



# Factors Associated with Backsliding of Members in West Congo Field as a Basis for a Retention Strategy

Grégoire Mbaya Mbaya

Theological Seminary, Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

Email: [mbayag@aua.ac.ke](mailto:mbayag@aua.ac.ke)

**Abstract:** *The current study investigated factors associated with backsliding of members in west Congo Field as basis for a retention strategy, using quantitative method. Sources of data were questionnaires and documents. Four churches, one hundred and seventy-five backsliders, pastors and church members participated in the study. Data analysis revealed several factors that explain the high rate of backsliders in west Congo Field. The study faced a real challenge in relation to the membership statistics, namely many which recorded did not correspond with the number of physical and active members. The study recommends that Knowing, according to Jesus' parable of the sower found in Matthew 13, in order to retain newly baptized members, even if every effort and possible means have been made, the church should not abandon the discipleship ministry in favor of those for whom Christ still pleads through small groups and visitation program as strategies.*

**Keywords:** *Backsliding, West Congo Field, Retention, Church, Growth, Discipleship*

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## 1. Introduction

Backsliding is defined as to lapse morally or in the practice of religion or to revert to a worse condition (Merriam-Webster, 1998). Backsliding is a general phenomenon in the sense that it only affects denominations, but also continents. The loss of church members is not new in the sense that the phenomenon has been deplored for decades or even centuries. Many new converts have left the church, and the average rate of backsliding is high. The problem is that there are many factors associated with this great loss of new converts in church attendance among which, the lack of a robust mechanism for retention of the said new members. According to Ferguson and Hirsh (2011), Globalisation, technological breakthroughs, international terrorism, geopolitical shifts, economic crises, the digitalization of information, social networks, the rise of bottom - up people movements and rise of new religious movements and others. The consequences of the French Revolution all conspired together to accelerate the marginalization of the church as we know it, forcing us to rethink our

previously privileged relationship to the broader culture around us.

This aspect has negatively affected the growth of the church in several aspects for years. According to Bomfim (2020), the Adventist church is currently facing a challenge with an average retention rate of 50%, obviously with a corresponding evasion rate. Several other researchers around the world have agreed in the same direction. Tompkins (2020) argues that the loss of church members through the back door is a real issue for the church today; the church is losing far too many young people, and the trend is hurting the worldwide church, the local congregation, and individual families.

On the African continent, several research have already been carried out in this area. For instance, according to Otieno (2014), the effort made by the Makoko Seventh - Day Adventist Church to fulfill the great commission (Matt.28:19-20, Mark 16:15-16) through public evangelism is challenged by the constant exodus of newly baptized converts out of the church. The immigration of new members has a compound effect on the church; it denies the church the opportunity to

disciple new converts and discourages church members from continuing to fund public evangelism as they are considered a waste of resources.

Locally, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kabwit (2014) postulates that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lwalaba Station is experiencing a decrease of its membership. Statistics have revealed a deplorable loss of believers in some Districts. It has been sad to notice that new converts enter the church and disappear after a while. Many churches which had a prosperous growth in membership have experienced a decrease of church members year after year.

Before discussing the factors or causes associated with backsliding, several researchers have found it to be important to recall the reasons which motivated these people to become members of the church. The reasons are numerous. According to McGavran (1980), they are categorized into three: secular, socio-relational, and spiritual. About secular factors, Teevan and Barry (1967) list, hunger, sex, thirst and pain. Meaning that people come looking for network for their business, wife, healing for various ailments or losses. Concerning socio-relational reasons, Dudley (2000) identifies three which are fellowship, friendship, and relationships. And finally, for spiritual reasons, Arloo (2016) argues that the findings conclusively attest people's desire to have more knowledge about God, be obedient to Him and get involved in Church ministries. The good news is that many people are in the church because they want to live sacred, moral and ethical lives. They regard attending Church services as the core of their quest to become in tune with God. So, people come to the church looking for salvation.

Seeking to identify the causes of dropouts in Christian churches, and this after reviewing the different writers on the subject, Niyonzima (2017) came to the conclusion that some of those causes are personal, related to the life of the ones quitting; others are related to the church as a body, where they used to belong, and others to the pastoral care of leadership of the church.

## **2. Biblical and Theological Reflection on Reducing Backsliding**

In the Holy Bible, both in Old and New Testaments, there are many teachings on reducing backsliding. By studying the Biblical views of backsliding through this section, a number of insights needs to be taken into consideration with the aim of reducing the rate of backsliders.

### **2.1 Biblical View of Backsliding in the Old Testament**

Referencing to the King James Version of the Bible, it should be better to note that the word “backslider” is only found in Prov 14:14 and means basically according to Brown et al. (1952), “to go back.” According to Hamilton (1980), three words derived from the one Hebrew root (shub) are applied to the concept of backsliding. These are: shobab (Jer 3:14, 22; Isa 57:17), shobeb (Jer 31:22; Mic 2:4), and meshuba (Hos 11:7). Finally, the term “backsliding” is a prophetic term, which describes Israel's infidelity to Yahweh and basically means “back turning” or “turning away”(Vernon, 1962).

### **2.2 Backsliding in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, it is the phrase ‘fall away’ that is used rather than backslides, although the idea remains the same. This term “Fall away” is, according to the bible concordance, used 15 times in the New Testament with the same meaning as in Heb 3:12. The same with the parable of the sower through which this state is depicted, and is due to opposition and affliction as shown in Matt 13:21; Mark 4:17 and Luke 8:13.

### **2.3 Factors Associated with Backsliding in the Bible**

Although the Bible describes various factors associated with backsliding, the list of those presented in this study is not exhaustive. Some of them are as follows: from the Old Testament, the prosperity and times of abundance (Deut 8: 12, 14), lack of trust in the Lord ((Josh 7:5; 1 Sam 4:2), worldly mixture (Num 11:4-6, 31; 33), covetousness (Num 16:32-35), apostasy (Jos 22:22, 2 Chr 29: 19), departure from the word of God and involvement in False religions and idolatry(Jer 3:6, 8; 8:4-17), marriage and close involvement with non-believers(Ex.34:11-16; 1 Kings 11:1-4.), ...

From the New Testament, following factors are worth highlighting: gospel way being narrow (Matt 7:13-14), persecution, tribulations and sinful environment(Mark 13:9-11, 12-13;10:28-34; Mat 24:12); cares and life burdens' (Luke 8:14; 21:34), spiritual immaturity (Luke 8:13), lack of repentance and faith (2 Cor.7:10) and worldly love (2 Tim 4:10); misunderstanding of God's Word (John 6: 51-52, 66); offence given by the words or deeds (Mark 9:42; 1 Cor 8:9-13), wrong motives (John 6), the desire of making up his own theological or belief system (2 Tim. 4:3-4), lack of holiness (1 Pet.1:16; Heb.12:14; Gal.5:22).

## 2.4 God's Attitude toward Backsliders

According to Jer 3:6, 8, despite the rebellion and the condition of backsliders, God continues to show his love to them. This God's tender love for backsliders is well expressed in verses 12-14 of the same Chapter. The same divine love towards backsliders is also well demonstrated in the book of Ezek 34: 11, 12, 16; Hos 14:4; Isa 55:7.

In the New Testament, God's attitude towards sinners and backsliders is clearly shown through parables, Jesus' life and teachings. The parables of the Lost Sheep (Matt 18:10-14; Luke 15:1-7), the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24) are eloquent to this effect. So, in view of the foregoing, the church has the duty to reclaim and restore those who have dropped out from her.

## 2.5 Ellen White on Backsliding

A review of Ellen White's writings on backsliding demonstrates not only her concern for the factors associated with this loss, but also the attitude of both God and the Church towards backsliders, as well as the church's attitude and responsibility in dealing with this phenomenon. According to her (1948), the responsibility for backsliding is shared. That is to say, she attributes it to Satan, to the backslider himself and to the church. About Satan as first cause of backsliding, Ellen White (1923) maintains that it is Satan who is seen as diligently working to draw people away from God and to apostasy. Concerning the Backslider himself, she (1948) evokes several factors as following: neglecting of nurturing and God's light, love of one's sinful habits, failure to work for others. Although apart from Satan, the backslider himself has his share of responsibility in his backsliding, the church and its members are not spared. The reason why E.G. White establishes the responsibility of the church by listing major factors justifying backsliding like: spiritual weakness and hypocrisy of old members, lack of pastoral care, poor preaching's...

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Design

This study used the quantitative method also called 'Logical positivism,' which analyzes data that deals with figures or numbers gathered through questionnaires. Out of two hundred backsliders chosen based on their convenience and availability for the surveys, one hundred and seventy five participated willingly.

### 3.2 Sample and Sampling

Four churches are selected, three of them from the city of Kinshasa and the fourth one called Kasangulu church from a rural area. The total membership for these selected churches stands at 4,148 and is distributed as follows: UNIKIN (1,198), Kasangulu (866), Gombe (601), and Lemba (1,483). Only the backsliders were the participants for this study. It is the nonprobability sample or convenience sample that was used although, according to John and David (2018) it is less desirable. The choice of this sample is justified by the fact that, in it, according to the aforementioned author respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability. So, two hundred backsliders were selected for the surveys.

The choice of these West Congo Field Churches is justified as follows: First, The UNIKIN church as its name suggests, is located on the campus of the University of Kinshasa, the largest and prestigious of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this University, there are nationals from all provinces, all tribes, all languages and all people of the Country. UNIKIN (East of Kinshasa) church is full of intellectuals of all levels. It is made up of members belonging to all socio-professional categories. Thus, the UNIKIN church better represents all the West Congo Field and more particularly those in urban areas. Lemba (South of Kinshasa) and Gombe (North of Kinshasa) are also from Kinshasa which contains almost a tenth of the Field membership. Finally, Kasangulu church (West of Kinshasa), which is located in a rural environment and will better represent all the rural churches in West Congo Field.

**Table1 : Sampling**

Churches	Membership	Respondents (Backsliders)
1. Unikin	1198	60
2. Kasangulu	866	40
3. Gombe	601	50
4. Lemba	1483	50
Total	4148	200

Source: WCF Archives, 2023

The choice of a sample of two hundred out of many backsliders is explained by the following reasons: availability, having stopped attending church more than one year ago and being old over 18 years old. They were actively involved but later stopped attending.

### 3.3 Data Collection Tools

The researcher used surveys for data collection. In this research, to collect data from backsliders, a questionnaire was designed. This helped to gather facts and establish truths about the loss of new converts. These data were used in seminars and the preparation of the training manual for member retention. About validity of instruments, the researcher was ensured the various variables are measured in the questionnaire.

The questionnaires are developed from the literature review, Questions are drafted according to Burgess (2001) who recommends that a questionnaire should have the following components: a target audience, key questions, a proper data collection method, a measuring scale and a title. It should also start with non-threatening questions. These questions used the Likert design.

### 3.4 Data Procedures

After obtaining the permission from the West Congo Field president, two hundred questionnaires were sent to the selected churches through the local church leadership. To ensure safety of papers and strict confidentiality of data, the same method was used to return collected data to the researcher. Since the beginning of 2023, each member of the board of any local church selected for the research had been asked to identify at least two backsliders willing to respond to the questionnaire.

Having the list of backsliders, the assistant researchers proceeded in two ways. First, introductions and rationale of research, signing the consent form, gathering on Sabbath after worship service, those who accepted the invitation to come and worship the Sabbath. After the explanation of the project, they were invited to answer the questionnaire. Second, the questionnaires were given to those who will not be available at the Sabbath meeting

to respond at home. Once completed, the questionnaire was enveloped and given to the assistant researcher who in turn put them together and transferred them to the researcher.

The data gathered from the location of the study were sorted out and prepared for editing before the researcher codes them. Then, the data were entered into the Statistical Program for Social Scientist. The information processed through SPSS helped to figure out the reliability of the tool.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Collected data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and processed appropriately with the aim of determining the factors associated with church members backsliding.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

After discussing the project proposal with the West Congo Field officers, a letter of permission was sent to the chairman of their executive committee with a copy to the pastors of selected Districts/Churches for research. Before participants agree, the researcher informed them about the purpose, procedures, and duration of research, risk, benefits, and how confidentiality will be maintained.

## 4. Results and Discussions

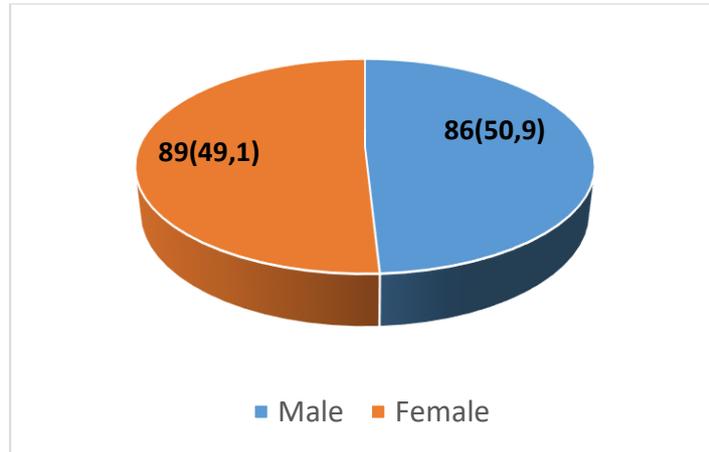
At this stage, the aim is to present the results of the study, using the research questions to guide process.

### 4.1 Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions:

**Research question 1:** What is the general outlook of demographics of the backslidden in West Congo Field?

The diagram below shows the gender of the respondents

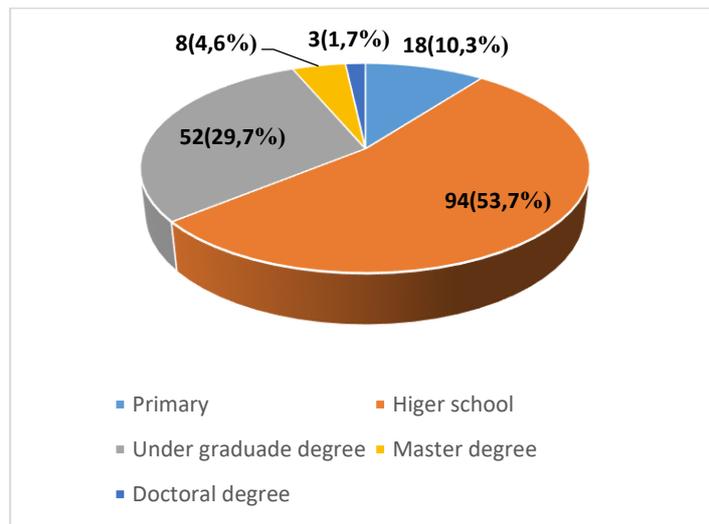


**Figure 1: Gender of the Respondents**

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024

Out of 175 respondents, 49.1% (86) were males while 50.9% (89) were females. This does not represent a significant difference between the two genders.

The diagram below shows the education level of the respondents



**Figure 2: Level of Education**

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

Out of 175 respondents 18 are primary school holders which make up 10.3 % of the study, 94 respondents are high school holders representing 53.7% of the study, 52 respondents are undergraduate degree holders which represent 29.7% of the study, 8 respondents are master's

degree holders which represent 4.6% and 3 respondent's doctoral degree holders representing 1.7 %.

The table below shows the age distribution of respondents

**Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents**

Age groups	Less than 18	18-30	31-45	46-65	66 and above
Frequency	38	47	46	39	5
Percentage	21.7	26.9	26.3	22.3	2.8

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

Out of 175 respondents, 38(21.7%) are under eighteen years old; 47(26.9%) are within the range of 18 and 30 years, 46 are within the range of 31 and 45 years which represent 26.3 % of the study; 39 are within the range of 46 and 65 years representing 22.3 % of the study and 5(2.8%) are within the range of 65 years and above. In light of these data, it is worth noting that more than 40% of backsliders are youth or young adults. This confirms

Tompkins’ (2020) statement that the loss of church members through the back door is a real issue for the church today; the church is losing far too many young people, and the trend is hurting the worldwide church, the local congregation, and individual families.

The table shows the marital status of respondents.

**Table 3 : Marital Status**

Status	Frequency	Percentage
1. Single	73	41.7
2. Married	76	43.4
3. Separated	4	2.3
4. Divorced	9	5.2
5. Widow	7	4
6. Widower	6	3.4

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

Out of 175 respondents, 73(41.7%) are singles, 76(43.4%) are married, 4(2.3%) are separated, 9(5.2%) are divorced, 7(4%) are widows and 6(3.4%) are widowers. Analysis of these data reveals that marital status also played a significant role in the loss of members, supporting what was discovered in the literature review. In WCF, 85% of backsliders are single

and married. Most young people, pupils or students, and still dependent on their parents, face the problem of Sabbath keeping and family pressure, while some married people are forced to abandon their faith by their non-Adventist spouses.

The table below shows the respondents’ family of origin.

**Table 4: Family of Origin**

Parents	Frequency	Percentage
1. Both parent Adventists	49	28
2. One parent Adventist	25	14.3
3. None Adventist	101	57.7

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024

Concerning the family of origin of backsliders, out of 175 respondents, 49 or 28 % come from families where, two parents were Adventists and for others, one of the parents was an Adventist (25 persons or 14.3 %). This table 4 shows that more than half of backsliders who responded to the questionnaire (101 or 57.7 %) come from non-Adventist families. Finally, let us note that more than half of the backsliders come from families in

which no parent is Adventist and some of them have had to deal with family pressure.

**Research question 2:** What church services were available to the new converts in West Congo Field and what is the level of satisfaction of the church services of new converts?

**Table 5. Level of Satisfaction on Church Services and Activities**

	Satisfied	Unsatisfied
1. 1. The divine worship	156(89.8%)	19(10.8%)
2. The Sabbath school	162(92.5%)	13(7.5%)
3. The small group ministry	72(41.1%)	103(58.9%)
4. The prayer ministry	112(64.0%)	63(36.0%)
5. The worship style	142(81.2%)	33(18.8%)
6. The Bible study	156(89.1%)	19(10.9%)
7. The communion service	162(92.5%)	13(7.5%)

8. The way of handling the finances in the church	135(77.1%)	40(22.9%)
9. Church decoration	100(57.1%)	75(42.9%)
10. People's attitude	111(63.4%)	64(36.6%)

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

Concerning the level of satisfaction with church services and activities, table 5 shows that out of 175 respondents, the greatest number circled satisfied compared to those who checked unsatisfied. Those who had affirmative opinion about divine service were 156(89.8%) and those who had a negative opinion had 19(10.8%). The same with Sabbath school 162(92.5%) of respondents were satisfied against only 13(7.5%) unsatisfied.

The issue of small group ministry is the only one serious in this table followed by church decoration. About small groups, that data analysis reveals that the majority of the respondents 103(58.9%) were unsatisfied against 72(41.1%) satisfied.

Out of 175 respondents 112(64.0%) who were satisfied with the prayer ministry, against 63(36.0%) who were unsatisfied with this ministry. About worship style, 142(81.2%) of respondents were satisfied while 33(18.8%) were unsatisfied with it. As for Bible study the table shows that 156(89.1%) indicated satisfied while 19(10.9%) of the respondents circled unsatisfied.

As for the communion service, 162(92.5%) indicated that they were satisfied while those who had negative opinions were 13(7.5%) who marked unsatisfied. The same with the way of handling the finances in the church, 135(77.1%) circled satisfied against 40 (22.9%) who marked unsatisfied. Those who marked unsatisfied. Concerning church decoration, 100(58.9%) were satisfied while 75(41.1%) were unsatisfied. The number of those opposed to the church's decoration is not

negligible. Finally, 111(63.4%) of respondents were satisfied with people's attitude, but 64(36.6%) were unsatisfied.

Contrary to what Arloo (2016) declared about the level of satisfaction with the service and activities of the church that another major reason why many believers backslide is the lack of attending regular church services where believers can be strengthened and grounded in the Lord; the above data reveals that in West Congo Field, the majority of respondents were satisfied with it except for the small group ministry and the church decoration. And yet these small groups play an important role as demonstrated by Africa Seventh-day Adventist Study Group (2024). This Group states that these small groups can provide an intimate and nurturing environment for spiritual growth, create a sense of community, foster relationships among new converts and address the unique needs and questions of new converts. Which can help to significantly reduce the rate of backsliding.

About church decoration, Milton's comment (1932) is eloquent on this subject. He argues that

such lax conditions tend to bring into disrepute the cause represented by the buildings and lower our people in the minds of those who exercise greater care for their churches. Many turn away in disgust, unwilling to consider our presentation of the truths for this hour. What a contrast in this unfortunate condition with the counsel, 'The house where God is worshiped should be in accordance with His character and majesty.'

**Table 6: Level of Spiritual Growth**

	Yes	No
1. Baptism out of own decision	142(81.1%)	33(18.9%)
2. Baptismal commitment done before baptism	157(89.7%)	18(10.3%)
3. Baptismal commitment made clear to the understanding	123(70.3%)	52(29.7%)
4. Adequate instruction in church teachings before baptism	101(57.7%)	74(42.3%)
5. Influencing others to become Adventist	93(53.1%)	82(46.9%)
6. Holding any church office	83(47.4%)	92(52.6%)
7. Having regular personal prayer	121(69.1%)	54(30.9%)
8. Having regular Bible study	91(52.0%)	84(48.0%)
9. Joining another church after stopping attending SDAC	76(43.4%)	99(56.6%)
10. Returned to the original church after stopping attending the SDAC	52(29.7%)	123(70.3%)
11. Visitation of church members after stopping attending SDAC	105(60.0%)	70(40.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024

Table 6 above shows that the majority of respondents, 142 (81.1%) indicated that the baptism was out of their

own decision as against only 33 (18.9%) of them who indicated that the baptism was not out their own decision.

Only 18 (10.3%) of respondents indicated that they did not a baptismal commitment before being baptized as against 157(89.7%) who indicated that they did. Out of 175 respondents, 123 (70.3%) indicated that the baptismal commitment was made clear to their understanding against 52(29.7%) who indicated that it was not made clear. 101(57.7%) of respondents indicated that they received adequate instruction in church teachings before baptism as against 74(42.3%) who indicated that they did not receive. Out of 175 respondents, 93(53.1%) indicated that they tried actively to influence others to become Adventists as against 82(46.9%) who indicated that they did not; 83(47.4%) indicated that they held any church office as against 92(52.6%) who indicated that they did not. Same observation as Niyonzima (2017) who argues that the lack of involving new converts in the activities of the church is one of the causes to drop out. Thereupon he postulates that on the backslider's side, they deplore having never being involved in any church activity at an important percentage (75%).

121(69.1%) indicated that they had a regular personal prayer while 54(30.9%) responded negatively; 91(52%)

indicated that they had regular bible study as against 84(48%) what indicated that they did not have it.

After the decision to stop attending the SDAC, 76(43.4%) of respondents indicated that they joined other non-Adventist churches while 99(56.6%) said they went nowhere. The analysis of this data implies that there should be regular activities and programs to retain and reclaiming former church members and backsliders. Out of 175 backsliders, only 52(29.7%) indicated that they returned to their original churches while the big number of 123(70.3%) did not. Some joined news churches and others have gone nowhere as previously stated. About visitation by church members, 105(60%) indicated that they were visited as against 70(40%) who responded negatively. As mentioned previously, the lack of visits has contributed considerably to the backsliding.

**Research question 3:** What services and activities done by West Congo Field churches were helpful to new converts as part of measures to retain them?

The table below shows the level of helpfulness of church services and activities.

**Table 7: Level of Helpfulness of Church Services and Activities**

	Helpful	Unhelpful
1. The sermons preached	170(97.1%)	5(2.9%)
2. Sabbath school classes	157(89.8%)	18(10.2%)
3. Bible study sessions	156(89.1%)	19(10.9%)
4. Visitation program by the deacons	84(48.0%)	91(52.0%)
5. Holy communion	167(95.4%)	8(4.6%)

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

In this table dealing with the level of helpfulness of the church services and activities, the investigation reveals that, the major issue is the visitation program by the deacons while this is one of their duties according to Deacon' and Deaconess's Handbook (2015). It argues that in many churches visitation is arranged by distributing membership by districts and assigning a deacon to each district with the expectation that he will visit each home at least once a quarter. The data analysis shows that 91(52.4%) of respondents found it unhelpful although 84(48.0%) declared it helpful. Although other services and activities were mostly judged helpful by respondents: sermons preached, Sabbath school classes, bible study sessions and Holy Communion with

respectively 170(97.1%) against 5(2.9%); 157(89.8%) against 18(10.2%), 156(89.1%) against 19(10.9%), and 167(95.4%) against 8(4.6%); it should be noted that they also, contributed to the backsliding of church members in West Congo Field, in accordance with what was discovered in the literature review previously.

**Research question 4:** What pastoral care services were provided by Pastors to the new converts in West Congo Field?

The table below shows the visitation done by church members, pastors or church elders.

**Table 81: Visitation by Church Members, Pastors or Church Elders**

Visitation	Once a week	Once a month	Once a quarter	Never
1. Church Members	56 (32.0%)	30 (17.1%)	45 (25.7%)	44 (25.1%)
2. Pastors and Alders	46 (26.3%)	35 (20.0%)	46 (26.3%)	48 (27.4%)

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

About visitation by church members, out of 175 respondents, 32 % (56) declared having visited once a week, 17.1 % (30), once a month, 25.7 % (45) once a quarter, and 25.1 % (45) had never been visited.

Concerning visitation by pastors or church elders, out of 175, 26.3 % (46) were visited once a week, 20 % (35) once a month, 26.3 % (46) once a quarter and 27.4 % (48) had never been visited. Therefore, on average 46(26%) backsliders had never been visited before ceasing to attend the church by either the members or the pastor or

church elders, and this lack reinforced the drop out of these believers as noted by Chor-Kiat (1999). According to him, some of us are tempted to be negligent and uncaring about visitation because pastoral visits demand patience, compassion and guanine diligence.

**Research question 5:** What factors stopped the new converts in West Congo Field from church attendance?

The table shows the level of agreement on factors of non-church attendance.

**Table 9: Level of Agreement on Factors of Non-church Attendance**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Work pressures	63(36.0%)	112(64.0%)
1. Family issues	95(54.3%)	80(45.6%)
2. Conflict within church members	42(24.0%)	133(76.0%)
3. Felt un accepted and un welcomed in the church	63(36.0%)	112(64.0%)
4. The church had too high standards	90(51.4%)	85(48.5%)
5. Married a son-Adventist	47(26.8%)	128(73.2%)
6. Change of location	48(27.5%)	127(72.5%)
7. Pressure from the family	88(50.3%)	87(49.6%)
8. Lack of genuine relationship with Jesus	87(49.8%)	48(50.2%)
9. Issues with some of the church doctrines	97(55.3%)	78(44.7%)
10. Felt socially degraded in the church	49(28.0%)	126(72.0%)
11. Felt discriminated in the church	66(37.7%)	109(62.3%)
12. The lifestyle was not in harmony with standards of Christian living	99(56.6%)	76(43.4%)
13. Not rooted in scriptures	102(58.3%)	73(41.7%)
14. Pressure about Sabbath keeping	101(57.7%)	74(42.3%)
15. Lack of contact with all church officers	88(50.3%)	87(49.7%)
16. Nobody cared for	88(50.3%)	87(49.7%)
17. Hypocrisy and inconsistency of church members	89(50.9%)	86(49.1%)
18. No many friends in the church	44(25.2%)	131(74.8%)
19. Stress due to life challenges	103(58.9%)	72(41.1%)
20. Lack of trust in God	63(36.0%)	112(64.0%)
21. Criticized by church leaders	46(26.3%)	129(73.7%)
22. Lack of competent administration by the church	40(22.9%)	135(77.1%)
23. Social status didn't fit that of the church members	39(23.3%)	136(77.7%)
24. Education level did not fit that of the church	21(12.0%)	154(88.0%)

Source: Fieldwork, June 2024.

The analysis of the data from table 9 as allowed the highlighting of the major factors associated with backsliding. These factors had been mentioned by a significant number of respondents having checked agree with higher rate against that of those having marked disagree.

These factors most relevant in West Congo Field are as follows in descending order:

**Stress due to life challenges (103 respondents or 58.9%).** To this statement, 103(58.9%) of respondents agreed against 72(41.1%) who ticked disagreed. This

issue is one of the 7 reasons discovered by Ron (2014) as being associated with the backsliding.

**Not rooted in scriptures (102 respondents or 58.3%).** Out of 175 respondents, 102(58.3%) indicated agree to the statement while those who disagreed rated 73(41.7%). This is confirmation of the remark made by Finley (2009) who argues that without a strategy of discipleship in place, apostasies will be high. If the church does not provide nurturing opportunities for new believers, they will either be weak in the faith for years and create problems in the church or leave the church altogether.

**Pressure about Sabbath keeping (101 respondents or 57.1%).** Concerning this issue, the investigation discovered that 101(57.7%) marked agree while 74 (42.3%) had a negative opinion against this issue and underscored disagree.

**The lifestyle was not in harmony with standards of Christian living (99 respondents or 56.6%).** The data analysis shows that 99(56.6%) rate the issue agree and 76(43.4%) rate the issue disagree. Exactly what Neil (1966) had stated. According to him, the survey revealed that very few left the church because of lack of belief in, or understanding of, the doctrines.

**Issues with some of the church doctrines (97 respondents or 55.3%).** The data analysis about this issue, revealed that 97(53.3%) agreed with it, but other backsliders hold different views as 78(44.7%) disagree. Regarding this issue, there is contrast with what said Rene Sand (1966) who maintains that only 2% quit the church as a consequence of lacking deep understanding of biblical teachings.

**Family issues (95 respondents or 54.3%).** The analysis shows that 95(54.3%), more than half of respondents circled agree against 80(45.6%) who circled disagree. This issue was well illustrated by Deltamore (1965) who argues that young mothers, who face the problems of a hectic time caring for their babies before and during church, often begin to neglect church attendance at these times. By the time the children have grown a little older and quitter, the regular habit of church attendance has been broken.

**The church had too high standards (90 respondents or 51.4%).** To this issue, it can be seen from the table above that 90 (51.4%) agreed as against 85(48.5%) who disagreed.

**Hypocrisy and inconsistency of church members (89 respondents or 50.8%).** When respondents were asked about this issue, 89(50.9%) out of the 175 respondents rated agree while 86(49.1%) rated at disagree. Russel (1990) in his study done in East Jamaica Conference of Seventh-day-Adventists came up with a number of reasons for dropping out of the church, among which, this one.

**Lack of contact with all church officers (88 respondents or 50.2%).** Out of 175 respondents, 88% rate the statement agreed while 87 (49.8) rate it disagree. These results confirm that of the study conducted by Oosterwal (1976) in North America among people who had stopped attending the Seventh-day Adventist church and had revealed ten most basic reasons for leaving the church. Among them, lack of contact with pastors and church officers.

**Nobody cared for: 88 respondents (50.2%).** Out of 175 respondents, 88(50.2%) tricked agree while 87(49.8%) circled disagree. Exactly what was said previously by

Neil (1981), who argues that so many also leave the church when they no longer feel loved and cared for by the church community.

**Pressure from the family (88 respondents or 50.2%).** To this issue, 88(50.3%) rate was agreed, while the remaining respondents, 87(49.7%) disagreed. This is the case of students forced by their parents to attend classes on Sabbaths and certain workers who do not have Sabbath free as demonstrated by Neil (1981).

**Lack of genuine relationship with Jesus (87 respondents or 49.7%).** About this issue, the data divulges that 87(49.7%) of respondents agreed as against 48(50.2%) who disagreed. This result confirms what was said by James White (2015) on this factor. According to him, we should not be surprised when people leave, especially those whose hearts have not been truly transformed by a well-articulated, well understood Gospel that aims at redirecting the self from sin to the Saviour, turning that produces a level of commitment and consecration that can endure the challenges of living a holy life in an unholy world and the often ugly nature of a church that is all too imperfect.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusions

This research consisted of highlighting the factors associated with church members backsliding in the West Congo Field with the aim of proposing a strategy to not only increase membership retention in the church but also preparing the churches of this Field for the work of reclaiming their Backsliders. As the pilots implemented the project, GOMBE, KASANGULU, LEMBA, and UNIKIN churches were cited. Theological foundation for the reduction of membership backsliding was cited from both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

There were also the Spirit of Prophecy writings of E.G. White and other sources that were reviewed. The writer used a quantitative method in order to ascertain the extent of the problem.

The project was spread over a period of twelve months, during which the backsliders were subjected to a questionnaire which revealed a variety of reasons for their backsliding. These reasons not only supported the conclusions of the other writers and researchers as seen in the literature review, but also generated some encouraging prospects for future follow-up, as well as some significant growth in understanding and fellowship that took place within the selected churches themselves.

### 5.2 Recommendations

As stated previously, the ultimate objective of this research was to craft a strategy to considerably reduce the membership backsliding rate in West Congo Field.

Having reached the end of the process, the theological foundation and the literature review, and the findings from questionnaires, the writer recommends to churches as well as to West Congo Field the following:

1. To strengthen the faith of newly baptized members and non-established church members, pre- and post-baptismal lessons, and mentors or spiritual guardians should be given to them.
2. To integrate the newly believers into the life of church to affirm their faith and this by connecting them with various ministries and by encouraging them to be involved in different church ministries like Adventist Youth ministries, Adventist Women's ministries, Adventist Men's organization, and Children's ministries. These ministries will give them opportunities to link up with one of their own.
3. Church leaders should check on absentee members, to identify their challenges, to intensify caring for them and to encourage them to return.
4. Organize frequent and more programs for the church in particular for young and young adults.
5. Organize more seminars on Bible study for members in churches, initiate and re-energize small group ministries without forgetting an intentional and strong visitation program for members.
6. The mission should recommend this project as a guiding tool to departments, in particular Personal Ministries, ministers and local churches across the field.

## Further Studies

Based on the researcher's experiences in the four aforementioned churches, some suggestions are made to use them not only in his future ministry but also by someone else who will find them helpful by conducting a similar project regarding backsliding. These suggestions are as follows:

1. It could be beneficial if another researcher would administer a survey questionnaire to both experienced pastors and former members to discover the findings, major factors associated with backsliding, and what they have found as helpful suggestions not only in retaining newly baptized members but also in reclaiming backsliders to the fellowship of the church.
2. Another researcher could focus on monitoring the progress of GOMBE, KASANGULU, LEMBA, and UNIKIN churches to find out what long-term impact this project has on the

overall church life and member retention as well as the Backsliders' Ministry.

3. The above recommendations are not exhaustive. In the interest of making West Congo Field Churches the centers of loving Christian fellowship and to take steps to reduce considerably the rate of backsliding, there is still much more that could and should be done.

Knowing, according to Jesus' parable of the sower found in Matthew 13, that three out of four groups who had received the seed of the Gospel dropped out of God's Kingdom, or even among His own disciples betrayed Him; therefore, in order to retain newly baptized members and reclaim backsliders, every effort and possible means have been made, the Church should not abandon the discipleship ministry in favor of those for whom Christ still pleads.

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