**Guidelines for the Digital Expansion of Mission
in Seventh-day Adventist Churches**

Throughout its history, Seventh-day Adventists have used new technologies to share the good news of salvation. More recently, with unprecedented access to digital tools and devices,[[1]](#footnote-2) Adventist congregations worldwide have embraced the challenge to share the gospel digitally.[[2]](#footnote-3) Accordingly, this document will address three critical questions:

1. How can churches appropriately expand their digital ministry and mission?
2. How can churches appropriately integrate individuals from different geographical areas who can only connect digitally into local church membership?
3. Should we organize new churches where members would gather exclusively online?

**Expanding Digital Ministry and Mission**

Seventh-day Adventist churches should embrace opportunities for digital ministry. However, our digital expansion must support and enhance our ecclesiastical structure rather than undermine it. Local fields, through their various departments (Media and Communication, Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, Ministerial, etc.), bear the responsibility of guiding churches in digital ministry expansion. They should provide encouragement, training, and resources to help each church progress through different phases of digital engagement. These phases are not a local church ranking system. Rather, they form a strategic framework designed to expand their reach and impact in a meaningful and sustainable way.

*Phase 1: Digital Platform*

Local churches are encouraged to develop a digital channel by regularly posting on at least one digital platform, such as a website, social media account or podcast. The communication department of the local church will ensure all content published will encourage engagement and be: 1) well-designed; 2) relevant; and 3) biblically accurate, upholding the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

*Phase 2: Digital Streaming*

After establishing a digital channel, local churches are encouraged to stream their services online, whether Sabbath School, the main Sabbath worship service, prayer meetings, Bible studies, youth meetings, or other church activities.

*Phase 3: Digital Spiritual* *Care*

The third phase of digital expansion is to provide spiritual care to those connecting remotely, especially through digital visitation, with opportunities for prayer, Bible study, small group participation, and training. Churches in phase three should also provide regular opportunities for people to engage in church services and volunteer for missionary activities, both online and in person.

**Integration of Individuals Living Remotely**

The Bible emphasizes that our responsibility is to make disciples who are more than passive spectators and consumers of church services and digital content. All churches should actively encourage individuals to become members of a local church in their community, even if it requires a degree of sacrifice.

Churches with active digital ministries will at times interact with individuals from outside their local area, who are interested in joining their congregation. For a church to accept members from outside its local area, it must be recognized by the local conference/mission as having reached phase three of digital expansion, demonstrating strong digital spiritual care. Local churches must still adhere to the guidelines in the *Church Manual* in terms of the process and requirements for local church membership.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Church members living in a different geographical area from the physical place where the church meets should still be trained and involved in church ministries and personal witnessing. For example, members who live remotely could lead prayer meetings, Bible studies, or Sabbath School classes. They could also be elected to church office when their essential duties, such as bulletin preparation and spiritual care, can be fulfilled through digital platforms.

Members who worship remotely are encouraged to return tithe and give offerings to the church that holds their membership through the most convenient means available to them. When this is impossible, they should remit their tithe and offerings to the local conference/mission nearest to them.

Members who worship remotely are also encouraged to interact with their community. They may be trained to start a branch Sabbath School or small group in their homes and to plant a new church where they live. The local conference/mission should be notified and involved in any potential transition to a new congregation at the appropriate time, as the new congregation may potentially be attached to a new field.

**Churches Have a Physical Presence**

Scripture says, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25, NKJV). According to the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief number 12, the church is a community of believers who gather for worship, fellowship, and mission.[[4]](#footnote-5)

While modern technology provides many opportunities for the church to connect and reach people in new ways, some of the most sacred practices of our faith require physical presence and cannot be accomplished in a virtual environment. Baptism and communion are the most prominent of these, as presented in the *Church Manual.*[[5]](#footnote-6) While churches have developed creative ways to conduct the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper during crisis times, for these services only to be available online would rob them of the tangible imagery and interpersonal connection so central to their meaning. Thus, physical presence is always the ideal and the goal. A church should not rely on online gatherings only.

Pastors, evangelists, and other church leaders with experience in offering digital spiritual care have discovered a natural tendency for people to desire in-person fellowship and connection. As their relationship with the church matures, people long for a face-to-face experience with those they’ve come to trust and love[[6]](#footnote-7). Therefore, planting exclusively online churches would fail to reflect biblical ecclesiology and fall short of what we know from experience and best practices in digital spiritual care.[[7]](#footnote-8)

# **Commitment to Digital Ministry**

Millions of people search for spiritual content on search engines and social media platforms daily.[[8]](#footnote-9) The General Conference should collaborate with divisions to ensure that Adventist content ranks highest in all online searches for spiritual content. The General Conference should support divisions requiring assistance in developing channels that nurture relationships between members, visitors, and the Adventist faith. All contacts should be connected to churches in their localities.[[9]](#footnote-10)

We also understand the critical importance of ensuring that digital evangelistic content and online spiritual care are accessible to individuals with disabilities. We encourage our entities to assess the resources from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), including guidelines for making audio and video media accessible. We believe it is our responsibility to provide resources for every seeker.

# **Recommendations**

Therefore, considering what the Bible presents about our church and mission, the following concluding statements should function as guidelines for the digital expansion of mission in our local churches:

* Whereas Adventists have always embraced new technologies to share the gospel, local churches should be encouraged to engage in digital ministry, from establishing a digital platform to providing digital care.
* Whereas our God-given mandate is to make disciples, not merely consumers or spectators, churches should encourage people to become active members of a local church in their own area.
* Whereas fellowship and service can happen online, some of the most sacred practices of our faith, such as baptism and communion, require physical presence and should not be attempted online. Furthermore, a church must have a physical gathering to qualify as a Seventh-day Adventist church.
* Whereas people naturally desire in-person fellowship and connection as their relationship with the church matures, exclusively online churches with no plan to connect with the physical body of Christ should not be allowed as they would fail to reflect biblical ecclesiology.
* Whereas individuals may be unable to join a local church nearby, churches that reached phase three of digital expansion by demonstrating the capacity for robust digital care may accept these individuals into membership.
* Whereas millions search for spiritual content online daily, the General Conference should collaborate with divisions to establish the official website and social media accounts that represent the Adventist Church globally. This should be done in an accessible way, in all languages, and with the express purpose of connecting these individuals to a local church.
* Whereas digital evangelism and spiritual care are increasingly important, seminaries should teach these skills to future pastors, and conferences/missions should continually train pastors and elders in digital literacy and online ministry.
* While we must embrace digital platforms to extend our reach, we should continue to prioritize nurturing personal relationships and community bonds through physical gatherings. This dual approach will ensure a wholistic spiritual experience for all members and enhance our ability to proclaim the Three Angels’ Messages to the world.
1. Ministry, September 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “I Will Go” Strategic Focus, 2020–2025, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2022), 57–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “The Church,” **Adventist.org**, accessed September 2, 2024, https://www.adventist.org/the-church. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Church Manual,” General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, accessed September 2, 2024, https://gc.adventist.org/church-manual/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Samuel Neves, “A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Self-Disclosure in Hybrid Pastoral Care” (PhD diss., University of Westminster, 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. S. R. Cellini, “How Does Virtual Learning Impact Students in Higher Education?” **Brookings**, August 13, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-does-virtual-learning-impact-students-in-higher-education/> and
M. J. Kruger, “Power of Presence in Theological Education,” **The Gospel Coalition**, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/presence-theological-education/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. This includes places where search engines are free to present their own results and other parts of the world where search engines are regulated, as documented by K. Zakariasen, “Seeking Truth Online, Finding God,” **Billy Graham Evangelistic Association**, September 20, 2023, https://billygraham.org/story/seeking-truth-online-finding-god/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Key Performance Indicator 9.5: “The General Conference has, and its entities are working toward, an integrated media plan that maximizes the potential of technology.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)