

Rediscovering the Humanitarian Aspect of Mission

By Reinder Bruinsma

Speaking as a missiologist, Børge Schantz concludes that the Church should focus not on humanitarian activities, but on its core business: proclamation of its end-time message of salvation. When he asks the question: "Should

the Seventh-day Adventist Church duplicate programs that other Christian organizations are doing just as well?" he seems to be inclined to answer "No."

At the very least, Schantz would urge ADRA to combine a direct Christian witness with its social projects. I have great respect for Schantz, for his long and outstanding service for the Church, and his dedication to the mission of the Church, but this time I disagree with the overall-message he seeks to deliver.

Concerns

The fact that I want to give solid support to ADRA does not mean, however, that I have no criticisms or concerns. To some extent they coincide with concerns mentioned in Schantz's article; to some

extent they differ. My overarching concern is that ADRA continue to honor fully the Adventist element of its name and remain an Adventist agency in the full sense of the word. Whether that needs to be translated into overt evangelism as part of the package ADRA offers to those in need is another matter.

I know that an ongoing debate exists about how Adventist ADRA should be. Some argue that the ties between ADRA and the Church should be much tighter, so that the Church retains a firm grip on ADRA's humanitarian arm and does not lose contact with ADRA. Others argue just as passionately that ADRA should operate some distance from the Church, and that its work will be seriously hampered if such distance is not carefully maintained.

This is not an easy matter to resolve.



A conscious decision has been made to structure ADRA not as a church department but as a separate agency. There are many very good reasons for that decision. If ADRA asks for and receives grants from governmental and quasi-government organizations in the United States and other developed countries in the West, it must have a fully independent status.

Also, if the Church is to avoid major financial risks it needs to protect itself against ascending liability and make sure that legal claims against ADRA do not become claims against the Church. Whatever ADRA's organizational structure and legal status, the Church must, I believe, be very intentional in keeping ADRA close to it—in its ideals, *modus operandi*, ethics, policies, and culture.

One of my major concerns is that ADRA be viewed as a ministry, not primarily as a development organization, an NGO (nongovernment organization), a worldwide agency, or an industry. Of course, I understand that ADRA must, within the world in which it operates, identify itself to external audiences as an international NGO and profile itself in a somewhat secular way. But ADRA must be understood as one of the Church's key ministries when it tries to define itself within the context of the Church, when ADRA leaders try to define their ideals and goals, and when they try to position ADRA within the Church.

With Schantz, I am concerned that ADRA may at times be in danger of placing too much emphasis on large grants. ADRA may need to decline grants if it cannot guarantee that the programs or projects it funds are fully in harmony with the Adventist ethos of the organization. Also, the fact that in many countries ADRA now

uses Harvest Ingathering funds puts a special burden on ADRA. It has a responsibility with regard to church-related projects funded from these sources.

Tensions with the Church

Over the years I have had a fair amount of exposure to areas of tension between the Church and ADRA. I believe that such tensions can be resolved to a large degree. Of course, there will always be challenges in the relationship between ADRA and the Church because they have different natures and assignments. A lot of this tension can be defused if the parties are willing systematically to identify and analyze the problems and look for creative solutions.

ADRA has an image problem in some sectors of the Church that it needs to take seriously. In contrast, many church leaders need to be educated about the world in which ADRA seeks to minister, about the possibilities of which it must take advantage, and about the limitations it must face.

In some instances, better communication can eliminate misunderstanding. Church people talk a lot about ADRA among themselves; likewise, ADRA people talk about the Church. What is needed is more open and intelligent dialogue. It would be well worth the investment, I believe, to appoint an international task force of Church employees and those who work for ADRA to study relevant issues and propose a long-term strategy for dealing with them.

A Theology of Development

I agree wholeheartedly with Schantz that the work of ADRA needs to be more solidly rooted in an Adventist theology of development and relief. A Church is not a business; its strategies do not depend primarily on market forces or on maximizing opportunities for numerical growth and economic health. A Church has a mission that needs to be grounded in a solid and relevant Bible-based theology.

This is no easy undertaking. A theology for ADRA would need to answer a multitude of questions. It would need to deal with the implications of the view that each person in this world is of unique and equal value in the eyes of the Creator, and must clarify how in each man and woman the *imago Dei* can best be reflected. It would need to deal with the implications of the premise that all human beings



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must have the opportunity to develop their gifts and live meaningful lives. It would need to probe the implications of true interhuman solidarity and focus on the God-given mandate to be good stewards of this earth and its wealth.

A theology for ADRA would need to highlight the biblical concern for the poor and ask how that can be translated into the real-life conditions of the twenty-first century. It would need to ask how the biblical holistic view of man impacts the Church's ministry in terms of spiritual care, health care, Christian education, and development work, and whether there are political and economic dimensions. As Schantz correctly emphasizes, it must also have a strong eschatological component.

Numerous questions would need to be asked. For example, to what extent must an explicit proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ accompany the construction of wells, literacy courses, and food distribution if a ministry is to be truly Adventist? How does our theology inform us about projects ADRA prioritizes? Should ADRA distribute food or clothing for free and educate people how to set up small farms? Should ADRA teach people to claim their human rights? Should it help people organize cooperatives to market their product at a fair price and organize and strengthen labor unions?

The Church has an obligation to itself and its ADRA ministry to develop some initiative that will ultimately result in a firm theological basis for its humanitarian activities. Developing such a theology may have serious consequences. If this theology compels us to be far more active in the struggle against poverty and work more intensely for greater equality in the distribution of wealth, how would that affect the culture within ADRA? If it emphasizes the basic equality of all humans and calls for solidarity with those who have much less than we do, how would that affect salary policies and spending patterns?

Not only would this theology challenge ADRA and its policies, activities, and concerns, it would also challenge the Church at large. It may urge the Church to



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spread its own wealth more equitably between the first and developing worlds, or between some of the higher administrative levels of the Church and some of its lower levels (and in some cases vice versa), and between large urban churches and small country churches.

Such a theology may offer far-reaching insights with regard to evangelistic strategies. Could it possibly tell us to focus more on the poor and disenfranchised in our recruitment of new members? We may well come up with a theology that would demand us to ask our hospitals around the world to do more for the poor, rather than catering mostly to those who can pay hefty medical bills on their own, or at least have good insurance coverage.





I am certain that our theological study would provide us with ample justification for the existence of ADRA. The holistic view of man, which the Bible clearly teaches, stresses the need to minister to the whole man, to his soul and spirit as well as his body. Careful reflection on the ministry of Christ and his teachings will convince us that we ought to follow his example of ministering to the whole person.

I believe that such a theology will lead us to conclude that the work of ADRA truly belongs to the core business of the Church. We will be left with no doubt that the humanitarian work of ADRA is an integral aspect of preaching the gospel, in word and deed. The fact that in this line of ministry no explicit Bible teaching and "faith talk" takes place does not diminish its status as a ministry.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has rediscovered the humanitarian aspect of its mission. It was certainly present in early Adventism. Ellen White was quite vocal about the practical aspects of Christianity. One may quote passages that seem to defend a narrow focus on explicit gospel proclamation while downgrading the need for social work, but one can also find statements that stress the opposite view.

ADRA is not the only medium through which Adventist Christians can channel love for their neighbors. ADRA should not feel threatened by other

Adventist humanitarian initiatives. At the same time, it is fitting that a church that professes to have a message that affects the entire person has risen to the challenge of creating a ministry of relief and development that has become a blessing to millions of people around the world. ADRA is a Christian ministry, integral to our Adventist Christian witness.

Jesus' mandate comes to his disciples across the cen-

turies, but remains startlingly relevant. The mission of Christian relief and development is to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom and minister to the needs of the weak and the oppressed. To do so we must walk through their dusty roads, feel their pain, identify with their sorrows, and experience their powerlessness, just as Jesus did.

It was he who had no place to lay his head. It was Jesus who confronted the corrupt religio-political system of his day and was ultimately crucified by it. It was he who said that the servant is not greater than his master and that we should take up the cross and follow him. It was his disciples who were to become vulnerable and dependent in proclamation and service to the needy.¹

Notes and References

1. Wayne G. Bragg, "Theological Reflections on Assisting the Vulnerable," in Edgar J. Elliston, ed., *Christian Relief and Development: Developing Workers for Effective Ministry* (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1989), 71, 72.

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