
Mission and Missions

Converting Entire Peoples

by Gottfried Oosterwal

In fulfilling our missionary task as Seventh-day Adventists, we must attend to what I call the six pillars of mission: the God who sends, the church that is sent, the message and specific task, the purpose and objectives, the target audience, and the ways and means of accomplishing the task. We have traditionally given great attention to the special message; recently we have reflected considerably on the ways and means of accomplishing the task. The other pillars, however, are largely forgotten in our thinking, especially pillar number five, the *target audience*, the very object of God's mission. It is on this pillar that I wish to focus the remarks that follow.¹

Unequivocally, Scripture identifies the object of our mission as the *world* (John 3:16, 17; II Cor. 5:19-21; Matt. 28:18-20), the *whole* world in its variety of tribes and tongues and nations and people (Rev. 14:6), of men and women and children in their plurality of needs and values and ways of thinking; the

world with its many different cultures and religions and ideologies, its large metropolitan centers and isolated villages. To reach these different groups of people, the church must consider carefully the particular context and circumstance in which these groups live and work and exist. That was a hallmark of Christ's own ministry on earth. He met the people where they were, always considering the wants of the time and the place.² It also figured prominently in the life and work of the Apostle Paul (see I Cor. 9:19-22). "He varied his manner of labor," Mrs. White writes, "always shaping his message to the circumstances under which he was placed."³

We are touching here on one of the most crucial issues in Adventist world mission today: our need of a thorough understanding of the particular needs and hurts of those who are the recipients of the gospel, in the context of their particular culture and religion and upbringing and socioeconomic conditions. As Mrs. White once put it: "In order to lead souls to Jesus, there must be . . . a study of the human mind."⁴ "We also must learn to adapt our labors to the condition of the people — to meet men where they are. . . . God's workmen . . . must not be men of one idea, stereotyped in their manner of work-

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ing. They must be able to vary their efforts, to meet the needs of the people under different circumstances and conditions.”⁵ This requires more than developing a variety of strategies for *presenting* our message. In addition, we must consider carefully and prayerfully what message best fits the diverse times and cultural contexts we meet, so that people will hear it and recognize it as “Good News” indeed. As Ellen White has put it: “That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago.”⁶ The point is that in order for the message of Revelation 14:6-12 to be heard and received by “every nation and tribe and language and people,” it must be lived and proclaimed in ways which people of different cultures and conditions can understand and accept.

This calls for a greater emphasis on pillar number five; it calls for a new way of looking at the world into which God has sent us. Traditionally, we have thought of the target audience in terms of countries or numbers of persons to be reached. We say, for instance, that the Adventist church has been established in 191 out of the 221 (or 223) countries of the world, leaving some 30 more to reach before we attain our goal of proclaiming the message to the whole world. This is a nice way of assessing the tremendous progress of Adventist mission in the world, and truly a sign of the miraculous power of God in the world. But is it the biblical way?

We say, too, that the Adventist church has a membership of nearly four million believers, and that every year some 350,000 new members are being added, or (nearly) one thousand souls a day. Then we say that this is still not adequate, since some 150 million people are being added every year to the world population. We thus assess well the magnitude of our unfinished task, but in so doing are we looking at the world in the biblical way?

The answer is “no.” In fact, the Bible describes the world as the object of God’s mission, not in terms of countries or individual persons, but in terms of distinct groups, communities or peoples.⁷ And this calls for a

people-centered approach in mission, in which the different groups, in the context of their particular needs and hurts and culture and behavior, become *as groups* the object of our mission. Christ Himself commissioned us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19; 24:14; Luke 24:47). This term *ethnos*, commonly translated “nation,” does not denote in the first place a geographical area or a political unit, but a “people-group.” It is an anthropological term that stands for a particular people, characterized by its own culture, values, religion, language, social structure and traditions. A better translation of Matthew 28:19 would be therefore: “Go then to all peoples, everywhere, and make them my disciples” — the translation given, indeed, in the Good News Bible. Likewise, the three angels’ message is to go, as Revelation 14 suggests, to every kingroup (tribe, clan, kindred, family), and language group (tongue), and every other category of people such as religious groups, classes, ethnic groups, etc., which make up our world’s population of 4.7 billion people.

It is this people-centered approach in mission, rooted in a more biblical way of looking at the world as the objective of God’s mission, that offers hope for finishing God’s work in this generation.

What is the basis of such hope? Besides the clear biblical mandate, there is, first of all, the evidence of this people-centered approach in the effective mission work of the early Christian church. Second, there is the evidence from mission history. The Christianization of the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was mainly a result of whole people-groups reaching out to the gospel and accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Third, research on church growth in mission has clearly shown that rapid advance of the gospel and large accessions to the faith are the result of *people-movements* and of a church’s ability to incorporate whole villages, tribes, or other social groups into their communion of faith.⁸ Finally, and most significantly of all, we live in a time again today when everywhere whole groups of people are (suddenly) becoming receptive to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Reports of such people-movements towards Christ abound from

Burma to Brazil and from Ghana to New Guinea. They have challenged Adventist mission in Indonesia and South India, in Northern Thailand and West Iran, in Rwanda and in Zaire, in Mexico and in Peru. God's last movements to finish His work on earth will be, we say, very rapid ones. Our failure to reap the large harvests God has already prepared accounts in part for why the work of God is not being finished now. A thorough understanding of the peoples of the world and their particular needs, in the context of their cultural conditions and level of readiness for the gospel, is an indispensable condition of all effective evangelism and church growth.

What strategies should be developed based on this insight? First, we should prepare a list — for the different divisions of the church — of *all* the people-groups now without an effective Adventist evangelistic presence: Who are these people? Where are they located? How many are there in the groups? What are the elements that distinguish and unify them as a group (religion, language, ethnicity, values, culture, etc.)? What kind of contact, if any, have they had with Christianity? How open, or resistant, are they to religious change, or to the Advent message in particular, and why?

Most of this information is already available through the *Unreached Peoples Program* at the Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center of World Vision International; the *World Christian Encyclopedia* of 1980, edited by David B. Barrett; the *Unreached Peoples Profiles*, prepared by C. Peter Wagner and Edward R. Dayton; and the many collections of ethnological surveys, such as the *Human Relations Area Files*, or the twenty-one volume series on *Peoples of the Earth*.

Second, we should establish a need-profile on these peoples to guide us in the development of particular methods and ways of reaching them with the Advent message. Both *felt* needs and the *observed* needs should be included in this profile. Third, we should select a number of unreached peoples who are showing (some) receptivity toward the Adventist church and its message, make a careful study of their

customs and culture, their values and social structure, and begin an effort to win them as groups. We should do this in the light of their particular conditions, i.e., without demanding of them that they must cross social and cultural boundaries in order to become a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. (Graduate students from Adventist universities could be an enormous workforce, together with many retirees and volunteers).

Fourth, we should prepare and train missionaries on a worldwide scale for their work of communicating the gospel cross-culturally in their home countries and abroad. This includes both career and "tent-making" missionaries, volunteers and professionals, older people and younger ones, all according to their specific gifts. Especially an *Adventist Youth Service Corps* could accomplish great things in this respect. It is estimated that our world today consists

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of some 25,000 distinct people-groups. Missiological research indicates that it would take an average of four missionaries per group to evangelize the world. That amounts to a hundred-thousand missionaries, a number that is definitely within the range of our church's spiritual and financial and administrative resources. After all, a hundred-thousand missionaries means only one out of every forty believers, or only 2.5 percent of our total world membership. Research on church growth in missions has shown that churches can marshal and mobilize up to 10 percent of their membership in effective evangelistic outreach! So, what are we waiting for?

Fifth, we should set clear goals for church planting and the evangelization of these unreached people-groups, work out plans and

organizational structures to accomplish these goals, and consider the best ways and means to do so. Sixth, we should develop a procedure whereby the work can be constantly evaluated, plans and courses of action can be corrected, and new and unexpected opportunities can be used for an unprecedented advance of God's work in the whole world.

What are some of the advantages — and disadvantages — of this people-centered approach in mission? Starting with the latter, there is first of all the newness of the whole idea, however biblical it may be, of defining the object of our mission in terms of unreached people-groups. Our current missionary thinking and terminology, as well as policies and practices, do not help us in this respect; indeed, they would be, in many ways, an obstacle to quick implementation of this new strategy.

Second, our western way of thinking does not prepare us for a people-centered approach in mission. It is rooted in the humanistic notion that man is, in essence, a self-existent, individual being, whose worth and value and dignity are determined by his or her individual self. Our approach to evangelism, therefore, has been the winning of individuals, one by one, with great emphasis on individual conversion, private devotion and personal piety and grace. According to scripture, however, man was created, in essence, a communal being, made for fellowship with God and with his neighbor. This group-orientation has been preserved in many cultures and societies of the world. And the group-centered approach becomes thereby a biblical mandate, as well as a practical necessity.

Third, the people-centered approach militates against the much favored "standard-method" concept in Adventist evangelism. This method is rooted in the view that all human beings are basically the same, have

the same essential needs, and can be reached, therefore, by the same means and methods. This view does not deny that people differ in language and custom and culture. But it considers these differences insignificant and of little or no consequence to mission and evangelism. The same "tried and tested" methods that have worked *here* are therefore more or less rigidly applied over *there*. (Do I need to give any examples?) And concepts and plans that have borne no fruit here are discarded as a means of effective evangelism somewhere else. Of course, this "standard-method" has not been without success. But as a means to evangelize the world, it is totally inadequate, in fact doing more harm than good, as examples from our own history and practice of mission in Africa, Asia and Europe clearly indicate.

As to its advantages, the people-centered approach in mission first of all makes finishing God's work in this generation a distinct possibility. It also makes us see the world more as God sees it than we do apart from this approach. Further, it allows us to respond better to the many people-movements toward Christ now arising everywhere, and to incorporate whole groups into the Adventist communion of faith. Another distinct advantage is that the whole church can become involved in cross-cultural mission, since mission is defined by "unreached peoples" within each country, rather than by the country itself. Political boundaries will be much less of an obstacle to mission. Mission work becomes more manageable, and the assessment of our failures and successes in reaching our goals, more realistic. Above all, however, since this approach is more in harmony with the biblical mandate and the practices of the New Testament church, it also appears as "an open door for an effective work" in our time, to make disciples of all peoples everywhere to the glory of God, in preparation for the soon coming of our Lord.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This article is a shortened and slightly altered version of an address given at the 1981 Annual Council of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Washington, D.C. In earlier publications, and

in the address given at the 1981 Annual Council, I distinguished five pillars. Added has been pillar number four, the goal, purpose and objectives of mission, which before had been included in pillars

number one and three. They do, however, together constitute a pillar and deserve to be studied as such.

2. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald), pp. 301ff.

3. *Gospel Workers*, p. 300.

4. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 4 (Mountain View: Pacific Press), p. 67.

5. *Gospel Workers*, p. 301.

6. From manuscript 8a, 1888, as printed in A. V. Olson, *Through Crisis to Victory, 1888-1901* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1966), pp. 273, 274.

7. The most significant Hebrew terms for these categories of people — besides *'am* (for God's own people) and *goy* (for those of other religions) — are: *'eret*, a descriptive term for a people-group in its geocultural context (language, customs, social struc-

ture, traditions, area), *lashon*, which stands for a language group, and *mishpachah*, which highlights kinship, family and marriage relations as the binding factors of the group, such as tribe or lineage or kindred or clan. Though the New Testament terms to describe the world as the object of God's mission are more comprehensive, they, too, emphasize that the world is in essence a "mosaic of people groups" which are distinct from each other in respect of culture, ethnic background, kinship, language and social structure.

8. See especially, D. A. McGavran: *Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955); *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers in Mission* (1959); and *Understanding Church Growth* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

Anatomy of the Church Growth Movement

by Jon Dybdahl

Evangelism is the lifeblood of the Christian church and Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally made it a central part of their mission. However, as W. B. Quigley recently said in *The Ministry*, Adventists face a crisis in that we no longer seem as excited about evangelism as we once were. Quigley goes so far as to say that this is more significant, indeed, than recent theological controversy and financial fiasco.¹ One response to a crisis like this is the development of Adventist evangelism models — metaphors or images that suggest a comprehensive approach both to the rationale for evangelism and the methods of the evangelistic enterprise.

The present lack of comprehensive models

splinters our approach to evangelism. On the one hand, some are primarily interested in methods. It is easy for these practitioners to ignore basic questions about the nature of mission in their search for the "right" or "efficient" way to accomplish evangelism. On the other hand, some think constantly about the nature of the mission and message of the church but have disdain for "hands on" evangelism. They may not like present evangelistic methods, but often fail to substitute new ways in place of the old ones.

The function of a model as a comprehensive metaphor is to bring these two concerns together — as they should be. Both — what the mission is and the method used in carrying it out — must be examined in light of true biblical theology and ethics. Only when these two vital parts of the totality of evangelism are joined in a model can the wholeness needed in evangelism be attained.

In the following, I examine such a model,

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