

ADRA and Adventist Missions: Rescued or Kidnapped?

The Concerns of a Missiologist

By Børge Schantz

With joy and pride I read in the latest statistics from the General Conference that total aid distributed by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in 2002 amounted to almost \$220 million. ADRA helped more than 30 million people at the lowest levels of misery, poverty, hurt, shame, and dignity. Although the average amounted to only about seven dollars per person, the ministry is still impressive.¹

ADRA's employees reach out, help the disadvantaged, and break down prejudice toward Adventists whenever they meet with donors who have authority and influence at the United Nations, with governments throughout the world, in various Christian churches, with other nongovernmental agencies, and in private businesses.

It brought me special satisfaction to know that even a few Seventh-day Adventist hospitals and schools have benefited from ADRA funds. Although ADRA does not generally provide such funding, in some encouraging instances dedicated

ADRA personnel have assisted struggling Adventist churches. There are even cases where ADRA could claim to be an opening wedge for Adventists to unentered areas. However, this involvement often took place on a private basis with unbudgeted funds in the spare time of ADRA workers.

I read the statistics and other ADRA reports with some misgivings, to which this article is intended to draw attention. By doing this I am sticking my neck out—I am touching a sacred cow of modern Adventism. However, I feel that church members are generally left somewhat ignorant of ADRA, its objectives, limita-



tions, and operations. They need honest openness, explanation, and guidance.

My main apprehensions are expressed in eight questions. These questions deal with issues that, based on my feelings and experience, indicate that ADRA is not working concurrent with the objectives and fundamental values peculiar to the Advent movement in its God-given task during the last days of the world's history.

I am aware that perhaps my church needs to update its strategy, methods, and self-understanding in the twenty-first century. After all, in the 150 years since it started things have changed tremendously.

Missions Kidnapped?

Years ago, we sent out as missionaries with the solid commission to proclaim the gospel and bring people into the Church. Marching orders also included instructions to preach an end-time message. Medical, educational, and welfare programs served well as opening wedges. They were not, however, goals in themselves.

In current ADRA reports there are no accounts that

tell about people being brought into meaningful relationships with Jesus Christ and his Church.

Recently, speakers at a Sabbath church service promoted ADRA activities and the agency's achievements. One member in the audience asked whether ADRA workers had witnessed for their Christian beliefs or the uniqueness of Adventism while giving help to the needy. Such recipients are generally in a winnable state of transition, being positively disposed toward persons helping them. The answer was a clear No.

Not only did the donors, which included governments, not allow proselytizing, many of the ADRA workers could not have done so even if permitted because they were not Seventh-day Adventists.

1. Has the Seventh-day Adventist mission been kidnapped?



ADRA, A Newcomer in the Adventist Framework: An “Ecclesiolae in Ecclesia”?

ADRA holds an interesting position within the administrative framework of Adventism. It is a child of Adventist mission and loving care, though a child that followed its own untraditional path. The transition in the 1980s to ADRA from its predecessor, the Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Service (SAWS), which the Church controlled and funded, did not take place without birth pangs.

In a short time the new program became very popular. It had some excellent leaders and efficient promoters. It was incorporated independently with a separate board, and got its own administration and treasury.² In some cases, ADRA created its own salary scales a little higher than those of the Church. This inequality hurt the Church at times because good organizers and hardworking pastor/evangelists in the Third World were tempted to work for ADRA rather than the Church.

ADRA is classified as a nongovernment organization (NGO). Its objectives are expressed in terms similar to those of many other faith-based NGOs and it works under the same conditions. Funds granted by governments and other donors—even when augmented by grants from the Church—cannot be used to promote political or religious convictions, including Christian beliefs and the unique Seventh-day Adventist message. This restriction silences ADRA workers from sharing Adventist beliefs.

2. Does such an arrangement agree with the objectives outlined in Seventh-day Adventist working policies: “The purpose of the General Conference is to teach all nations the everlasting gospel of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ and the commandments of God”?

Government Support and Seventh-day Adventist Missions

The first Protestant missionaries were evangelists in the technical sense of the word. They had only one aim: to proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior. Medical and educational programs were not initially part of their mission. The few medical doctors and teachers sent out in the nineteenth century were sent to serve missionaries.

Not until the end of the nineteenth century did medical and educational staff expand beyond mission compounds and serve nationals. It was soon discovered that these services were extremely effective in drawing people to the mission churches.³

The Seventh-day Adventist mission impulse developed afterward and followed this pattern with success. The mission budget included funding for education and medical care, all financed by Sabbath School offerings and, later, Harvest Ingathering. Preaching the Advent message had primacy. But whereas other mission agencies received grants from colonial governments, SDAs adamantly opposed such assistance.

As time passed, the Church reconsidered its initial opposition to government aid. The Church reluctantly decided to accept outside funds if no strings were attached. It did not want proclamation of the gospel and proselytizing to be hindered.

However, as ADRA currently operates this condition is not honored. Although performing valuable work among the destitute, ADRA has diminished or altogether neglected the importance of preaching the everlasting gospel.

3. Has the Church sold the Gospel Commission for a “lentil stew”?

Ellen G. White and Social Involvement

Ellen G. White offered counsel along these lines on a number of occasions. “The Lord has marked out our ways of working . . .,” she wrote in 1904. “As a people we are not to imitate and fall in with Salvation Army methods.”⁴

Commenting on social-medical work she emphasized the need to maintain the priority of the gospel. In 1900, she wrote:

There may be and is danger of losing sight of the great principles of truth when doing the work for the poor that it is right to do, but we are ever to bear in mind that in carrying forward this work the spiritual necessities are to be kept prominent. . . .

Because of the ever-increasing opportunities for ministering to the temporal needs of all classes, there is the danger that this work will eclipse the message that God has given us to bear in every city—the proclamation of the soon coming of Christ, the necessity of obedience to the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus. . . . It is to be proclaimed with a loud voice and go to the whole world.⁵

4. Where do such counsels fit into the development of ADRA as a Seventh-day Adventist agency?

Harvest Ingathering

Traditionally, church members raised Harvest Ingathering funds each year collecting money door to door from neighbors and friends. Funds collected were then used directly for missions in the traditional sense. Not only were they spent to help the Church keep established mission stations operating, they also helped it enter new areas with educational and medical work that served as opening wedges for the gospel.

Today, things have changed. Now, Harvest Ingathering funds are handed to ADRA, which mixes them with major donations from governments and others. Because governments and other donors often attach conditions that restrict proselytizing, the original mission purpose of Harvest Ingathering has been weakened.

Other changes have come, as well. Traditionally, pamphlets handed out during Harvest Ingathering served a domestic mission purpose through articles of a spiritual nature and advertising that promoted Bible correspondence schools. However, recent issues do not in any way reveal the Seventh-day Adventist faith. As a result, opportunities for reaching people at home—perhaps the Church's greatest opportunity for mission outreach each year—have been lost.

5. Do members on the local level who still take part in Harvest Ingathering understand how what used to be mission funds are currently handled?

6. Are they aware that only Sabbath School and World Mission offerings (which last year totaled less than \$51 million) can be used for taking the Three Angels Messages to the world?

Competing Faith-Based NGOs

NGOs are based on humanitarian concerns. They can be divided roughly into two groups: faith based and secular based. The objective common to both is to help people in need. Furthermore, both render help regardless of the recipients' race, sex, creed, or politics.

Today, a young generation of donors tends to support projects rather than agencies, regardless of the NGO's basic affiliation. Many Seventh-day Adventists have no problem occasionally donating to NGOs like World Vision, Red Cross, Save the Children, other church aid programs, and CARITAS, a Catholic relief agency. This happens especially when

donors know the limitations under which ADRA works.

ADRA has trained many good people. Some of these people have sought alternate employment with other NGOs. Interviews with some of these workers have revealed that the change has not really affected their religious devotion. Opportunities to witness are still somewhat restricted. One such worker even claimed that his new faith-based NGO is more "public about its values and beliefs" than ADRA. These recent developments raise an important question:

7. Does the Seventh-day Adventist Church have resources to duplicate programs that other Christian organizations can do just as well?

Conflicting Eschatologies

Official attempts to justify ADRA's existence turn to the same biblical references and texts that generations have used to promote traditional missions, educational work, and help for the needy. However, there is a significant difference in ADRA's publications. The call for gospel witness is scarcely touched when the Biblical Perspectives of ADRA work are listed. Words like "redeeming" and "salvation" are admittedly used, but only in a casual manner, lacking in emphasis.

Similarly, such Adventist core themes as the Decalogue, Sabbath, signs of Christ's Second Coming, and the Three Angels Messages are used creatively and interpreted in an interesting way. But they are discussed in a general way without application as part of an outreach program.

All of which raises the issue of eschatology. Traditionally, the form of Christian eschatology in which one believes has influenced not only the spiritual life of the believer, but also the level of involvement in missionary tasks, as well as the methodology followed.

A strong end-times eschatology tends to result in a proclamation that has little social involvement. At the other end of the scale are those who claim that Christians should focus on perfecting the existing social order in hopes of advancing the Kingdom of God. Those who subscribe to this view seem to be more concerned with present conditions than the kingdom to come. Between these two views are a variety of eschatologies.





At present, Adventism in general has moved way from an extreme end-time eschatology, which reflected our earlier experience. In practice, we live in what could be termed an "in-between times eschatology" in which members "work while waiting" for the "delayed" Second Coming.⁶

It seems that ADRA has moved one step further to the left and is closer to a "social gospel eschatology" position. ADRA leaves the impression that social, welfare, medical, educational, and development work is a goal in itself, not a means to evangelize the world.

8. Is the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its unique fundamental beliefs and worldwide mission program, able to accept, live with, and operate with conflicting eschatologies guiding outreach programs?

Toward a Solution

Although the concerns expressed here are personal, they are shared with many others. I have struggled with these concerns for years, not only in my service in the home and mission fields, but also in my teaching, research, and writing. These tensions have also had a healthy and creative effect on my perspective. I have been forced to explore the relationship between gospel proclamation and social actions. I do not claim that there are easy solutions; it is hard to find a balance.

However, here is a suggestion for ADRA's leaders. There is great need for a genuine theology of action.

Such a biblical theology should be based on the Seventh-day Adventist ethos, an understanding of the Church's own commission and its perception of its role in the world, as well as of ADRA's rightful place in the Church.

This theology should not be developed by "desk theologians" alone, important as their input is. Persons with practical knowledge, who have been involved with non-Christian religions as frontline missionaries and grappled with cultural differences, should also be members of the team.

Such "task theologians" have observed and experienced the positive charges that only the gospel can bring in the many hopeless and depressing circumstances where social services are otherwise out of reach. These experienced missionaries could bring valuable insights to the process of developing an ADRA theology of action.

ADRA's outstanding work for the needy of this world must continue and be strengthened. However, social involvement should be balanced with attention to the supernatural elements of faith and traditional Christian beliefs.

Notes and References

1. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *139th Annual Statistical Report, 2001* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2002), 66, 67, 75.
2. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Working Policy, 2001* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2001-2), 356-59.
3. Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, trans. and ed. Dale Cooper (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 212-14.
4. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 8:185.
5. *Ibid.*, 6:290.
6. Roy Branson, "Adventists Between the Times: The Shift in the Church's Eschatology," *Spectrum* 8.1 (Sept. 1976):15-26.

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