The SDA Church in Latin America and the Caribbean

Reviewed by Joan A. Francis and Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid

Greenleaf, Floyd. *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean.* 2 vols. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1992.

Floyd Greenleaf, professor of history and senior vice president for academic administration at Southern College has pulled together in two volumes the highlights of the development of the Adventist Church in the two largest divisions of the world. The first volume chronicles the trials of faith, the hardships and the struggles of the earlier workers, including colporteurs, ministers, and their wives and children. The volume begins the narrative in the late 19th century and ends around the 1940s. The companion volume highlights the growth of the work, with special emphasis on institutional development, especially education, from the 1940s to 1980. As Greenleaf has tried to cover such a large area, his approach is to give a basic framework, which provided the main lines of growth in the area.

Heavy concentration is given to the 1940s, when mission work was at its peak, when missionaries were in control. In fact, extensive discussion is undertaken in the areas of the educational and health enterprises of the church during this period. To a lesser degree, some of the tensions are dealt with, e.g., racial issues in Jamaica and Brazil between unqualified missionaries and local qualified workers in the early decades of this century. However, the negatives are purposely avoided, for the most part, because "more things were done right than wrong" (ii).

Although the author refers to it as *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Latin America and the Caribbean*, the title of the work is not representative of the material presented. It is really an excellent description of the work of the missionaries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Scant coverage is given to the voice, feelings, and work of the indigenous, local members and employees who suffered just as much as the missionaries. One needs simply to glance at who are the subjects of interviews as listed in the bibliography and the bias is

An "official," sympathetic account of missionaries to Latin America.

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clearly evident. The title prepared the reader to expect a truly comprehensive, concise, unbiased history and analysis of the period under study. However, two limitations are clearly stated at the outset that alert the reader that this will not be the case. First, his claim that his book is primarily an "official" history; and second, his statement that without apologies he writes a sympathetic account.

In Greenleaf's attempt to write an "official" history, he limits himself, almost 100 percent, to select sources of information; viz., missionaries, the General Conference, division, and union headquarters documents. Details of local fields' personalities are, for the most part, purposely omitted. This is unfortunate, as the missionaries were usually successful when there were strong local persons to support their efforts. The weakness of this approach is that it is based on a hierarchical theology/philosophy of the church, which gives more weight to the highest echelon of the structure than the masses. This is the type of history that was in vogue long ago, but with the advent of social history, historians can no longer ignore the role of the nonleaders in discussing and writing the history of movements and churches. So locked in is Greenleaf in the mode of drawing the picture from the perspective of the mission perspective that the 1950s are skipped over matter-of-factly; it is as if they were not important. Yet it is this very period when the roots of nationalism in church development and growth were being embedded and which had its blossoming in the 1960s to 1980s. An official history should include the local officials, too.

Clearly Greenleaf is intrigued with the phenomenal growth within Latin America and the Caribbean, yet he tries to explain it simply in relation to "soul multiplication." But a selective discussion of numerical growth does not do justice to a historical treatment of the church. Other areas of concern, issues of democracy, nationalism, indigenization, territorial turf wars, as well as growth and decline in all the other areas of church life should have been featured. Most "missionaries" will be happy with Greenleaf's volumes, but many nationals will find them inadequate and biased. Especially in the post-World War II period more of the nationals' work in the development of the church should have been highlighted.

The author used "official" missionary sources. It should not have been difficult, therefore, to obtain materials from the various unions when nationals were in charge. Additionally, better use of recent secondary sources was necessary. For example, the work of Charles Teel, Jr. and Lake Titicaca should have been included in the discussion on the Stahls. The past decade has seen a number of centennials of work in these areas and much material has been unearthed by nationals as they research the roots of the Adventist Church in their land; these would have added some needed perspective to the book.

Nevertheless, Greenleaf is to be commended for trying to accomplish the impossible, writing the history of two of the largest divisions with such a diverse topography, language, and culture in two small volumes. No one from now on will be able to be a credible voice on Latin America and Caribbean Adventism without taking into account these two volumes.