Chapter 11
Perceptions of the Mission of the Church Outlined by Teachers in Australian Seventh-day Adventist Schools

Wendy A. Jackson

Avondale University College

Many organisations have well-defined mission statements that function as a means of communicating the goal or overriding purpose of their organisation. These statements are believed to impact the strategy and performance of the organisation (Darbi, 2012). Studies suggest that mission statements have a variety of other important functions. Bartkus reported on their value in changing the behaviour of employees or group members by motivating and inspiring them (Bartkus, *et al*., 2004). Mission statements can also form the basis for a collective identity, and even attract people to the organisation (Desmidt, 2015). In the Church, it is hoped that the mission statement will influence all four of these areas.

However, the mission of the Church is not some push for success driven by the thoughts of key influencers. Rather, it derives from the foundational document of the church, the Scriptures. It is the scriptural focus of mission which undergirds the official mission statements of the Church and is expected to inform the understanding of mission held by its membership.

According to the *Working Policy* of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to "Make disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witnesses and proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels' Messages in preparation for His soon return (Matt. 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, Rev. 14:6–12)" (General Conference of Seventh-

day Adventists, 2019–2020). But are teachers employed in Adventist schools aware of the content and nature of the mission of the Church which employs them? Adventist schools exist primarily to serve the mission of the Church and, as such, need to both understand the mission and be intentional in their fulfillment of it.

Regular examination of an institution's employees regarding their understanding of mission is important, given the tendencies of organisations to gradually drift away from their original purpose and identity. While it might seem inconceivable that the Adventist Church would ever lose sight of its mission, mission drift in organisations is almost inevitable unless careful steps are taken to prevent it (Greer & Horst, 2014). The causes of mission shift are many, from poorly defined or communicated mission statements (Greer & Horst, 2014), to organisational change (Burtchaell, 1998), social and cultural demands placed on the organisation (Comforth, 2014), or decisions which make compromises due to misalignment of values (Childless, 2019). To reduce the tendency of mission shift, an understanding of the mission of the organisation must be deeply embedded at every level of the organisation. (Greer & Horst, 2014). Thus employees of the Church need to know and understand the mission of the Church.

Much effort is put into in measuring the success of mission statements, but there appears to be limited research into the perceptions of these statements by employees or members of organisations (Desmidt, 2015). This chapter addresses this gap in research by discussing the perceptions of the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church held by teachers employed in Adventist primary and secondary schools in Australia.

Methodological Notes

Two survey questions are considered in this chapter. The first, Question 4, was an open-ended question in which educators were asked to write one or two sentences in response to the following: "If I were asked, 'What is the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?' I would say:". The qualitative responses from this question have been analysed using thematic analysis. This form of analysis enables clear organisation and communication of the variety of ideas expressed by participants (Boyatzis, 1998). An inductive approach to the thematic analysis was chosen to allow the themes to emerge from the data itself rather than imposing pre-conceived themes upon it (Rapley, 2016). NVivo software was used to assist the process of

analysis as it provides a set of tools that help manage large amounts of qualitative data. These tools include the ability to sort, link queries, and visualise data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The information from this analysis is presented by theme in the next section of this chapter. The words of the participants are presented in italics throughout the discussion.

The second question discussed in this chapter is Question 5. This question presented respondents with a series of statements that described various things the Seventh-day Adventist Church could be doing. It then asked the educators to find the two they thought were most important, and note for each statement how they rated its importance as a goal of the Church.

What Is the Mission of the Church? (Question 4)

This section addresses Question 4, which focused on what individual teachers thought about the mission of the Church. The question read, "If I were asked, 'What is the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? I would say:"

Question 4 was placed in all branches of the survey, and all participants were invited to comment on their perception of the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This means that there was a potential for a total of 519 responses amongst Australian teachers. However, 219 participants did not respond to this question. A further four indicated that they were not sure or did not know how to answer the question. The total number of missing responses (223) is almost double the number of responses of the most prominent theme amongst those who did respond to this question and accounts for 43% of participants. The reason for this unexpectedly high number of missing responses is unclear. It may be that the participants did not know the answer, or that they did not want to respond to the question. It is also possible that they had survey fatigue and could not be bothered thinking about anything that required more than a tick in a box.

From the responses that were provided, three main themes predominated, with another cluster of five themes that had significantly fewer responses. Themes with at least 20 responses are outlined in Table 11.1.

Table 11.1
Top Themes From the Australian Responses to Open-Ended Question 4: Goals of the Church

Theme	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
No response/don't know	223	43%
Share the gospel	116	22%
Leading people to Jesus	101	19%
The future	55	11%
Love	37	7%
Reflecting and representing Christ	20	4%
The three angels' messages	20	4%
Teaching biblical truth	20	4%
Increasing church membership	20	4%

The most comprehensive response included multiple themes and all the key ideas from the official Church mission statement. This respondent noted that "*The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make disciples of all people, communicating the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Savior and unite with His remnant Church, discipling them to serve Him as Lord and preparing them for His soon return"*.[1] However, this is the exact wording of the mission statement found on the website of the North American Division of Seventh day Adventists, and, given that it included the American spelling of the word Saviour, may have been cut and pasted from the web rather than reflecting that person's own knowledge and thinking.

Target of Mission

Australian educators mentioned the focus or target of the mission of the Church in many of their responses. The most frequently mentioned target was the word *people,* with no further qualification (61). This was followed by *the world* (49) and several variations such

1 Note: Italics in the text is used to indicate a verbatim citation from a participant response.

as *all* (6), *everyone* (2), *each person/every person* (2), *all peoples* (1), and *all his people* (1). The next biggest groups that were identified as the objects of mission were *others* (30), and the *community* (12). Educators then turned to those within their sphere of influence, identifying *students* (10), and *children* (3), along with *their families* (3) as the focus of the Church's mission. Other more localised areas of focus were *everyone around us* (1), *each one we encounter* (1) and *all we pass* (1). Other objects of mission included *those who don't know God* (1), *non-believers* (1), and *the lost* (1).

Sharing the Gospel

The most prominent theme arising from the responses of Australian teachers who answered Question 4 was the spreading of good news. It was expressed in four main ways. The first major expression was *spreading the gospel*. Fifty teachers expressed the idea that the mission of Church had to do with the gospel. They believed the Church should *spread* (22), *share* (13), *preach* (5), *communicate* (2), *take* (1), *tell* (1), *present* (1), *proclaim* (1), *promote* (1), *reveal* (1), or *live* (1) the gospel. The focus was clearly on a verbal evangelistic sharing of the gospel. About a third of the responses clarified the nature of the gospel message. Eight responses noted that it was the *gospel of Jesus Christ,* with four others noting various ideas related to the character of Christ, and in particular the *gospel of Jesus' love* and the *gospel of his saving grace*. A further two mentioned the *gospel message of love* without mentioning the name of Jesus. Other descriptions of the gospel included *everlasting gospel* (2), *gospel of the kingdom* (1), *the gospel of the Bible* (1), and *the gospel message of hope* (1). Two considered the gospel in the context of the three angels' messages. A minority included the reasons for sharing the gospel, but for the most part they had little to do with salvation. Only one mentioned *leading people to have a better life in God,* while four respondents mentioned that we should spread the gospel in order *to hasten his return*.

A second closely related expression of the theme was to *spread the good news*. Eighteen respondents talked about good news that needed to be *spread* (8), *shared* (4), *delivered* (1), or p*roclaimed* (1). The good news was further defined in most responses. The nature of the good news included the *news about Jesus Christ*, and *his love* and his death on *the cross* (5), *salvation*, *restoration*, and his *second coming*.

A third expression of the theme was to *share Jesus Christ*. Thirty-two respondents considered sharing Jesus as the mission of

the Church. Most used the word *share* (18) as the verb, while other responses such as *spread, tell, teach, make aware, deliver*, and *reveal* were only mentioned by one or two respondents each. A small number of responses mentioned specific information about what needed to be shared about Jesus. These included his love, salvation, forgiveness, and identity. One noted that we needed to share that Jesus *was the way, truth, and life*.

A final related expression was to *share God*. Fourteen teachers considered sharing God was the mission of the Church. Half used the verb *share*, while others used *teach, spread,* and *tell*. Information about God that needed to be shared included *his love*, *his message,* and *what he has done.*

I include two other responses under this theme which simply stated the word *evangelise.*

Leading People to Develop a Relationship with Jesus

The second-highest theme arising out of the open-ended statements about mission was the concept of leading people to accept Christ as their Saviour. This theme moves beyond simply telling people about Jesus, as noted in theme one, to actively leading them to Jesus and helping them develop a relationship with him. The theme was expressed in two main ways. The first focused on the concept of *leading people to Jesus*. Seventy-nine people discussed this idea with the main verbs being *bring* (27), *lead* (24), *introduce* (5), *connect them with* (4), and *help* (3). A diverse number of methods were suggested for accomplishing this mission, including *knowledge of God's word* (3), the *Holy Spirit*, *leading them to the foot of the cross*, *improved health*, creating the right *environment*, *service opportunities*, *teaching others what God has done in our own lives*, *showing what Jesus is like*, and other means of *personal witness*. The purpose of leading people to Jesus was noted in a smaller number of these responses and encompassed ideas such as *following him*, *having a saving relationship with him*, *uniting with his church*, *worship*, and the ability to enjoy a future such as *heaven*, or *eternity*. One of the more comprehensive responses in this section noted that the mission was *to teach others about what God has done in our own lives and what He could do in theirs. Leading them to make that decision of having Him as their personal Saviour too.*

The second key expression of this theme focused on the idea of helping others have a relationship with God/Jesus. Twenty-two

responses dealt with the idea of relationship in some form. The type of relationship that the Church should be helping others form was described variously as *saving* (5), *working*, *committed*, *loving*, *restored*, *personal, lasting*, and *true.* Several responses classified in this subtheme did not specifically use the word relationship but implied it. For instance, one response noted the mission was to *bring others to know Jesus as their friend, father and creator*, while another noted that the mission was to *help people develop a walk with Jesus Christ that helps guide in their life*. Only one respondent in this subtheme noted how the relationship was to be brought about. In their opinion it was *through nurture, compassion and providing hope for the future*. Two responses seemed to be focused on relationships within the Church and noted the need for *growing relationships*.

The Future

The third most prominent theme arising from the perceived mission of the Church related to the future, in particular, preparation for the future. This was expressed in relation to three main ideas: the *second coming*, *eternity,* and the *kingdom of God*. Forty-three teachers mentioned the *second coming* in their responses. Of these, sixteen specifically used the word *prepare* in relation to the second coming, while others considered the message of the soon coming of Jesus important to *spread* (6), *share* (5), *tell others* about (3), *teach* (2), *proclaim* (1), *remind* of (1), or *deliver* (1) so that others would be ready. The necessity of having transformed characters ready for the second coming was mentioned by a further two teachers. The second coming was also associated with hope and good news.

Six responses took an alternative approach. Rather than preparing others for the second coming, they mentioned that spreading the gospel or good news of Jesus would in some way hasten or bring about the second coming.

The idea of *preparation for eternity* was mentioned by a further seven teachers, although one thought that eternity would be spent in heaven rather than on the new earth. Others wanted to preach about and prepare people for the coming *kingdom of God* and provide *hope for the future.*

Love

God's love or the *love of Jesus* was mentioned by 28 responses, with an even split between them. About two-thirds of the responses in

this theme focused on the Church providing an intellectual or verbal explanation of God's love via words. This was conveyed by the use of terms such as *share* (10), *spread* (5), *preach* (2), and *teach* (1). On the other hand, approximately one-third suggested a more active role for the Church urging that it *demonstrate* God's love (1), *portray* it (1), or *show God's love through actions* (7). One considered the mission of the Church was to demonstrate *unconditional love*, while another noted that the Church needed to *learn to love people*.

Teaching Biblical Truth

The theme of teaching biblical truth was spoken about by 24 educators. Nine simply saw the mission of the Church as *spreading* or *teaching the word of God*. Seven responses were more focused on the broad idea of doctrinal truths, especially from an Adventist viewpoint. One response noted that *the Seventh-day Adventist Church likes to promote the belief that they are the only church who follow the bible correctly*. Other responses in this category included phrases such as: *propagate its teachings*, *the true message from the Bible*, *to present the SDA gospel message*, *to teach people ... how to live a Christian life through the SDA way of life*, and the *teachings of the Adventist message*. Some went on to specify which Adventist doctrines needed to be taught. Other than the second coming, which has been previously addressed, these included the truth about the *Sabbath* (5), the *health message,* including a *vegetarian diet* (4), and the *state of the dead* (1).

Reflecting and Representing Christ

The remaining themes emerging from Question 4 had considerably fewer responses than those discussed so far. A series of three themes all had 20 responses. The first of these is the theme of the Church showing, reflecting, or representing Christ. Nine of the responses used the word *show* in relation to *Jesus* (4), *Jesus's love* (2), *God* (1), *God's love* (1), and the *gospel* (1). The means of showing the world God and his love was through *actions*, *grace, love*, or in other *practical ways*. The purpose of the Church showing God's love was so that the world would be *interested in listening to the good news*, or to *bring them to him*.

A smaller number of responses used words such as *reflec*t (1) *reveal* (2), and *represent* (2), in combination with Christ (3), and God (2)—specifically their love, character, and honour. Similar ideas were expressed through phrases such as *live out Jesus* and *be an example*

of Jesus. A further three responses saw the role of the Church as being the living embodiment of Christ, working as *his hands and feet*.

The Three Angels' Messages

The three angels' messages also scored 20 mentions. In four instances the term was listed as the mission of the Church, without any other words of qualification. Others qualified the mission as the need to *share* (6), *spread* (4), *preach, teach, proclaim, fulfill, communicate, or promote* the three angels' messages. The Church was clearly seen to have an active role in educating others about the messages of Revelation 14. In general, this theme was associated with the need to share Jesus or the everlasting gospel, although it was generally unclear if the respondents had a clear understanding of the nature of the three angels' messages. However, in two cases, the three angels' messages were defined. In one case, a respondent suggested that the mission was to *to share the gospel which is the three angels' messages*, in the other the messages were summarised as *Jesus wants a restored relationship with us and to bring us home*. This theme also accounts for three of the four Bible texts that were listed in answer to Question 4.

Increasing Church Membership

The final theme, garnering 20 responses, was the idea of getting people to join the Church. *Baptism* was mentioned in isolation, without further qualification, by one educator, and in combination with teaching and preparation for the second coming by another teacher. A further two responses considered the mission of the Church was *to get baptised members,* while others mentioned getting people *to unite with his church*, *self-propagation,* or to *win non-believers to the church*. The remaining responses in the category focused specifically on making Adventists and included statements such as *make Adventists of all nations*, *save people to the SDA church*, to *become Adventists and increase its membership*, *convert Adventist Christians*, and *make more SDAs*.

Other Concepts

Ideas such as service, making disciples, restoring the image of God, engaging critically with culture, opening up life opportunities, empowering others, and nurturing the Church all scored less than 20 responses.

Aims of the Church (Question 5)

Question 5 provided a variety of statements about the aims of the Church and asked respondents to rate their importance. Table 11.2 lists the goals in ranked order based on the percentage of those who thought each statement should be listed in the top two or three goals of the Church. The column headed as Tot% refers to all responses by teachers in Seventh-day Adventist schools in Australia, whereas the column headed up as Wkly% refers only to responses of teachers who claimed to attend church at least weekly.

Two ideas were the clear front runners. These were "leading people to accept Jesus as their personal saviour" and "sharing the message and teachings of Jesus with the world". These match the top two themes in the open-ended questions of sharing the gospel and leading people to Jesus. The next highest ranked goal of the Church was preparing people for the soon return of Christ and this also matches well with the open-ended responses where the theme of the future ranked third.

Table 11.2
Ranking of the Goals of the Church (AUC)

Possible goals of the Church	Should be one of the top two or three goals of the Church		Should not be a goal of the Church	
	Tot%	Wkly%	Tot%	Wkly %
Lead people to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour	74.9%	80.2%	1.8%	1.7%
Share the message and teaching of Jesus with the world	71%	74.2%	2.8%	2.3%
Prepare people for the soon return of Jesus	54.4%	60.6%	2.0%	2.1%
Reduce poverty, disease, and ignorance	38.3%	35.6%	2.2%	1.7%
Provide meaningful worship services	37.5%	37.5%	1.8%	2.0%
Teach an ethical viewpoint	36.8%	33.6%	1.6%	2.0%
Increase the numbers who attend church on a regular basis	16.1%	15.2%	5.9%	6.9%
Convince people of the teachings of the Church	14.0%	13.3%	11.2%	11.2%
Persuade people to join the Church through baptism	12.5%	12.9%	10.0%	9.1%

The next three highest ranked goals of the Church in Question 5 are clustered together, with 36.8% to 38.3% rating them in the top three goals of the Church. They have little correspondence with the responses to the open-ended questions. The idea of reducing poverty, disease, and ignorance has some overlap with the idea of reflecting and representing Christ, but fits better with the idea of service, which failed to make the top eight themes in the open-ended responses. The idea of worship was only mentioned by one person in the responses to Question 4 and that was not in relation to worship services. Ethics and values were not mentioned at all in responses to Question 4. The reasons for this discrepancy are not entirely clear, although the idea of meaningful worship services is quite internal and hence might not be considered in the idea of Mission which tends to be outward focussed.

The aim to "persuade people to join the Church through baptism" is at the bottom of the rankings in Question 5, with only 12.5% seeing this as one of the top goals of the Church, and almost one in ten stating it should not be a goal of the Church. This is in keeping with the low rating of increasing church membership in the thematic analysis of Question 4.

While those attending church weekly were between 3% and 6% more likely to rank the leading goals as important, there is little difference between the two groups when it comes to the lower-ranked goals. It is interesting to note that those who attend church weekly were marginally less likely to see "reducing poverty, disease, and ignorance" and "teach an ethical viewpoint" as important goals, but the magnitude of the difference suggests this is unlikely to be significant. Weekly church attendance had little impact on the overall ranking of the goals of the Church.

Conclusion

In both the open-ended response and ranked goals, the Australian teachers prioritised three key components of the official mission statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church: sharing the gospel, leading people to Jesus, and preparation for the second coming. The other components of the mission statement can also be found amongst the key themes emerging from the open-ended responses. Nevertheless, like the North American Adventist teachers (Jackson, 2019), few responses from Australian teachers go beyond the idea of proclamation and conversion to consider the full process of disciple-making.

More concerning is the extremely high number of participants who did not attempt to answer this question. This raises doubts about the true prevalence of teachers who understand and engage with the mission of the Church. It is heartening, however, to see that those teachers who did engage with the open-ended question had a very Christ-focused understanding of the mission of the Church, which took priority over Adventist dogma, while not discarding its importance.

The priority of themes in the open-ended question match closely with the rankings provided in Question 5, especially at the top and bottom ends. This provides validation of the thematic analysis. Question 5 also provided interesting data that deserves more thought. One such area is the relatively high ranking of the goal of providing meaningful worship services, in comparison with low ranking of persuading others about Adventist doctrine and getting them to join the Church.

Overall, this study has shown that those teachers who chose to engage with the questions on the mission of the Church have a good understanding of the need to proclaim the gospel and lead people to develop a relationship with Jesus in preparation for the second coming of Christ. However, the lack of any significant consideration of ongoing discipleship suggests that there is a need to focus more on the communication of this aspect of mission.

References

Bartkus, B. R., Glassman, M., & McAfee, R. B. (2004). Mission statements: Are they smoke and mirrors? *Business Horizons*, *43*(6), 23–28.

Bazeley, P., & Jackson, K. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo* (2nd. ed.). London: Sage.

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. London: Sage.

Burtchaell, J. T. (1998). *The dying of the light: The disengagement of colleges and universities from their Christian churches*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Childress, H. (2019). *The adjunct underclass: How America's colleges betrayed their faculty, their students, and their mission*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Comforth, C. (2014). Understanding and combating mission drift in social enterprises. S*ocial Enterprise Journal*, *10*(1), 3–20.

Darbi, W. P. (2012). Of mission and vision statements and their potential impact on employee behaviour and attitudes: The case of a public but profit-oriented tertiary institution. *International Journal of Business and Social Science, 3*(14), 95–109.

Desmidt, S. (2016). The relevance of mission statements: Analysing the antecedents of perceived message quality and its relationship to employee mission engagement. *Public Management Review, 18*(6), 894–917.

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. (2019–2020). *General Conference Working Policy, 2019–2020,* A 05. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing.

Greer, P. & Horst, C. (2014). *Mission drift: The unspoken crisis facing leaders, charities and churches*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House.

Jackson, W. (2019). Beliefs about personal salvation held by teachers in North American Seventh-day Adventist schools. In R. K. McIver & S. J. Hattingh (Eds.). *Educating for service and mission: Teachers in Seventh-day Adventist schools in North America and their perceptions of mission* (p. 173–192). Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press.

Rapley, T. (2016). Some pragmatics of qualitative data analysis. In D. Silverman (Ed.). *Qualitative research* (4th. ed., p. 331–345). London: Sage.