

# The Role of Language Literacy in Gospel Ministry in Africa: An Analysis of the West-Central Africa Division of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church

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## Abstract

Illiteracy, characterized by the inability to read, write, and communicate in a standardized language, remains a pervasive challenge across Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan regions. This issue presents significant obstacles to various facets of societal development, including economic growth, healthcare, and education. However, its impact on religious institutions, particularly in the context of gospel ministry, is often underexplored. This article discusses the role of language literacy on the gospel ministry of the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) of Seventh-day Adventist Church, an area encompassing a diverse range of linguistic and cultural groups. The study aims to understand how literacy levels influence the dissemination of the gospel and the overall growth of the church in this region. By analyzing literacy rates across countries within the WAD, the article explores the correlation between literacy and church development, with a particular focus on membership ratios. The research reveals a strong link between higher literacy rates and increased church membership, suggesting that literacy plays a crucial role in the ability of individuals to engage with religious texts, participate in church activities, and embrace the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Furthermore, the article discusses the challenges faced by the church in regions with low literacy rates, including the limitations in accessing written religious materials and the reliance on oral traditions. It also examines the strategies employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church to address these challenges, such as the promotion of literacy programs and the use of local languages in religious education. The findings highlight the importance of literacy as a foundational tool for spiritual growth and community development within the church. This study underscores the need for increased efforts to improve literacy in the West-Central Africa Division as a means of enhancing gospel ministry and church growth. It calls for a more integrated approach that combines literacy education with religious instruction to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their literacy level, can fully participate in the spiritual life of the church. The implications of this research extend beyond the Seventh-day Adventist Church, offering valuable insights for other religious organizations operating in regions with similar literacy challenges.

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

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview of the study

The West-Central Africa Division encompasses 22 countries, namely 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 nations collectively represent a

complex mosaic of multicultural dynamics that, in various ways, impede the comprehensive advancement of the gospel. Key factors contributing to these challenges include cultural diversity, religious plurality, ethnic distinctions, and language literacy levels.

The significance of cultural and religious influences in the context of gospel outreach is widely acknowledged today; however, language literacy emerges as a predominant barrier to the dissemination of the Kingdom of God, despite being frequently overlooked. Gilbert Wari, a former President of the West-Central Africa Division (WAD), underscored literacy as one of the most significant "social challenges" confronting the Division in the realm of gospel propagation during a keynote address to Division delegates<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the General Conference highlighted literacy as one of the top six challenges faced by the Adventist Church in a 1995 statement<sup>2</sup>.

UNESCO's 2016 report indicates that 758 million adults worldwide are illiterate, with 188.3 million of them residing in Sub-Saharan Africa (WAD territory)<sup>3</sup>, accounting for approximately 25% of the global total. Furthermore, 80% of the top 10 most illiterate countries in the world in 2017 were within WAD territory<sup>4</sup>. According to Africa Literacy Facts, more than one in three adults in Sub-Saharan Africa are illiterate, with 182 million adults unable to read or write and 48 million youths (ages 15-24) being completely illiterate.

Illiteracy is intricately linked to numerous factors, many of which are prevalent in WAD territories. Man-made disasters such as conflicts, violence, and famine are widespread in several regions within WAD. Consequently, many individuals are displaced, reside in isolated areas, or are victims of ethnic or gender discrimination. These factors collectively hinder both literacy and Church development.

While a high literacy rate does not necessarily guarantee receptivity to the gospel, low literacy undeniably impedes it. Literacy is a crucial element for gospel propagation, as a significant part of gospel outreach involves guiding individuals to a true understanding of God through the Bible. The message of the Bible is inherently tied to literacy, and its dissemination necessitates a literate audience. Illiterate individuals generally live within limited environments and communicate in their local languages, yet they still require access to the gospel message.

Given these statistics, critical questions arise regarding the role of the Church. How do these literacy statistics impact Church development? What strategies could be employed to combat illiteracy and facilitate the propagation of the gospel? What measures has the Church implemented thus far?

## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are articulated as follows:

- To analyze the literacy rates across various nations within the Western African Division (WAD).
- To assess the Church membership ratio in each country by comparing the total membership to the overall population.
- To compare the Church membership ratios with literacy rates, thereby evaluating the relationship between literacy rates and Church development.
- To propose strategies aimed at combating illiteracy and promoting Church development.

### 1.3 Justification, Significance and Delimitation

The significance of factors such as culture and religion in gospel outreach is widely recognized today. However, language literacy remains a significant barrier to spreading the Kingdom of God and is often overlooked. This study aims to analyze and evaluate the impact of literacy on church development and propose new strategies to overcome language barriers.

The research examines how literacy affects church membership growth, highlighting the challenges faced by the Church. It urges church entities and members to integrate literacy initiatives with gospel outreach programs.

While the study focuses on the influence of language illiteracy on the Church, it acknowledges that this is not the sole issue the Church must address. Other factors affecting church development and gospel outreach are beyond the scope of this study.

### 1.4 Methodology

The methodology of this research is quantitative. It utilizes membership reports from the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) and UNESCO's annual literacy reports. The study aims to compare the literacy rates (Lt) of countries with the membership rates (Mb) of Seventh-day Adventists. Literacy rates are sourced from the UNESCO 2024 Global Education Monitoring Reports. The total membership (TMb) by country is derived from the WAD 2024 Statistical Report. Population data by country is taken from the State of Africa's Population 2024 report by the African Union. The Adventist membership rates (Mb) by country are calculated using the total membership (TMb) and the population of each country.

## 2. CAUSES OF ILLITERACY IN WAD

Illiteracy in Sub-Saharan Africa is influenced by numerous factors, leading to more than 38%<sup>5</sup> of the population lacking basic education. Understanding these factors allows the Church to contribute effectively to reducing illiteracy and improving literacy rates in the region. According to UNESCO<sup>6</sup>, the primary factors include poverty, uneducated parents, geographical disparities, gender disparities, health challenges, displacement, and wars.

- ***Poverty, Conflicts, and Displacement***

These three interconnected factors significantly impact Sub-Saharan Africa, making the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) one of the most affected regions by issues contributing to illiteracy<sup>7</sup>. In 2024, the World Bank reported that 347 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa (WAD territory) were living in extreme poverty. Another report highlighted that "over 40% of people living in Sub-Saharan Africa live in absolute poverty<sup>8</sup>." Conflicts and terrorism in countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have exacerbated poverty. The United Nations reported that in June 2017, approximately 8.5 million people were victims of insecurity and poverty due to Boko Haram attacks in the region. World Vision's website states that 5 million people in Mali are suffering from famine due to acts of terrorism, and the African Development Bank reports that around 700,000 people are displaced in the same country. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, about 71% of the population suffers from poverty due to conflicts.

In these conditions of extreme poverty, conflicts, and displacement, education is often neglected in favor of addressing more immediate needs such as food and health.

- ***Geographical, Ethnic, and Gender Disparities***

Many people in WAD territories live in complete isolation, preventing them from accessing educational facilities. In Nigeria, for example, many areas have been devastated by Boko Haram terrorists. Parents have been killed, children forcibly recruited into terrorist groups, and numerous schools have been targeted and kidnapped by terrorists.

### 3. LITERACY RATES AND SDA CHURCH DEVELOPMENT IN WAD

The General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church issued a statement on literacy during its meeting in Utrecht, the Netherlands, from June 29 to July 8, 1995. The statement identified six major challenges that also affect the Church: literacy, poverty, abuse, health, work hours and conditions, and opportunities for training and mentoring.

Placing literacy at the forefront of these challenges is justifiable. These issues are interconnected, and literacy serves as an underlying factor in all of them. The inability to read and communicate effectively impacts every aspect of life.

There is a correlation between literacy rates and church development. The following data helps us analyze this relationship. This section compares the literacy rates (Lt) of countries with the membership rates (Mb) of Seventh-day Adventists. Literacy rates are sourced from the UNESCO 2024 Global Education Monitoring Reports. The Total Membership (TMb) by country is derived from the WAD 2024 Statistical Report. Population data by country is from the State of Africa's Population 2024, by the African Union. The Adventist membership rates (Mb) by country are calculated based on the Total Membership (TMb) and the population of the 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%

The highest Adventist membership rates in the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) are found in Cameroon (2.95%), followed by Cape Verde (1.64%) and Ghana (1.09%). These three countries have literacy rates above the average, exceeding 50%.

Moderate Adventist membership rates in the WAD are observed in Liberia (0.42%), Gabon (0.17%), Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea (0.16% each), Sierra Leone (0.13%), and Nigeria (0.12%). While some of these countries have literacy rates above the average, others, such as Sierra Leone (47%) and Liberia (below 43%), fall quite short.

The distribution of Adventists by country indicates a relative homogeneity between literacy rates and Adventist membership rates. Countries with higher literacy rates tend to have higher populations of Adventists, while those with lower literacy rates generally have fewer Adventists. This correlation suggests that literacy significantly impacts church development; the more literate the population, the more receptive they are to the gospel.

#### **4. IMPLICATIONS OF LITERACY RATES ON THE CHURCH'S MISSION IN WAD**

These findings underscore the critical role of literacy in church growth. They highlight areas where the church should focus its mission efforts. At the fundamental level of gospel outreach, literacy programs should be integral. The church needs to develop and implement influential educational programs and establish centers to provide fundamental education to the masses, through which the gospel can be introduced effectively. This strategy will not only enhance literacy rates but also foster a more receptive environment for the church's mission.

##### **Focus Areas for Mission Efforts**

###### **Educational Initiatives:**

The church should prioritize the development and implementation of robust educational programs. These initiatives should encompass basic literacy education, aiming to equip individuals with the skills to read and comprehend religious materials. By establishing literacy centers, the church can provide accessible education to a broader audience.

- **Integration of Literacy with Gospel Outreach:**

Integrating literacy programs with gospel outreach efforts can significantly enhance the church's mission. When individuals are able to read and understand religious texts, they are more likely to engage with and internalize the message of the gospel. This integration ensures that literacy efforts directly support the church's spiritual objectives.

- **Community Engagement and Support:**

The church must engage with local communities to identify literacy needs and tailor programs accordingly. Community involvement is crucial for the success of these initiatives, as it fosters a sense of ownership and collaboration. By working closely with community leaders and stakeholders, the church can create a supportive environment for literacy and spiritual growth.

- **Sustainable Development:**

Establishing sustainable literacy programs requires long-term commitment and resources. The church should invest in training educators, developing curriculum, and providing necessary materials and infrastructure. Sustainable literacy efforts will lead to lasting improvements in education and spiritual engagement within the community.

- **Holistic Approach**

A holistic approach to literacy and education can address various socio-economic challenges faced by the community. By improving literacy rates, the church can contribute to overall social development, including better health outcomes, economic opportunities, and social cohesion. This, in turn, creates a more conducive environment for the church's mission.

- **Long-term Benefits**

By integrating literacy programs into its mission strategy, the church can achieve several long-term benefits.

- **Enhanced Engagement:** Higher literacy rates will enable individuals to engage more deeply with religious teachings and participate actively in church activities.
- **Increased Reach:** Literacy programs can expand the church's reach to previously inaccessible populations, allowing the gospel to spread more widely.
- **Empowerment:** Educated individuals are empowered to make informed decisions, including those related to their faith and spirituality.
- **Community Transformation:** Improved literacy can lead to overall community transformation, aligning with the church's broader mission of holistic development and spiritual growth.

## 5. LITERACY IN ELLEN G. WHITE'S WRITINGS

Ellen G. White, cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, placed significant emphasis on the importance of literacy. She regarded literacy as a crucial element for both mission work and education. Recognizing the pivotal role of language in missionary activities, she advised that every missionary should "[devote] a portion of each day to [study] the language" of the region where they are working. This dedication to language learning was seen as essential for effective communication and engagement in their missionary efforts.

In the realm of education, Ellen G. White also emphasized the critical importance of language skills. She believed that language study was one of the fundamental branches of learning and advocated for its thorough teaching in all schools. She stated, "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."

Her commitment to language literacy extended to children as well. She insisted that "Children should be educated to read, write, to understand figures, to keep their own accounts, when very young." This highlights her belief that foundational literacy skills are essential from an early age, ensuring that children are well-equipped for their future roles in both secular and religious capacities.

Ellen G. White's emphasis on literacy reflects her broader vision for a well-rounded education that prepares individuals for both spiritual and practical aspects of life. Her teachings continue to influence the educational philosophy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, underscoring the enduring importance of language literacy in personal and community development.

## 6. MULTILINGUALISM AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR ILLITERACY

The West-Central Africa Division (WAD) is a region characterized by a rich tapestry of languages spoken across small and disparate communities. The approximate number of languages spoken in various countries is as follows:

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>9</sup>.

One significant literacy challenge in these countries is the lack of educational programs in indigenous languages. Most people do not receive formal education in their native tongues, and only a few literacy programs cater to these languages. While many languages have benefited from Bible translations, the effort remains insufficient. For instance, the Bible Society of Nigeria has translated the Bible into 24 languages and the New Testament into 60 languages. Similarly, the Alliance Biblique de Côte d'Ivoire has translated the Bible into 4 languages and the New Testament into 5 languages. These initiatives highlight efforts to promote literacy in local languages, but the need for such programs is still immense.

The Adventist Church should prioritize translating and teaching the message of the three angels in Revelation 14 in local languages. The Adventist mission must recognize the importance of preaching this message in every language to ensure it reaches all communities.

## 7. 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>10</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.

- ***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>11</sup>.

- ***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.

- ***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>12</sup>. The Church could contribute in providing literacy and spiritual materials in local languages.

- ***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.

- ***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>13</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.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The West-Central Africa Division (WAD) represents a vast and dynamic missionary field with significant potential for embracing the gospel. However, this potential is tempered by numerous multicultural complexities that impede the full advancement of the gospel and the growth of the church. Various social factors and man-made disasters present formidable barriers to the propagation of the gospel. These challenges include famines, wars, kidnappings, displacements, and ethnic and gender discriminations, all of which create an unfavorable environment for church development.

Among these challenges, illiteracy stands out as the most persistent obstacle to gospel propagation. It is intricately connected to many other issues and severely hampers the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. Data shows that regions with higher illiteracy rates tend to have lower church membership and slower church development.

To address this critical issue, the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) must prioritize literacy as a foundational element of its outreach strategy. By developing and implementing effective educational programs, the church can enhance literacy rates and create a more receptive environment for the gospel, ultimately fostering spiritual and social growth within the community.



Furthermore, the church must make a concerted effort to promote literacy among adults and youth. This includes establishing educational facilities, encouraging Bible reading in local languages, incorporating literacy activities into youth programs, and specifically encouraging young women to read. These initiatives are crucial as we prepare for the anticipated return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Footnote

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