

Seven Adventist Trends

Statistical Profile of a Changing Church

F. Donald Yost

During the 1990s the Seventh-day Adventist Church is projected to grow in membership by about half a million a year, but neither its dollar income nor its working force will increase proportionately. The influence of church leaders in the developing countries will increase, but the contributions received in their fields may not be sufficient to care for their mushrooming church needs. An ever younger-aged and more vibrant church in these emerging nations will continue to look to members in the affluent nations for financial assistance.

These and other trends will present unusual challenges to the Adventist Church as it seeks to fulfill the gospel commission during the coming decade. Church statistics make these trends plain. Let's look at seven churchwide trends that fairly leap from the pages of recent editions of the *Annual Statistical Report*. (A "Glossary" at the end of the article explains the meaning of the abbreviations.)

Sustained Growth in Membership

Trend 1. Seventh-day Adventist church membership is growing exponentially and, at the present rate, may reach 11 to 12 million by the close of the year 2000.

From only a handful of adherents in 1848, the year of the Sabbath conferences, and an estimated 3,500 members when the General Conference was organized in 1863, Seventh-day Adventists have multiplied to more than 6 million and have established themselves in nearly every nation—large and small.

Although it took about 92 years to reach the first half million members, it currently takes only about 13 months to add an additional half million. Because new converts soon bring in additional converts, each half-million in membership growth has required fewer years—and now, fewer months. See *Table 1* and *Graph A*.

No one can predict with certainty that recent growth rates will continue. Between 1900 and 1989 the rate averaged 5.2% a year. Since 1975 the rate has climbed to 6.2%, due in part to the vigorous promotion of all forms of evangelism, including *The Thousand Days of Reaping* (1982-1985) and *Harvest 90* (1985-1990).

Table 1
GROWTH IN MEMBERSHIP
By Half Millions
1848-1989

The approximate number of years required for the Adventist Church to increase in size each additional half-million members:

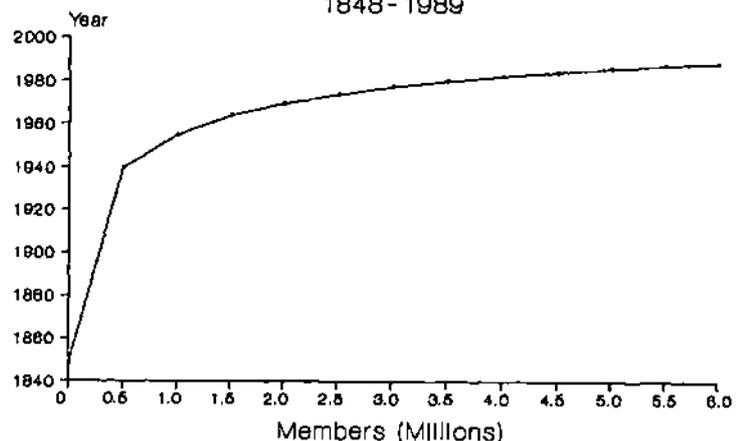
To 0.5 million	92.0 yrs
From 0.5 to 1.0 million	15.1 yrs.
From 1.0 to 1.5 million	9.1 yrs.
From 1.5 to 2.0 million	5.7 yrs.
From 2.0 to 2.5 million	4.3 yrs.
From 2.5 to 3.0 million	3.5 yrs.
From 3.0 to 3.5 million	2.8 yrs.
From 3.5 to 4.0 million	2.3 yrs.
From 4.0 to 4.5 million	1.9 yrs.
From 4.5 to 5.0 million	1.6 yrs.
From 5.0 to 5.5 million	1.5 yrs.
From 5.5 to 6.0 million	1.2 yrs.

If recent rates of growth continue, the church will have a membership of 11.5 million by the year 2000. Table 2 lists five-year growth and loss rates since 1960.

Table 2
NET MEMBERSHIP GROWTH RATES
AND LOSS RATES
By Five-year Periods, 1960-1989
Average Annual Average Annual
Period Net Growth Rate Loss Rate

1960-1964	4.8%	2.9%
1965-1969	5.3%	2.9%
1970-1974	5.2%	3.2%
1975-1979	5.6%	2.7%
1980-1984	6.0%	2.6%
1985-1989	6.9%	2.1%

Graph A
GROWTH IN MEMBERSHIP
By Half Millions
1848-1989



Ratios of Adventists to World Population

Trend 2. Church membership is growing at a faster rate than is the world's population.

From time to time a voice is heard declaring that the population of the world is growing faster than the membership of the church. So, it is said, there is no way for us ever to succeed in

years from now. (See Population Reference Bureau, "1989 World Population Data Sheet.") If the church's current rate of growth continues for 112 years and the world's population stabilizes, as predicted, half the world's population will be Seventh-day Adventists in about 2102 AD—5.2 billion Adventists in a world of 10.4 billion people.

There is no question about it: Seventh-day Adventists have been

billion, there were fewer than three Adventists for every million persons in the world. By 1920 there were 100 to a million (one in 10,000). Today with 6.2 million Adventists in a world of 5.3 billion inhabitants, there are 1,168 per million (one in 856).

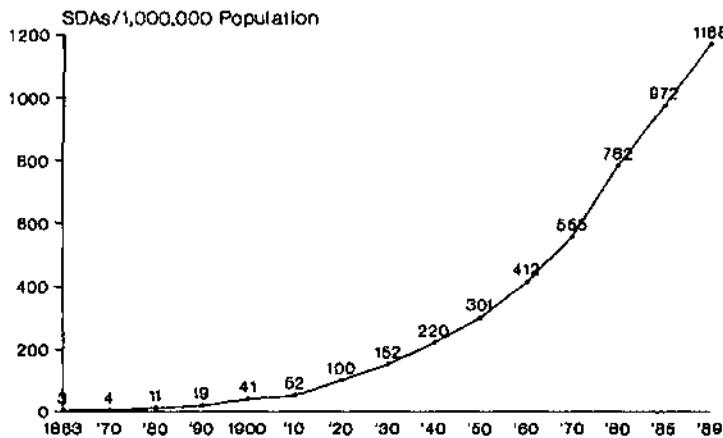
Wide But Unevenly Distributed Presence

Trend 3. Although the Adventist Church is the most widely distributed Protestant denomination, its message is unknown among vast segments of the world's population.

Where are Adventists found in the greatest concentrations? And where the least? *Graph C* shows that the South Pacific Division reports an average of 8,900 members for every 1 million of its population. The Middle East Union, on the other hand, averages only about 20 members for every 1 million. And within all territories shown, there are certain countries where Adventist density is much higher or much lower than the overall average for that territory.

What *Graph C* does not show is that the greatest concentrations of Adventists generally occur where population is less concentrated. In the two Latin American

Graph B
SDAs AND WORLD POPULATION
1863-1989



taking the gospel to every "nation and kindred and tongue and people" as we have set out to do.

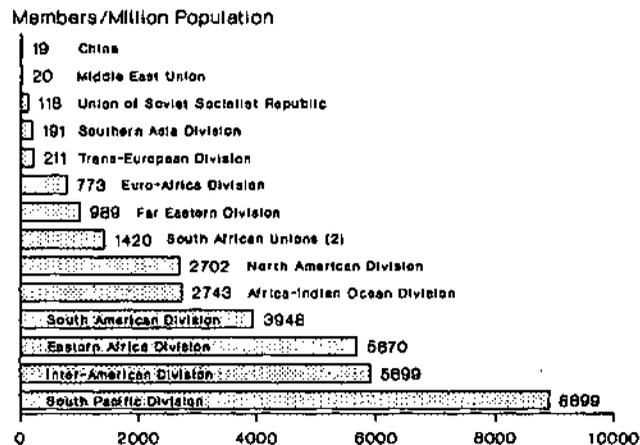
It is true that while the church is baptizing hundreds, the world's population is growing by hundreds of thousands. In 1989 the church grew by 433,850 members; meanwhile, the world's population was increasing an estimated 87 million. Quite a contrast! However, there's another way to view the data:

1. The church's *rate of growth* is greater than the world's rate. Between 1979 and 1989 our membership grew at an average annual rate of 6.455%. During that same period the world's population grew at an average annual rate of 1.935%, only a third of the church's rate.

2. Population experts predict that the world's population will level off at about 10.4 billion 100

and are increasing more rapidly than the general population. (See *Graph B*.) In 1863, with about 3,500 Adventists in a world of 1.3

Graph C
Membership in Relation to Population
By World Divisions, 1989



divisions, for example, where Adventists represent 3,948 per million (SAD) and 5,899 (IAD), the populations are 239 and 200 million respectively. However, where the world's population is greatest, the Adventist presence is slight if not totally absent. China, India, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East account for nearly half of the world's population, but the ratios of Adventists to population in those lands range from 19:1,000,000 to 191:1,000,000, whereas the world average is 1,168:1,000,000. The challenge to Adventist mission is obvious.

Membership Shifts From North to South

Trend 4. With rapid growth occurring in the developing nations and slow growth in the former home bases (the western industrialized nations), the larger proportions of members now appear in Africa, Latin America, and eastern and southern Asia. By the year 2000 about three fourths of all Adventists will be residents of the more southerly regions.

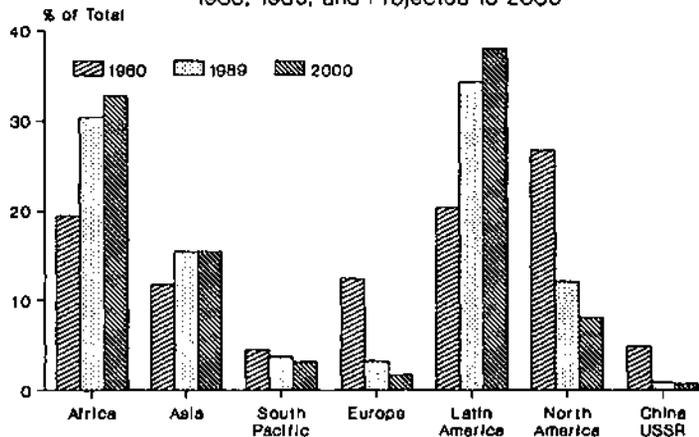
Graph D and *Table 3* reveal the trends in membership growth in the seven areas of the world chosen for analysis in this article. In 1960 North America contained about 27% of all church members and Africa had less than 20%.

Table 3
MEMBERSHIP BY AREAS OF THE WORLD
1960 and 1989
With a Projection for 2000*

Area of the World	Membership		
	1960	1989	2000
Africa	241,574	1,879,565	3,765,000
Asia, East and South	146,315	952,102	1,775,000
South Pacific	56,289	33,740	370,000
Europe	154,808	200,350	200,000
Latin America	252,606	2,119,491	4,360,000
North America	332,364	743,023	930,000
China and USSR	61,168	55,314	85,000
Totals	1,245,125	6,183,585	11,485,000

*Projection based on membership increase, area by area, between 1960 and 1989, and adjusted to conform to projection of total world membership. The projection for China and the USSR is speculation.

Graph D
MEMBERSHIP BY AREAS OF THE WORLD
AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL
1960, 1989, and Projected to 2000



Latest reports (1989) show that North America now has 12% of all members and Africa 30%. Other regions show significant changes. Only the South Pacific has remained nearly the same, at about 4%. These changes reflect the significant differences in rates of growth from region to region.

The world membership growth rate between 1960 and 1989 averaged 5.7% a year. If all regions of the world had grown at that rate, the first two bars for each region would be identical in *Graph D*. But some grew much more rapidly than others. If these varying rates continue until 2000, membership

will be distributed as shown by the third bar in each set in *Graph D* and the third column of figures in *Table 3*. Africa and Latin America will continue to claim larger proportions and the others' shares will remain the same or decline.

Heavy Concentrations of Adventists in some countries.

Finding an Adventist in Iraq would be like locating a needle in a haystack. But in Jamaica one person in every 17 is an Adventist. And in Rwanda, the figure is one in every 34.

Table 4 lists the ten countries with the largest Adventist mem-

Table 4
TEN COUNTRIES WITH THE LARGEST MEMBERSHIP

Country	1989	
	Total Membership	Members Per 1,000,000 Population
United States	743,023	2,986
Brazil	511,264	3,469
Philippines	475,125	7,321
Mexico	316,609	3,652
Kenya	286,851	11,903
Zaire	218,954	6,274
Peru	211,110	9,865
Rwanda	205,316	29,331
India	163,384	196
Jamaica	148,202	59,280

bership. The United States leads with a 1989 membership of 743,023 and Jamaica concludes the list with 148,202 members. The density of Adventists in these 10 countries ranges from 59,280 per million population in Jamaica to 196 per million in India.

Four of these nations are in Latin America, three in Africa, and two in southern and eastern Asia.

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Adventists Trends

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Church Employees Now Serve More Members

Trend 5. The number of denominational employees—both evangelistic and institutional—is increasing as the church grows, but the ratio of employees to church members is declining.

The Adventist Church is *not* growing more top-heavy. In 1920, when the church employed 13,081 workers, there were 185,450 church members. The ratio of employees to members was 1:14 (Table 5). Throughout the intervening years the ratio has steadily

Table 5
TOTAL ACTIVE WORKERS
1920-1989

Year	Total Active Workers	Ratio to Membership
1920	13,081	1:14
1930	21,461	1:15
1940	29,816	1:17
1950	38,927	1:19
1960	48,890	1:26
1970	65,957	1:31
1980	92,912	1:38
1989	111,140	1:56

widened until now, with a membership of about 6.2 million and a working force of 111,140 evangelistic and institutional workers, the ratio is 1:56.

These changing ratios might suggest a stagnating church, but vitality is not lacking. Perhaps ministry was more labor intensive in the old days. Perhaps, as members then lived more simply, they contributed a larger share of their income to the church. Perhaps we now invest our church funds in equipment, travel, and special projects to a greater extent than a few decades ago. It seems to go without saying that if more funds were available, a greater number of employees would be hired.

Evangelizing, Nurturing, and Sharing—a Formula for Growth

Strength in membership and in ministers does not necessarily predict rapid growth.

When Jesus described the earth's harvest as "white," He called for workers to go into "the field." Today, do larger harvests occur where there are a great proportion of members and ministers or where there are fewer? *Graphs E-1* and *E-2* present four bar-graph profiles to portray the relationship among members, ministers, and accessions (new members).

The first bar represents a division's percentage of the total number of members; the second, of ministers; and the third, of accessions. EAD, for example, has 14.2% of the world membership, 7.0% of the total number of ministers, and 22.8% of the total number of accessions. Four profiles are apparent:

1. Three divisions share the first profile: they have a small proportion of ministers in relation to members and a much larger percentage of accessions.

2. The LAD alone presents the second profile: Here the percentage of accessions matches the division's percentage of members, but the percentage of ministers is much lower.

3. The FED has nearly equal percentages of the three factors.

4. The remaining seven (shown in *Graph E-2*) share a different profile: large percentages of ministers; smaller percentages of members; and (usually) very small percentages of accessions to the church.

The differences in these graph profiles may be due to a number of factors. Among the possible explanations are:

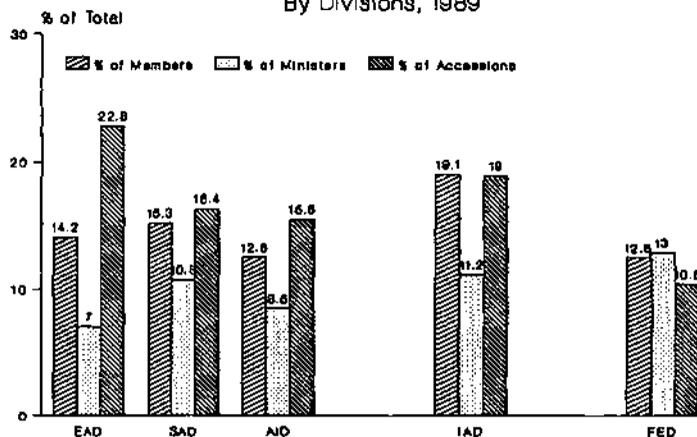
1. The divisions shown in *Graph E-1* are the fastest growing. For some time more members have been joining the church in relation to the number of ministers in contrast to the situation in many other parts of the world.

2. Funds are especially limited in the first three—EAD, SAD, and AID. Perhaps with many members living at a lower economic level, it requires the tithe of more members to support one minister than would be the case in affluent societies.

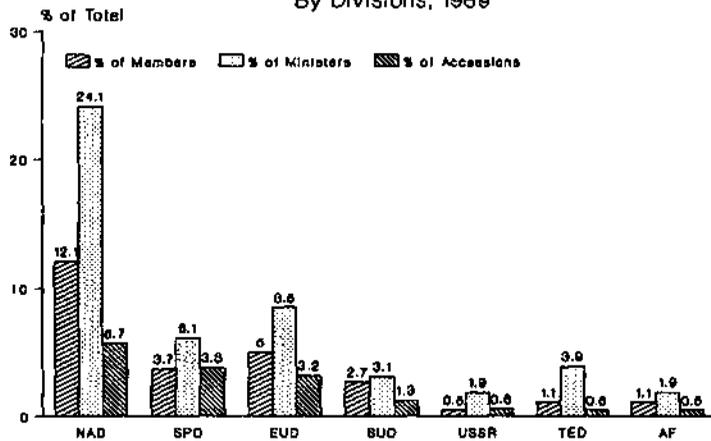
3. Funds are more readily available in most of the divisions shown in *Graph E-2*. SUD is an exception. In the hard-currency, economically advanced nations, it is more likely that the salary of the minister places him about on a par with the average church member. In the developing countries, the salary of the minister may be considerably above the income of the average member.

Graph E-1
RELATIONSHIP OF NUMBERS OF MEMBERS
AND MINISTERS TO ACCESSIONS

By Divisions, 1989



Graph E-2
RELATIONSHIP OF NUMBERS OF MEMBERS
AND MINISTERS TO ACCESSIONS
By Divisions, 1989



4. Where the church is more institutionalized, older in history, and has an older-age membership, there are more ministers per member but fewer accessions per minister. A concomitant factor is that these are third-generation Adventist cultures, where enthusiasm for the message has been supplanted by a "business as usual" church life. Fewer laymen are soul-winners.

Members' Contributions and Purchasing Power

Trend 6. Contributions are increasing overall but are not keeping pace with the growth in membership nor with inflation.

Contributions have grown twentyfold in 40 years but have less than tripled in purchasing power.

In 1950 the church treasuries received nearly \$46 million in tithe and offerings. In 1989 the amount of total contributions had grown to nearly \$953 million. During the same period membership had increased eight times and inflation had cut the value of the US dollar to less than a fifth of its 1950 purchasing power. (These ratios are based on the Consumer Price Index calculated and published by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

Table 6 and Graph F show the history of giving in two ways: (1)

contributions per capita in current dollars, that is, the dollars of the year in which the donations were made, and (2) contributions per capita in constant dollars (1950 dollars have been chosen here). The first column shows that in 1960 the average Adventist gave \$66.09 a year in tithe and offerings. In 1989 the average had risen to \$174.58. However, when inflation is factored out (right column), total contributions declined on a per capita basis from \$66.09 in 1950 to \$33.33 in 1989. That is, what each Adventist contributed to the church in 1989 could buy

Table 6
TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS PER CAPITA
In Current and Constant (1950) Dollars
1950 - 1989

Year	Contributions	
	Per Capita (Current \$)	Per Capita (1950 \$)
1950	66.09	66.09
1960	85.26	69.30
1970	116.49	72.22
1980	98.47	57.98
1989	174.58	33.33

only half of what each Adventist contributed in 1950. Or, the \$174.58 he or she gave in 1989 could buy no more than what \$33.33 would have bought in 1950.

North America—a Source of Much Funding

Trend 7. North America, the original home base of the church, continues to provide major funding for the worldwide work, but its role is declining.

North American Adventists donate 70% of all tithe and offerings received into church treasuries worldwide. Table 7 shows the total contributions given in 1989 (\$953 million) divided by areas of the world. Each area's percentage of the total is given in the right-hand column.

Graph F
TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS PER CAPITA
In Current and Constant (1950) Dollars
1950-1989

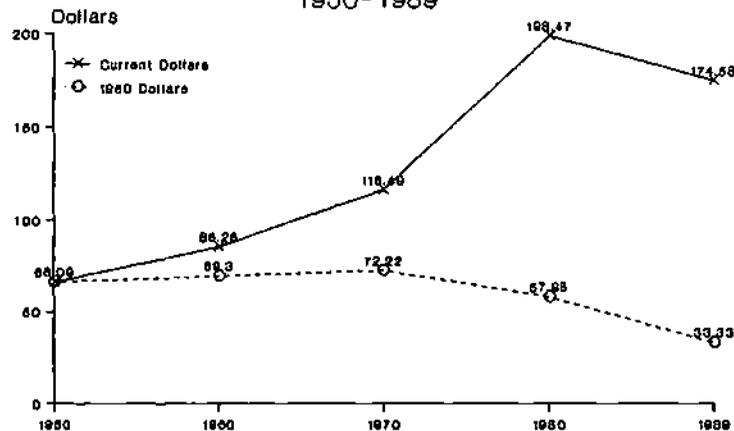


Table 7
TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS
BY AREAS OF THE WORLD
1989

Area	Contributions	% of Total
Africa	\$ 19,688,927	2.0
Asia, E&S	53,199,619	5.6
South Pacific	47,784,314	5.0
Europe	79,987,990	8.4
Latin Am.	85,062,318	8.9
North Am.	666,747,028	70.0
USSR	477,588	0.1
Totals	\$ 952,947,784	100.00

Projections

What do these seven trends reveal for the present and what do they portend for the future?

To the degree that the message of the Bible, the gospel of Jesus Christ, finds a welcome in some places more than in others, just so will the church grow. As Jesus taught, some seed falls into fertile ground and bears a rich harvest, while other seed falls among thistles and is snuffed out. There is no reason to suppose that growth will abate in Papua New Guinea, in Malawi, or in the Philippines within the next ten years, but we may see remarkable changes in receptivity to the Third Angel's Message in such places as eastern Europe.

From a human standpoint it seems safe to say that church growth will not occur evenly throughout the world.

What happens to a denomination when its membership exceeds 10 million, is multinational, multicultural, and multilingual? How many more educational centers will have to be built? Where will teachers, trained in the necessary specialties, be found? And in which of the world's hundreds of major languages will Adventist media—both print and broadcast—publish the message of our returning Lord?

Rapid growth without matching income presents a special set of problems. We have seen that *per capita* contributions have declined in recent years because the number of members who have small incomes has overtaken the number who have large incomes. That trend will continue unless there is a turnaround in church growth in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Although a great deal of funding still flows from North America to other parts of the world, membership trends clearly predict that North America and Europe will soon have only 10% of the world membership. Will a tenth of the world's members be able to continue the level of support that other divisions have received in the past?

Conclusion

One hundred and twenty years ago, the tiny Seventh-day Adventist Church began to think of sending out a missionary from North America. To give the world a special message for the last days was nothing short of impossible. But our pioneers began. The results have been remarkable.

Today we seem to face a still-impossible task. But we know from what God has done through our past efforts that His kingdom will flourish and victory will be achieved at last.

Fortunately, the proclamation of the gospel does not depend upon statistics! Our God is a God of surprises. Willing, surrendered Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit, produce results for the kingdom of Christ. All of us have the answer to the needs of the kingdom: unswerving devotion to Christ. Through Him all things are possible.

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GLOSSARY

The tables and graphs appearing with this article use abbreviations for the church's world divisions and include certain assumptions that are clarified below:

World Divisions: The following territorial descriptions give only the general locations of each division. For complete details, see the current edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*.

AID-Africa-Indian Ocean Division (western sub-Saharan Africa including Francophone nations and islands as far east as Madagascar and Mauritius).

EAD-Eastern Africa Division (Ethiopia south to Botswana).

EUD-Euro-Africa Division (central and southern Europe, North Africa, Angola, and Mozambique).

FED-Far Eastern Division (Asia's Pacific rim from Japan and Korea south to Indonesia and west to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka).

IAD-Inter-American Division (Mexico, the Caribbean, and the northern rim of South America).

NAD-North American Division (Bermuda, Canada, and the United States).

SAD-South American Division (all of South America except the five northernmost nations).

SPD-South Pacific Division (Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific islands).

SUD-Southern Asia Division (India, Nepal, Bhutan).

TED-Trans-European Division (Northwestern Europe, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece, Israel, and Pakistan).

AF-Attached Fields (three unions that are attached directly to the General Conference: (1) Middle East Union Mission (*MEU*) (from Libya east to Iran and Oman and from Turkey south to Sudan); (2) South African Union (*SAUC*); (3) Southern Union Mission (*SUM*) in South Africa).

Areas of the World: The areas of the world referred to from time to time are the continents with two exceptions: Latin America refers to Central America, the Caribbean islands, and South America. "Asia" is used in graphs and tables to refer to only eastern and southern Asia, and excludes China and the USSR, which are given separately.