

STRUCTURAL MODELS FOR WORLD MISSION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Many writers have discussed the internal and external missiological challenges of the times. David J. Bosch's magisterial work, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*,¹ traces paradigm shifts in mission through the centuries and suggests elements of an emerging postmodern paradigm. In *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*,² Philip Jenkins discusses the shift of Christianity's numerical center of gravity into the global South (Africa, Latin America, and Asia) and what it implies for mission. Lamin Sanneh addresses a provocative question in the title of his book, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*.³ Modernity,⁴ postmodernity,⁵ and globalization⁶ present particular challenges to Christian mission.

The factors mentioned above only begin to outline the context in which an effective paradigm for mission must function. Contemporary missiologists are more confident in outlining challenges than in making prescriptions for mission in the new century, for several reasons: First, as Bosch says, mission is always in a state of crisis or flux.⁷ This is because mission functions at the nexus of history, culture, and faith. Where the church is already established, mission seeks to retain a pure faith within the constantly evolving historical-cultural context. Where the church is being newly planted, the challenge is carrying a pure faith across the bridge between the missionary's context and the receivers' contexts.

Second, the global church has an unprecedented array of human and material resources and communication media to use. This abundance, with its diversity and complexity, presents a formidable strategic and logistical challenge.

¹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

²Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁴See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁵See Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁶See Malcolm Waters, *Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁷Bosch, 2.

Third, never have so many unevangelized peoples lived on the earth. In 1901, there were about 1.3 billion non-Christians, but that number swelled to approximately 4 billion by 2001. The proportion of Christians actually fell slightly in the last century, from 34.5 percent to 33.0 percent.⁸ This means that more cross-cultural Christian missionaries are needed than ever before, but the challenges missionaries face are in some ways greater than ever before.

Finally, forces actively opposed to Christian mission have developed unprecedented levels of sophistication. Hinduism and Islam stand ready and determined to block the spread of the gospel, yet the hearts of people yearn for the salvation and peace that only Jesus Christ can provide.

In view of these and many other challenges, the starting point is to reaffirm the ministry of cross-cultural missionaries as a permanent part of the mission paradigm. Roughly one third (2 billion) of the world's population lacks the presence of a local Christian congregation—of any denomination—from whom to hear the Good News. Problems with missionary service during the colonial era and the fast growth of Christianity outside of America have led some to think of missionary service as an anachronistic relic, but this conclusion is inaccurate.

Several working definitions will be helpful for what follows (see Figure 1).⁹

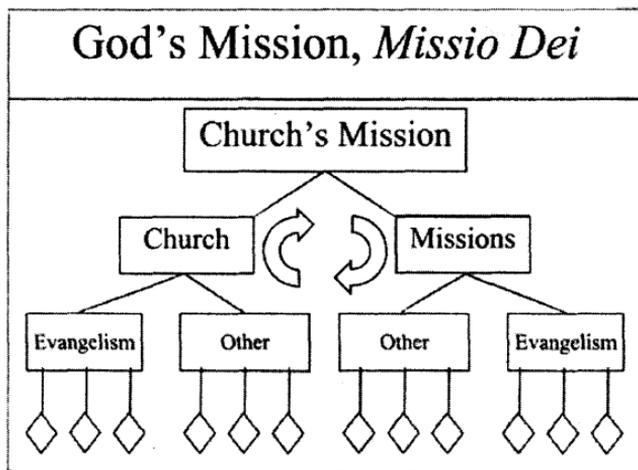


Figure 1.

“Mission” (singular) refers ultimately to God’s work to save lost humanity. God’s mission is larger than the church, although the church is his primary human

⁸Unless otherwise indicated, global statistics are taken from David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Trends* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001). Seventh-day Adventist statistics come from the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics <www.adventiststatistics.org>.

⁹Working definitions may not be all-inclusive or exhaustive.

agency. Because this article focuses on the work of the church, “mission” is used to refer to the whole work of the church. “Missions” (plural), as in “doing missions,” refers to the sending of people to minister in cultures other than their own and to the doing of cross-cultural ministry. Thus “mission” is the broader work of the church, while “missions” is the specific work of crossing cultural boundaries. A “missionary” is a person sent by the church to do cross-cultural missions.¹⁰ “Doing church” refers to the ministry of believers in local congregations within the communities where they live and work.¹¹ “Missiology” means the “theology of mission” or “the conscious, intentional, ongoing reflection on the doing of mission,”¹² the work I do as a “missiologist.”

Adventist Missionary Service in Historical Perspective

As the twentieth century dawned, the task of Adventist leadership was to lead some 75,000 members—83 percent of whom were in North America—in mission to about 2 billion people, 1.3 billion of whom were non-Christians. As leaders pondered this goal, they realized that the existing organizational structure was not able to accomplish it and went through the reorganization of 1901. By 2001, the world population had grown to 6 billion, about 4 billion of whom were non-Christians. There were 12 million Adventists in 2001, 92 percent of whom lived outside North America. Adventist membership grew 439 percent in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Projections for the year 2025 suggest an Adventist membership of about 50 million in a world of about 7.8 billion, of whom 5.2 billion will be non-Christians.¹³

The restructuring of 1901 prepared the Adventist Church for action. Presidents A. G. Daniells and W. A. Spicer were leaders of broad vision, who led dramatic new initiatives in mission.¹⁴ The church had enough human and material resources to make major advances, and was, in effect, a mission agency, with the work of missionaries handled at the very heart of the organization.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Adventist Church grew steadily in size and complexity. The organizational skeleton of 1901 was

¹⁰While every Christian is a “missionary” in a broad sense, this article focuses on a narrower meaning.

¹¹The boundary between “doing missions” and “doing church” can become a little “fuzzy” when multicultural congregations minister in multicultural and multireligion communities.

¹²A. Scott Moreau, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 633.

¹³Unpublished projections by Jonathan Brauer, September 2002, General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, ranging from 47 million to 52 million, depending on growth rate.

¹⁴See Bruce Lee Bauer, *Congregational and Mission Structures and How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Has Related to Them* (D.Miss. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1983).

“fleshed out” with the addition of new or enlarged features. The functions of areas such as publishing, education, youth ministry, and family life were handled by specialists in departments who were not responsible for general church administration. Missionary service, however, was located within the general administrative structure (the Secretariat), instead of in a specialized department. In 1990, the Office of Global Mission was established to develop strategy and make new initiatives among unreached people groups. Within their own territories, the world divisions placed workers among unreached peoples.

*Harmonizing Mission Theology, Structure,
Strategy, and Methodology*

Like most Christian groups, twentieth-century Adventists were so preoccupied with the practical realities of doing missions in the midst of two world wars, a global depression, a cold war, a shift from colonialism to political independence, and many other historical factors, that they tended to overlook the theological underpinnings of mission.¹⁵ However, the experience of the twentieth century and the fresh challenges of the twenty-first century have forced upon many denominations and groups the realization that they must work harder in bringing their theology, structure, strategy, and methodology for world mission into closer harmony. The global reach and cultural diversity of our own denomination make this harmonization an urgent need. Many denominations have more members than do Adventists, but only Roman Catholics function within a single global structure such as Adventists do.¹⁶ The range of Adventist cultural, economic, and educational diversity is vast, yet mission demands a high degree of unity.

The need for unity rests on twin imperatives, one practical in nature and the other theological. The practical imperative seeks unity for the sake of doing effective evangelism, or “finishing the work.” The theological imperative requires unity as part of the church’s core identity. It would not remain what it is if it were to become fragmented into separate national or regional organizations. Scripture demands a unity that is more than merely nominal—it must include spiritual unity of heart and functional unity of structure.

The relationship of structures for doing church and missions varies widely between denominations and groups. Structures invariably reflect particular theologies of church and mission, even if they are not fully articulated. Conversely, a group’s ecclesiology and missiology are invariably molded over the passage of time by its own structures. This being the case, it is vital that one’s theology of church and mission be clearly articulated and that structures be intentionally constructed to reflect theology. If the church is to retain the unity within diversity that it considers theologically and practically essential, it

¹⁵Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 19.

¹⁶Many Protestant denominations enjoy a global fellowship but operate within national or regional structures that are not globally linked.

dare not allow structure, strategy, and methodology to simply evolve in reaction to economic and political pressures, completely out of contact with theological reflection. Rather, it must accept the task of articulating and harmonizing all of the component parts of missiology.

Paul G. Hiebert, the renowned Mennonite anthropologist and missiologist, discusses two structural models used with variation by many different denominations.¹⁷ Hiebert's models, including his critique of them, are the starting point for this article's look at structures for church and missions.

Model 1: Missions Separate from Church

This first structural model is the most common among Protestant groups (see Figure 2).

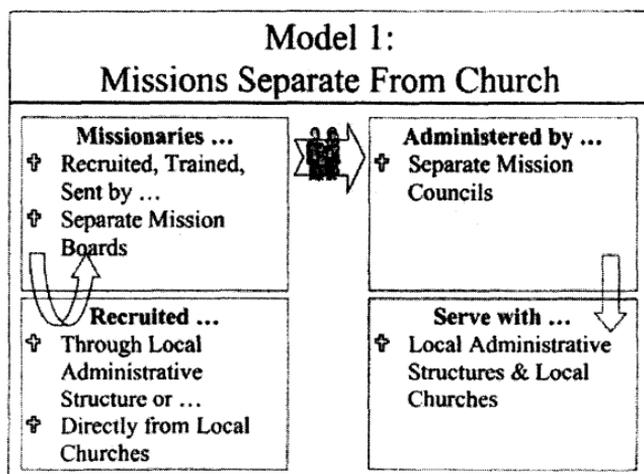


Figure 2.

Historically, this model was developed in the early nineteenth century by people such as William Carey, whose mission vision greatly exceeded that of the established denominations. Scholars argue about how mission-minded the Protestant Reformers were, but without question “the churches which resulted from their labors were not missionary churches in the modern sense of the word, and the theologians who followed them and claimed to be their true successors and interpreters did not advance the missionary idea and motivation.”¹⁸ Credit for the awakening of Protestantism to the mandate of the Great Commission belongs to the German Pietists.

The modern missionary society, such as Carey's Baptist Missionary Society, was a voluntary organization that depended on freewill support and involved lay

¹⁷Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 249-252.

¹⁸George W. Peters, “The Church in Missions,” *BSac*, 125/497 (1968): 46.

men and women, was often interdenominational, and was not linked to denominational structures. Andrew F. Walls says that "it arose because none of the classical patterns of church government, whether episcopal, presbyterian, congregational, or connexional had any machinery (in their late 18th century form anyway), to do the tasks for which missionary societies came into being."¹⁹

In this model, doing missions is seen as a separate activity from doing church. Mission boards are independent from local church or denominational structures. Mission boards rely on spontaneous donations in the "faith-mission" tradition or on congregational or denominational subsidies in a variety of combinations. They are frequently interdenominational and often serve congregationalist churches that lack resources to administer their missionaries serving abroad.

In the field, missionaries tend to emphasize church planting, moving to new areas when church plants are successful. Missionaries work with local churches, but may or may not be members or officers therein; and they are administered by separate mission councils that may or may not include local people. "Missions" is defined primarily as the evangelization of unreached peoples. Walls, who is positive in his assessment of the modern mission society, focuses on the institutional inertia and myopia that made it necessary.²⁰

Wall's model has advantages and strong points. It fosters a direct faith-response by members in support of specific missionaries and projects. People working in the organization have an undivided focus on missions that resists distraction. This approach fosters a strong connection between senders and missionaries that stimulates zeal and support for missions. It is well suited to specialized ministries such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and media ministries.

Given the key role of mission societies in the modern missionary movement, one might ask, Why argue with success? However, Peters points out three negative features:

First, it [the missionary society] left many of the larger churches passive and uninvolved in mission. Second, it set up a trade company type of mission administration and complex with the mission societies becoming autonomous agencies alongside autonomous church bodies, thus introducing a dichotomy on the home base. Third, it related the churches of the mission lands to a missionary society rather than to a mother or sister church of the sending countries.²¹

To partially restate Peters' objections, the weak points or disadvantages of separating church and missions can be summarized as follows: First, and perhaps most significantly, this model rests on a weak ecclesiology. Adventist ecclesiology defines the church as one organic global fellowship, which rules

¹⁹Andrew F. Walls, "Missionary Societies and the Fortunate Subversion of the Church," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3d ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 234.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Peters, 48.

out a type of church planting that establishes autonomous congregations or groups of congregations and then severs their relationship with the planters. If the church is God's primary agency for the salvation of humankind, placing missionaries within agencies that work at structural distance from the church, either at home or in the field, is unacceptable.

Second, this model assumes and fosters a dualistic theology of humanity, where mission focuses exclusively on "saving souls," rather than on ministering to whole persons. The global church can best manage human and material resources for holistic missions from a unified structure.

Third, missionaries who do not enter into and fully participate in local church structures cannot fully embody the ideal of "incarnational ministry."²²

Fourth, relationships between missionaries and local church members in the field are ambiguous and potentially troublesome when they work within separate structures. When structures link senders with missionaries in the field, but not directly with the young churches they plant, the long-term potential for partnership in congregation-building and evangelization is diminished. The "plant-'em-leave-'em" approach that may result from an exclusive church-planting focus wastes human and material resources in the long term.

Finally, transferring leadership to nationals is problematic when the departure of the missionaries includes the removal of a major structural element, the missionary council.

Clearly, this first model does not fit the Adventist Church, although there may be justification for some operational distance for some specialized ministries. In Adventism, missiology and ecclesiology are tightly interwoven, and this interweaving should be reflected in organizational structures.

Model 2: Church and Missions Together

In this second model, the mission board functions within church structures (see Figure 3). General administrative officers and committees appoint and oversee the work of mission-board officials. Mission-board funding, however it is obtained, is overseen by church leadership.

In the field, missionaries join and serve, when needed, as officers in local churches. Missionaries in the field serve within local church structures, without having separate missionary councils. Missionaries may or may not occupy leadership positions in the field.

This model has strong points that rectify many of the problems of Model 1: First, it rests on a strong theology of the church as God's primary agency of salvation. Second, holistic ministry is best facilitated when all departments and agencies are linked within a common structure. Third, the ideal of incarnational missionary service is best fulfilled as missionaries work within local church structures in the field. Finally, transferring leadership to nationals is easier when

²²The "incarnational" model is based on Christ's incarnation, or coming into the world as fully human. The "incarnational missionary" enters into the life and culture of people he or she serves.

they simply take over positions held by missionaries, instead of having to fill the vacuum made by the departure of separate missionary councils.

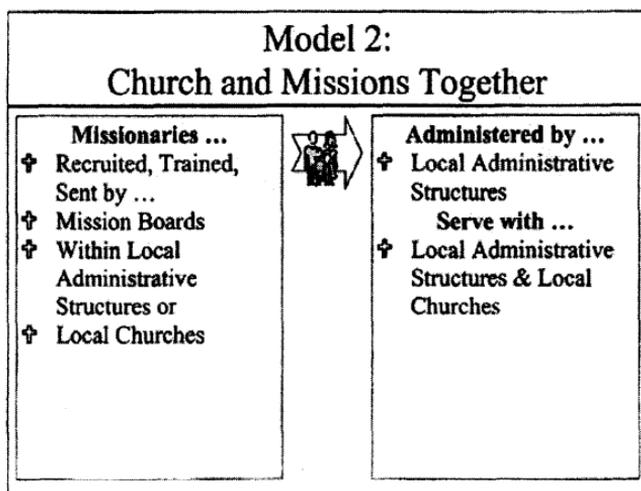


Figure 3.

There are, however, also disadvantages linked with this model: First, as membership in the field grows, as national leadership takes over, and as missionaries depart, the missionary senders may lose contact with the field, and their general focus on missions may fade. When this happens, senders may lose the motivation and the pathways for making direct faith-responses to needs in the field.

Second, the predictable trend toward the institutionalization of missions over time may be augmented by the structural linkage of this model. Maintaining the sense of being a movement may be difficult.

Finally, the denomination may lose its shared understanding of missionary service as a specialized ministry. The administration of missionaries can be perceived as a generic administrative task. Church officials who combine responsibilities for both church and missions in their portfolios may be distracted from the single-minded focus and specialization that cross-cultural missionary service needs and deserves.

Clearly, this model suits Adventism better than the first. Adventist ecclesiology and missiology require doing church and missions together. History demonstrates the advantages of this model; in a real sense Adventists have been a "missionary church" precisely because they have done church and missions together. However, their experience also illustrates some of the challenges associated with this model.

First, dramatic membership growth and leadership nationalization outside of North America have weakened the sender-to-receiver linkage, making North America's continued participation in world missions problematic. Only about 8 percent of membership now resides on the continent of the denomination's

birth, and North Americans comprise a diminishing fraction of official missionaries. Many members have the misconception that “the day of the missionary is over.” There is a general inclination toward isolationism that waxes and wanes. Sabbath School mission offerings are in decline, and the Sabbath School mission report is less often heard, yet both the human and material resources of North America remain vital for Adventist global mission.

Second, as the church has grown and become more complex and institutionalized, the official missions enterprise has become depersonalized. General Conference missionaries are invisible from within their home divisions. Giving Sabbath School mission offerings seems like supporting a multinational corporation. The offering-plate funding of official missionaries, for all the stability that the system provides, does not facilitate direct faith-responses to their work. Passion for missions is redirected to parachurch agencies, special projects, and short mission trips. As valid as alternative missions activities may be, warning lights begin to flash when the church’s official missionary program no longer focuses and channels the commitment and support of the members as well as it did in the past.

Finally, officials of the General Conference Secretariat carry general administrative responsibilities, in addition to their responsibilities for missionaries. This takes away the specialization and single-minded attention that missionary administration needs. Church executives in the specialized areas of publishing, healthcare, youth ministry, religious liberty, and others do not carry responsibilities in general church administration. This article argues that although world missions overlaps specialized areas of service (such as those named above), the tasks of devising mission strategy, planning new initiatives, and the administration of missionaries (in its many phases) is, in itself, a specialized work.

*Hybrid Model A: Together at Home
but Separate in the Field*

As might be expected, the main models for doing church and missions are sometimes crossed with each other. In Hybrid Model A (see Figure 4), Models 1 and 2 are crossed with each other to produce the following features: Missionaries are sent by mission boards that function within church structures. In the field, however, missionaries serve under separate mission councils instead of within local structures. In other words, church and missions are done together back home, but separately in the field.

Adventist missions partly resembled this model during the colonial era. Missionaries in the field joined and served in local churches and were part of local organizational structures. However, matters pertaining exclusively to missionaries were handled by “Section 2” committees, on which nationals did not serve. Thus church and missions were partially separated in the field. Today, all missionaries in the field are handled by the same committees that administer local church work.

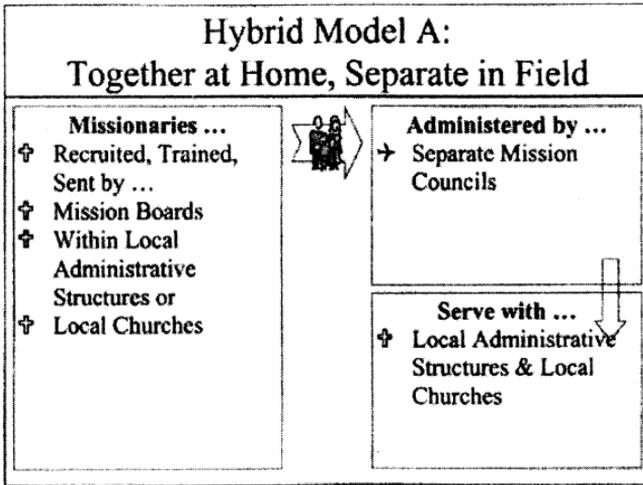


Figure 4.

*Hybrid Model B: Separate at Home
but Together in the Field*

In Hybrid Model B, doing church and missions are seen as separate activities, as in Model 1 (see Figure 5). Mission boards are independent of church structures. In the field, however, missionaries serve within local organizational structures.

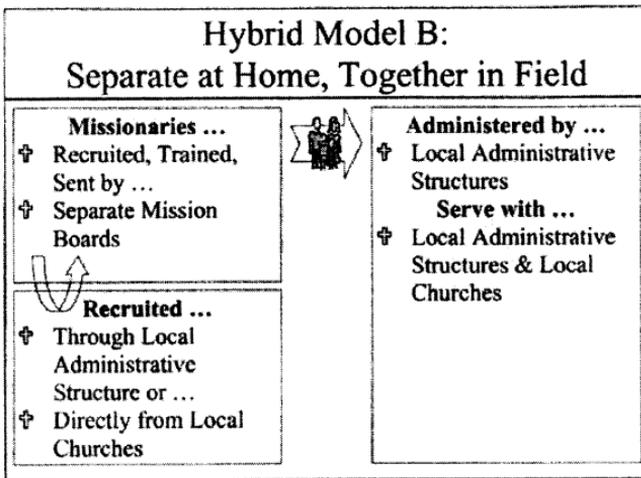


Figure 5.

At first glance, Adventist missions may seem to have nothing in common with this model. However, a closer look may indicate that the contemporary situation actually resembles this model. Missionaries are sent

from within the church structure. However, a situation has evolved that has distanced church from missions on the sending end.

For many years, the General Conference and the North American Division were barely distinguishable from one another. However, with the dramatic growth of the church outside North America, the North American Division is gradually developing a separate identity, which increases the distance between itself and the General Conference missions program. Although North American Division officials at world headquarters may sit on committees that administer missionaries, their primary focus is on their own division.

The unions, conferences, and local churches of the North American Division have never participated formally in the administration of missionaries. In the past, there was effective informal networking between the North American Division and the missions program through the many church members who had relatives or friends serving abroad. Today, however, North Americans comprise a diminishing portion of the missionary workforce, meaning that a diminishing portion of sending churches are linked informally with serving missionaries. Thus the missionary from North America serves within church structures in the field, but is virtually invisible and detached from his or her North American Division senders. The actual functioning of the General Conference Secretariat currently resembles the "Missions Separate from Church" paradigm of Model 1. A century ago this was less true, but the church has evolved with the passage of time to increase the distance between the Secretariat and the local churches, conferences, and unions of the North American Division. The distance is even greater between the General Conference Secretariat and other divisions.

A Proposed Model for the Twenty-first Century

In light of the foregoing analysis, what adjustments to the structural model might enhance the effectiveness of Adventist missions (see Figures 6 and 7)?

First, strong anchors are needed at both the sending and receiving ends of the missionary bridge. As we have seen, Adventist missionaries already have reasonably good anchorage at the receiving end, but better anchorage is needed at the sending end. Divisions, unions, conferences, and local churches at the sending end need to have ownership and participation in all phases of the missionary enterprise. Missionaries should be formally linked with conferences and congregations in their homeland, to whom they send regular reports and make visits while on furlough.

Second, the key elements of strategic planning and missionary administration could probably be best administered within one structure. Protestant denominations generally refer to such an entity as a "mission board." Even though "mission board" was used by Adventists in the early twentieth century,²³ the term sometimes raises questions today because some mistakenly think it necessarily implies Model 1 missiology. In other words, some may think

²³See Bauer.

that the name implies taking Adventist missions out of the church structure and administration. In fact, the term works well with the “Church and Missions Together” paradigm of Model 2. This article does not contend for any particular term, but its usage is one that is familiar in Christian missions.

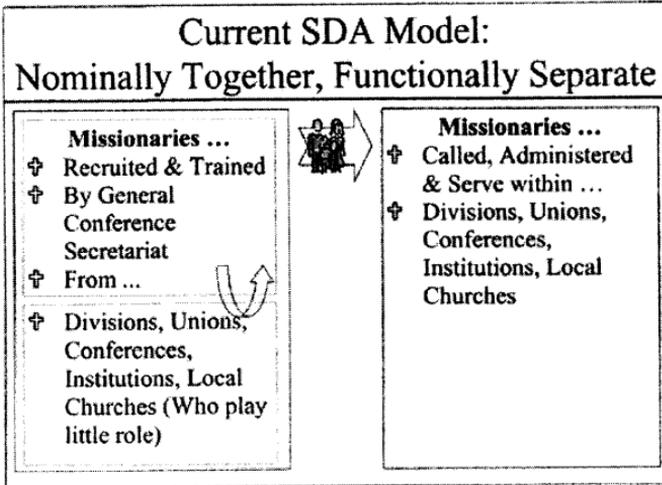


Figure 6.



Figure 7.

An Adventist mission board might fit the “department” model, reporting to Presidential, Secretariat, and Treasury administrations. Alternatively, it might be located in either the Secretariat or Presidential (where the Office of Global Mission now resides) administration. The mission board could function at both General Conference and Division levels. At the General Conference, it would

coordinate the areas of global strategy and missionary funding, education, placement, and care in the divisions. At the Division level, the board could develop strategy for its territory, arrange funding for the missionaries it sends, and recruit, educate, and provide care for missionaries. Perhaps the implementation of this design in the divisions would take some time, depending on economic factors. Perhaps missionary budgets would continue to come from the General Conference with the divisions gradually providing more of the budgets as their vision and means allow.

Third, new and creative methods for funding missionaries are needed. With Sabbath School attendance and offerings declining in North America, we cannot continue to consider the Sabbath School offering as the sole or even major source of funding for missions. A new pathway is needed to channel the faith responses of Adventists, who are moved to directly support the ministry of cross-cultural missionaries through the proposed mission board.²⁴

Fourth, new and creative methods of making cross-cultural missionary service more visible to and appreciated by church members are needed.

Finally, the challenges of missions among “creative access peoples” suggest that missiological education needs to be significantly enhanced. The church has already accomplished the easiest part of its mission by establishing a vibrant and growing membership in the relatively more receptive regions of the world. The task we now face is much more demanding and even dangerous.

Conclusion

Humanly speaking, the Great Commission of Matt 28:19-20 is impossible. Existing budgets are inadequate, and the masses of unevangelized people seem almost beyond numbering. Even the most ideal organizational structure will not successfully complete the task. Yet there are adjustments that need to be made so that the human element of God’s mission to the world will be configured in the best possible way. Men and women stand ready and willing to commit themselves and their resources to world mission. The church’s task is to structure itself so as to unleash and channel the passion of its spiritually gifted members.

²⁴This article does not advocate the direct funding of individual missionaries.