

# Mission in a New Key

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13

The church has been called into existence for a missionary purpose. Its whole life and liturgy, work and worship, therefore, should have a missionary intention, if not a missionary dimension. Its mission is the heartbeat of the church; if this heartbeat stops, the church ceases to be. Each institution, every program, and any activity of the church has meaning — and a right to exist — only if it participates in this mission. Every believer who by baptism has declared himself publicly a follower of Jesus Christ is thereby pledged to be a coworker with him for the salvation of men. Awareness of this mission is the hallmark of the Christian. To sing in church, "Redeemed, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb!" or to pray, "Thy kingdom come," is to bind oneself irrevocably to participation in Christ's own mission. Nobody can truly say he belongs to God's own people unless he is serving Christ as a missionary.

## I

Each generation of Christians must assess anew this task of presenting Christ to the world — and it must do so in its own particular way. The reason is obvious: each generation of Christians faces a different world. In the case of the present generation, this difference seems to be greater than any generational difference in history. The world of our parents no longer exists. To the people born in the twenties and earlier, the present world looks like a city that has just been struck by a terrible earthquake, immediately followed by a tornado. Roads are blocked, institutions have collapsed, and the familiar landmarks by which people oriented themselves are gone. Everywhere there is confusion about what should be done first and how the limited resources should be spent.

Among the older generation two attitudes prevail. On the one hand, one can simply ignore the revolutionary changes in the world and carry on busi-

ness as usual. The argument is: Let the world be what it is; just preach the message; the task of the church is to proclaim the "everlasting gospel," not to be concerned about the world and its affairs.

On the other hand, one may be aware of the many changes in the world he wishes to reach with the gospel but try to solve the many problems involved in the church's mission by seeking to restore the old and partially destroyed world of yesteryear. To reestablish familiar landmarks, to repair the damaged institutions, and to use "the good old tried and true" methods are taken to be the answer to the problems of the present. When one country closes its borders to official missionaries, for example, one should just wait and hope and pray and work that the barrier may be removed. This attitude is merely to see the old ways blocked but not to see the many new "openings" created by the earthquake and the tornado — to lament the removal of familiar landmarks, but remain oblivious to the presentation of tremendous opportunities.

Both of these prevalent attitudes are fatal to the advance of the gospel today. Success in the Adventist mission depends on a deep understanding of the world and a constant involvement in its activities. Ellen G. White pointed out that the reason the Israelites failed in their mission was that "they shut themselves away from the world,"<sup>1</sup> erecting a partition between themselves and the Gentiles. Ignoring the world, or failing to come to grips with it as it is now, is evidence that "the spirit which built up the partition wall between Jews and Gentiles is still active."<sup>2</sup> The results are terrible: millions of people are virtually shut away from the gospel;<sup>3</sup> we tend to "scratch where it does not itch," and mission deteriorates into sterile religious propaganda.

Indication of such results comes from the recent Gallup poll on Adventism in North America. In spite of a tremendous system of communications — radio, television, press, and public evangelism — barely 40 percent of the American population had ever heard about Seventh-day Adventists. And what they know is that these people don't smoke or drink, don't eat meat, don't dance, don't go to movies, and *don't* do a few other things. Hardly 3 percent had a (fairly) clear idea of the Adventist mission of peace, hope, and judgment. The greatest challenge to the present generation of the church, therefore, is to break down those visible and invisible walls that separate it from the world, so that people may see and hear and touch the kingdom of God as a reality. Thus the Adventist mission will again lead to definite decisions for or against Christ.

Another indication comes from Africa. In 1959 there were some 35 mil-

lion Christians on that great continent. Then the great revolutions began. Nationalism "quaked" the old colonial missionary structures; a tornado of secularization swept away old beliefs and social structures. In a hurry an international missionary conference convened to lament "the end of Christian mission in Africa." Prayers were sent to God to stem this tide of nationalism and secularization. Praise the Lord for not listening.

Just ten years later there are already 100 million Christians in Africa. Christ added more souls to the Adventist church in these ten years than in all the previous years of its mission in Africa. The Central Africa Union Conference has 1 Adventist to every 65 non-Adventists in its territory. In Rwanda, the ratio is approximately 1 to 50. The church is expanding at a rate of about 15 percent per year, ten times faster than in North America. To be sure, African nationalism is damaging the old forms of mission and destroying traditional concepts; hospitals are taken over by the government; in many countries the church cannot operate its own schools; and American missionaries are not allowed to hold leadership positions. So there is a tendency to lament the evil of nationalism that puts roadblocks in the way of mission. The church wonders why God does not stem the tide of revolution and secularization but at the same time fails to see that more people are being won to Christ than ever — that the earthquake and the tornado have created more openings for Adventist mission than the church is entering.

The challenge to the younger generation is to show the church these tremendous new opportunities for mission in a revolutionary world and to accept the responsibility of following Christ in his mission today. The unpardonable sin in regard to the church's mission is to be flippant and superficial in understanding the world as the object of God's mission and thereby fail to see how God is leading. As Ellen White observed, "The varying circumstances taking place in the world call for labor which will meet these peculiar developments."<sup>4</sup>

## II

When Adventism began, the pioneers were convinced that the gospel had already been preached in all the world and that, by and large, the world was a Christian world. The few pockets of heathenism would soon disappear under the impact of Protestant and Roman Catholic missions. The Adventist pioneers were also convinced that the special message of Christ's soon return had been rejected by the churches of their day. For that reason, they limited the proclamation of the Adventist message to those who had come out of the "great disappointment" of 1844. God's work for the world

in general was finished. So firmly was this believed that one future member of the church was nearly refused the message because he had not been in the 1844 movement and therefore was considered forever lost.<sup>5</sup>

A few years later, however, this "shut-door" doctrine was given up. Visions given to Ellen White during these formative years of the church convinced the pioneers that they had a message to a much wider circle than those of the original advent faith. But it took some decades before this new missionary vision was finally adopted and put into practice. During the late 1850s and the 1860s, the world of Adventist mission expanded to all the Christians of North America. The pioneers came to believe that God had many sons and daughters in the various Christian churches who had to be "called out" in order to be saved. It was believed that those churches as corporate bodies had rejected the "last warning message," but that individual Christians within them could still be rescued. These individual Christians then became the object of concern in this second phase of Adventist mission.

But not a thought was given in those days to expanding this mission to areas outside North America. On the contrary, Adventists were discouraged, and even forbidden, to do so. As late as the early 1870s the scriptural statement that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world and then shall the end come" was regarded as referring simply to a "prominent sign of the last day" that was realized in the extension of Protestant missions. Its complete fulfillment was in no way associated with the spread of the advent movement throughout the world.<sup>6</sup> When some of the immigrants from Europe who had become acquainted with the advent message in America wanted to go back to their home countries to preach that message, they were given to understand that God's word was already fulfilled and that the judgment had come to an end.

One of these immigrants was M. B. Czechowski, a former Roman Catholic from Poland. When Adventist leaders strongly advised him not to go back to Europe, this determined missionary applied to another denomination and was sent to Europe in 1864. In the service of another church Czechowski raised up companies of Seventh-day Adventists in northern Italy and Switzerland, and later in Romania and even Russia. "By accident" some of these new converts in Switzerland learned about the Adventist work in Battle Creek. Contacts were made which finally (but not without opposition) led to the sending of J. N. Andrews as the first official Adventist missionary in 1874. This marked the beginning of the third phase of Adventist mission, in which the church expanded into all the world.

Today, the Adventist church is the most widespread single Protestant missionary movement in the world, with the greatest number of overseas missionaries (approximately 2,500). This church, moreover, continues to grow rapidly and regularly and has seen no drop in the number of missionaries sent out every year. Truly, gratitude and praise should go to Christ, the "missionary-in-chief," who has worked this miracle of modern mission.

### III

Nothing can detract from the tremendous missionary success of the advent movement — except the mistaken notion of having arrived at the end of the missionary road, that is, of having proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in all the world. In view of the current world situation, two limitations of the Adventist concept of mission as it developed in its third phase stand out clearly. First, continuing to view the world by and large as a *Christian* world, Adventists saw the goal of their mission as calling the true children of God out of "Babylon," namely, the "apostate" churches of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Second, conception of the world being largely in *geographical* terms, the crossing of salt water and the traversing of continents became the missionary goal. The reaching of the farthest ends of the earth — that is, the farthest away from the United States — and the planting of the church in the greatest number of countries became the criteria of missionary success. And this was correct, but only in a limited way.

Adventist missionaries who in the 1870s and 1880s left the shores of North America all went to Christian countries: Germany 1875, France 1876, Italy 1877, Denmark 1877, Norway 1878, England 1879, Sweden 1880, and Australia 1885. When the church gradually expanded into the former colonial areas, missionaries first approached the foreigners (such as colonial administrators and businessmen) and the Christians among the indigenous populations. So, when Adventist missionaries went to Fiji, they did not go to the thousands of heathen but to the Methodist villages of the island. Even today Adventist missionary methods presuppose the presence of Christianity, with the vast majority (about 95 percent) of Adventist converts coming from a Christian background. No wonder that Adventists got the name of "sheep-stealers."

The older generation of Adventist missionaries was not prepared to reach out into the non-Christian world. Muslims were considered anti-Christian and proud, the Hindus stubborn and unreachable, and the Buddhists sold to superstition and idolatry. There certainly was not room for

them in the Adventist concept of the impending final conflict of the great controversy, which deals especially with an apostate Christian world. Both the missionary message and mission strategy were determined by that concept. But today about 80 percent of the total world population is non-Christian; some 1.6 billion people (eight times as many as in the days of the apostle Paul) have never even heard the name of Christ. Did Christ die, then, for Christians only?

The new generation of Adventists must not be content with the inherited concept of world mission, but must go, truly, into all the world. It must be guided by the example of the apostle Paul: "It is my ambition to bring the gospel to places where the very name of Christ has not been heard, for I do not want to build on another man's foundation; but, as Scripture says, they who had no news of him shall see and they who never heard of him shall understand."<sup>7</sup>

This new dimension of missionary task is a challenge — not just to missionary methods, strategy, and organization, but to the Adventist theology of mission in particular. The revolutionary changes in communication, in life-style, and in political, religious, and socioeconomic constellations in the world require new forms and a new organization of mission work. It is obvious that changes in approach are already long overdue. Years ago Ellen White said: "Had different plans of labor been adopted, tenfold, yes, twentyfold more, might have been accomplished."<sup>8</sup> Signs abound that the church is indeed studying and developing new methods and forms of mission.

#### IV

In 1961 for the first time a conference convened in Beirut, Lebanon, to study the problems and methods of Adventist mission to the Muslim world. Now, ten years later, the first attempts are being made to implement suggestions made at that conference and another one in 1963. New emphasis is also being laid on contact with Jewish people, as is evident from the founding of the Hebrew Scripture Association in 1955, the forerunner of the Israelite Heritage Institute established in 1964. Two years later, in 1966, almost a hundred years after the church overseas mission program began, the General Conference established the Institute of World Mission for the training of missionaries. That year the Theological Seminary at Andrews University added a department of world mission and comparative religion.

Great things may be expected from the strategies and methods developed by the Loma Linda University School of Health and the Adventist Colle-

giate Taskforce. New ways of advancing the gospel have been demonstrated by the student missionary movement and its operation of English language schools and other teaching programs. New forms of mission activity are also being developed by the Adventist Volunteer Service Corps and the urban mission training centers. The office of Adventists Abroad promotes overseas work by Adventist professionals: physicians, engineers, businessmen, agricultural specialists, and others, in areas where career missionaries cannot enter and where the church is weak. The fruits of such work can already be seen in India, Greece, and Afghanistan (in the work of the Loma Linda University heart team) and also in projects to New Guinea, Fiji, Okinawa, and areas of Southeast Asia. The recent developments in mainland China indicate that Adventists Abroad may well be the greatest current asset of the Adventist church for its mission today.

But the challenge offered by this newly discovered world of mission goes much deeper still. Now that the era of Europe is over and the era of Asia has begun, a biblical message that centers in the ten toes of the image of Daniel two seems rather shallow. And the question arises whether the history of God's people, and therefore of the whole world, will indeed be determined by what happens in the United States of America.

Already over 80 percent of church members live outside North America. If present trends continue, ten years from now barely 10 percent of the church members and barely 3 percent of the total world population will live in the United States. What is the role of the 2 billion people of Asia in biblical perspective, and of the 100 million Christians in Africa? Now barely 20 percent of the world population is Christian, and many of that number, particularly in the West, are only nominally so. What is the place of Islam (550 million people), Hinduism (over 500 million), and Buddhism in God's plan of salvation and in the final conflict of the great controversy between Christ and Satan?

Unless these questions are simply ignored, the Adventist church, which in the past has done so well in speaking clearly on the issues of world history and eschatology, faces the task of discovering new vision, a new message which is truly "present truth" for our day. The present generation cannot be content merely with what it has inherited. With fasting and prayer it ought to meditate on the word of God and be carefully and humbly receptive to the Spirit God sends to guide men into all the truth and to make known the things that are coming.<sup>9</sup> For this reason alone the General Conference should implement its own suggestion of organizing another conference to give these issues attention. Adventist missionary outreach to-

day stands in great need of a theology of mission to guide the church in its preaching, policies, message, and methods. Truth must be relevant to the actual cultural and religious situation of the people.

When J. N. Andrews arrived in Switzerland, he formulated his missionary message in three points: teach the Sabbath; warn the people of the coming judgment; and call God's people to obedience to the unchangeable law of God.<sup>10</sup> This three-point message has determined Adventist missionary outreach ever since. Obviously this *was* "present truth" to the genuine Christian community of his day. And this formulation of the message remains present truth to all believing Christians. But this is no longer a Christian world, not even in the West. In Japan less than 1 percent of the population is Christian, in India less than 3 percent, and in Pakistan less than 1 percent. The total population of just these three countries amounts to over 850 million people. If Adventists are going to take the non-Christian world seriously, formulation of the message of J. N. Andrews cannot apply today.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through meditation and careful study of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, the new missionary generation has to discover what is "present truth" for this particular situation and time. The great heritage from Adventist pioneers was not a creed or a fixed formulation of truths; it was the concept of an ever-dynamic, ever-powerful word that would guide the church in any situation and at all times. Adventist pioneers used to say, "The Bible is our only creed." It is on this great legacy that the present generation is called to build its theology of mission and its formulation of "present truth." As Ellen White put it: "Never say, this has never been taught. . . . Away with these restrictions. That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God's message for this time."<sup>11</sup> And "present truth, from the first letter of its alphabet to the last means missionary effort."<sup>12</sup>

## V

Besides conceiving of the world largely as a Christian world, the early Adventists, understandably, also identified it largely as a *geographical* unit. The frontiers of mission were defined by distance (away from the United States), inaccessibility, salt water, national boundaries, and cultural differences. Crossing these barriers made the American secondary school principal, physician, minister, secretary, or builder a missionary. The whole world was divided into "overseas divisions," which were mission territories, with North America in the center. And though a few of these overseas territories



have become "home bases" themselves, little or nothing has changed in the organization and conceptualization of the Adventist mission.

Even though North America has only 20 percent of the church's world membership today, and will have barely 10 percent by the end of this decade, and even though the ratio of Adventists to non-Adventists in North America is 1:550 (as against 1:45, 1:55, 1:65, or 1,300 in such territories as Jamaica, Rwanda, Central Africa, and the Philippines), most Adventists continue to conceive of North America as the "home base" and all other territories as "mission fields." People who live in those countries, or who come from there, are called "nationals." Any person leaving North America in the service of the church is called a "missionary," even though he is leaving an area where the Adventist message has hardly been heard and is going to an area where the church is the largest and most influential group in the country. That's called "from home base to frontline."

The present generation faces the world as a "global village." The frontiers the young missionary has to cross are no longer primarily geographical, but social and economic, racial and cultural, political and religious. Adventists will have to wake up to the fact that the era of Europe is over and that America is no longer the missionary center of the world. Ever-increasing numbers of Adventist missionaries come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. And now that the doors of many countries in Asia are being closed to Western missionaries, and their people are saying to Americans, "Missionary, go home," missionaries from Asia and other parts of the Third World are the church's greatest asset.

It is extremely unfortunate, then, that certain financial and organizational policies that reflect the missionary situation of a former generation make it impossible for the church to make the most of this great reservoir of Asian missionaries. The future advance of the gospel in India and China (with a total of some 1.3 billion people who are now largely beyond the reach of the Adventist message) will depend greatly on the way in which the present generation of Adventists will stimulate, promote, and finance the development of an Asian missionary force.

With the modern means of transportation and communications technology, the geographical frontier hardly exists any more; the ends of the earth have been reached geographically. But that does not mean that Adventists have truly reached the goal of mission. In the New Testament, "the world" is not a geographical but an *anthropological* concept. Christ did not die for the mountains of the world or for the islands or the beauty spots; he died for the people. As long as there are people who have not heard the

gospel and who have not been urged to accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour, the church's mission is not done.

This means that the boundaries of mission are determined not by geography but by whether or not a person is a member of the household of God. As any person in whom Christ lives is a missionary, so any person who is still foreign to God is a mission field. *The only boundary a person has to cross in order to be a missionary is that boundary between belief and unbelief.* The boundary runs right in front of the door.

Barriers to the boundary are our wealth and others' poverty, our abundance of food and their famine, our freedom and their oppression. The ends of the earth are no longer geographical, but racial, economic, sociological, and religious. Hesitance to cross these frontiers on the part of the older missionary generation has led to serious problems in missionary efforts, both inside and outside the Adventist church. But these frontiers have to be crossed in order for all men to hear the gospel and see it truly come alive in their own situation. As Christ did, we have to become poor with the poor, oppressed with the oppressed, Asian with the Asian, and black with the black. The evangelization of the whole world in *this generation* will depend to a large extent on our awareness of these new missionary frontiers and our willingness to cross them.

The true missionary, then, is not he who by a right theology points the way — but he who is going that way himself. It is important that the younger generation remain open to the dynamics of this world, whose forms and fashions, fads and frontiers, are constantly changing — important that we continually put ourselves under the instruction of the word of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Then we do not need to worry what we shall speak, where we ought to go, or how we may achieve our goals. We have Christ's promise: "I work and my Father continues to work also."<sup>18</sup> For mission truly is Christ living and working in us.

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- 6 See, for example, D. M. Canright, Present condition of the world, *Review and Herald*, p. 138 (April 16, 1872).  
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- 7 Romans 15:20-21.
- 8 White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1920), p. 294. (This sentence from the 1893 Battle Creek edition was omitted from later editions.)
- 9 See John 16:12-15.
- 10 J. N. Andrews, Meeting of Sabbath-keepers in Neuchatel, *Review and Herald*, p. 172 (November 24, 1874).
- 11 White, Manuscript 80, 1888.
- 12 White, *Counsels on Health* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1923), p. 300.
- 13 John 5:17.