



*Trans Pacific Union Mission*

## **Investigating factors that influence member retention in the Trans Pacific Union Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is a global family of Christian believers who are united in mission, purpose and belief founded on the premise of making discipleship for Jesus Christ. Adventists around the world seek to follow biblical principles of Christ-like living, communicating, discipling, teaching, healing, and serving until Jesus comes again. The Seventh-day Adventist Church's official mission statement is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to all the people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels' Messages in preparation for His soon return" (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, Revelation 14:6-12). The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church drives the church's strategic targets in thirteen regions across the globe including the Trans Pacific Union Mission (TPUM).

#### **BACKGROUND**

Since the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in TPUM more than a century ago, its membership has grown to approximately 140,000 members in eleven Pacific Island nations of American Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu by the end 2022. In recent years, membership audits in the TPUM have indicated member retention challenges affirming the need to ensure church growth that is consistent with its mission. While some emerging evidence demonstrates discipleship approaches in TPUM are effective, church growth remains challenging in the region. The present study empirically investigates factors that influence member retention in the Trans Pacific Union Mission to systematically inform future strategic targets.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology was implemented in a four-phase design study using a participatory approach to collect data with four different instruments. The first phase used the document analysis instrument ( $N = 12$ ), the second phase used the questionnaire instrument ( $N = 105$ ), the third phase used the individual interview instrument ( $N = 16$ ), and the fourth phase used the focus group interview instrument ( $N = 72$ ). Purposive sampling was implemented to select documents and participants that met the selection criteria from the TPUM region. All instruments used were adapted from similar studies by Trim (2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019) and colleagues in the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Office of Archives, Statistics and Research. Data collected was then thematically analysed to identify emerging themes in response to the research questions.

#### **KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The findings in the present study provide the results of the lived experiences of members who are no longer active in the SDA Church and pastors, ministers and leaders in the TPUM. The findings are presented in response to each of the three research questions as informed by the results of all the coded questionnaires, semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, and documents that were collected.

**Research Question 1:** What are the member retention trends in the TPUM in the last five years?

- **Membership net loss** rate in TPUM was approximately 6% in effect, one of every 20 church members have slipped away over the last five years.
- **Average membership loss** rate in TPUM in each year is less than 2%, one of every 60 church members slipped away each year over the last five years.
- **Age group** of members who are no longer active in the SDA Church when they left the Church were mostly male young adults and middle-aged adults.
- **Membership audits** statistics were generally overstated in some of the missions within the TPUM that warrant consistent and reliable membership audits.

**Research Question 2:** What are the factors that influence member retention in the TPUM?

- Key factors that significantly caused members to join the SDA Church before they were no longer active in the Church were firstly, **raised as an Adventist by parent**, secondly, **attended Adventist schools/institutions**, thirdly, **personal Bible study**, fourthly, **evangelistic campaigns** and finally, **influence of Adventist friends**.
- Key church programmes that were significantly helpful in assimilating members who are no longer active to the SDA Church after their baptism were firstly, **regular Sabbath School classes**, secondly, **social activities**, thirdly, **special small group**, fourthly, **regular small group** and finally, **Daniel and Revelation Bible study group**.
- Key factors that significantly triggered members who are no longer active in the SDA Church to leave the Church were firstly, **personal conflict with other local church members**, secondly, **family conflict**, thirdly, **dislike of worship styles**, fourthly, **marital difficulties** and finally, **perceived hypocrisy in other church members**.
- **Attending Adventist schools/institutions** was not a key factor that triggered members who are no longer active to leave the SDA Church.

**Research Question 3:** How can the SDA Church successfully retain members in the TPUM?

- **Promote** small group Bible study strategies which members who are no longer active in the SDA Church found most helpful in retaining their strong belief in the Bible as taught by the SDA Church.
- **Enhance** digital opportunities for all church members to be involved in the SDA Church that are interactive, engaging and inclusive.
- **Enhance** membership audits for ministers and church members to reach out to members who are no longer active in the SDA Church regularly and consistently.
- **Increase** access to quality Adventist schools/institutions for all church members regardless of their socio-economic status.
- **Promote** SDA Churches that are welcoming for all members regardless of their lifestyle challenges, worship styles are more engaging and inclusive, small group activities are strongly encouraged and relationship conflict reconciliations are supported.

### **PRACTICAL MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES**

It is important that church leaders understand how the aforementioned factors affect membership and retention in SDA churches in the TPUM and guide strategic targets that retains members in the Church in alignment to its mission. Therefore, the present study suggests several key opportunities for effective practical ministry in retaining church members in the TPUM until Jesus comes again.

- **OPPORTUNITY 1: Implement** small group discipleship that promotes digital opportunities for all church members to complement mass evangelistic campaigns.
- **OPPORTUNITY 2: Enhance** accessibility to Sabbath School Bible studies online in the vernacular language.
- **OPPORTUNITY 3: Strengthen** relationship building in the churches with improved family and related ministries such as youths, women and children ministries and effective conflict and reconciliation support strategies.
- **OPPORTUNITY 4: Promote** quality Adventist schools/institutions that are accessible to church members with mission-focused teachers, viable financial models that is affordable and strong Adventist ethos and identity.
- **OPPORTUNITY 5: Develop** churches that are discipleship oriented, engaging and inclusive for all members of the SDA Church.
- **OPPORTUNITY 6: Ensure** membership audits are timely, accurate and readily available for church leaders and members to access with ease to improve reclaiming of all church members.

### **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the present study provided key practical ministry recommendations that were systematically informed by findings from the qualitative data collected and analysed. The present study investigated the experiences of the study participants before and after they became no longer active in the SDA Church at the time of the data collection including ministers and church leaders called to retain members in the SDA Church. Based on the findings of the present study as supported by the relevant literature, it is concluded that of greatest importance in retaining church members in the TPUM were small group discipleship, relationship building, accessible quality Adventist schools/institutions, inclusive and engaging church services, and reliable membership audits.