



# Into the World of The 21st Century

By the year 2000, 70 percent of Adventists will live in Africa and Latin America; by 2005, there will be more Adventists than Jews.

*by Jon L. Dybdahl*

**A**T A RECENT MEETING OF THE AMERICAN Society of Missiology, I had a meal with major mission leaders of the Nazarene and the Assemblies of God churches. They asked me how mission was going in the Adventist Church. I replied that, in North America, the Adventist Church as a social organization is past its prime.

North America now sends less than half the missionaries it used to 20 years ago. In 1993, fewer than 35 missionaries were sent from North America, the 10th largest Protestant mission effort; in 1973, 69 missionaries left North America, then ranking Seventh-day Adventists at fourth among Protestants.

While tithe per capita in North America (adjusted for inflation) increased from \$353.22 to \$404.20 during the 40 years from 1950 to 1990, Sabbath school and mission offerings actually declined per capita for the same period—from \$125.73 to \$22.25.<sup>1</sup> The General

Conference suggests that, by the year 2000, 8 percent of our members will be in North America, 2 percent in Europe, 31 percent in Africa, 16 percent in Asia, and 39 percent in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

## From Everywhere to Everywhere

**M**y Nazarene and Protestant friends visibly breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. They proceeded to share openly their struggle to bring renewal, and the plateauing in North America of their denominations in the area of mission.

Of course, Adventists shouldn't despair about their expansion as an institution. Adventism is now growing at 5-plus percent per year; at that rate, membership doubles about every 11 years. The approximately 10 million members of today will increase to about 18 million by 2005. That's slightly more than the projected number of Jews in 2005, and only 4 or 5 million fewer than the projections for Sikhs.

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Furthermore, we are not seeing an overall decline in cross-cultural mission, but a radical reshaping of the whole Adventist missionary enterprise. The last decade has seen the rise of numerous new Adventist mission organizations in North America. What Adventists originally called “independent” or “self-supporting” ministries are now termed “supporting” ministries. We now know of 30 major Adventist mission-sending agencies. Some, like Maranatha (whose youth participants numbered more than 1,000 in 1995), do short-term mission projects of only a few weeks while other agencies like Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM) send 6-year-term missionaries with more training preparation than the General Conference gives. Adventist Frontier Missions already has branches in the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, and contributions, over the past four years, have increased at the rate of 50 percent per year.

Increasingly, Adventist missionaries go from everywhere to everywhere. In line with trends among other evangelical Christians, the already numerous missionaries from the Philippines, India, Singapore, and Malaysia will certainly grow. The 1,000 Missionary Movement, headquartered in the Philippines and funded mainly by Korean money, is a major player in the Asian Adventist missionary scene. The collapse of the Iron Curtain has opened up eastern Europe both as missionary-receiving (Albania now has missionaries) and missionary-sending countries.

While Adventists are globally growing more rapidly than most other denominations, Christianity as a whole is expanding. In 1996, Daniel S. Barrett, the most widely used statistician of global mission, counted about 1.95 billion Christians, which represent 33.7 percent of the world population. His forecast for 2025 is 3.06 billion Christians for a total of 36.9 percent of the world population. Islam, the second largest world religion, numbers about 1.13 billion today, but by 2025 should count

1.96 billion adherents, or about 24 percent of the world population. The number of foreign missionaries in 1996 is given as 398,000, which will increase to 550,000 in 2025. Missiologists believe that the largest amount of this increase will be missionaries originating in non-Western countries.

## From Hardware to Software

In 1996 I asked some 50 M.Div. students in my “Mission to the World” class how Global Mission differed from Harvest ’90 and other such earlier mission plans. Only a few had a clear idea.

I had to explain that earlier evangelistic/mission programs emphasized the number of baptisms. Different church entities were encouraged to baptize a certain target number of people. The goal of Global Mission is church planting—specifically church planting among unreached people. Unentered population segments became the prime target. To use a fast-food franchise analogy, the Adventist Church switched from emphasizing the number of vegeburgers it sold to establishing vegeburger-producing franchises in places where there had been none before. The present Global Mission strategy discourages evangelists from going simply to the place where they think they can get quick, easy baptisms, and leads them to seek out places where the gospel has not been known.

Recently, I had a brief visit with a seminary student. He was not a rabble-rousing agitator, but a supportive senior seminarian with a concern about mission. He said, “I’d like you to help me evaluate a project I’m working on. I’m designing a series of one-page ads for major American magazines.” He was proposing ads that would represent basic doctrinal beliefs like the Sabbath and the state of the dead, but would not mention the church. “I have been reading,” he said, “about

Apple and Microsoft. I'm convinced we in the church have for years been working like Apple, and if we don't change we may be doomed as they seem to be." He went on to explain that Apple had a great operating system but wouldn't let others use it. To get the Apple operating system, you had to buy their "box" (computer/hardware). Microsoft sold its operating system and software to everybody. They let any "box" use it. As long as they could sell their operating system and software, they didn't care what kind of computer you had or who made it.

This serious seminarian was raising fundamental questions in a more explosive way than if he had deliberately planted a bomb on the Adventist 747. Do we see our software and hardware as an indivisible unit, like Apple, or can we make the "software" (Adventist beliefs and life-style) available and usable for people who already have their own "box" (hardware/organization)?

## From Christian Remnant to World Remnant

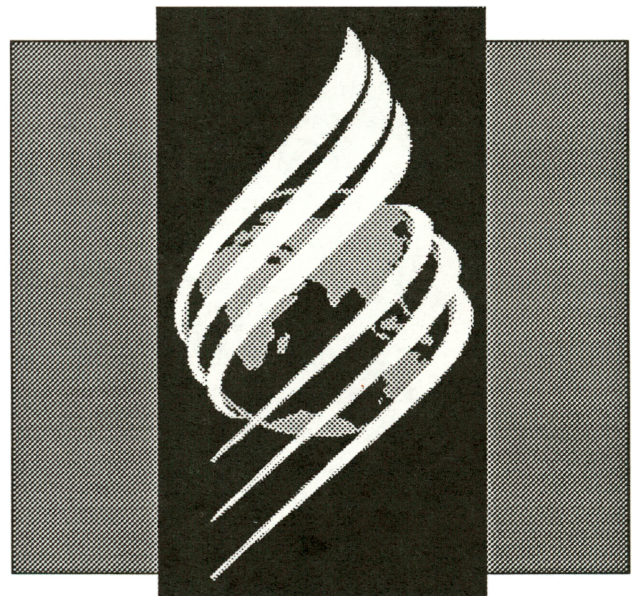
The issue for mission now and into the 21st century is how Christians are to view other religions. Are these religions false or true or somewhere in between? Can one find salvation in other religions? If so, on what basis? The answers given to these questions radically affect not only how one views Christian mission but also how Christian mission is practiced—if at all.

Unbeknown to many members, a small group of Christian missiologists interested in evangelizing Muslims has started a movement in a certain Muslim country. This movement accepts many major Christian beliefs, but if members were asked their religious affiliation, they would answer, "Muslim." This group has a distinctively Adventist segment which, the last I knew, numbered more than 1,500 mem-

bers. They believe in the Sabbath, tithing, baptism, prophecies of the Second Coming, and so on. If someone questioned their specific identity, they would say they are the *true remnant of Islam*. Called to defend their beliefs, they are able to do so from the Koran. Many leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have, for the past several years, given the initiative their tentative support. While Adventist officials continue to discuss and consider the situation, the movement continues to grow at a high rate—winning literally hundreds yearly.

Adventist Islamicists have begun quietly to suggest that Adventism should not consider itself merely a remnant of the Christian church, but a true remnant in *all* world religions. While the details of this argument have been worked out only in relationship to Islam, the clear suggestion is made that scholars of other religions should make the same theological assumption. This whole situation raises profound theological and methodological issues which, in my estimation, should be considered a high priority for our faith community.

The theological rationale for the support of this Islamic movement to Christ springs at least in part from a new understanding of the remnant. I think this motif in Adventism will



continue to be explored, reshaped, and re-born even as we enter the 21st century. The remnant idea is so deep in the Adventist tradition and psyche that to toss it aside would be to lose too much of ourselves. Furthermore, the remnant motif is rich enough to be continually mined for new uses.

By and large, the remnant has been used to *narrow* the way we view religion, to lessen the number of true believers. But the failure of Old Testament Israel to declare God's glory among the heathen (Isaiah 66:1) and be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6; 42:6, 7), made the remnant necessary to widen and broaden the scope of God's people. The remnant concept should expand rather than contract our vision and our mission. Has the time come to see Adventism as a reform movement among, rather than out of, other world religions? Should we look at ourselves as a world religion, rather than a branch of Protestantism?

## From Rationalistic Streak to Spiritual Mission

There is another major theological issue with which Adventists must deal as we enter the 21st century. I call it the *spiritual dimension of mission*. Many forms of Western Christianity—even evangelical ones—have a rationalistic understanding of Christianity. Missionaries from Europe and America planted primarily these kinds of churches. Call to ministry was a matter of education. Guidance was a matter of planning. Healing was a matter of medicine and doctors. World Christianity increasingly realizes that this brand of “faith” is a less than satisfying imitation of the real biblical item. The roots of this new viewpoint lie deeper than the surging charismatic movement. The reality of the demonic plays a part, but the increasing emphasis on prayer and intercession is crucial also. While I certainly would not want to endorse all this movement

teaches, we can learn from it. Adventism of both right and left has a very rational streak. Adventists find it hard to understand both charismatics and mystics, and are poorer because of it. To reach an often jaded secular society, we must have a firmer conviction about the reality of the spiritual realm. Non-Western Adventists have always understood this fact.

At the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, where I teach, we have recently been through a long and sometimes fairly shrill discussion that has led to the formation of a “School of Evangelism, Mission, and Ministry.” In the end, all departments of the seminary were made part of the new school. I think it was a good decision. Most of us in the mission/evangelism area have chosen to not take personally characterizations of the two parts of seminary education such as “we content people (theology, Old Testament, New Testament, church history) teach them what to say, and you practice people (mission, evangelism, preaching, counseling) teach them where to stand when they say it.” We realize that we may have in the past said equally simplistic and deceptive things.

Actually, missiologists should be teaching theology, and theologians (or biblical scholars) should teach mission. As Paul Piersen says:

Paul was the greatest theologian of the church because he first was the greatest missionary. His theology flowed out of his practice of mission. Similarly theological education must flow out of the same passion for mission. . . . [A]ll theological education. . . must be missiological. It will not be enough to add a course or two on mission. This calls for a reshaping of the theological enterprise around mission.<sup>3</sup>

It is my deep conviction that the church of the 21st century will not listen to or financially support a theology (or biblical study) that is not vitally connected to mission. On the other hand, the Christian faith community of the 21st

century will be ill-served and in fact betrayed by a missiology (or evangelism) that fails to reflect theologically on its task.

Our culture, our generation, and our training have made Adventist academics and professionals very articulate in asking questions and critiquing the status quo. I am not recommending that we lose this ability. However, I

am deeply convicted that we must also undertake the imperative task of creating and articulating a clear, positive vision of our mission. When a church articulates a common vision, people are changed, organizations are revitalized. We must have a vision, a story that makes us what we are. We must tell that story often and passionately.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Gibson, Ann. "Divisional Winners in the Growing World Church," unpublished paper.

2. Statistics from a report prepared by the staff of GC Archives and Statistics, September 7, 1988.

3. Responses quoted in Elliston, Edgar J. *Missiological Education: Moving Forward From Where We Are* (Pasadena, Calif.: Draft published as a syllabus by the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1994), p. 7.