good news* (26). The church was to *share* (11), *spread* (8) or *tell* (3) the *good news*. Respondents provided four big ideas about the content of the good news: *Jesus* (14), his *soon coming* (6), *God's love* (4), and *salvation* (3).

Together these responses provide evidence that respondents favor a Christ-centered approach to mission which focuses particularly on his love and soon coming. This is important given that Jesus describes himself as “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Salvation is only through him, and the truths of Scripture only make sense in the context of a relationship with him.

### **Leading people to Jesus**

The second-highest theme arising out of the open-ended statements about the mission of the Church was the concept of bringing people into a saving relationship with God. It is encouraging to see this theme take such a prominent place in the thinking of educators. The theme was expressed in two main ways. The first was the mission to *lead people to Jesus* which was expressed in 132 responses. The most commonly used word in these responses was *lead* (43) but a variety of similar terms were also used. These included *introduce* (18), *bring* (16), *help* (15) *connect* (6) and *point to* (5) Jesus.

A second major expression of the theme explicitly considered the idea of relationship through terms such as *helping people develop a saving relationship* or an *eternal friendship* with Jesus. The idea of helping people to develop some form of relationship with Jesus was found in 89 responses. As in the first expression of this theme, the words *lead* (18), *help* (12), *bring* (10) and *introduce* (8) were used frequently. These words imply an active role that goes beyond the mere preaching or teaching of information. The type of relationship or friendship which is desired is described in a variety of ways including *loving*, *eternal*, *lifelong*, *personal*, *meaningful*, *genuine*, *saving* and *living*.

Two of the teachers who talked about relationships suggested it was not only important to *provide opportunities* to lead people to Christ but also to *deepen* existing relationships. Another specified that we need to go beyond bringing people into relationship because what is important is *not simply knowing about Him but seeking Him with all our hearts*. Twelve responses connected the need for the relationship with the second coming of Jesus, and three linked it with benefits in this world stating that it *transforms their life, enables us to be our best, and makes a tangible and worthwhile difference in our lives*.

### God's Love

God's love was mentioned by 153 participants in their description of the mission of the Church. Ninety-seven teachers considered *teaching, sharing, or spreading* the message of God's love as key to the mission of the Church. This intellectual approach to God's love predominated over other ideas. A second group of 53 responses focused on the need to demonstrate God's love practically. Many of these responses used words such as *show, model or demonstrate* Christ's love. Others noted that the Church should *act as agents of love, compassion, and understanding as Christ would do*, that they should be the *vessel through which the Father/Son/Spirit can expose this love for mankind or the embodied message of God's love*. A third group of 10 responses indicated that the mission of the Church included a need for them to *love God* as well as others. Finally, a small group of six responses involved helping people to *fall in love with Jesus* and to *encourage people to love God more than anything else, then share this love with others*. Several responses combined the first two ideas considering that it was important that people both know about and experience God.

### Preparation for the Future

The idea of preparation for the future appeared in 138 responses to the question that asked participants to describe the mission of the Church. Preparation for the second coming was uppermost in their minds with 107 responses mentioning this. The word *prepare* in various forms was used in an overwhelming majority of these responses.



However, the idea *warn* was also mentioned by three teachers. The focus of preparation when noted included *people* (39), *the world* (24), *students* (2), and *the community* (2). Personal preparation was implied in several responses and overtly stated in two responses. Given that an expectation of the second coming is central to the name and identity of Seventh-day Adventist, this focus is an expected outcome of employees in a Seventh-day Adventist School. Additional other-worldly future-oriented preparation included *preparation for eternity* or *eternal life* (12), *preparation for heaven* (10), and *preparation for the kingdom* (3).

Although the teachers identified “preparation for life” as important in the mission of their schools, preparation for “life on earth” was not a strong theme in relation to the mission of the Church. Only eight responses to the open-ended question on the mission of the Church talked about preparation for this life, and four of these focused specifically on students. It is thus possible that they may have confused the question with a discussion of the mission of the school. The four non-student-focused responses in relation to “preparation for this world” noted that the church should prepare people for *service*, and *ministry*, train people to *share the good news*, and *train young people to be missionaries*.

### Reflecting and Representing Christ

Although the predominant themes focused on the telling of the gospel story, there were nonetheless a group that emphasized the Church’s mission to demonstrate God’s love in tangible ways. This theme was expressed in three main ways. The first group of 39 responses emphasized the need to *show* (14) or *reflect* (7) God’s love. Other variations of this expression included *live the gospel* (8) and *model Christ* (2) along with the call to *reveal the character of Jesus through our interactions*, to *be an example of Jesus* and to *let his love shine through us*. A second major expression of this theme focused on representation (14). Most of these responses simply noted our responsibility to represent Christ / God to the world with no other detail. Two individual responses provide interesting elaborations on the theme. The first suggested the mission of the church was to *compassionately represent the love of Christ by meeting people where they are physically, spiritually, and emotionally and assisting them*

*in those areas* while the second noted the mission to *represent God's loving character to the world* and treat others as Jesus modelled. The third expression of the theme of demonstrating God's love emphasized the idea of the church as a living embodiment of Christ (11). One used the term *living embodiment of Christ* while another suggested the church should be *the embodied message of God's love*. Six responses suggested the church needed to be *the hands and feet of Jesus*, two *the hands of Jesus*, and one *the arms of Jesus*.

### The Three Angels' Messages

The three angels' messages were also a popular theme with 57 responses mentioning this. Five listed Rev 14:6–12 alone, and one more probably intended to but got the reference wrong by a chapter. It was the second most-popular theme of those who simply listed Bible texts. Another two individuals wrote the words "three angels' messages" without explanation. Other respondents suggested that we should *share* (15), *spread* (7), *preach* (5), *teach* (4), *proclaim* (4) or *fulfill* (3) these messages. The choice of words suggest that many teachers saw the Church having an active role in relation to educating others about the three angels' messages. However, in three responses it was noted that the three angels' messages needed to have an impact on their own lives, suggesting we should follow or live the three angels' messages. One claimed that preaching Revelation 14 involved *revealing of Christ's character in individual lives working together under the influence of the Holy Spirit* rather than sermons.

The mention of the three angels' messages was commonly associated with the target audience of the world, everyone or every nation (27) as might be expected given the call in Revelation 14 to take the messages to "every nation and tribe and language and people."

It was clear however, that not everyone understood what the messages were about. One response read:

I'm a newer Adventist and I would say I always hear it's to spread the 3 angels' message to the world. I've heard that over and over and have visited several SDA Churches in the Midwest and have rarely heard the 3 angels' message explained.

Several responses from educators linked the messages with the gospel (14) in some way. Representative responses include *to teach*

*the everlasting gospel as spelled out in the first Angel's message and to share the gospel through the three angels' messages.* But engagement with themes of the three angels' messages was not limited to the gospel. One statement summarized the messages as *to teach the world to fear God and give him glory, to get out of Babylon and to not accept the mark of the beast.* Others saw the key features as worshipping God, or the identification of God as creator and owner of the world. Two responses connected the three angels' messages with Jesus.

Many respondents clearly connect the three angels' messages with the mission of the church. In this way they maintain the connection between Revelation 14 and Adventism's self-identity which was described by our Adventist pioneers. Nevertheless, it is unclear how well the teachers understand the content or nature of the messages as few responses provide more detail or explanations of what they mean.

## Service

Closely related to the theme of reflecting and representing Christ is the theme of service. Twenty-two responses suggested the mission was to *serve others* or *reach out in service*. Service was seen to be a way to model Christ and to express his love. Another nine responses focused on serving by *meeting the needs of the people* in the community. One teacher expanded on the theme, noting that *the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to do the work Jesus did—meeting people's physical needs, social needs, and spiritual needs. In doing this, we draw them to our Savior and His gift of salvation.* Another 11 responses focused specifically on *doing the work of Christ, furthering Christ's ministry* and *following the example of Christ* by helping others. Some responses specified practical ways the church can meet these needs such as *feed the hungry, care for those in need, set the oppressed free, helping strangers, poor or prisoners by inviting them in, clothing the poor, and looking after the sick.*

## Making Disciples

Forty-five teachers focused on the idea of making disciples or discipling. The words used most frequently in relation to this concept were to *make* (25) or *create* (5) disciples. However, other active variations included *teach them to be disciples*, and *help them to be*

*disciples of Him*. In an additional 10 responses the *gospel commission* was listed or simply written as *Matt 28:18–20*.

I have separated this theme from leading people to Christ as there is a fundamental difference between simply leading someone to Christ and creating a disciple. A disciple's role in the church is not simply a passive role. A disciple makes disciples. They are trained to take on an active role in winning others for Christ. Although the concepts are different only three responses clearly explained the nature of a disciple. One teacher wrote that the mission was, *To create disciples who go out into the harvest and reap souls for Christ*, while another wrote, *We are to share the love of Christ for each person, inviting them to accept the gift of salvation, and, in turn, become sharers of God's love with others*.

### **Teach Biblical Truth**

A somewhat smaller theme was the teaching of biblical truth. This theme took several forms in the survey. For 16 educators this was a very general idea and it elicited responses such as *to exalt the biblical truths of God for the purpose of drawing the world into a saving relationship with Jesus*, or *to draw all men to a knowledge of God's truth*. Others specified the types of truth they had in mind. These included the truth about the *health message* (7), *Sabbath* (2), *Christ* (1), and *final events* (1). Another four responses considered a holistic view of truth from an Adventist viewpoint. Two mentioned the uniqueness of the Adventist teachings, and understood the mission was *to proclaim present truth unique to Seventh-day Adventists* while two others considered the mission involved *teaching the 28 fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Overall, teaching truth took a back seat to the much more prominent themes of sharing the good news and leading people to Christ.

### **Baptism and Getting People to Join the Church**

Only 20 responses discussed baptism or getting people to join the church. Eleven of the responses mentioned baptism specifically, and seven of these were made in the context of a statement that summarizes the great commission of Matthew 28:18–20. Other comments suggested the mission was to *get more members*, to *bring*

*people to Christ and the church, to gain more Adventists, or to make followers of Jesus and become SDAs.*

While there were few teachers who spoke about this theme, it should be noted that this theme is closely related to the second major theme of leading people to Christ. The discrepancy between the very strong understanding of the need to lead people to Christ and the much lower consideration of baptism or church membership may have arisen because teachers consider this is implied in the concept of leading people to Christ. Alternatively, and I think more likely, the discrepancy may reflect the growing trend to see Adventists first and foremost as Christians. When identity is about Christianity and not Seventh-day Adventism, the focus is all about Jesus and not denominational membership. In support of this idea, one teacher wrote that the mission should be to *help others know Jesus but the reality feels like - the mission is to baptize as many as possible so they are saved.*

### **Other Concepts**

Ideas such as worship, creating supportive and accepting communities, equipping and empowering, and seeking justice all had less than 20 supporting responses.

### **Concerns**

Eight responses to question 4 addressed concerns in relation to mission. Most of the concerns discuss the difference between what the mission of the church appears to be based on the current actions of the church and what the individual considered the mission of the church should be. Two of these responses expressed concern that we should be helping others know Jesus but instead seem to be focused on the 28 Fundamental Beliefs or baptizing as many as possible. The remaining concerns are listed below:

#### **a. Control and assimilation**

*I thought we were supposed to be a movement, not a church. I thought we were to be so focused on the second coming of Christ that we never shut up about it. We were supposed to be constantly*

*searching through the Bible for truth, clear and present. In recent years, it seems that the mission of our church is to tell everyone how wrong they are. The church's mission is to control and assimilate those who encounter it. I am scared to mention the parts of 'traditional' Adventism that I disagree with or parts that I think are out-dated. I feel like there is a disconnect between the spirit of what our church should be, where we started and the actuality of what our church, where we are.*

#### **b. Uniformity**

*At the NAD level, it seems to be to spread the gospel and demonstrate a love for Jesus. At the GC level, it seems to be to force unification on issues that are not doctrinal/biblical.*

#### **c. Appearance is more important than actually fulfilling the mission**

*It appears to be focused on creating a perception of Christ-like followers who are in reality more interested in appearance than actually reaching out into a world of non-Adventists.*

#### **d. Protection is more important than fulfilling the mission**

*Often I see it trying to protect itself as an institution rather than spreading God's love.*

#### **e. Changing culture without thinking through the consequences**

*My experience has been that the SDA church tries to change people's culture to that of an active SDA, veggie food, and being a part of SDA schools no matter if you can afford it or not.*

These responses provide evidence that a small number of teachers are frustrated with the institution of the Church and its actions. Their views of the Church as more concerned with itself than mission are likely to result in limited engagement with the mission of the Church.

### **Aims of the Church: Question 5**

Question 5 provided a variety of statements about the aims of the Church and asked respondents to rate their importance. Table 10.2 lists the goals in ranked order based on the percentage of those who thought each goal should be listed in the top two or three goals. There were three clear favorites. These are 'sharing the message and

teachings of Jesus with this world,’ ‘leading people to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour,’ and ‘preparing people for the soon return of Jesus.’ These rank in the same order as the themes emerging from the open-ended question 4 discussed above.

**Table 10.2: Ranking of the Goals of the Church in Question 5**

	<b>One of the top three goals of the School (%)</b>	<b>Should not be a goal of the School (%)</b>
5e. Share the message and teaching of Jesus with the world	89.0	0.2
5f. Lead people to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour	88.2	0.1
5h. Prepare people for the soon return of Jesus	67.6	0.7
5a. Provide meaningful worship services	26.3	1.1
5c. Reduce poverty, disease and ignorance	24.4	1.3
5d. Teach an ethical viewpoint	15.6	2.6
5b. Increase the numbers who attend church on a regular basis	8.2	10.4
5i. Persuade people to join the Church through baptism	7.7	17.7
5g. Convince people of the teachings of the Church	4.9	22.1

There is a significant gap (40%) between the number who see these three goals as important and the next group of ranked goals. ‘Provision of meaningful worships services’ as the next highest ranked goal is somewhat surprising given the idea of worship did not rank in the top ten themes from question 4. However, the way the question is worded to highlight the ideas of aim or a purpose rather than the mission of the Church likely impacts this rating. The word “aim” is broader and more likely to get respondents thinking about their own experience than the word “mission” which is often very externally focused. Worship services are where meaningful connection with the Church occurs for many members and so are a natural internal focus.

In keeping with the thematic analysis provided for question 4, the rankings of ‘persuading people to join the church through baptism’ and ‘convincing people of the teaching of the church’ are rated as the lowest priority with close to one in five believing these should not be a goal of the Church.

## Conclusion

In open-ended responses about the mission of the Church, teachers from the NAD collectively listed all the elements of the official mission statement of the Church. A strong Christ-focused mission was evident in the thinking of a majority of respondents along with an emphasis on the three angels' messages and the soon return of Christ. There was, however, a relatively low number who went beyond the idea of proclamation and conversion to consider the creation of disciples, which is a key feature of the official statement. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents made no attempt to answer the question, raising the possibility of lack of engagement or understanding of the mission by a considerable number of teachers.

The priority of themes emerging from question 4 matches closely the ranking of goals found in question 5 and provides some validation of the thematic analysis. The very low ranking given to the role of the unique truths of the Church in both questions needs more consideration and raises questions about how Adventist doctrine is handled by these teachers in the mission field of the school.

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