



Small Group Ministry as a Strategy for Church Member Retention and Backslider Reclamation in West Congo Field

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Abstract: For several decades, the rate of backsliding of church members in West Congo Field (WCF) has been glaring and ever increasing, despite the use of various strategies to close the back door. Having discovered, in a previous study, the factors associated with backsliding in the said mission Field, the present study targeted small group ministry for discipleship as a strategy to reduce the rate of backsliding and reclaim backsliders. It is true that there is a lot of literature on small group ministry and that it has been used in WCF, but the bottom line is that they have not done enough to address the high rate of backsliding and reclaiming backsliders. The researcher used the methodology of program development. The implementation of this strategy, which consisted of the creation of new small groups and the revitalization of existing ones resulted in a significant reduction of backsliding rate of around 33 %, an increase in the church growth rate of up to 11 percent, and also in the backsliders' claim of the order of 17%. The findings of this study are crucial for the Seventh-day Adventist church in WCF because they have shown the improvement of member retention, effectively nurturing of new converts, the growth, and the stability of the church in this Field. So, researcher recommends that WCF promotes the creation of small groups in all local churches in its territory and revitalize those that are not operational.

Keywords: Backsliding, Church, Discipleship, Growth, Reclaiming, Retention, Small Group, West Congo Field

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1. Introduction

According to Burgess et al. (1988), small groups are defined as units of people between three and fifteen individuals established to perform certain tasks.

On a religious level, small groups create healthy and vibrant churches. Church activities are shared and done according to skills the members have – preaching, ushering, teaching, passion for serving, singing, praying, healing, among others. These practices bring the church members together and make them work as teams towards spreading the word of God (GC, 2010).

Generally, small group functions can be classified as relational-oriented and task-oriented. Meaning that they might be related in terms of sharing community outreach programs, same social media forums, resource mobilization to support their colleagues financially, morally, spiritually, or relief supplies to those who are bereaved, lack accommodation, medical access, tuition fees, or church construction support(Hergie, 2011; University of Minnesota, 2016).

According to Faithlifeministries (2015), small groups are places where relational values are cultivated. These are values such as loving one another (John 13:24), being

devoted to one another (Rom.15:7), accepting one another (Rom.15:7), serving one another in love (Galatians5:13), supporting each other (Eph.4:2), being kind and compassionate to each other, forgiving one another (Eph.4:32), teaching and admonishing one another (Col. 3:16), encouraging and edifying each other (1 Thess. 5:15), encouraging each other to love and good deeds(Heb.10: 24), praying for one another (James 5:16), ...All small groups need common spiritual values upward (Matt.22:36-38), inward (Matt.22:39), outward(Matt.28:19),and forward(Matt.28:20).

On the African continent, the Africa Seventh-day Adventist Study Group (ASDASG) conducted, between April and August 2023 a comprehensive study to understand the dynamics between Evangelism Strategies, Conversion Patterns, and Membership Retention in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Sub-Saharan Africa. Among the findings of this study, ASDASG (2024) argues that 25.20 % of the surveyed churches about small group ministry maintain that they are indicating a commitment to fostering a sense of community and support among new converts. These small groups can provide an intimate and nurturing environment for spiritual growth.

Locally, in WCF, church members are not formed in small groups in most local churches as recommended by White (1946). So, they minister to their fellow church members and also non-church members about the meaning of the life. This research aims, through the literature review on small group ministry to address these gaps which will have the effect of reducing considerably the rate of church member's backsliding and reclamation of backsliders in this Field.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Small-Group Ministry in The Old Testament

The principles of small groups' ministries started at the creation and can be traced to the first verse in the Old Testament, Gen. 1:1 when God established the family unit system that consisted of man and woman-Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The word for God in the original language is plural, which includes more than one Person involved in creation (GC, 2010; Kurt, W., J., 2008).

Gen. 1: 27 and 2:18 let see that Adam and Eve were created as social creatures given that humans need each other socially, that is to say, living in groups and fulfilling basic needs. They are a small community in relationship to their Creator who gave them the task to do (Gen.2:15) and told them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen.1:28). Through this small community from the creation, several key principles of group life are highlighted. On this subject, Kurt (2008) argues that a small group is a minimum of three individuals-two humans and God. They interact and do things together.

They desire for others to join their group and add to their social and spiritual development.

Another example of small group ministry is one that shows the important leadership roles they played. Without mentioning women and children, the church in the wilderness was comprised of 603,550 men according to Exodus38:26. In Exodus 18: 21-23, Moses received instructions from Jethro to divide the people in to the groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. This, because Moses alone could not bear problems, burdens and complaints of the peoples (Deut. 1:12).

2.2 Small Group Ministry in the New Testament

In the New Testament, small group ministry has two elements namely, the social element, followed by the outreach and church element.

About social element, the church was begun with small groups. From Mth.4:18-22; Luke 6:13-16, Jesus choose twelve disciples, he taught them to be humble and work harmoniously together under the Holy Spirit's guidance (Matt.18:1-5; Luke 22:24-30). Then, to meet with people, Jesus used home based small groups. In his ministry, Jesus saw that the creation of small groups was needed for his spiritual mission to succeed. After Jesus' ascension to heaven, the book of Acts records that when His disciples received the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-8), they were together in the house.

Concerning outreach and church growth element, the disciples called by Jesus to follow Him and be fishers according to Matt. 4:19. Jesus worked with this small group of twelve (Matt. 10:2-4) who receive the Great Commission of preaching the gospel to the whole world. After, Jesus called seventy and he sent them to witness (Luke 10:1). This small group ministry strategy brought a big impact in the work of witnessing house to house. This impact on the growth of the church is visible through the following passages: 120 disciples gathered in the upper room(Acts 1:15); 3000 new converts(Acts 2:41, 42), 5000 men(Acts 4:4), more and more or multitudes(Acts 5:14), increasing (Acts 6:1,7), grow in numbers(Acts 9: 31), church planting was taking place(Acts 16:5) and many thousands of Jews(Acts 21:20).

2.3 Paul's Ministry

Paul also and his team, including Barnabas and John Mark, used small group ministry as strategy. Paul and Barnabas were ordained and sent by the early Christian church to preach (Acts 13:1-3). In Acts12:12, the record of Luke is that the Christians believers met in the house called, house of faith (Gal. 6:10). Examples of house churches are legion in the New Testament. This is the case of: Paul teaching and preaching in public and house to house (Acts5:42; 20:20), churches in the house of Mary the mother of John and Mark (Acts 12:12), Priscilla

and Aquila (Rom.16: 3-5; 1 Cor.16:19), Philemon (Phil.2), Nymphas (Col.4:15) ...

Paul's warning to the church leaders of Ephesus shows how he cared for converts, to keep them from backsliding (Acts 20:28-31). Throughout paulinian Epistles, Paul's strategy to retain believers faithful to Jesus is found in different activities such as encouragement of fellowship in house or small groups (Rom.6:5), commitment in personal pastoral care to church members (Col.1:24-2:5) ...

In view of this experience in the early church, it should be noted that the church grew from a small group to multitudes. Hence, if the small group ministry is well organized today while following Christ's method of seeking and saving the people, new church members will be retained and church growth will be rapid.

2.3 E.G. White on Small Group Ministry

Forming small group companies was a very important idea for the church (White, 1970). According to her (1952), this method was to encourage group members to meet together for success. She argues also that large churches should form small companies to be easy to work not only for the members but also for those who are unbelievers.

Social and Spiritual Care

As noted above, small groups play an important role in allowing members, as social beings, to meet and interact with each other. It was a place to edify them by exchanging thoughts and feelings and to helping them not only to gather strength and light, but also to encourage them becoming acquainted one another's hopes and inspirations (White, 1948).

Outreach Element

One of the important elements in the church for reaching people with the message of hope is evangelism. On this aspect, White (1910) recommends that the church should form companies of workers organized and diligently trained to labor in the Cities. They should labor two by two, to reach the people and from time to time all should meet, not only to share their experiences, but also to pray and to plan how to reach the people in a quick manner, if possible, redeeming the time.

This way of working together brings not only a sense of unity but also acceptance and encouragement (White, E., G., 1952).

Nurture and Retention

Referring to Paul in Thessalonica, she (1946) argues that he used to meet with small groups comprising with men and women who loved Jesus, for worship and nurture. He took time to teach them how to connect with their

Creator, prayed for them from evil and help them to be earnest, active missionaries. Thus, she (1970) stipulated that it will help them to be rooted and grounded in the truth, and established them against the deceptive error.

2.4 Small-Group in West Congo Field

The West Congo Field, formerly called West-Zaire Field, where the study is done is one of 5 Fields of the West Congo Union Mission (WCUM) and includes four of twenty-six provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, namely: Kwango, Kwilu, Mayi - Ndombe, and Kinshasa. This Field includes 134 locales churches and companies, and 33314 church members (2024 WKF Statistical Report). Apart from Sabbath School, small groups where church members are grouped during the Sabbath school and Bible study lessons, small group ministry is almost nonexistent. Given the high rate of backsliding, the researcher came up with the small group ministry as a strategy to address not only the issue of backsliding but also that of nonexistence of small group ministry itself. In an effort to draw members' attention to the high rate of member loss and the importance of small group ministry for member retention and backslider reclamation, a training series was held in four selected churches in the year 2024.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This research used the methodology of program development through which the researcher determines the need for a program or intervention, establishes its theoretical basis, sets its objectives, designs it, implements it, and evaluates the results (Nancy Vyhmeister, 2008). This study was based on the following steps: The theological foundation on small group ministry, the writings of Ellen G White and various literatures reviewed that have prepared the grounds for the implementation of this program. The period taken for this project was January 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024.

To alert church members to the phenomenon of church backsliding, the analysis of the statistical report of their respective churches was carried out with them from the first contact on Sabbath after divine service. This analysis successively took place on Sabbaths April 6, 2024 (Gombe SDAC), April 13, 2024 (Kasangulu SDAC), April 20, 2024 (Lemba SDAC) and April 27, 2024 (UNIKIN SDAC).

The training was conducted in the four venues namely: Gombe SDA church, Kasangulu SDAC, Lemba SDA church, and UNIKIN SDA church. Those who attended were church elders as trainers of trainees, church board members and some Church members. The training included four topics presented over four weekends for all selected churches, in June 2024. From July 2024, activities in small groups have been effective.

The formation of small groups for discipleship was done taking into account the physical and active membership. And this, because a large number on record does not correspond with the physical and active membership could be misleading regarding the numerical strength of the church and the spread of its membership misrepresenting mission accomplishment. Similarly, the mission progress of a church may be under reported where the physical and active membership is more than the book membership (Angela and Samson, 2015)

3.2 Sample and sampling

Four churches with a total membership standing at 4,148 were selected. This membership is distributed as follows: UNIKIN (1,198), Kasangulu (866), Gombe (601), and Lemba (1,483). Backsliders, board committee members and church members were the participants for this study. About surveys on the factors associated with backsliding, two hundred backsliders were selected but only one hundred and seventy-five participated willingly. These backsliders were selected based on their convenience and availability. Concerning focus group discussion, 48 church committee members including two elders, one deacon, one deaconess, two youth leaders; two women leaders, two Sabbath school leaders and two personal Ministry leaders from each of the four selected churches for the focus group discussions.

It is the nonprobability sample that was used although it is less desirable (John 2018). The choice of this sample is like that of backsliders, based on convenience and availability of respondents.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Apart from the secondary data sources composed of biblical sources in both OT and NT, other authors and Spirit of Prophecy, some of which were retrieved from science database, others were from WCF archived reports, surveys and focus group discussions. It was based on the research questions that the data were collected. Following are the research questions:

1. What are the biblical Small Group ministries and how can they reduce the rate of church members backsliding and reclaim backsliders in WCF?
2. What is the Statistical Report on membership growth and losses in WCF?
3. What are the focus group discussion findings?
4. What are the outcomes of the strategy?

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data from various sources, namely, literature review, WCF, questionnaires, focus group discussion, and organized small groups have been arranged, sorted, put together, classified appropriately according to each research question with the aim of

reducing considerably the high rate of backsliding and reclaiming some backsliders to the said Field.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The collection of field data was preceded by permission from both the Adventist University of Africa's Research Ethics Committee and the WCF administration. Before participants agreed, they were informed about the purpose, procedures, and duration of research, risk, benefits, and how confidentiality will be maintained. The 200 questionnaires were sent to the selected churches through their leaders, and the collected data were returned to the researcher through the same channel. In the last quarter of 2023, each member of the board committee of the churches selected for the research was asked to identify at least two backsliders who could voluntarily respond to the questionnaire. With the backslider list ready, the assistant researchers invited the backsliders to come and worship together on the Sabbath. After the divine service, introductions and rationale of research, singing the consent form, and the explanation of the project, the backsliders were invited to answer the questionnaire. For those who were not available to respond to the Sabbath invitation, the questionnaire was given to them, and they responded from their homes. The complete questionnaire was enveloped and transferred to the researcher by the assistant researchers. The data were sorted out, prepared for editing, coded, and entered into the Statistical Program for Social Scientist Program with the aim of figuring out the reliability of the tool. The factors associated with the backsliding of church members in WCF, which were highlighted after the data analysis, served as a basis for the focus group discussion and the implementation of the strategy for retention of members and reclaiming of backsliders.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, results and discussion are addressed according to the research questions.

4.1 Research Question 1: What are the biblical Small Group ministries and how can they reduce the rate of church members backsliding and reclaim backsliders in WCF?

To address this question, WCF needs to apply OT and NT small group ministry strategy as did God, Moses, Jesus, and Paul's team. This is also true given the advantages that this small group ministry offers, namely: loving one another (John 13:34-35), accepting one another, (Rom.15:7), supporting each other (1Thes.5:15), teaching and admonishing one another (Col.3:16) ...

Given that humans need each other socially or living in groups and fulfilling basic needs (Kurt, 2008) as was the case of Adam and Eve who were created as social creatures (Gen.1:27; 2:18), similarly, in WCF today, new church members need this relationship for their retention.

Just as Moses, as leader, was unable to bear the problems, burdens, and complaints of the people (Ex.18:17, 18; Deut.1:12), WCF pastors are also ministering to the church with little assistance. This is practically impossible for them alone to meet the needs of their church members and therefore retain them all. This is why it is important to involve all members by forming small groups. This will help strengthen them from backsliding. Because Moses did it (Ex.18:21-23, 26), it is practical, necessary and possible to organize a church in small groups in WCF by pastors and lay members.

Since the small group ministry strategy used by Jesus Himself, his disciples, and Paul's team brought a big

impact on membership retention and rapid church growth, if applied in WCF, the backsliding rate will be significantly reduced.

So, in view of the above, small group ministry strategy for reducing backsliding and reclaiming backsliders is biblically founded and it was a God initiated plan (Stark & Wieland, 2024). This strategy being applied, the impact would be retaining and integrating new adherents into the church's life and connecting church members and motivating them to work together to accomplish small group goals (Otieno, 2014).

4.2 Research Question 2: What is the Statistical Report on membership growth and losses in WCF?

The table below shows the membership gains and losses from 2019 to 2024

Table 11: Membership Gains and Losses - 2019-2024

Years	Gains		Losses		Percentage Growth
	Members on Jan 1	Baptisms Profession of faith Transfers in	Transfers out Dropped Missing Death	Members On Dec 31	
Gombe SDA Church					
2019	456	20	23	453	-0,6%
2020	453	91	8	536	+18%
2021	536	53	29	560	+4%
2022	560	53	29	584	+4%
2023	584	50	33	601	+3%
		267	122		
KASANGULU SDA Church					
2019	806	22	14	814	-1%
2020	814	40	11	843	+3%
2021	843	23	8	858	+2%
2022	858	18	15	861	-0,3%
2023	861	19	14	866	-1%
		122	62		
Lemba SDA Church 2019-2023					
2019	1376	41	23	1394	+1%
2020	1394	52	7	1439	+3%
2021	1439	39	18	1460	+1%
2022	1460	37	31	1466	-0,4%
2023	1466	34	17	1483	+1%
		203	96		
UNIKIN SDA Church 2019-2023					
2019	932	85	49	968	+4%
2020	968	152	19	1101	+12%
2021	1101	82	36	1147	+4%
2022	1147	73	51	1169	+2%
2023	1169	81	52	1198	+2%
		473	207		

Source: 2019-2023 WCF secretariat stational reports

Table 1 shows that Gombe church, at the end of 2023, had a total of 601 members with an annual average of 53 people. The increase was due to new baptisms,

profession of faith and transfers of believers. Comparing the gains and losses of Church members, this statistical report reveals that the loss rate is high, thus justifying a

low percentage of growth whose varies between – 0, 6% (2019) and 18% (2020). The negative rate recorded in 2019 was due to an unethical crisis caused by a leader who, unilaterally, without an action from board committee or to inform his fellow officers, signed two contracts with two different societies to build on the parcel of the church. He used parallel seal, touched money not versed on the account of the organization. When the suspicions began, he used the lie. And when the facts were confirmed, the church experienced an unprecedented crisis within the Union territory and particularly in the city where the headquarters of the Union is located as well as one of West Congo Field.

In the statistical report at the end of 2023 (table 1), Kasangulu church was reported to have 866 church members. During the period from 2019 – 2023, the average growth recorded is around 24 members. The

dropouts and missing are a high percentage when comparing the gains and losses of church members. The rate of growth is low (From – 0, 3 % to +3%) in this church.

Concerning Lemba church, table 1 shows that at the end of 2023, the membership was around 1483 with an annual average growth of 40 members. The loss rate is also high with a low percentage of growth which varies between -0, 4 % and +3%. Finally, the table shows that UNIKIN church had total membership of 1198 at the end of 2023 with a growth rate varying between +2% and + 12% and the annual average growth of 95 persons. The table below shows the membership gains and losses from 2019 to 2023

The table shows the membership gains and losses in West Congo Field.

Table 2: Membership Gains and Losses in WCF (Gombe, Kasangulu, Lemba, and UNIKIN) 2019-2023

Gains			Losses		
Years	Members on Jan 1	Baptisms Profession of faith Transfers in	Transfers out Dropped Missing Death	Members On Dec 31	Percentage Growth
2019	3570	168	109	3629	+2%
2020	3629	335	45	3919	+7%
2021	3919	197	91	4025	+3%
2022	4025	181	126	4080	+1%
2023	4080	184	116	4148	+2%
		1065	487		

Source: 2019-2023 WCF secretariat statistical reports

Taken together in table 2 these selected churches give us the image of membership gains and losses in West Congo Field. From this statistical report for the years 2019 to 2023, these churches have grown by 1065 members, an average of 213 persons per year. In establishing the difference between church member’s gains and losses, the dropouts and missing are a high percentage. Hence, a low percentage of growth ranging from +1% in 2022 and to + 7% in 2020.

Based on these five years about membership growth and losses in West – Congo Field, it should be noted that the highest growth rate over the five years taken into account is that of 2020. During the year during which there was a crisis due to Covid 19; but also a miracle of grace with regard to the mission despite the confinement. Each house had become a small group where neighbors were invited to worship together. After confinement, several souls were baptized and preserved. During this period of crisis, the church in West Congo Field experienced what Tim (MinistryMagazine.org, 2020) wrote about the great opportunity. He argues that, so, what of this economic winter? The key takeaway for Christians is not so much a Kondratieff Winter. Pother, history shows us that these economic winters are really harvest seasons for God. These are times when worried people are ready to listen to a message of hope. In such times, struggling,

oppressed human beings are responsive to compassion and grace. This is not only a time when harvest is plentiful in a world looking for answers but also an opportunity to finish the Great commission given us by Christ Jesus.

In summary, it should be noted, after comparing the statistical report with the reality experienced on the ground that the number on record does not correspond with physical and active membership. This is due to the irregularity of membership audit. These findings support Trim (2015) who argues that church has suffered from “statistical illusion”.

4.3 Research Question 3: What are the focus group discussion findings?

In total, four focus groups for discussion were formed for this study. The first two group discussions took place at UNIKIN church on June 12, 2024(UNIKIN and Lemba. The second two group discussions took place at Gombe church on June 13, 2024 (Gombe and Kasangulu). The discussion focused on the following questions:

1. What can the church do before baptism so that the newly baptized stay in the church?

2. What can the church do after baptism so that the newly baptized stay in the church?
3. What should the church do to reclaim backsliders?

Below are the recorded responses from different focus group discussions:

From the first question:

- a. Let former members not compromise their faith by making unrealizable promises in order to win them;
- b. Ground them properly in church doctrines by making them disciples;
- c. Familiarize them with Adventist doctrines resulting in proper nurture;
- d. Make a baptismal manual and suitable and spirit filled available;
- e. For candidates to be thoroughly grounded, the duration of their preparation for baptism must be long enough;
- f. That those in charge of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL) assist students and who do not have Sabbath free to obtain it.
- g. Leave them the free choice to be baptized by persuading them rather than forcing them.
- h. Former members should establish a solid friendship with the candidates before their baptism;
- i. Prepare every candidate adequately before his or her baptism, meaning that there should be evidence of genuine conversion, thorough instruction in all the major teachings of the church, and regular support of the church programme;

From second question:

- a. For the church, need of regular visitation by the pastor and mature members should be priority;
- b. At any time they are absent or otherwise, concern should be shown by the church;
- c. The number and quality of social programs should be improved;
- d. Integrate the newly baptized members into the church programme and life through small groups and youth ministry without pushing them into taking on responsibilities which they cannot feel ready for;
- e. Give more opportunity for church members to share their testimonies and experiences in church meetings for the edification of new converts;
- f. Emphasize small group's ministry that provide opportunities for members not only to grow in Christ but also to serve others and express faith through their skills an interest;
- g. Integrate them by stabling them in the faith, meaning to help them to study the scriptures for themselves;

- h. Those who have a low of education must be assisted by the church;
- i. Need of effective Bible studies;
- j. For not only visitors but also newly baptized or lonely members, to have a restored group to care for lunch;
- k. Follow – up the appeal voted by the general Conference of Seventh – day Adventist Executive committee on conserving membership Gains document;
- l. Encourage wide dissemination of the above call to both church leaders and local congregations.
- m. Need of fellow- up programs;
- n. Put the name of every newly baptized member in some Sabbath school class. That the teacher of Sabbath school class be responsible to contact those who do not attend or who attend irregularly;
- o. When a member changes the location, Ray the secretariat alert the church in his new area. The contact should be made as soon as possible.
- p. Multiply small groups;
- q. Improve efforts in caring and nurturing newly baptized members into discipleship path.

From third question:

- a. Follow the specific counsel of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 18: 14 – 20 white working for backsliders;
- b. For those who longer do not attend or support the church, the congregation must think of.
- c. Since the majority of backsliders are young people, organize evangelism weekends and special youth prayer weeks where backsliders will be invited;
- d. Send subscriptions of church magazines to the identified backsliders;
- e. Create a visiting team which will receive the names of the backsliders;
- f. Meet their personal difficulties and help at the point of private causes of backsliding;
- g. To support the pastor in workings for missing members forming a special reclamation team proves beneficial;
- h. Organize an intercession prayer for backsliders.

4.4 Research Question 4: What are the outcomes of the strategy?

The creation of new small groups for discipleship and the revitalization of existing ones have produced remarkable effects.

Church Attendance

Table below shows the church attendance

Table 3. Church Attendance

Department/Activity	Before	After	Observation
Gombe Church			
Church choir	81	105	Increase
Bible study	100	150	Increase
Mid-week prayer	145	302	Increase
Women's ministries	27	68	Increase
Path finder meetings	65	111	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath open	73	94	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath close	142	188	Increase
Divine service	478	580	Increase
Kasangulu Church			
Church choir	49	61	Increase
Bible study	61	92	Increase
Mid-week prayer	92	180	Increase
Women's ministries	19	42	Increase
Path finder meetings	39	73	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath open	42	40	Decrease
Vesper-Sabbath close	88	121	Increase
Divine service	222	330	Increase
Lemba Church			
Church choir	58	72	Increase
Bible study	75	93	Increase
Mid-week prayer	107	209	Increase
Women's ministries	28	51	Increase
Path finder meetings	52	106	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath open	54	70	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath close	100	135	Increase
Divine service	399	480	Increase
UNIKIN Church			
Church choir	63	96	Increase
Bible study	79	100	Increase
Mid-week prayer	112	226	Increase
Women's ministries	47	59	Increase
Path finder meetings	58	79	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath open	61	117	Increase
Vesper-Sabbath close	112	140	Increase
Divine service	411	500	Increase

Source: Field Data, January 2025

Tables 3 reveals a notable growth in the participation of members in the various activities of the church during the week and the Sabbath day as never before the

project, except at Kasangulu church where there was a slight decline with regard to vesper Sabbath opening.

The table shows the west Congo Field church attendance.

Table 4: WCF Church Attendance, Gombe, Kasangulu, Lemba and UNIKIN

Department/ activity	Before	After	Observation
Church choir	251	334	+33%
Bible study	282	435	+54%
Mid-week prayer	456	917	+101%
Women's ministries	121	220	+81%
Path finder meetings	214	369	+72%
Vesper-Sabbath open	230	321	+40%
Vesper-Sabbath close	442	584	+32%
Divine service	1510	1741	+15%

Source: Field Data, January 2025

Table 4 shows the summary of church attendance for the four select churches. It shows the increase in all activities. This increase varies between 15% for the divine service a 101% for mid – week prayers. The small

increase in divine service compared to other activities is justified by the fact that there was no English week in the Democratic Republic of Congo and given that the population is young (60%) certain Adventist students

attending public institutions and certain Adventist workers in the public sector who were not spiritually mature were forced to profane the Sabbath of the lord. But since August 1, 2024, there was been an English week in public Administration following a presidential decree. Which will have a positive effect on certain backsliders and the retention of certain church members.

Believers and Small Groups

The table shows the number of selected churches believers and small groups.

Table 5: Number of Selected Churches Believers and Small Groups

Churches	2023		2024		Increase or Decrease
	Number of small groups	Real number of believers	Number of small groups	Real number of believers	
Gombe	20	534	50	601	Increase
Kasangulu	7	366	30	371	Increase
Lemba	13	466	40	483	Increase
UNIKIN	18	363	44	522	Increase
	58	1729	164	1,977	

Source: Field Data, January 2025

Table 5 clearly shows that there has been an increase in small groups compared to the year 2023. It goes from 58 to 164 in 2024. It should also be noted that not all the small groups of 2023 were operational.

Sidewalk Evangelism

The table below shows the sidewalk evangelism from 2023 to 2024.

Table : Sidewalk Evangelism, 2023 – 2024

	2023	2024	Increase or decrease
Number of churches that participated	3	4	Increase
Number of active SWE sites	9	17	Increase
Number of lay people active on the sidewalks	35	171	Increase
Number of invitations issued	1018	2302	Increase
Number of registered students	438	1135	Increase
Number of bible studies given	675	1450	Increase
Number of diplomas awarded	27	54	Increase
Number of baptisms carried out	23	43	Increase
Number of Bible distributed	27	54	Increase
Number of active Bible workers	3	8	Increase

Source: Field Data, January 2025

Table 6 shows that in 2023, three out of four churches, expect that of Kasangulu, were involved in the SWE project. The comparison between 2023 and 2024 reveals a considerable increase in 2024 and this reflects all variables.

Backsliders Reclaimed

The table below shows the backsliders reclaimed in 2024.

Table 7:2. Backsliders reclaimed, 2024

Churches	Number of backslides identified	Number of backsliders reclaimed	Percentage
Gombe	50	11	22%
Kasangulu	40	6	15%
Lemba	50	7	14%
UNIKIN	60	13	21%
Total	200	37	17%

Source: field Data, January 2025

Two hundred backsliders who were identifies by church members and who were willing to respond to the survey questionnaire were visited regularly and invited to various program for their reclaiming. These were: special Sabbath week of prayer, public evangelism campaign, registration for VOP or sidewalk evangelism, etc.

although not all the backsliders have get returned to the church, a number of very fruitful contacts have been made during the project. Table 7 shows that out of 200 identified backsliders, 37 representing 17% came back home during the implementation of the strategy and most

of them are young students and some workers attending public institutions without the free Sabbath.

Membership gains and losses in WCF, 2023-2024

The table shows the membership gains and losses in West Congo Field from 2023 to 2024.

Table 8: Membership Gains and Losses in West Congo Field, 2023 – 2024

Churches	Gains			Losses		Percentage Growth
	Years	Members on Jan 1	Baptisms Profession of faith Transfers in	Transfers out Dropped Missing Deaths	Members On Dec 31	
Gombe	2023	584	50	33	601	+3%
	2024	601	105	13	693	+13%
Kasangulu	2023	861	19	14	866	-1%
	2024	866	39	5	939	+8%
Lemba	2023	1466	34	17	1483	+1%
	2024	1483	53	28	1508	+2%
UNIKIN	2023	1169	81	52	1198	+2%
	2024	1198	159	26	1331	+10%
Total	2023	4080	184	116	4148	+2%
	2024	4148	356	72	4432	+6%

Source: Field Data, 2025

In table 8, comparison of gains and losses between 2023, before the implementation of the strategy, and 2024 after implementation shows that there was an increase in gains and a significant reduction in losses. While in 2023 the gain was of the order of 184 members with a loss of 116 members, thus reducing the average growth rate to 2%; in contrary, the gain was 356 and the loss of 62 members, an average growth of 11%.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

In general, the results of the strategy implementation are showing up an improvement in member retention rates and the recovery of backsliders in GOMBE, KASANGULU, LEMBA, and UNIKIN churches (WCF). Over the course of these twelve months, the project has influenced the lives of church members, played a significant role in changing their attitudes, improved the level of close fellowship among church members, a great awareness of the church's responsibilities towards backsliders, growth of church attendance, return of some backsliders, and fostered a feeling of warmth in church services.

This considerable increase in membership participation in various church activities such as weekday activities and divine service has been the result of the creation and revitalization of the small group ministry. These success and effectiveness of the strategy developed, implemented, and evaluated were testified also by both church members and church elders.

5.2 Recommendations

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, started from the theological foundation, the literature review, the findings from questionnaires and focus group discussion, the implementation of interventions, the writer recommends to churches as well as to West Congo Field the following:

1. To manage the lack of correspondence between recorded and physical and active membership, the researcher recommends that West Congo Field administrators prioritize regular membership audits in all churches;
2. To take at least a period of one year before implementation for the preparation and revitalization of the church in order to effectively support the project;
3. To strengthen the program, the use of small groups for prayers, discussions, and fellowship will be helpful.
4. About reclamation of backsliders, before the visitation phase of the project begins, old church members should be trained for them to be ready to contact the backsliders. It will also be better to check with church members before they visit backsliders on why they think these people left the church.
5. It would be helpful if a similar project were conducted by others over a longer period of time. This would not only provide a greater opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of a project of such magnitude but also much could be done to more fully deduce the significance of the results obtained in the said project. For instance, a follow-up study might concentrate on showing the significance of every single major factor in backsliding.

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