



“Total Commitment To God” Statement

President Robert Folkenberg drafts “a declaration of spiritual accountability in the family of faith.”

The “Total Commitment to God” statement has had a somewhat troubled history. The document was conceived by Robert Folkenberg, president of the Adventist World Church, in preparation for the North American Division Higher Education Summit, scheduled for December 1996. Once drafted, the document was expanded to include not only institutions of higher education, but also the General Conference, divisions, unions, conferences and missions, food industries, Adventist Book Centers, publishing houses, radio stations, hospitals, institutions of lower education, congregations, pastors, and individual members. This document, citing the Gospel Commission found in Matthew 28: 19, 20, to “Go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . and make disciples,” calls for “spiritual accountability” on the part of all of the above mentioned groups and indeed any person, group, or organization associated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As work on this document pro-

gressed and its scope was broadened, leaders decided that it should be presented to a more representative church body before it went to the summit on higher education. With this in mind, the “Total Commitment to God” statement was presented at the General Conference Committee Annual Council held in San Jose, Costa Rica in October of 1996. After passing through the administrative committee of the General Conference, Folkenberg recommended the document to the Annual Council of the General Conference Committee. The recommendation to the full committee was not to accept the document as part of the denominational working policy, but as a guideline which was still subject to alteration. In his recommendation speech, Folkenberg outlined his intent in the creation of this document:

This is not, cannot be, is not written to be, it is designed not to be, anything that takes any intrusive governance mechanism, that's authority centrally applied on any-

thing. If you read it, you won't find it. It's been designed out. Why? It won't work. It just simply doesn't work. The only way there can be transformation is for the Holy Spirit to be poured out. What this [document] is doing, is saying, “Please come together, on your knees, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, but ask the right questions. Don't be satisfied with the popular positive pabulum.”

In the ensuing discussion, several minor wording amendments were suggested and approved. One, recommended by Donald E. Robinson, modified the title from “Developing Total Commitment to God,” to the current title. Another added as a subtitle “A Declaration of Spiritual Accountability in the Family of Faith.”

At the end of deliberation a “yea” “nay” vote was taken, and it was unanimously voted “To approve the wording of the ‘Total Commitment to God’ document, with the understanding that further attention to the document will be given during the

ensuing year" (as reported in the General Conference Committee Annual Council minutes, Action #199-96Ga).

Shortly after the Annual Council of the General Conference Committee, at the North American Division Year End Meetings, the document was viewed with some misgivings (see transcript, beginning on p. 20). When it was introduced, Harold Baptiste, secretary of the North American Division, made the motion that the document be "adopted" by the North American Division. But, in the end, the vote was "To receive the document . . ." Alfred C. McClure, president of the North American Division and chair of the session, explained the motion that was voted: ". . . We have before us a motion to record in our minutes that we have heard, reviewed the document. We're not suggesting that it must be assimilated at this point."

The North American Division Committee then referred the document to several other bodies. The Health Care Summit, which meets semi-annually and is comprised of presidents and board chairs of all Adventist Health Systems in North America, along with the president of the North American Division, met in Tucson, Arizona, December 1996. Although no action was taken which directly responded to the "Total Commitment to God" statement, the committee accepted an extended statement that grew out of earlier meetings between Folkenberg and Adventist health care executives.

The North American Division Board of Education, K-12, is scheduled to discuss this document in their meetings in February 1998.

One major group to which the document was referred has already met. The Higher Education Summit, comprising presidents and board chairs of all Adventist colleges and universities in North America along with North American Division official, was the original impetus of the

"Total Commitment to God" statement. Discussion at the December 1996 summit in Tucson was long and, at times, heated.

Concern centered around the last paragraph of the section entitled "What 'Total Commitment to God' involves for the colleges and universities." This paragraph mentions a "General Conference-appointed, international panel of highly qualified educators who will provide the college/university board with a written evaluation of the spiritual master plan and the assessment program." Dr. Charles Scriven, president of Columbia Union College and an attendee of the Higher Education Summit, said, "No North American college or university president is totally comfortable with the last paragraph."

The discontent surrounding this portion of the document does not stem from an unwillingness on the part of the colleges and universities to assess and improve spirituality on their campuses. Indeed many of them, such as La Sierra University, Loma Linda University, and Union College, already have their own programs in place. Dr. John Kerbs,

president of Union College, says that this document and the discussion surrounding it has led him to take a look at the current spiritual assessment methods, and to consider possible ways to improve and expand their methods.

The perceived problem is with a group of outside 'experts' attempting an evaluation of a situation with which they are not totally familiar. Some, such as Dr. Marvin Anderson, president of Southwestern Adventist University, also cite the existence of the Adventist Accreditation Association which, among other things, reviews the spiritual programs on Adventist college and university campuses. "We already have a system, so why are we having to submit to this new panel?" In the end, the representatives at the Higher Education Summit took no official action or vote on the "Total Commitment to God" statement.

—Mitch Scoggins

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Total Commitment to God

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is filled with examples of individuals and institutions who have been, and are, vibrant witnesses to their faith. Because of their passionate commitment to their Lord and appreciation of His unbounded love, they all have the same goal: to share the Good News with others. One key Bible text has motivated them. It is a text that fires the souls of Seventh-day Adventists everywhere. It is what is called the Gospel Commission, the mandate from the Lord Himself, as recorded in Matthew 28:19, 20, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." The New International Version says: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. . . ."

This mandate, from the Lord Himself, is simple, beautiful, and binding. It is for every follower, whether member, pastor, or administrator—**Go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . make disciples.** This principle ignites the mission of the Church and sets the standard for any measuring, any assessment, of success. It touches all, whatever their responsibility, whether they are laypersons or church employees. It spans all the elements of church life, from the

local church to the General Conference, in schools and colleges, publishing houses, health-care institutions, and health food organizations. The promise is encapsulated in the baptismal vows, in mission statements, in aims and objectives, in policies, and in constitutions and bylaws "to witness to His loving salvation," "to facilitate the proclamation of the everlasting gospel," "to supply the multitudes with the bread of life," and "to nurture them in preparation for His soon return." The four-fold command to **go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . make disciples** sounds wherever Seventh-day Adventists work or come together.

As the Church has grown in size and complexity, more and more members, pastors, and administrators have asked serious questions about how the Church relates to the Gospel Commission. Do the wheels and the gears of the Church just turn out above average products and services that cannot be readily distinguished from their secular counterparts? Or does the Church make sure its basic products and services reveal to the world the way to eternal life? Nothing should be excluded from these questions, whether it be church worship services or organizational or institutional programs and products.

The time has come for the Church as a whole to ask and answer the hard questions about how the Church is relating to the guiding principle of the Gospel Commission. How can the guiding principle be actualized in the lives of members, pastors and congregations? How can they measure their progress in fulfilling the Gospel Commission? How can the Church's universities, colleges and academies, health-food factories, high-tech health-care institutions, clinics, publishing houses, and media centers develop accountability based on the Gospel Commission?

This challenge calls for a frank and analytical approach in determining where the Church is in relationship to the Lord's command. It is not enough to measure success by secular standards, not enough to give those standards priority. Total commitment to God involves, primarily, total acceptance of the principles of Christianity as outlined in the Bible and as supported by the Spirit of Prophecy. Congregations, institutions, individual church employees and church members can easily find satisfaction in goals reached, funds raised, buildings completed, budgets balanced, accreditation achieved or renewed, and yet fail to be accountable before God to the Gospel Commission. The first and continuing priority for the Church must be this directive from the Lord: **Go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . make disciples.**

While the Gospel Commission does not change, its fulfillment is demonstrated in different ways. A pastor works within a different context than that of a classroom teacher, a physician, or an institutional administrator. Whatever the personal or institutional role, each one is accountable to God's command. Among the great benefits resulting from an assessment of their effectiveness will be the increasing trust that develops as each member, each pastor, each administrator, and each church institution addresses this priority and gives it proper attention.

The family of God acknowledges that each person is individually accountable to God. At the same time, believers are admonished to examine themselves (see 2 Corinthians 13:5). A spiritual assessment process has its place in the personal life. Just as surely it has its place in organizational life.

Spiritual assessment, while appropriate, is also a very delicate matter. For humankind sees only in

part. The earthly frame of reference is always limited to that which is visible and to a brief span of time surrounding the present. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from careful and thoughtful evaluation of personal and organizational life.

It is possible to identify several principles which can guide such an assessment. While any attempt will be incomplete, the following areas of specific assessment will heighten awareness of and accountability to God and to the mission which is an integral part of the Christian's relationship and commitment to Him. The list is not comprehensive of those identified for attention, but the principles outlined here are applicable also to other individuals, organizations, and institutions.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for each church member.

Each Seventh-day Adventist, whether denominational employee or layperson, is promised the gift of the Holy Spirit which will enable spiritual growth in the grace of the Lord and which will empower the development and use of spiritual gifts in witness and service. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is demonstrated by . . .

- maintaining, where possible, a Christian home where the standards and principles of Christ are both taught and exemplified,
- experiencing a life that rejoices in the assurance of salvation, is moved by the Holy Spirit to effective personal witness to others, and which experiences in Christ a gracious character that is consistent with God's will as revealed in His word,
- using the spiritual gifts God has promised each one,
- dedicating time, spiritual gifts, and resources, prayerfully and systematically, in Gospel proclamation and, individually as well

- as part of a church family, becoming the Lord's salt and light through sharing His love in family life and community service, always motivated by the sense of the soon return of the Lord and His command to preach His Gospel both at home and afar, and
- participating in a plan for systematic spiritual growth and assessment of one's personal walk with God by forming mutually accountable spiritual partnership where the primary objective is to prayerfully mentor one another.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for a church pastor.

A Seventh-day Adventist pastor, called and empowered by the Holy Spirit, driven by love for souls, points sinners to Christ as Creator and Redeemer, and teaches them how to share their faith and become effective disciples. He or she regularly shares a balanced spiritual diet fresh from communion with God and His Word. The pastor shows the saving grace and transforming power of the gospel by . . .

- striving to make his or her family a model of what the Lord expects in marriage and families,
- preaching Bible-based, Christ-centered sermons that nurture the members and support the world Church, and teaching the fundamental beliefs with a sense of urgency rooted in the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of prophecy,
- appealing for all to submit to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit so that the Gospel may be validated in the compassionate life of the faith-directed believer,
- leading the local congregation in a strong evangelistic outreach that both increases membership and establishes new congregations, while maintaining strong support for the local and worldwide work of the Church,

- evidencing effectiveness in ministry as the family of God increases numerically and grows in spiritual experience and worship, thus hastening the return of the Lord, and
- affirming the prioritization of personal spiritual growth and mission effectiveness by regularly participating in a spiritual outcome assessment process. The division will facilitate the development of an assessment model, to be implemented by each union/local conference, which includes a self-assessment module as well as elements addressing the pastor's responsibility to the congregation(s) and the world Church organization.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for a congregation.

A Seventh-day Adventist congregation creatively and self-critically functions as a witnessing and nurturing community, facilitating Gospel proclamation, both locally, regionally, and globally. It lives in the world as "the body of Christ" showing the same concern and positive action for those which it touches as the Lord did in His earthly ministry by . . .

- demonstrating an abiding assurance in the saving grace of Christ and a commitment to the distinctive teachings of the Word,
- understanding and accepting its role as part of an end-time movement with a local, regional, and global responsibility for the spreading of the Gospel,
- developing strategic plans for sharing the Good News in its community, with the goal of ensuring that all persons understand how Jesus can change their lives and preparing them for His soon coming, and by helping establish new congregations,
- nurturing the lives of members and their families so that they will

grow spiritually and will continue confidently in the mission and truths expressed through God's last-day Church,

- acknowledging the privileges of being a Seventh-day Adventist congregation and the concurrent accountability to the world family of Seventh-day Adventist congregations, as outlined in the *Church Manual*, by accepting and implementing broad plans that empower the spread of the Gospel in wider contexts, and by participating in the organizational, financial, and representative system designed to facilitate a global outreach, and
- participating in an assessment plan that leads the congregation to awareness of its strengths and weaknesses and the progress it has made in its mission to teach, baptize, and make disciples. The assessment plan will normally be a self-assessment program conducted annually by the entire congregation meeting as a group; but, periodically, it should include an assessment of the congregation's participation in, and responsibility to, the broader organization. Each division will facilitate the development of the assessment process, in association with the unions and local conference/missions, that will be used within its territory.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for the elementary schools and academies.

A Seventh-day Adventist elementary school/academy creates a climate that nurtures the student spiritually, mentally, physically, and socially, and instills confidence in the relevance, role, message, and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The schools provide excellence in Adventist education by . . .

- developing, for the institution, a comprehensive spiritual master plan and curricula for all subjects

that, in addition to academic excellence, support the Seventh-day Adventist world view and integrate faith with learning,

- employing fully committed, professionally competent Seventh-day Adventist teachers, who are actively involved in their local church, and who integrate faith and learning as they nurture their students in being good members and citizens of both church and society,
- working with parents and local congregations to ensure that each student is presented with the claims of Christ and is given opportunity to decide for Him and be baptized,
- transmitting to students an understanding of the biblical role of the last-day people of God and how they can participate in fulfilling the mission of the Church,
- involving staff and students in outreach initiatives in ways appropriate to student age and planning community opportunities for witness, and
- participating systematically in a division-developed, and a union- and conference-implemented, spiritual assessment process which provides annual reports to the school board and its various constituencies.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for the colleges and universities.

A Seventh-day Adventist college/university offers academically sound, tertiary and/or post-graduate education to Seventh-day Adventists and to students of nearby communities, who welcome the opportunity to study in an Adventist environment, by . . .

- developing a comprehensive spiritual master plan, proposed by the faculty and approved by the board, that identifies the spiritual truths and values, both cognitive and rational, which the

institution is committed to share with its students and to comprehensively identify the opportunities through which those values will be communicated during a given period of time in campus life,

- maintaining a classroom and overall campus environment which ensures opportunities for both academic instruction and Gospel encounters that produce graduates who are recognized by both the Church and society for their excellence in both the academic and spiritual aspects of their lives; men and women who are well-balanced spiritually, mentally, physically, and socially; men and women who love their Lord, who hold high His standards in their daily lives, who will help build strong, thriving local congregations, and who will be salt and light to their communities both as laypersons and as church employees,
- affirming unambiguously in classroom and campus life the beliefs, practices, and world view of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, sharing the joy of the Gospel, demonstrating confidence in the divinely established role of the Advent movement and its continuing significance in God's plan for these last days, facilitating activities for faculty, staff, and students to engage in Gospel witness and Christian service, and encouraging the faculty and staff to a consistency of life-style which is manifested in nurturing, compassionate faculty/staff relationships with students,
- employing fully committed, professionally competent Seventh-day Adventist teachers, who are actively involved in their local church, and who integrate faith and learning in the context of nurturing their students to be productive members of both society and of the Lord's Church,

and who interact with parents and other constituents in order to understand and to fulfill their high academic and spiritual expectations for educational programs serving the youth,

- evaluating the achievement of the objectives outlined in the spiritual master plan by a faculty-developed, board-approved, comprehensive assessment program, designed with sufficient specificity to evaluate each element of campus life, to guide the college/university administration in taking affirming or corrective measures, and to serve as the basis for annual reports of the spiritual health of the institution to the governing board and various constituencies, and
- submitting the proposed spiritual master plan and assessment program to a General Conference-appointed, international panel of highly qualified educators who will provide the college/university board with a written evaluation of the spiritual master plan and the assessment program.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for the hospitals and health care institutions.

A Seventh-day Adventist hospital/health care institution provides the highest quality, whole-person, health care to the community it serves by developing a comprehensive spiritual assessment plan that includes . . .

- creating a well-planned, positive atmosphere that focuses on the healing presence of the Lord,
- developing a professionally competent, mission-oriented, and compassionate staff who sensitively minister to patients from the context of their Christian faith as well as distinctive Seventh-day Adventist beliefs,
- ensuring that all those within the institution's sphere of influence

are aware that the health care facility is affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church by developing staff-orientation and community-witnessing programs that portray positively both the hospital and the Church to those it serves,

- sensitively stimulating spiritual inquiry and responding to it systematically,
- allocating such financial and personnel resources as may be possible to the local, regional, and global soul-winning, educational, and/or health care mission of the Church, and
- demonstrating accountability for fulfillment of mission through participation, at least triennially, in a comprehensive evaluation process developed, planned, and overseen by the respective division executive committee to assess progress toward achieving specific, measurable, mission outcomes.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for the institutions of mass communication: publishing houses, media centers, Adventist Book Centers, and radio stations.

A Seventh-day Adventist institution of mass communication provides quality productions that enhance the mission of the Church and the commitment of its members to mission by . . .

- encouraging initiatives and the distribution only of that which contributes to Gospel proclamation and the nurturing of church members within the context of the last-day message,
- planning or supporting evangelistic activities which may lead to personal contact and involving the local congregation, wherever possible,
- using technology and media in a way that is sensitive to available funds, so that resources are maxi-

mized for the mission of the Church,

- coordinating initiatives with other church entities to ensure interaction with and support of related programs and projects,
- providing such staff as may be possible or appropriate to assist pastors and congregations in the follow-up of those responding to outreach initiatives, and operating a feedback system for product development or modification, and
- establishing, under direction of governing bodies, systems for periodic review of materials and programs, both for members and for the general public, thus providing management and governing bodies with an analysis of effectiveness in meeting mission goals, ensuring concurrence with Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and practices, and preparing reports for presentation to each regular meeting of the constituency and annually to the board.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for the food industries.

A Seventh-day Adventist food industry develops products that contribute positively to health, and provides a resource to assist the giving of the Gospel in these last days by . . .

- manufacturing and selling only those products which are consistent with the divine principles of diet and health,
- training personnel to inform the public on sound health practices and assisting the Church in developing increasingly better health among the members,
- providing low cost vegetarian food to the world's developing countries,
- implementing programs under which those influenced by the health message may receive further information about the

Church,

- budgeting financial assistance for the mission of the Church on a basis established by the division executive committee, and
- periodically evaluating performance in terms of efficiency, return on investment, and contribution to the mission of the Church, based on a system administered by the board and established by the division committee, in consultation with the International Health Food Association.

What "Total Commitment to God" involves for a Conference/Mission, or Union.

A Seventh-day Adventist conference/mission or union, with leadership that has a personal relationship with Jesus and is submitted to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, motivates members, pastors, teachers, and all other denominational employees to present to their neighbors and communities the saving truth as it is in these last days, and oversees and prioritizes its plans, initiatives, and finances to give first place to continuous soul-winning and nurturing ministries by . . .

- identifying and promoting the spiritual objectives, both evangelistic and nurturing, of the conference/mission or union and, through a strategic planning and financing process, involving the collective participation of its membership and organizations,
- showing, through the personal example of leadership, that the Church is continuing, without wavering, its divinely appointed role as a witness to this dying and needy world,
- nurturing and supporting pastors, members, and congregations so that they may grow as disciples and experience ways of fulfilling the Gospel Commission,
- exercising administrative leadership in institutions and entities under its direction to ensure that the mission of the Church is kept

clearly in focus, and developing and implementing initiatives to establish new congregations in communities and areas where needed,

- assuring that budgetary provisions for local, national, and global evangelistic endeavors are carefully balanced against the resources allocated to the nurture of the believers, and that both are demonstrated to be of the highest priority, and
- cooperating with the division in developing and implementing assessment processes, which may be evaluated by a committee designated by the General Conference, by which members, pastors, congregations, institutions, and the conference/mission or union itself may ascertain their commitment to and effectiveness in carrying out the Gospel Commission and reporting their findings to the respective constituencies.

What "Total Commitment to God" Involves for the General Conference/Divisions.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and its divisions, with leadership that has a personal relationship with Jesus and is submitted to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, provide overall global direction to the spiritual life and mission of the Church, develop strategic plans and policies, generate initiatives and programs, and allocate financial and human resources in ways that demonstrate urgency in

completing the mission of the Church and subordination to the command to **Go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . make disciples** by . . .

- giving priority at Annual Councils and Spring Meetings of the General Conference and division executive committees to the nurture of the spiritual life of a growing Church with a clear mission to carry the eternal gospel, in the time of the end setting of the Three Angels' Messages, to all the world,
- appointing small committees with international representation as may be necessary to evaluate and make recommendations to appropriate boards or executive committees concerning assessment programs being developed,
- ensuring that administrations and boards of institutions and agencies under their direction establish spiritual accountability processes that give evidence of their commitment to the last-day mission of the Church, and demonstrate their effectiveness in accomplishing it,
- requiring that initiatives and activities of limited focus, while having some merit of their own, are, in fact, subordinated to the broader, coordinated mission goals of the Church, and governing the disbursement of budgets to promote the promulgation of the Gospel to all the world,
- ensuring the mission of the Church is clearly understood and implemented through assessment pro-

cesses that review progress in meeting mission objectives involving both nurture of members and evangelistic outreach, and

- developing a spiritual master plan and assessment program, to be monitored by a committee appointed at each level by the General Conference/Division Executive Committee, for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of the General Conference/Division in terms of the mission of the Church and assisting all levels of church organization and all institutions to assess the effectiveness of their spiritual master plans and assessment programs.

Truly, the spiritual mandate is simple. **Go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . make disciples.** Responsible Seventh-day Adventist Church members and all church employees must remember that each one will be held accountable before God for this principle. Someday, at the great judgment bar, the Lord will ask, "What have you done, relying on My grace, with the gifts, talents, and opportunities I gave you?"

As He did 2,000 years ago, the Lord commands His Church today: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." **Go . . . teach . . . baptize . . . make disciples.** Total commitment to God mandates the fulfillment of this commission, which is still the only and true measure of success.