

The View from ADRA: An Interview with Charles C. Sandefur, Jr.

By Bonnie Dwyer

Being president of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency has given Charles Sandefur two lives. There is the life at the General Conference office where he is involved in both strategic planning and responses to crises that erupt worldwide. The other half of his life is helping to build up ADRA's ministry in different parts of the world. In the fall of 2003 he spoke with *Spectrum* about ADRA, and specifically about the comments by Børge Schantz and Reinder Bruinsma that appear in this issue.

BD: Both Børge Schantz and Reinder Bruinsma have talked about a need for a theology for ADRA, what do you see as the theology of ADRA?

CS: In Matthew 25, God calls us into account for how we have lived our lives, not just for what we have believed. God does not desire people to be extremely poor. He does not desire people to have AIDS. He does not desire people to be hungry. When we address those needs in the name of Christ, I believe that we are living out the mission of the Church.

When we live out that mission we are committed to acts of love, because the world needs to be transformed. It's not just a form of public relations to increase the image of the Church or to be pro-evangelistic. We do this because Jesus asked us to do it. Humanitarian acts are part of our Christian duty and that is part of the mission of the Church. ADRA seeks to be an embodiment and an expression of that.

BD: How does that message resonate here in the General Conference and with the Church at large?

CS: I have really good support from the leadership of our Church. I think a lot of Church members love the idea that the Church does some of its witnessing unconditionally. Everything isn't just, you know, we dig this well so that we can create baptismal water. We give out this food so it will become communion bread.

No, we do it because it's an expression of God's love for the world; we're imitating the life of Christ at an incarnational level.

There are people who want all of these acts of ministry to be measured by their baptismal productivity. Christ did not measure his ministry that way and I'm not sure the Church should measure all its ministry in that way.

BD: What is the current top priority project for ADRA?

CS: We have been focusing a lot of our energy on AIDS, especially in Africa. We have multiple programs, everything from educational programs working with church leaders down to the local congregational level—we have entire congregations in which AIDS is the dominate fact of life in the Church community.

BD: Does ADRA have a specialization within the international aid community?

CS: We have five areas in our portfolio, two of which are the ones for which we are best known. Those five areas are: food security, health, education, relief, and economic development. Food security and health programs are





what we are very well known for. We just have a long history of having done well-designed food distribution and agricultural programs.

It's no surprise that, as an Adventist agency, ADRA brings a lot of health experience. Most of our health programming is really more in the area of public health. We don't operate very many clinics—bricks and mortar institutions. What we do is teach mothers how to care for their babies, train birth attendants, work with immunizations. I think we have a really good reputation within the humanitarian universe in conducting those programs.

The amount of activity that ADRA is engaged in is really kind of incredible. The total gross product in U.S. dollars is between 100 and 200 million a year. We're directly touching the lives of 15 to 25 million people annually. We are identified in 125 countries, and in over half of those countries we are involved in a very substantial way. We're the most broadly based humanitarian agency in the world. No other aid agency is in as many countries as ADRA. There are many that are larger, in fact much larger, but our breadth is overwhelming. I think that is expressive of being Adventist.

BD: *Do human rights play into your mission?*

CS: Yes. ADRA is primarily an implementing agency, which means we go out and do real work. We get our fingernails and boots dirty. We do projects in villages. One of the stories that someone told me the first day I came to ADRA was that ADRA goes places where no one else will go and stays when everyone else has left. That really embodies ADRA.

We are less involved (in advocacy) than, say, Amnesty International, whose whole calling is one of advocacy. Ours is one of implementation. But the other side of implementation is standing on the side of the poor and the needy and wanting to make sure that

there is public policy, that there is funding available to address those kinds of needs.

We try to be very careful at ADRA that we work closely with the Church in whatever countries we are. When we make pronouncements or sign statements we're not doing this away from the Church, just doing our own thing. We're the only Adventist entity that has general consultative status with the United Nations.

BD: *What does that mean?*

CS: That's a level of recognition that allows us to make comment, to be involved in dialogue on items with the United Nations. From that platform, we frequently join with other agencies in signing declarations of commitment to the values that we think are expressive of ADRA's work and ministry. It ought to be a no-brainer to Seventh-day Adventists for us to speak up vigorously in defense of the poor on issues having to do with everything from AIDS to hunger, immunizations for children, clean water, literacy, and the rights of women.

One of the interesting things about ADRA's work is that the vast majority of it is with women and children. Part of that is just the result of the fact that most sustainable change works best when women are the ones addressed. That includes everything from food and agriculture, to taking care of babies, to clean water. Most of our literacy programs are actively addressed to women.

Someone taught me this little saying: If you teach a child to read, you've taught one person to read. Teach a man to read, he might forget. Teach a woman to read, and she'll teach her children to read. So there's this geometric effect of working with women. Not to mention that women have been the ones who have been most neglected.

I think about Nepal, for example. The rates of maternal deaths in delivery are just astronomically high. We're involved in some public health programs to address that. In addition, there are forms of advocacy. But we're primarily an implementing organization—not an advocacy organization.

BD: *Since you arrived at ADRA, have you changed the structure in light of how you see the mission?*

CS: ADRA's called an agency. It's not a department of the Church, and neither is it an institution. We are incor-

porated and registered in many, many countries. That leads to kind of a crazy quilt in terms of how ADRA is structured. It's not a cohesive, integrated system.

We're taking a look at that so that ADRA clearly has a definition that all Adventists will understand. We've got ADRA's that are at local church levels and ADRA's that are at country levels. We find ADRA's we didn't even know existed. There's been some concern now in a globalized society about the meaning of that, so we're forming a commission to take a look at it.

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BD: *How does the crazy quilt structure affect your funding?*

CS: ADRA gets its funding from multiple sources. Some of our funding comes from the Church officially—probably 4 to 5 percent—most of that in the form of salaries paid in various parts of the world where ADRA operates. And then we get donations from individual Adventists, and without that ADRA could not exist. That's another 7, 8, 9 percent.

The rest of our money comes from various grants that we receive from multiple governments—20 to 25 governments around the world. (In addition, we distribute clothing, medical supplies, and medical equipment that has a cash value but doesn't provide cash flow for ADRA.)

I know that the issue of government funding is a big issue for some people. I actually like to flip it the other way. For me a more important issue is why so few Seventh-day Adventists fund ADRA. I just wish that ADRA captured the hearts and minds of even more Seventh-day Adventists so that more of our funding came from within our Church community.

The Adventist Church officially does not begin to subsidize ADRA to the extent that it does educational work, for example. We are much more similar to how health care is funded in the Adventist Church. Basically, Adventist health care in North America receives no funding from the Church. We receive some funding, but not much. Health care is over here, ADRA is here, and then over here are massive subsidies for Adventist education.

Yeah, I wish we had more private funding. We keep looking for new strategies to capture the stewardship hearts of Seventh-day Adventists.

BD: *In the discussion of funding, we're always talking about the effect of money upon an agency's loyalty—about being corrupted by government funds. What about the issues involved with the local governments where you do your work?*

CS: Those are two separate questions. One is, what is our obligation to the donor? Then, what is our obligation to the country in which ADRA is operating?

On the first one, what is our obligation to the donor? I've heard a lot about the issue of government funding, and I think people might be surprised how often ADRA

says no to government funding because we think it has too many strings attached. I'm proud of that.

We recently had an opportunity to possibly get the largest amount of funding that ADRA has ever received in the history of the organization, but we thought that there were too many strings attached. It was not going to allow ADRA to do its work the way we want to do our work, and so we said No. We just passed on the opportunity to do it.

BD: *Then the other side of that question touched upon the obligation of the agency to the host country.*

CS: In the countries where we do our work, most of our ADRA offices are registered. It's not ADRA from the United States coming and doing something. It's ADRA Bolivia, it's ADRA Ghana, it's ADRA Uganda that's doing work thanks to funding that comes from ADRA partnering members in one of these other countries. So working carefully with those governments is important to us.

It becomes more problematic in Muslim countries. Recently when I visited with the minister of justice for one of these Muslim countries, I said that ADRA is sponsored by an entity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. "We are not trying to trick you. We are honest that we care for the people of your country. We want you to know that our motive for being here arises out of our Christian conviction of love for everybody. We want you to know



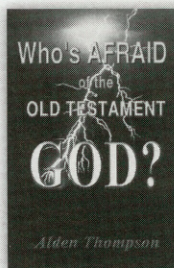
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that we are Seventh-day Adventists, but we're not just trying to use our humanitarian aid as a gimmick and as a ruse to do evangelism. We're not. We're here to provide health care for the people of your country."

And he said, "Fine. No problem. I just wish that other Christian organizations would be that transparent."

Some Christian communities have used humanitarian aid just as a ploy to be able to get inside a country. That was a big issue in Afghanistan and even Iraq in the last several months. I think ADRA has a good reputation about not abusing its privileges. We will always be clearly and candidly Seventh-day Adventists.

BD: *How does one go about staffing the work in a Muslim country? Is that done by nationals primarily? Is the staffing difficult?*

CS: Good question. All of our country directors in the 125-plus countries are Seventh-day Adventists. But we have many staff people who aren't Seventh-day Adventists. In some countries, ADRA could not do its work if it did not hire from within the community.

I know we're doing a project in a Muslim country in which we are working with villagers. Part of the project is to hire one of the women in village and to train her to be a village nurse. We find out who the leading mothers are in that little village and then recruit them sometimes as volunteers and sometimes as employees.

BD: *Back to theology and ADRA.*

CS: I could not agree more with Børge Schantz and Reinder Bruinsma that ADRA needs to be viewed as arising out of the mission theology of the Church. I think that will enhance ADRA's work, expand it and not restrict it. But I come back to how little of ADRA's funding comes from within the Seventh-day Adventist community, and I want to find ways in which ADRA is viewed even more by the Church as a stewardship expression of Adventist witness and becomes an even clearer expression of radical discipleship.

We need a complete picture of what the Church's mission is, and we need to understand that without commitment to ministries like ADRA Adventist ministry and witness aren't accomplished. If more members could capture that in their own lives and in their support for ADRA, I think that would be a positive effect for the Church. Certainly it would be good for ADRA.