

Guidelines for the Digital Expansion of Mission in Seventh-day Adventist Churches

Throughout its history, Seventh-day Adventists have used new technologies to share the good news of salvation. More recently, with unprecedented access to digital tools and devices,¹ Adventist congregations worldwide have embraced the challenge to share the gospel digitally.² Accordingly, this document will address three critical questions:

1. How can churches appropriately expand their digital ministry and mission?
2. How can churches appropriately integrate individuals from different geographical areas who can only connect digitally into local church membership?
3. Should we organize new churches where members would gather exclusively online?

Expanding Digital Ministry and Mission

Seventh-day Adventist churches should embrace opportunities for digital ministry. However, our digital expansion must support and enhance our ecclesiastical structure rather than undermine it. Local fields, through their various departments (Media and Communication, Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, Ministerial, etc.), bear the responsibility of guiding churches in digital ministry expansion. They should provide encouragement, training, and resources to help each church progress through different phases of digital engagement. These phases are not a local church ranking system. Rather, they form a strategic framework designed to expand their reach and impact in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Phase 1: Digital Platform

Local churches are encouraged to develop a digital channel by regularly posting on at least one digital platform, such as a website, social media account or podcast. The communication department of the local church will ensure all content published will be: 1) well-

¹ Ministry, September 2023.

² General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “I Will Go” Strategic Focus, 2020–2025, 8.

1 designed; 2) relevant; 3) encourages engagement; 4) is biblically accurate, upholding
2 the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3 *Phase 2: Digital Streaming*

4 After establishing a digital channel, local churches are encouraged to stream their
5 services online, whether Sabbath School, the main Sabbath worship service, prayer meetings,
6 Bible studies, youth meetings, or other church activities.

7 *Phase 3: Digital Pastoral Care*

8 The next phase of digital expansion is to provide spiritual care to those connecting
9 remotely, especially through digital visitation, with opportunities for prayer, Bible study, small
10 group participation, and training. Churches in phase three should also provide regular
11 opportunities for people to engage in church services and volunteer for missionary activities,
12 both online and in person.

13 **Integration of Individuals Living Remotely**

14 The Bible emphasizes that our responsibility is to make disciples who are more than
15 passive spectators and consumers of church services and digital content. All churches should
16 actively encourage individuals to become members of a local church in their community, even if
17 it requires a certain degree of sacrifice.

18 Churches with active digital ministries may interact with individuals from outside their
19 local area interested in joining their congregation. For a church to accept members from outside
20 its local area, it must be recognized by the local conference/mission as having reached phase
21 three of digital expansion, demonstrating strong digital pastoral care. Local churches must still
22 adhere to the guidelines in the *Church Manual* in terms of the process and requirements for local
23 church membership.³

24 Church members living in a different geographical area from the physical place where the
25 church meets should still be trained and involved in church ministries and personal witnessing.
26 For example, members who live remotely could lead prayer meetings, Bible studies, or Sabbath

³ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2022), 57–60.

1 School classes. They could also be elected to church office when their essential duties, such as
2 bulletin preparation and spiritual care, can be fulfilled through digital platforms.

3 Members who worship remotely are encouraged to return tithes and give offerings to the
4 church that holds their membership through the most convenient means available to them. When
5 this is impossible, they should remit their tithes and offerings to the local conference/mission
6 nearest to them.

7 Members who worship remotely are also encouraged to interact with their community.
8 They may be trained to start a branch Sabbath School or small group in their homes and to plant
9 a new church where they live. The local conference/mission should be notified and involved in
10 any potential transition to a new congregation at the appropriate time, as the new congregation
11 may potentially be attached to a new field.

12 **Churches Have a Physical Presence**

13 Scripture says, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of
14 some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb.
15 10:25, KJV). According to the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief number 12, the church
16 is a community of believers who gather for worship, fellowship, and mission.⁴

17 While modern technology provides many opportunities for the church to connect and
18 reach people in new ways, some of the most sacred practices of our faith require physical
19 presence and cannot be accomplished in a virtual environment. Baptism and communion are the
20 most prominent of these, as presented in the Church Manual.⁵ While churches have developed
21 creative ways to conduct the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper during crisis times, for
22 these services only to be available online would rob them of the tangible imagery and
23 interpersonal connection so central to their meaning. Thus, physical presence is always the ideal
24 and the goal. A church should not rely on online gatherings only.

25 Pastors, evangelists, and other church leaders with experience in offering digital spiritual
26 care have discovered a natural tendency for people to desire in-person fellowship and

⁴ “The Church,” **Adventist.org**, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.adventist.org/the-church>.

⁵ “Church Manual,” General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://gc.adventist.org/church-manual/>.

1 connection. As their relationship with the church matures, people long for a face-to-face
2 experience with those they've come to trust and love⁶. Therefore, planting exclusively online
3 churches would fail to reflect biblical ecclesiology and fall short of what we know from
4 experience and best practices in digital spiritual care.⁷

5 The persecution of the Waldenses teaches us that church can never be confined to a
6 physical building. In the fields and the mountains, "God had provided for His people a sanctuary
7 of awful grandeur."⁸ Indeed, " 'The church in the wilderness,' and not the proud hierarchy
8 enthroned in the world's great capital, was the true church of Christ, the guardian of the treasures
9 of truth which God has committed to his people to be given to the world."⁹ Church for Jesus is
10 "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt.
11 18:20).

12 "As Christ's witnesses, our commission is clear, 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the
13 gospel to every creature.' We are to be waiting, watching, working. It is most inconsistent for the
14 church to whom has been opened the treasures of truth, to be dull, worldly, and indifferent.
15 Casting away all unbelief, we should by faith put every capability and every power into
16 exercise."¹⁰

17 Furthermore, our seminaries must teach future pastors how to implement digital
18 evangelism and pastoral care in their ministries. Local conferences/missions should train and
19 equip their pastors and elders in digital literacy, care, and evangelism.

20 **Recommendations**

21 Millions of people search for spiritual content on search engines and social media
22 platforms daily.¹¹ The General Conference should collaborate with divisions to ensure that

⁶ Samuel Neves, "A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Self-Disclosure in Hybrid Pastoral Care" (PhD diss., University of Westminster, 2024).

⁷ S. R. Cellini, "How Does Virtual Learning Impact Students in Higher Education?" **Brookings**, August 13, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-does-virtual-learning-impact-students-in-higher-education/> and M. J. Kruger, "Power of Presence in Theological Education," **The Gospel Coalition**, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/presence-theological-education/>.

⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1888), 66.

⁹ Ibid, 64.

¹⁰ Ibid, *Review and Herald*, January 17, 1893.

¹¹ K. Zakariasen, "Seeking Truth Online, Finding God," **Billy Graham Evangelistic Association**, September 20, 2023, <https://billygraham.org/story/seeking-truth-online-finding-god/>

1 Adventist content ranks highest in all online searches for spiritual content. The General
2 Conference should support divisions requiring assistance in developing channels that nurture
3 relationships between members, visitors, and the Adventist faith. All contacts should be
4 connected to churches in their localities.¹²

5 Therefore, considering what the Bible presents about our church and mission, the following
6 concluding statements should function as guidelines for the digital expansion of mission in our
7 local churches:

- 8 • Whereas Adventists have always embraced new technologies to share the gospel, local
9 churches should be encouraged to engage in digital ministry, beginning with establishing
10 a digital platform to providing digital care.
- 11 • Whereas our God-given mandate is to make disciples, not merely consumers or
12 spectators, churches should encourage people to become active members of a local
13 church in their own area.
- 14 • Whereas fellowship and service can happen online, some of the most sacred practices of
15 our faith, such as baptism and communion, require physical presence and should not be
16 attempted online. Furthermore, a church must have a physical gathering to qualify as a
17 Seventh-day Adventist church.
- 18 • Whereas people naturally desire in-person fellowship and connection as their relationship
19 with the church matures, exclusively online churches with no plan to connect with the
20 physical body of Christ should not be encouraged as they would fail to reflect biblical
21 ecclesiology.
- 22 • Whereas individuals may be unable to join a local church nearby, churches that reached
23 phase three of digital expansion by demonstrating the capacity for robust digital care may
24 accept these individuals into membership.

¹² General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Key Performance Indicator 9.5: “The General Conference has, and its entities are working toward, an integrated media plan that maximizes the potential of technology.”

- 1 • Whereas millions search for spiritual content online daily, the General Conference should
2 collaborate with divisions to establish the official website and social media accounts that
3 represent the Adventist Church globally. This should be done in all languages with the
4 express purpose to connect these individuals to a local church.
- 5 • Whereas digital evangelism and pastoral care are increasingly important, seminaries
6 should teach these skills to future pastors, and conferences/missions should continually
7 train pastors and elders in digital literacy and online ministry.
- 8 • While we must embrace digital platforms to extend our reach, we should continue to
9 prioritize nurturing personal relationships and community bonds through physical
10 gatherings. This dual approach will ensure a wholistic spiritual experience for all
11 members and enhance our ability to proclaim the Three Angels' Messages to the world.