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Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN

Top administrators, evangelists and Ministerial secretaries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are reprioritizing the role of God's spirit and simple Bible truths in public evangelism.

Ernestine Finley reminds church evangelists and Ministerial secretaries that baptism is just the beginning. Her "spiritual friendship plan" matches new believers with existing church members who share similar interests and backgrounds. [photo: Ansel Oliver]

Rather than complicating the gospel or endlessly repackaging it, leaders are advocating a simpler approach.
They say preaching basic Bible truths is the most compelling way to present the Adventist hope.

This approach requires admitting one's own vulnerability, said Shawn Boonstra, associate director for the Ministerial Association of the church's North American Division. "The world is tired of religious know-it-alls," he said, citing a New Testament story in which the apostle Paul identifies with his audience to make a point.

"It's OK to be a sinner saved by Christ. If your audience doesn't see that you need Jesus, they'll never listen to your message," Boonstra told members of the world church's Evangelism Symposium last week.

The symposium is a broadening of the church's Council on Evangelism and Witness to include more regional evangelists and Ministerial secretaries in the discussion. About 40 leaders from each of the church's 13 divisions met at Adventist world headquarters November 28 to 30 to share resources, exchange ideas, address challenges to evangelism and pray together.

"Jesus' mission is to seek and save everyone who is lost, so the number one priority of the church should be to win people to Jesus," said Jerry Page, secretary of the world church's Ministerial Association.

In an increasingly secular world, evangelists can no longer assume their audience is either familiar with Christian principles or Biblically literate, said veteran Adventist evangelist Mark Finley.

"I would say my preaching has become more Christ-centered, more biblically basic, and certainly ministering more to the felt needs of people," Finley told ANN during a symposium break.

This message of simplicity seemed to resonate with church leaders and evangelists who attended.

"I think maybe we'll need to accept the idea of just submitting ourselves to the Lord and just preach the simple gospel truth and leave the rest to Him. I think we need to get out of this trap of always thinking we must invent something new or sophisticated, and just use the Bible," said Mikhael Kaminskiy, director of the Office of Assessment for the church's Euro-Asia Division.

Church leaders said a clear, authentic message of truth can even connect with world's growing postmodern population -- a group of 1.8 billion people worldwide, according to Miroslav Pujic, communication director for the church's Trans-European Division.

"We are realizing that Jesus' message is exactly what this generation is looking for -- the real truth, transparency and an alternative to the systems and churches they don't trust in," said Robert Costa, an associate secretary for the world church's Ministerial Association.

Fundamentally, postmodernism is despair and disenchantment with humanity's failed attempts to explain, order and better the world through logic and reason, Boonstra said. "Instead of understanding, logic and reason brought some of history's worst disasters -- two world wars, genocide, religious scandal and economic crisis."

Postmoderns are seeking an authentic, meaningful answer to today's unsettled world, Boonstra said. The Adventist truth provides a compelling one, he added. The church's understanding of history and interpretation of the Bible "can offer clarity and set the table for understanding," he said.

"God has put a longing for eternity in the human heart. Somewhere inside they know that they were not meant to be severed from their Creator. They might come at it from a different frame of reference, but it's there," Boonstra said.
Adventist evangelism should focus on people aware of this void, Boonstra said, not those who refuse to "budge spiritually." A close reading of the Bible indicates that there were "no cold conversions in the New Testament," he said.

"The disciples watched for interested hearers, which is a lot different than trying to interest hearers," he said.

This approach requires "doing a lot more homework and a lot more listening," but it's the only method of evangelism modeled in the Bible, Boonstra said. Even during Pentecost, the outpouring of God's spirit on the early Apostolic church, the Bible says "devout men from every nation" (Acts 2:5) were converted. "God has already been there every time. God wakes up the human heart, and then sends us," he said.

A symposium presentation by Ernestine Finley reminded church leaders what to do after they've welcomed new believers to their congregations. Her "spiritual friendship plan" for nurturing fledgling Adventists connected with Johnny and Poppy Lubis from the church's Southern Asia-Pacific Division. "Sometimes we do evangelism and 500 come in, but 500 more go out the back door," Poppy said.

As the church embraces a focus on urban evangelism, nurture will be crucial in ministry to large cities in Indonesia, such as Jakarta, Johnny said.

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**A young pastor's quick-meet ministry to airplane passengers**

*They have chaplains at the airport?; the hottest book in the chapel*

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Ansel Oliver/ANN

Every Thursday morning, Jose A. Barrientos Jr. leaves his home shortly after 5 a.m. and drives to Washington Dulles International Airport to minister to his flock for several hours.

Instead of church members in pews, his congregants are scurrying commuters and employees in one of the nation's largest international airports.

Jose Barrientos, a volunteer chaplain at Washington Dulles International Airport, helps the Ribeiro family find a shuttle to a nearby mall during their five-hour layover between Rio de Janeiro and Orlando. Barrientos assists Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking passengers with practical support and sometimes prays with those who may need spiritual comfort. [photos: Ansel Oliver]

Barrientos is a Seventh-day Adventist minister and one of 18 assistant chaplains at the busy hub. Not only is he the youngest, he's also the only Hispanic chaplain there, which makes him to go-to guy in offering assistance to Spanish-, Portuguese-, and Italian-speaking passengers, as well as the maintenance staff, the large majority of
whom are Hispanic.

He and other chaplains offer support by roaming the terminals looking for people to assist with directions, calming down passengers at baggage claim who haven't received their luggage, or reading faces to find those who might need solace. Barrientos also takes a turn once a month leading the Wednesday evening Protestant service held at the inter-faith chapel in the international terminal.

His full-time job is youth pastor at Community Praise Center Adventist Church in nearby Alexandria, but he volunteers several hours each week outside the church at Dulles.

Denominational leaders hope that more Adventist ministers serving as community chaplains at airports is an idea that will take flight.

"We favor more pastors extending their ministries into the community," said Gary Councell, director of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries, the denomination's ecclesiastical endorsing agency. "We only have influence when we mingle with people and spend time with them for their interests instead of our needs."

Adventist pastors who become endorsed by ACM serve in places such as corporations, fire and police departments, sporting events and cruise lines.

At airports, many people will talk to a chaplain just to share their good mood for a few minutes, while others are desperate for spiritual support, such as a woman who was sobbing during a chapel service after discovering her significant other was unfaithful. Still, some are seeking other things.

"Need help finding your gate?" Barrientos asked a man wandering toward a dead-end corridor loaded down with a large backpack, computer bag and neck pillow.

Barrientos is clergy, but also serves as a guide, restaurant critic, and a first-rate public relations representative. He brags up the architecture of newer terminals and boasts of upcoming renovations. Dulles airport is currently involved in the largest public transportation construction project in the nation.

"You'll love it. When it's done, you'll say, 'I want to travel more,'" he tells passengers.

Barrientos, left, helps a traveler find his gate on a recent early Thursday morning. Some days he meets with people in the airport chapel, while other days he walks several miles assisting passengers with directions.

Opened in 1962, Dulles is 26 miles from downtown Washington, D.C. and employs almost 30,000 people. Last year it served nearly 24 million passengers, according to its website.
"It's a huge, huge place," Barrientos said one recent morning while walking through the pre-dawn chill to the terminal. "Are you ready to do a lot of walking?"

His supervisor, Ralph Benson, wears a pedometer and estimates he walks five to nine miles each day on the job. An American Baptist, he frequently sees Barrientos on the job and requests his assistance in working with Spanish-only speakers.

"He's wonderful, everyone loves him," said Benson, who serves as director of ministry for The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, which owns both Dulles and Reagan National airports.

Barrientos has dark, spiky hair and wears a charcoal gray suit with a green tie. It's up to each chaplain how he or she wants to dress, he says, but he chooses formal apparel -- he needs all the cred he can get. He's 28 years old and has a cheery, young face and a slight build. Most Hispanics, he said, don't expect a minister to be young.

"But you're not old," a quizzical passenger on the underground train between terminals said to him in Spanish.

Passengers are often surprised that his job exists.

"I didn't even know airports had chaplains," said Betsy Buckner, who with her husband had flown all night after visiting friends in Argentina. They were looking for the Air France executive lounge during their five-hour stopover before a flight home to San Diego, California.

"Passengers are usually one of two extremes: people are either really, really happy or really sad," Barrientos said. Many passengers he meets are going to visit loved ones, while others have just lost loved ones.

Airport ministry is fast -- a chaplain must get to know someone quickly, and just as fast, let them go.

"It's easy for me. I like to make friends," he said after chatting up a security guard. "[My girlfriend] will tell you I talk too much."

When not talking with employees or leading passengers, Barrientos lets people know about the chapel and its services. Of the literature rack, he says the Adventist book he has to restock most often is El Camino a Cristo, the Spanish version of Steps to Christ, written by Adventist Church co-founder Ellen White. About 300 people visit the chapel every day.

The first airport chapel was established in 1951 at Boston Logan International Airport. It was a Catholic chapel named "Our Lady of the Airways." Now more than 140 airports worldwide have chapels, according to the International Association of Civil Aviation Chaplains, a non-profit organization.

Many airports began offering several denominational chapels, but the trend in recent decades is to offer one interfaith chapel, such as the one at Dulles, which offers services for Catholics, Muslims and Protestants.

Barrientos leads the 7 p.m. Protestant service the third Wednesday of each month.