



A case study of rapid growth in the Mopani district of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Abstract: The Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa has experienced significant growth in the Trans-Orange Conference Districts between August 2023 and December 2024. This article examines the contributions of the districts and that of Pastor Mavuso to this expansion, highlighting his methodologies and the resultant numerical and qualitative growth of the church in these regions. The study has deduced that, although the church is growing numerically (Mopani district, which is a case study, has surpassed its target and is thus assisting in the overall conference target being achieved), it may not necessarily be growing qualitatively in terms of the quality of believers produced. The accountability of most of the baptised individuals is problematic, as several factors contributing to this issue may not be known to the church. The study has concluded that the strategies used in the Mopani district were designed primarily to convert people from their denominations to Adventism, instead of making them disciples of God. Therefore, numerical growth is not a sign of spiritual growth.

Keywords: church growth, discipleship, Mopani district, numerical growth, Trans-Orange Conference

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1. Introduction

The proclamation of the Gospel is a defining mission of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. This mission is encapsulated in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The SDA Church, as it is commonly known, also embraces the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14 as its denominational mandate to the contemporary world. Before delving into the methods employed by the SDA Church of witnessing, it is essential to understand its organisational structure.

The church hierarchy begins with the General Conference, the highest governing body. Below are the Division Conferences, which oversee Unions. The Unions, in turn, govern Conferences, which are divided into districts, zones, and local churches. This study focuses on the Trans-Orange Conference of the SDA Church in South Africa, specifically on the districts within the northern territory of the conference, which comprises 26

organized districts. In the Trans-Orange Conference, growth and success have been measured in baptismal numbers. When the districts are not producing increasing numbers of baptisms, the assumption has been that evangelism is not done as it should be. This is because the Seventh-day Adventist church in South Africa prides itself as an evangelism-based denomination.

Traditionally, success within the Trans-Orange Conference has been measured primarily by baptismal numbers. A consistent increase in baptisms has been considered a key indicator of successful evangelistic efforts. This emphasis on baptismal numbers reflects the strong emphasis on evangelism within the South African Seventh-day Adventist Church. There has been no study regarding the growth of the Trans-Orange Conference. Currently, the Mopani district shows more success in their number of targets, surpassing their target by a mile. This has enabled the Trans-Orange Conference to reach the target set out by the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries department. This paper will assist the Trans-Orange Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to assimilate the method used by the Mopani district and serve as a template in the territory of the Trans-Orange Conference, which can be used throughout the conference territory. Such a study has not been conducted before; thus, it will assist the incoming Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director in the quest for qualitative growth in the Trans-Orange Conference. The research seeks to investigate if the achieved baptismal numbers are a true reflection of qualitative and spiritual growth, which will aid the Trans-Orange Conference in the Mopani district. The objective of the study is to analyse the strategies that contributed to the success of the Mopani district. The aim is to share this success as a blueprint in the Trans-Orange Conference and sister conferences of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa.

2. Research Methods

This article explores a comparative analysis of data collected by the Personal Ministries director of the Trans-Orange Conference. The data is compared with the rest of the districts in the territory of the Trans-Orange Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with a special focus on the Mopani district.

The article will present a theological analysis of key concepts that are used by the Seventh-day Adventist Church globally. The reason for this is that the operational system of the SDA Church cascades strategies from the global church to the local church. The concepts to be analysed are as follows: firstly, the concept of evangelism within a theological and sociological (the contextualisation of the mission to various areas) framework. Secondly, exploring the Adventists' evangelism strategic jargon (total member involvement, one member one soul, I will go).

The interconnectedness of these evangelic strategies will be analysed within a holistic approach to church growth. A case study of Pastor Maxwell Mavuso, a district director of the Mopani district, will be considered concerning the numerical growth of the

church in that region versus the rest of the other conference districts. Lessons will be drawn that are poignant for discipleship as a critical component of sustainable church growth.

3. Results and Discussion

The Concept of Evangelism

Evangelism is a multifaceted concept that has been interpreted and implemented in various ways by different scholars and denominations. Mark R. Teasdale defines evangelism as a bias held by a denomination regarding the proclamation of what God has accomplished through the intervention of His Spirit.¹ This definition suggests that the work of evangelism should not be confined to the perspectives of a particular sect, given the universal nature of the Gospel. Therefore, it presupposes that there should be no bias in its presentation or proclamation. When evangelism is viewed solely through the practices and objectives of specific groups, it risks losing its true essence.

Conversely, Frederik R. L. Coetzee, Malan Nel, and Johannes J. Knoetze argue that evangelism must not only be understood but also integrated into the community of believers.² From their perspective, evangelism is a communal witness, and in the context of this article, it is the witness of the Seventh-day Adventist community. Scholars like David Bosch³ and Stefan Paas⁴ emphasise that evangelism is at the core of the church's mission. Both theologians and laypeople can agree that evangelism is central to the church's purpose. However, it should not be conducted through the lens of a particular denomination but should be rooted in biblical theology to avoid denominational biases. On the other hand, C. J. P. Niemandt rightly asserts that evangelism is about sharing the narrative of God's deeds and responding to this narrative by engaging in the mission, also accepting the responsibility that comes with it.⁵

Martin Reppenhagen posits that evangelism is essential for a convert or new believer to accept faith in God, implying that without evangelism, individuals might not

¹ Mark R. Teasdale, "Extending the Metaphor: Evangelism as the Heart of Mission Twenty-Five Years Later," *Methodist Review* 14 (January 2022): 49, <https://methodistreview.org/index.php/mr/article/view/276>.

² Frederik R. L. Coetzee, Malan Nel, and Johannes J. Knoetze, "Evangelism as an Invitation to Missional Discipleship in the Kingdom of God," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44, no. 1 (February 2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2708>.

³ David J. Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today," in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 8–9.

⁴ Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 11–19.

⁵ C.J.P. Niemandt, "Rediscovering Joy in Costly and Radical Discipleship in Mission," *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (May 2016): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3831>.

become believers.⁶ Darcy Lazerte emphasises the importance of having a structured approach to evangelism, as it pertains to God's mission.⁷ Before initiating evangelistic efforts, a church should have a clear strategy for soul-winning to ensure the process is effective and goal-oriented. Walter Brueggemann views evangelism as a means of inviting people not just to church membership but to active participation by sharing their personal experiences with God.⁸ Tumelo Silas Motsie redefines evangelism as a lifestyle that should be lived authentically, not just preached.⁹ It is insufficient to merely share doctrines if those who share them do not live by them. Burabari Sunday Deezia and Grace Lawrence-Hart assert evangelism as a response to meaning, belonging and spiritual fulfilment.¹⁰ Bolaji Aquila Adegoke Adesanya, however, posits that evangelism should be understood as bringing the entire Gospel to humanity, and this is a critical ministry of the church.¹¹ Interestingly, Donald E. Ratcliff argues that the amount of evangelism should not be used by the church as a barometer of spirituality.¹² A church may not presume that its evangelistic activities reflect its spirituality.

Coetzee et al.,¹³ and then Mathias Yuvan Shunmugam and Marilyn Naidoo¹⁴ emphasise the communal dimension of evangelism, highlighting its significance within the community of believers. From their perspective, evangelism is not merely an individualistic endeavour but a collective witness of the faith community. Teasdale contends that the purpose and definition of evangelism should focus on the relationship between those who share the Gospel and the Gospel itself, rather than on the practices of sharing it.¹⁵ Bosch makes a compelling point that evangelism requires a radical attitude from believers.¹⁶ The numerical growth in the Trans-Orange Conference, particularly in

⁶ Martin Reppenhausen, "Contemporary Theological Discourse on Evangelism," in *Sharing Good News: Handbook on Evangelism in Europe*, ed. Gerrit Noort, Kyriaki Avtzi, and Stefan Paas (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2017), 63–64.

⁷ Darcy Lazerte, "Toward a Theology of Evangelism for the Pluralistic West," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (April 2022): 57–71, <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt-2020-0192>.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 10.

⁹ Tumelo Silas Motsie, *Evangelizing Instead of Evangelism* (Klerksdorp: Self-Published, 2019), 121–23.

¹⁰ Burabari Sunday Deezia and Grace Lawrence-Hart, "The Quest for Soul and Sustenance: A Philosophical Evaluation of Public Transport Evangelism in Port Harcourt, Nigeria," *BW Academic Journal* 2 (February 2025): 45, <https://www.bwjjournal.org/index.php/bsjournal/article/view/2802>.

¹¹ Bolaji Aquila Adegoke Adesanya, "Evangelism through Artificial Intelligence Generated-Content: Opportunities and Pitfalls," *The Pastoral Counsellors: Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors* 4 (January 2025): 58, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14599695>.

¹² Donald E. Ratcliff, "Using Behavioral Psychology to Encourage Personal Evangelism," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 6, no. 3 (June 1978): 219–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164717800600307>.

¹³ Coetzee, Nel, and Knoetze, "Evangelism as an Invitation to Missional," 2–4.

¹⁴ Mathias Yuvan Shunmugam and Marilyn Naidoo, "Considering the Evangelism Mandate in the Face of Interfaith Dialogue in South Africa," *Theologia Viatorum* 48, no. 1 (July 2024): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v48i1.237>.

¹⁵ Teasdale, "Extending the Metaphor," 50.

¹⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 414.

the Mopani district, demonstrates that those leading evangelism have indeed adopted a radical approach. However, it is crucial to analyse whether this growth reflects genuine quality in believers' faith or merely serves as a positive narrative to support numerical expansion.

This paper aims to analyse the implementation of evangelism within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Mopani District under the Trans-Orange Conference. It will examine the strategies used to grow membership numerically and assess whether the reported growth under Pastor Maxwell Mavuso's leadership reflects qualitative growth. The objective is to benchmark these strategies and provide recommendations to the SDA Trans-Orange Conference on how similar territories can adopt effective evangelism practices serving as a blueprint for the entire conference.

Evangelical Methods Used: A Focus on Total Member Involvement

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has distinguished itself as a denomination focused on evangelism and church growth. The aims and objectives of the church stem from the great commission of Matthew 28 and the proclamations of the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14. Over the years, the church has developed slogans to complement the work expressed in the aforementioned scriptures. This paper will address three of the most recent slogans to encourage church growth. These are as follows:

1. Total Member Involvement (TMI)
2. One Member One Soul (OMOS)
3. I Will Go (IWG)

James Nkansah-Obrempong¹⁷ asserts that the church exists for mission, and these missions, according to Tyler Dalton McNabb and Michael DeVito, should be done "with care and attention."¹⁸ The Seventh-day Adventist Church has established a strong identity as an evangelistic denomination with a clear focus on church growth.

The concept of Total Member Involvement (TMI) emerged to encourage the Adventist constituency to be involved in the mission of the church, which is evangelism and church growth. It is poignant to note that the church is not a space for spectators. Unlike in a sporting space, members are not expected to be passive in their faith, but they should be involved. This alleviates the stress and pressure of soul-winning solely on the church pastor. When all members are involved in mission work, not only is it a good thing for outreach, but it becomes an important tool for retention. The more involved everyone

¹⁷ James Nkansah-Obrempong, "Africa's Contextual Realities: Foundation for the Church's Holistic Mission," *International Review of Mission* 106, no. 2 (December 2017): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12186>.

¹⁸ Tyler Dalton McNabb and Michael DeVito, "A Christology of Religions and a Theology of Evangelism," *Religions* 13, no. 10 (October 2022): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100926>.

is, the more members are disciplined, nurtured, and they grow in their faith. With this achieved, ordinary church members can defend their faith. Ida U. Heikkilä emphasises the importance of member participation in the church's mission,¹⁹ while Coetzee et al., argue that active involvement in evangelism reflects a church's health.²⁰ The more individuals engage in mission work, the more vibrant the Adventist community becomes, contributing to both numerical growth and spiritual development.

R. Trivedi postulates that it is imperative for pastors to empower and motivate their constituents to actively participate in the declaration of the Gospel.²¹ This paradigm shift challenged the traditional model where evangelism was primarily the responsibility of pastors and a select group of dedicated members. The concept of TMI enables church members to be actively involved in discipleship instead of being passive worshippers. This fosters a holistic approach to ministry rather than burdening pastors. The involvement of families in evangelism does not require members of the family to wait for formal church gatherings to experience God. Douglas C. Youvan argues that the family space is a sacred place of worship.²² It is on this family platform that members of the home discuss how faith impacts their lives.

One Member One Soul (OMOS): A Strategy for Mobilising Church Membership in Evangelism

One Member One Soul (OMOS) is another strategy that was coined by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in order to motivate church members to be active agents of church growth. Calida Chu argues in favour of this view that it is imperative for each person to evangelise others.²³ All the personal ministries directors adopted this method, and at the beginning of each year, churches projected 100% growth through this strategy. If a church had twenty members and each one brought one person to church, it means that at the end of the year, the church would have double the initial number of its membership.

As each member works for one soul, in the process of working for an individual, time for prayer, intercession, and Bible studies not only advantages the one being laboured for, but also becomes an in-reach for the one working for a soul. The more one

¹⁹ Ida Heikkilä, "Witnessing Together – Who, What and to Whom? The Concept of Witness in Together Towards Life and The Church: Towards a Common Vision," *Ecclesiology* 15, no. 3 (September 2019): 261–62, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-01503003>.

²⁰ Coetzee, Nel, and Knoetze, "Evangelism as an Invitation to Missional," 2.

²¹ R. Trivedi, "Soul Harvesting by Pastoral Work in India: A Metaphor for Evangelism," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology (IJMRSET)* 7, no. 10 (October 2024): 16063–65, https://www.ijmrset.com/upload/69_Soul.pdf.

²² Douglas C. Youvan, "The Family as the True Church: Biblical Foundations for Spiritual Growth Within the Home," Article (ResearchGate, October 6, 2024), 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33587.03368>.

²³ Calida Chu, "Evangelization of the Christian Church in the Twenty-First Century: A Digital Theological Perspective," *Hong Kong Journal of Catholic Studies*, no. 14 (2023): 134–35, https://www.academia.edu/114548756/Evangelization_of_the_Christian_Church_in_the_Twenty_First_Century_A_Digital_Theological_Perspective.

prepares to share the Gospel with others, the more they are prepared to become better ambassadors of the Gospel. As members are taught to do the work of witnessing and evangelism, they become involved, and it is essential to allow pastors time to focus on the spiritual health of the church, families, and individuals.

I Will Go (IWG): A Critical Analysis of Capacity Building for Evangelism

The I Will Go (IWG) concept assumes that the constituency of the church has been prepared for the work. From a personal experience, I have seen how many are often available to go, but they are not capable of going. When we look at a teacher-student relationship, it would not be ethical for the teacher to expect the student to do what they did not teach them. It is for this reason that the student must be taught and grasp the spiritual concepts theoretically, then observe, and ultimately be given the opportunity to practice.

The Messiah first called individuals to be his disciples, and after their acceptance, he bid them to follow him and allow him to make them. Those who are available to go without being made have no agenda that speaks to the goal of church growth and discipleship. It is only those who have been made that are to go. These achieve more results than those who go out without knowing what the agenda is. Concerning this method, it is evident from the data collected from the Trans-Orange Conference Personal Ministries Department that other districts show good numbers of growth, while others are showing slow growth patterns. Before members are available to go, they should be well-trained. It is also fair to note that growth may not only depend on the capacity of those who go, nor is this paper suggesting that districts that show a slow growth pattern are not capacitated. It may mean that while other districts have more trained people who are involved with the work, others have less committed people in that regard. Teasdale highlights a critical challenge faced by congregations: the issue is not merely technical skills or practices but the disposition and knowledge of the Gospel.²⁴ It is essential for Christians to understand the Gospel thoroughly to articulate it effectively to others.

These three concepts are interwoven, emphasising the importance of involvement in the Gospel mission. They encourage the church community to understand the significance of a faith-based community and how it relies on its constituents' involvement and dedication to grow. The church is made up of members who ought to be totally involved in the mission of salvation. Individual involvement is as important to the organic growth of the community; hence, every member has a responsibility to labour for another. Ultimately, everyone will be involved, everyone will have someone they are working for, and everyone will be available to go and do the work of being ambassadors of the kingdom of God. The paper posits that these methods cut across all denominations.

²⁴ Teasdale, "Extending the Metaphor," 51-52.

It is the first time in the history of the Trans-Orange Conference that the numbers achieved by Pastor Mavuso have been reached. From his deployment in Vhembe, he has been baptizing more than the other directors, which has warranted him being called the “Baptist of the Conference”. Almost every month, he has been in the water baptizing, something that is unique in the Adventist Church, particularly the Trans-Orange Conference territory. The paper is interested in deducing lessons from his work, which, if proven to be a success story, is something that the rest of the conference can learn from and possibly adopt.

The TOC Districts Growth between August 2023 and December 2024

This paper examines the growth of the Trans-Orange Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in the Republic of South Africa. The growth is from the beginning of Pastor Peter Maphanga’s tenure as a Personal Ministries Director of the Conference from August 2023 to December 2024. The Trans-Orange Conference has 26 districts represented in at least five of South Africa’s nine provinces.

Data collected by the Personal Ministries Department shows that the Mopani district, under the leadership of Pastor Maxwell Mavuso, has recorded the highest number of baptisms. This study aims to analyse the growth patterns in the Mopani District and compare them with those of the other districts within the Trans-Orange Conference. By identifying the strategies employed in the Mopani District, the research seeks to identify best practices that can be adopted by other districts to enhance their own membership growth. Furthermore, the study investigates the conference-wide goal of achieving 10.000 baptisms during Pastor Maphanga’s tenure, which extends from August 2023 to the next elective conference in September or October 2025. By analysing current growth trends, the study aims to project the likelihood of achieving this ambitious target.

The findings of this research are intended to serve as a valuable resource for other denominations, providing insights into effective strategies for church growth. It is important to emphasise that the goal is not to foster inter-denominational competition but rather to empower churches with the knowledge and tools necessary to achieve sustainable growth.

Table 1. The Overall Performance of the 26 Districts

District	Goal	Actual number	Variance
Caledon	300	154	-146
Central Tshwane	500	395	-105
Diamond Heritage	300	134	-166
East Rand	500	278	-222
Ebenezer	500	175	-325
Ekurhuleni South	500	351	-149
Far West	200	122	-78

Gauteng West	500	509	9
Golden West	300	143	-157
Goldfields	300	118	-182
Greater Johannesburg	500	222	-278
Greater Soweto	550	261	-28
Highveld	350	90	-260
Lowveld	300	155	-145
Mahikeng	300	126	-174
Mopani	300	787	487
North East Gauteng	300	464	164
Orange Vaal	300	221	-79
Platinum	450	212	-238
Rand	500	448	-52
Shalom	500	239	-261
Shammah	200	102	-98
Shiloh	200	164	-36
Vhembe Central	500	275	-225
Vhembe East	500	238	-262
Vhembe West	350	265	-85
Total	10.000	6.648	3.352

This table reflects the performance of the Trans-Orange Conference districts of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We can deduce that while some districts have met their targets, others are still struggling to meet the goal set by the Personal Ministries department.

Due to the diverse socio-economic and geographical contexts of the districts within the Trans-Orange Conference, variations in membership growth rates are evident. In poverty-stricken places, people's concern is not about salvation or being associated with a specific faith community. Of the 26 districts of the Trans-Orange Conference, three have reached their targets. These are as follows:

1. Mopani district (passed its target of 300 with 487)
2. North East Gauteng district (passed its target of 300 with 164)
3. Gauteng West district (passed its target of 500 with 9)

Compared to other districts, Mopani district's membership growth has been remarkable, exceeding double the average. This indicates that Pastor Maxwell Mavuso's leadership may have employed unique and effective strategies. The other districts may not achieve their goals because of the pastor-ratio as these districts do not have the same number of churches. Some pastors are few, if not alone, in their district, while other districts have an abundance of pastors. Such differences should be considered.

Pastor Mavuso's Ministry Training and Early Deployment

My initial encounter with Pastor Maxwell Mavuso was at Solusi University in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in 2013. Upon my arrival for theological training, Pastor Mavuso, then a senior student, welcomed us and acted as a liaison between aspiring theologians

and the Trans-Orange Conference. His zeal for public ministry was evident, as he frequently participated in ministerial activities in nearby churches. This fervour continued as he transitioned into full-time ministry within the SDA Church.

There is a prevalent belief among Adventist pastors and administrators that fresh seminary graduates are often assigned to rural areas. This deployment is sometimes viewed as a form of “banishment,” a “lesson in humility,” or a “reality check.” However, for those trained in rural mission settings, such as at Solusi University, the transition is less challenging. Pastor Maxwell Mavuso’s early assignments mirrored his seminary environment, with similar contexts, people, and dialects, facilitating his acclimatisation and continued dedication to his ministry.

Upon settling in the Vhembe district, Pastor Maxwell Mavuso demonstrated a profound dedication to his calling, positioning himself as a vital instrument in God’s work in the territory. At the time, Vhembe was a large, undivided region, and Pastor Mavuso’s commitment to his mission was evident as he applied his theological training to practical ministry. The transition from being a theology student to a practitioner involves not only a deep understanding of theological concepts but also the ability to implement them effectively in real-world contexts.

Pastor Mavuso employed the concept of division by multiplication, as illustrated by Christ in the feeding of the five thousand (Matt 14:15-21), to foster growth in Vhembe. This strategic approach led to significant expansion within the Seventh-day Adventist constituency of the Trans-Orange Conference, a growth that persists to this day. Initially, the division of Vhembe into Central, West, and East districts was met with apprehension, as it seemed to disrupt familial and social bonds. However, the local constituency soon understood that such division was necessary for church growth. This new structure required the districts to intensify their evangelistic efforts, leading to increased engagement and outreach.

By embracing this strategic division, Pastor Mavuso and the Vhembe community were able to mobilise resources and efforts more effectively, resulting in a robust and thriving Adventist presence in the region. The success of this approach underscores the importance of adaptive strategies in ministry and the impact of dedicated leadership in fostering church growth.

Discipleship: A Critical Component of Sustainable Church Growth

Discipleship is a process that often takes months or years, and this paper does not seek to undermine the church’s achievements.²⁵ However, it is essential to recognise that genuine discipleship requires time and sustained effort. Teasdale’s views challenge the

²⁵ I Putu A. Darmawan, Jamin Tanhidy, and Yabes Doma, “Youth Key Persons’ Digital Discipleship Process during the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Era,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (April 2024): a9673, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9673>.

short-term methodology, emphasising the need for a deep understanding of the Gospel.²⁶ Pastor Maxwell Mavuso's approach focused on teaching the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which, while effective from a denominational standpoint, may lack the broader disposition necessary for true evangelism.

Mavuso's methodology involved teaching church doctrine in the homes of prospective members, which highlights a critical issue: the distinction between God's truth and denominational truth. When evangelism is conducted from a denominational perspective, it may persuade people to join a specific faith community rather than fostering a genuine encounter with God. The guiding factor for Gospel proclamation and discipleship should be biblical theology, which forms the heart of the church's mission, as argued by Bosch²⁷ and Paas.²⁸ Friendship evangelism became a key methodology for retention and continued soul-winning. This approach emphasises genuine relationships and care for individuals, rather than merely converting them into church members. This suggests that many new members were not effectively integrated into the Adventist community, leading to a phenomenon where new converts are not retained.

Effective evangelism requires more than just increasing numbers; it involves creating genuine connections and fostering a community where individuals feel valued and cared for. The methodology of friendship evangelism supports this by encouraging members to share their faith through their actions and relationships, not just words. When the focus is on genuine care for people's salvation, the Gospel is shared more authentically and effectively. The statistics indicate a troubling trend: despite apparent numerical growth, the church struggles with retention. This paper argues that the church should prioritise the integration and retention of new members over merely reporting numbers. The focus should be on genuine discipleship and creating a supportive community where new converts can grow in their faith.

The evangelism strategies used in the Mopani district have achieved significant numerical growth. However, to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these efforts, the church must focus on genuine discipleship and retention. By prioritising the quality of relationships and the depth of faith over mere numbers, the Seventh-day Adventist Church can create a more vibrant and enduring community of believers.

Effective Discipleship

A crucial factor that hinders retention within the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the lack of effective discipleship. Coetzee et al., assert that Gospel proclamation and discipleship should be inseparable.²⁹ When these two elements are divided, retention becomes nearly impossible. Discipleship involves both service and learning, as Holly J.

²⁶ Teasdale, "Extending the Metaphor," 54–60.

²⁷ Bosch, "Evangelism," 8–9.

²⁸ Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests*, 11, 19.

²⁹ Coetzee, Nel, and Knoetze, "Evangelism as an Invitation to Missional," 5.

Carey suggests.³⁰ Service towards others should be coupled with continuous learning from the Gospel. This dual focus ensures that as the church serves its community, it also deepens its understanding of God's word. Joseph Mattera argues that churches grow through discipleship, though he acknowledges its challenges.³¹ Bosch views the mission of making disciples as encompassing teaching and baptism.³² He posits that the mission can be summarised into three actions: make disciples, baptise, and teach. This highlights the importance of thorough teaching and assimilation of the Gospel before individuals decide to join a faith community. While the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Trans-Orange Conference incorporates aspects of disciple-making, the efficacy of these strategies needs to be evaluated critically.

The methodology employed in the Mopani district has included extensive Bible studies focused on the church's 28 fundamental beliefs. While these studies familiarise new members with Adventism, they may risk becoming more about indoctrination rather than fostering a holistic understanding of biblical truths. Bosch emphasises that discipleship requires a decisive and irrevocable commitment to God and one's neighbour.³³ True discipleship should not be centered on denominational doctrines but on God's broader theological truth. Effective discipleship should be God-centric rather than denomination-centric. The goal is not merely to increase church membership but to nurture genuine disciples of God. Bosch supports this by stating that being a disciple goes beyond being a member of the local church; it involves a deep, transformative relationship with God and others.³⁴

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's mission, particularly the proclamation of the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14:6-12, aims to convert as many people as possible to Adventism. This approach has driven the church's efforts in the Mopani district, with the long-term goal of expanding the Southern African Union (SAU) territory. The SAU, currently the smallest union in terms of recorded baptisms, has seen significant numerical growth in the districts of the Trans-Orange Conference, particularly in Mopani, which has surpassed its baptism targets for the years 2023-2025, respectively. However, numerical growth does not necessarily equate to effective disciple-making or the cultivation of quality believers. The accurate measure of success lies in how the Adventist community interacts with and treats people. In Mopani, the effectiveness of the Gospel in transforming lives is questioned. Despite numerical growth, the socio-economic

³⁰ Holly J. Carey, "Discipleship as Action in Luke 10:38-42: Be a Mary and a Martha," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 26, no. 1 (2023): 69, http://www.stone-campbelljournal.com/the_journal/research/volume-26-issue-1/260105.

³¹ Joseph Mattera, "The Global Apostolic Movement and the Progress of the Gospel," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 47, no. 2 (May 2023): 146-47, https://theology.worldia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ERT-47-2_web.pdf.

³² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 66-67.

³³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 83-84.

³⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 83-84.

conditions remain challenging, with high unemployment and social dependency. This raises concerns about the church's ability to have a practical, positive impact on its members' lives. The financial strain on members, coupled with the continuous weekly collection of tithes and offerings, highlights a disconnect between the church's growth and its practical support for its community. The church must address these socio-economic issues to ensure that its growth is not merely numerical but also reflective of a transformative impact on its members' lives.

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Mopani district has seen significant numerical growth, the true challenge lies in effective discipleship and retention. By prioritising God-centric discipleship over denominational growth and addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by its members, the church can create a more supportive and transformative community. This approach will ensure that new converts are not only retained but also grow into quality believers who embody the Gospel in their daily lives.

The concept of discipleship is articulated by Roger L. Walton as lifelong transformation.³⁵ This paper acknowledges the significant growth achieved by the church under Pastor Mavuso's leadership; however, it emphasises the importance of discerning between conversion and genuine discipleship. While rapid membership growth is a positive indicator, it is crucial to ensure that these new members are not merely added to church rolls but are truly integrated into the life and mission of the Adventist community.

Discipleship is a long-term process that requires long-term strategies. Teasdale highlights the need for a deep understanding of the Gospel, emphasising that a focus solely on denominational doctrine might not adequately prepare individuals for a genuine encounter with God.³⁶ Robi Panggarra and Leonard Sumule argue that discipleship is a method that can assist young people to grow spiritually.³⁷ Welly Hendrik et al., posit discipleship to be a process by which people are introduced to the Gospel, taught, and are later baptised.³⁸ This is similarly a view proposed by Frank Liesen.³⁹ He further proposes that churches must be contextual in their quest for disciple-making. The study concurs with Hendrik et al., that it is the responsibility of the church to nurture its constituents, and that can be achieved by delegating specific faith responsibilities to new members.⁴⁰

³⁵ Roger L. Walton, "A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission: Forming a New Ecclesial Identity for British Methodism?," *Holiness* 1, no. 1 (January 2015): 57–77, <https://doi.org/10.2478/holiness-2015-0003>.

³⁶ Teasdale, "Extending the Metaphor," 61–65.

³⁷ Robi Panggarra and Leonard Sumule, "Pengaruh Pelayanan Pemuda Berbasis Kontekstual Terhadap Pertumbuhan Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia Di Kota Samarinda," *Jurnal Jaffray* 17, no. 1 (April 2019): 91–92, <https://doi.org/10.25278/jj71.v17i1.325>.

³⁸ Welly Hendrik et al., "The Role Of The Apostle Paul's Evangelism Based On The Apostle's Story Of The Pentecostal Church In Growth In The Gedongkuning Church, Yogyakarta Indonesia," preprint, Qeios, March 28, 2023, 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.32388/85K65D>.

³⁹ Frank Liesen, "Creating Paths for Transformational Conversion: The Church Discipleship Matrix," *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society* 3, no. 1 (February 2023): 70–88, <https://www.journal-ems.org/index.php/home/article/view/73>.

⁴⁰ Hendrik et al., "The Role Of The Apostle Paul's Evangelism," 2–3.

According to David Neyland Sumarauw et al., it is not only poignant but also relevant to study the impact of church growth.⁴¹ The argument of this paper is that effective evangelism is not merely concerned with numerical growth. Still, it is imperative to establish a community of quality believers who will support and care for one another. Coetzee et al., emphasise the inseparability of Gospel proclamation and discipleship.⁴² When these two elements are divorced, long-term retention becomes exceedingly difficult. Discipleship, as Carey suggests, is a dynamic process that integrates service and learning.⁴³ On the other hand, Mattera suggests that although there are challenges with church growth, it is linked with effective discipleship.⁴⁴

4. Conclusion

The growth in the Mopani district should be celebrated; however, the study posits that the numerical growth achieved is not a sign of qualitative and spiritual growth in the area. The strategies employed were solely intended to make people Seventh-day Adventists, rather than to make them disciples of God. The study postulates that, as a result, there is serious denominational bias in the results. People were encouraged to be church members rather than to establish a solid relationship with God. Future research can be carried out on the significance of making disciples for God rather than making denominationalists.

In conclusion, while numerical growth is a positive indicator, the accurate measure of success for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Mopani district lies in its ability to make and retain quality disciples who are committed to God. By focusing on holistic discipleship, community engagement, and contextualisation, the church can ensure that its growth is not only sustainable but also deeply impactful on the lives of its members and the broader community.

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⁴¹ David Neyland Sumarauw et al., "A Theological Review Of Evangelism And Its Influence On Church Growth," *Jurnal Impresi Indonesia* 4, no. 1 (February 2025): 1097, <https://doi.org/10.58344/jii.v4i1.6287>.

⁴² Coetzee, Nel, and Knoetze, "Evangelism as an Invitation to Missional," 5–7.

⁴³ Carey, "Discipleship as Action in Luke," 71.

⁴⁴ Mattera, "The Global Apostolic Movement," 146–48.

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