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## The Impact of Language Literacy on Gospel Outreach in Africa: Case Study of West-Central Africa Division of Seventh-Day Adventist Church

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### **Abstracts:**

*Illiteracy or the inability to read, write and speak a standardized language of communication is very rampant in Africa in general and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The illiteracy affects many areas of development. This article evaluates how illiteracy affects the gospel propagation and the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the West-Central Africa Division. The study evaluates the literacy rates of countries of the Division and tries to show how it affects church development especially in terms of membership ratio. The study discovered that membership ratios are higher in the countries where language literacy is higher and lower where language literacy is lower.*

**Keywords:** Language Literacy, Illiteracy, Language Barrier, Gospel, SDA Church

### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1. Overview of the study*

The West-Central Africa Division stretches over 22 countries which are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. These countries are individually and in whole, a complex area of multicultural realities which in one way or another, hinder the full advancement of the gospel. Among these factors are culture, religion, ethnicity and language literacy.

While the importance of certain factors such as culture and religion are well known today within the context of gospel outreach, language literacy appears to be one of the major barriers to the propagation of the Kingdom of God, and yet almost ignored. Gilbert Wari, a former President of WAD, endorsed literacy in a keynote address to Division delegates among the biggest "social challenges" the Division is facing in terms of gospel propagation<sup>i</sup>. Similarly, the General Conference has released a statement in 1995 on the challenges the Adventist Church is facing, and literacy figures on top of six challenges mentioned<sup>ii</sup>.

According to UNESCO's 2016 report, 758 000 000 adults are illiterate worldwide, 188 315 000 of them are in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>iii</sup> (WAD territory), that is about 25% of the total. Besides, 80% of the top 10 most illiterate countries in the world in 2017 are in WAD territory<sup>iv</sup>. According to Africa Literacy Facts<sup>v</sup>, more than 1 in 3 adults in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot read, 182 million adults are unable to read and write, 48 million youths (ages 15-24) are totally illiterate.

Illiteracy is closely related to many factors and most of them are predominant in WAD territories. Man-made disasters such as conflicts and violence, and famine, are prevalent in many places within WAD. Many people are displaced because of one disaster or another, many are living in isolated regions and many are victims of ethnic or gender discrimination. All these factors hinder both literacy and Church development.

While high literacy rate is not a guarantee of gospel receptivity, low literacy is an undeniable hindrance to that fact. Literacy is a key factor for gospel propagation, as the major part of human effort in gospel outreach is to bring people to the true knowledge of God through the Bible. The Bible message is literacy, and its propagation requires literacy. Illiterate people generally live in a limited environment and speak their local language. Yet they need to hear the message of the gospel.

Amidst these ratios comes the question of the place of the Church. What has the Church done so far? What would the Church have done? What can the Church do?

As we analyze Church ratios, it is encouraging to recognize the active presence of the Church in WAD regions. However, when facing an ever-challenging issue such as illiteracy, there is need for the Church to sharpen new strategies in gospel propagation.

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How do these illiteracy facts affect the Church development? What strategies could be put in place to fight illiteracy and propagate the gospel?

### *1.2. Objectives of the Study*

The objectives of this study are listed as follow:

- Examine the literacy rate of different parts (countries) of WAD.
- Evaluate Church Membership ratio by country based on total membership and the total population of the country.
- Compare Church Membership ratios with Literacy rates and evaluate the relationship between literacy rates and Church development.
- Propose strategies to fight illiteracy and foster church development.

### *1.3. Justification, Significance and Delimitation*

While the importance of certain factors such as culture and religion are well known today within the context of gospel outreach, language literacy appears to be one of the major barriers to the propagation of the Kingdom of God, and yet almost ignored. The study aims at analyzing and evaluating the literacy factor on Church development and proposing new strategies to overcome language barrier.

The study analyzes literacy impact on Church development in membership. It brings out the realities the Church is facing and calls the attention of Church entities and members to combine literacy activities to gospel outreach programs.

The study aims at analyzing language illiteracy as it influences the church. However, it does not suggest that language illiteracy is the only problem the church needs to fight. As mentioned above, there are many other factors affecting the church development and gospel outreach which are not discussed in this study.

### *1.4. Methodology*

The methodology in this research is quantitative in nature. It uses membership reports of the SDA Church in WAD and UNESCO annual reports on literacy. It intends to compare literacy rates (Lt) of countries with the membership rates (Mb) of Seventh-day Adventists. The literacy rates are collected from UNESCO 2017 Global Education Monitoring Reports. The Total Membership (TMb) by country is calculated from WAD 2017 Statistical Report. For population by country, it refers to the State of Africa's Population 2017, by African Union. The Adventists membership rates (Mb) by country are calculated considering the Total Membership (TMb) and the population of countries.

## **2. Causes of Illiteracy in WAD**

Illiteracy is related to many factors. In Sub-Saharan Africa, these factors cause more than 38%<sup>vi</sup> of the population to live without any fundamental education. Knowing these factors enables the Church to consequently contribute to reduce them and enhance the literacy rates in that region. According to UNESCO<sup>vii</sup>, these factors are mainly poverty, uneducated parents, geographical disparities, gender disparities, health challenges, displacement, wars, etc.

### *2.1. Poverty, Conflicts and Displacement*

These three factors are interrelated in Sub-Saharan Africa and this makes WAD one of the most affected by woes which contribute to illiteracy. In 2016, the World Bank reports 347 million people living in extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>viii</sup> (WAD territory). Another report underscores that “over 40% of people living in sub-Saharan Africa live in absolute poverty”<sup>ix</sup> Conflicts and terrorism in Nigeria, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, D. R. of Congo and many other places in the region have accentuated poverty. According to the UNO, there were in June 2017 about 8.5 million victims<sup>x</sup> of insecurity and poverty due to Boko Haram attacks in that region. World Vision reports on its web site that 5 million people<sup>xi</sup> in Mali are victims of famine due to terrorism acts, and according to report of the African Development Bank, about 700 thousand are displaced in the same country<sup>xii</sup>. According to the African Development Bank, about 71% of the population in the D. R. of Congo are suffering from poverty, due to conflicts.

In these conditions of extreme poverty, conflicts and displacements, literacy is set aside to face the most vital needs such as food and health.

## 2.2. Geographical, Ethnic and Gender Disparities

Many people in WAD territories are living in total isolation, which does not allow them to benefit from educational facilities. In Nigeria for example, many places have been devastated by terrorists known as Boko Haram. Parents have been killed and children enrolled into terrorist army. Many schools have been victims of kidnapping by terrorists.

## 3. Literacy Rates and SDA Church Development in WAD

The General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church released a statement on literacy in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29 – July 8, 1995. According to the statement, there are six major challenges, which also affect the Church: "literacy, poverty, abuse, health, work hours and conditions, and opportunities for training and mentoring"<sup>xiii</sup>.

The mention of literacy on top of all challenges is reasonable. In fact, these challenges are interrelated and literacy can be seen as an underlying factor of all. The inability to read and effectively communicate impacts every aspect of life.

There is a relationship between literacy rates and church development. The data below help us to analyze this relationship. This section intends to compare literacy rates (Lt) of countries to the membership rates (Mb) of Seventh-day Adventists. The literacy rates are collected from UNESCO 2016 Global Education Monitoring Reports<sup>xiv</sup>. The Total Membership (TMb) by country is calculated from WAD 2016 Statistical Report<sup>xv</sup>. For population by country, it refers to the State of Africa's Population 2017, by African Union<sup>xvi</sup>. The Adventists membership rates (Mb) by country are calculated considering the Total Membership (TMb) and the population of countries. The following abbreviations are also used: MS: Missions, UM: Union Mission, CF: Conference, CFs: Conferences.

Entity	Population	Literacy rates (Lt)	Total Membership (TMb)	Membership rates (Mb)
Benin MS	10,800,000	29%	4 183	0.03%
Burkina Faso MS	19,000,000	35%	1 741	0.009%
Cameroon UM	24,400,000	71%	725 045	2.95%
Capo Verde CF	500,000	85%	8 768	1.64%
Central African Republic MS	5,000,000	37%	5 715	0.11%
Chad MS	14,500,000	39%	2 602	0.01%
Congo	4,900,000	79%	764	0.01%
Côte d'Ivoire CF	23,900,000	41%	7 722	0.03%
Equatorial Guinea MS	900,000	95%	1 467	0.16%
Gabon MS	1,800,000	82%	3 141	0.17%
Gambia	2,100,000	54%	309	0.01%
Ghana UCs	28,200,000	71%	312 866	1.09%
Guinea	11,200,000	25%	1 927	0.01%
Guinea-Bissau	1,900,000	59%	3 232	0.16%
Liberia UCs	4,600,000	43%	20 159	0.42%
Mali MS	17,300,000	34%	1 740	0.01%
Mauritania	4,200,000	46%	675/2	0.007%
Niger MS	19,700,000	15%	191	0.0008%
Nigeria	186,500,000	51%	234 200	0.12%
Senegal	14,800,000	43%	675/2	0.002%
Sierra Leone	6,600,000	47%	9 294	0.13%
Togo CF	7,500,000	60%	8 103	0.11%

Table 1

The highest Adventist membership rates in WAD are found in Cameroon (2.95%), followed by Capo Verde (1.64%) and Ghana (1.09). The three countries have literacy rates above the average (Lt 50%). The medium Adventist membership rates in WAD are found in Liberia (0.42%), Gabon (0.17%), Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea (0.16%), Sierra Leone (0.13%), Nigeria (0.12%). These countries also have literacy rates above the average or quite below in exceptional cases such as Sierra Leone (47%) and Liberia (Lt 43%).

The number of Adventists by country show a relative homogeneity between literacy rates and Adventists rates. Countries with higher literacy rates have higher populations of Adventists, and countries with lower literacy rates have lower rates of Adventists. So, these results show that there is a relationship between literacy and Church development, which means the more people are literate, the more they are opened to the gospel.

What are the implications of literacy rates on the mission of the Church in WAD? These results just show the importance of literacy factor on Church growth. It shows where the Church should put emphasis in this part of the mission. In fact, it shows where the Church should start from. At the fundamental level of gospel outreach

should be included literacy programs. The Church should look for means and ways to establish influential educational programs and centers to provide fundamental education to the masses through which the gospel will be introduced.

#### 4. Literacy in Ellen G. White's Writings

Ellen G. White, cofounder of Seventh-day Adventist Church, attached a particular importance to literacy. She specially views literacy as a major factor of both mission and education. Due to the importance of language in mission she advised that every missionary should “[devote] a portion of each day to [study] the language” of his field<sup>xvii</sup>. In the context of education, she also advised educators to have high regard to language:

“One of the fundamental branches of learning is language study. In all our schools special care should be taken to teach the students to use [...] language correctly in speaking, reading, and writing. Too much cannot be said in regard to the importance of thoroughness in these lines.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Clearly, Ellen G. White was very conscious of the importance of language literacy. She insists that “Children should be educated to read, write, to understand figures, to keep their own accounts, when very young.”<sup>xix</sup>

#### 5. Multilingualism as a Springboard for Illiteracy

WAD is also a region where many languages are spoken in small and disparate communities. The approximate number of languages by country is given as follow: Benin (56), Burkina Faso (71), Cameroon (280), Cape Verde (4), Central African Republic (83), Chad (132), Congo (65), Côte d'Ivoire (99), Equatorial Guinea (17), Gabon (43), Gambia (24), Ghana (87), Guinea (38), Guinea-Bissau (27), Liberia (34), Mali (72), Mauritania (8), Niger (22), Nigeria (527), Senegal (47), Sierra Leone (26) and Togo (46)<sup>xx</sup>.

One literacy problem faced in these countries is that literary education is not carried in the indigenous languages. Most people do not learn in their native languages. Very few literacy programs are offered in some indigenous languages. Many languages have benefited from the translation of the Bible, but it still is not enough. The Bible Society of Nigeria for instance has announced the translation of the Bible into 24 languages and the New Testament into 60 languages<sup>xxi</sup>. The Alliance Biblique de Côte d'Ivoire also announced the translation of the Bible into 4 languages and the New Testament into 5 languages<sup>xxii</sup>. This is to mention some efforts in local languages literacy in general. But the need in this area is still enormous.

The Adventist Church should endeavor to translate and teach the message of the three angels of Revelation 14 in local languages. The Adventist mission should not ignore the fact that the message should be preached in “...every language”.

#### 6. Overcoming Illiteracy through Gospel

What should the Church do to advance the gospel in WAD lower literacy zones?

Literacy is a factor of gospel propagation. Areas of lower literacy rates do not benefit from the fullness of the gospel outreach. Illiterates cannot fully benefit from the message of the gospel as they cannot read and efficiently seize the gospel message by themselves. Thus, illiteracy is a hindrance to the gospel. The more the Church contributes to reduce illiteracy, the farther the gospel is spread. The Adventist Women Ministries revealed on their web site some of the benefits of Christian literacy:

“[Literacy] is a tool for the evangelist—providing an ideal climate for conversion and church planting; opens the pages of the Bible and other Christian literature to both non-Christian and growing convert; is a door into nations and parts of nations where other types of missions are unwelcome; provides a satisfying activity for local Christians who are eager to help lift up their own people to a better life; expresses compassion, demonstrating that Christians are still in the Samaritan business”<sup>xxiii</sup>

The following points are recommendations which the Church can develop or initiate to reduce illiteracy on one hand and propagate the gospel on the other.

##### 6.1. Need to Start Adult and Youth Literacy Programs

A literacy program consists of a set of activities to help a target community acquire the basics in language, such as reading, writing, speaking. The Church has been able to impact communities in many regions of the world through such programs. One example is El Salvador, where the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been able to reduce illiteracy from 17% to 15% through young and adult literacy programs<sup>xxiv</sup>.

##### 6.2. Need To Promote Educational Facilities

One of the means by which WAD could reduce illiteracy is to promote, establish and develop educational facilities, such as schools and universities in countries where literacy rates are low.

##### 6.3. Promote Bible Reading in Local Languages

One of the UNESCO recommendations is to offer education to people in their mother tongues. According to the Organization, education in one's mother tongue is more efficient and has more impact on personal life and society<sup>xxv</sup>. The Church could contribute in providing literacy and spiritual materials in local languages.

#### 6.4. Include literacy activities in youth program

The Church could organize activities targeting youth in the community which include literacy activities such as reading, writing and oral expression. Fundamental documents such as the Sabbath School, the Fundamental Beliefs, the end time messages of Daniel and Revelation, and the books of the Spirit of Prophecy. The Church should endeavor to prepare messages on audios and videos in local languages. People should hear the message in their languages. The Church should plan and encourage literacy programs in local languages, teach people to write and read in their native languages.

#### 6.5. Encourage young women to read

The UNESCO's report on education shows a literacy gap between young men and women in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>xxvi</sup>. The report shows that women's literacy is lower than men's literacy. To alleviate this gap, the Church could carefully and conscientiously choose a variety of activities to encourage young women in the community to read, write and express themselves.

### 7. Conclusion

The West-Central Africa Division is a very large missionary field with a rich potential of gospel receptivity, but also with many multicultural realities which in one way or another, hinder the full advancement of the gospel and the development of the church. Many social factors and man-made disasters constitute strong barriers to gospel propagation. Famines, wars, kidnappings, displacements, ethnic and gender discriminations create an unfavorable ground for church development. However, illiteracy is the number one ever challenging factor of the gospel propagation. It is a closely related factor to other problems. Illiteracy is very prejudicial to the gospel and church development. The church membership ratios do show that gospel and church development are lower in higher illiteracy countries. Therefore, the church should conscientiously put all efforts to promote adult and youth literacy programs, educational facilities, Bible reading in local languages, literacy activities in youth programs, and encourage young women to read, as we are preparing for the ever sure soon coming of the Lord Jesus-Christ.

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