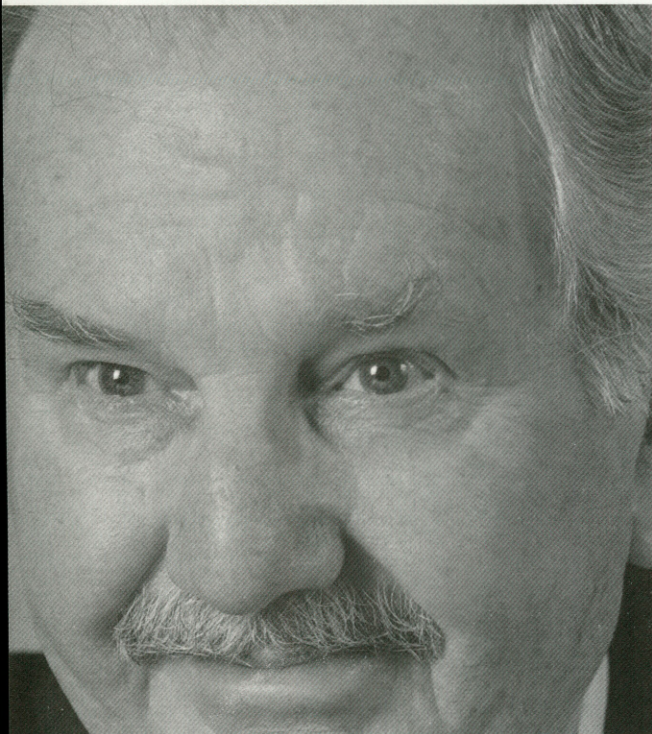


Diary of a Ministerial Intern

Where was Jesus? | BY TREVAN OSBORN



THURSDAY 9/7

I'm filled with anticipation and nervousness at the thought of trying to evangelize an unknown territory. Hunter's Point is where we will be working. It is the roughest part of San Francisco, which makes the task ahead more challenging. A police report details four murders in the area just two Sunday's ago and reveals an area infested with gang violence. One of the bright spots in the community is the YMCA, which is undergoing an expansive renovation, including a new gym in which our meetings will be held.

A lot of work has been done in preparation for the meetings. Bible workers have been making contacts and doing Bible studies, and all the logistics of meeting in the YMCA have been

worked out. I arrive today and help with the final setup to make sure everything is in order for tomorrow night's opening meeting. As we get things prepared, I wonder if the traditional Adventist prophetic messages will have any relevance for a community filled with crime, premature death, and poverty.

FRIDAY, 9/8

Opening night jitters are in the air as we wait for people to trickle in. I hate playing the numbers game, but it's virtually impossible to avoid. By the end of the night, there are about one hundred in attendance, with approximately forty visitors. The meeting is lively due, in part, to a large contingent of Adventists emitting energy and commitment. We have some of the best musicians in the area playing piano, organ, and drums, and it is clear the music will provide an excellent atmosphere of worship throughout the series.

The police chief gives an inspiring talk based on Hebrews 11 about the need to have faith that the community will get better. We also have special music by a men's group from the local Catholic Church. Huh? I am as surprised as you probably are but I'm glad they are here tonight and not when we talk about the Mark of the Beast.

The evangelist is a friendly guy from the South. He was a pimp and ended up in jail for robbing banks and was given a forty-year jail sentence. However, after four years he was miraculously released and has since become an evangelist who feels called to spread the gospel because of what God did for him. It's clear from the opening night that his testimony is going to

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play a key role in connecting with the people.

We are using the Amazing Facts PowerPoint sermons and Bible Study lessons. The opening night we discuss the Second Coming and what happens to the “wicked” and “righteous.” An extended time is also spent on debunking the rapture theory. I quickly realize that we are definitely not targeting the unchurched but are trying to convert Christians to Adventism.

SABBATH, 9/9

The congregation that is sponsoring the series is a small Adventist church whose membership is older and largely female. Some new life has recently come into the church in the form of three young adult members—of which two are new converts—who provide hope for the future of the church. The members have been solid supporters for the meetings and spirits are high.

The evening meeting has the same attendance with a large group of returning visitors but also a batch of first-time visitors. The topic for the evening is the Great Controversy and focuses mostly on the origin of the Devil and what he is doing in the world. I leave with the realization that after two nights, the people have learned more about the Devil than God.

SUNDAY, 9/10

Tonight we learn about a powerful attendance-raising technique. On opening night the evangelist offered one hundred dollars to the first person to bring ten people, and tonight the evangelist is one hundred dollars poorer. One of the visitors brought ten people along with him, so he wins the prize. We also have a couple computers that we will give away later to the person who has brought the most people throughout the series. I'm not comfortable with this technique, but at least people are coming.

Our attendance has lacked teens and young adults for the most part, but tonight is different: there are five teenage girls in the audience. Throughout the service, the teens are less than engaged in the subject of the Trinity (strange subject to cover on day three since it is such a difficult doctrine). Towards the end, however, the evangelist focuses on the girls in particular. He talks about his experiences and tries to relate to them. I can sense that the testimony is what connects with everyone, not just the teens, and the Amazing Facts material seems almost to get in the way.

MONDAY, 9/11

There are no meetings on Monday and Thursday nights, which will be a lifesaver. Our meetings are lasting two hours every night with hour and a half sermons every night. I'm worried that we are forgetting this is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to pace ourselves and respect people's time and ability to sit, listen, and retain the amount of information we are giving them.

WEDNESDAY, 9/13

Last night's meeting dealt with salvation. I wonder why this was not the first topic, but I am glad I got in there now. Tonight, we have decided to hit the streets before the meeting in hopes of driving up attendance. People are courteous and promise to check out the meetings, which is the common response, but very few actually come. I learn that people have their own stories and just want someone to listen. I wonder if there is truth to be learned from their stories but we are missing it because we are too busy talking.

It is also sad to see how many teens are just hanging out in the streets. We realize that what we offer will not meet their needs so we just walk by them. These are the people we need to be reaching out to. They need hope more than anyone else. Their lives need change, but it will take drastically different methods than we are used to, so we will leave them here on the street to perish.

In spite of our efforts, attendance drops to around forty for tonight's state-of-the-dead sermon.

SABBATH, 9/16

This weekend is our first opportunity to share about the Sabbath. Friday night was on the need to keep the Commandments and hinted at the Sabbath, but tonight we are devoting entirely to the Sabbath. The presentation has the typical Sabbath versus Sunday arguments with little information on what the Sabbath is supposed to be about. It seems that much of this series is about exposing what is wrong instead of uplifting and rejoicing in what is right. The evangelist is adamant against churches and pastors who do not keep the Sabbath and informs the congregation that any pastor who has told them not to worship on Sabbath is “not of God.”

WEDNESDAY, 9/20

This morning, we call a meeting in which we decide to refocus the meetings by making some changes. The atten-

dance numbers have settled at around forty people a night with a solid group of ten returning visitors and a few new visitors each night. The declining numbers reveal that there is a need that is not being met. We all feel like prayer should be playing a larger role in the meetings. In order to achieve this, we agree that sermons should be cut short and followed by seasons of prayer to end the meetings.

Tonight, the evangelist is preaching on the twenty-three hundred days and it is clear people are not following him. I think he notices this because towards the beginning of the explanation, he completely switches gears and speaks from his heart. He then has people come forward for prayer on different topics and we pray over each person. There is a wonderful spirit and attitude of prayer and worship that we had missed out on previously. We all feel God moving us in a new direction that is going to change people's lives.

FRIDAY, 9/22

Wednesday night went so well that we cannot wait for tonight's meeting. This weekend, we want to pray over specific concerns at the end of each meeting; tonight it is healing. The topic is the judgment and, unfortunately, I heard a lot about judgment and little about grace. The Sabbath continues to play a key role and seems to be the only issue deciding the judgment. The evangelist even states that he hopes he's right with God when his name is called in the pre-Advent judgment, which is theology I thought we had moved past. In his passionate warning, he preaches too long, making it impossible to take the proper time for prayer. Our powerful prayer and anointing service is reduced to a couple people standing for a short, generic prayer of healing.

The whole night feels like a waste. After the meeting, one visitor says, "I felt so condemned." We promised something that we did not deliver. People came for prayer and got judgment and condemnation instead.

SABBATH, 9/23

This is the first Sabbath since our Sabbath message, so we are expecting some new worshipers with us. About ten people made a stand for the Sabbath during the week and about half are here today. We had a vibrant church service, which included an interpretive dance done by Gina, the teenage daughter of one of the regular visitors. It is so good that we asked her to come back and do it for the evening meeting.

Gina brings four of her friends to see her perform.

Since the last five teenage girls have never returned, the evangelist welcomes them and during prayer asks God that he might speak in a way that reaches the youth. The topic for the night is health and the first words out of his mouth after prayer are, "How many of you want to look younger?" This is not really what teens care about. At the end of his message, the evangelist asks the girls to come forward and prays for each of them. He then assigns the seminarians to support them during the time we are here. After prayer we decide to hang out with the youth on Thursday nights.

THURSDAY, 9/28

Over the last few days, we have covered the Mark of the Beast, speaking in tongues, and the remnant; the tough topics continue to roll in. It has been more of the same, condemning other denominations and uplifting the need to keep the Commandments, the Sabbath especially.

Gina has been coming to the meetings every night, but the other teens have come sporadically. The meetings end at nine o'clock each night, making it increasingly difficult for families to come out since they have children that need to do homework and get to bed early to be ready for school. Tonight, however, we get to hang out with the teens.

One of the younger members of the church decides to open up his house. We eat pizza and have a lively discussion where we talk about their concerns. It's clear that they don't care about the topics we discuss in the meetings and have drastically different questions and needs. We do our best to bring all their concerns to Christ, and we encourage them to not give up.

FRIDAY, 9/29

At tonight's meeting, Gina brings around fifteen teens and pre-teens to the meeting. The evangelist is so impressed he gives her one of the computers tonight. Again he addresses the teens. He goes on an extended and graphic description of jail rapes, and assures the teens that prison is worse than Hollywood has ever painted it. It almost feels like he is implying that they want to go to jail and he is trying to stop them. Whenever he talks to them, it's always about drugs, gangs, and jail, but these are good kids who aren't wrapped up in that and are clearly just trying to live better lives.

The subject for the evening is baptism, and after the baptismal appeal there are three adults and six pre-teens interested in being baptized. The pre-teens are Gina's

friends and first-time comers. The three adults are baptized that night, and although there is some pressure to baptize the kids tonight, we decide it is wiser for them to take a baptismal class. I am relieved by that decision because one of the kids who "wanted" to be baptized asked me later what the "pool" was for.

WEDNESDAY 10/4

This is the last week of the series and attendance has remained at a disappointing thirty-five to forty per night. The last few nights we have covered jewelry, stewardship, and righteousness by faith, but somehow it all kept on coming back to keeping the Sabbath and being aware that angels are marking your every move.

Tonight, the topic is the "Scarlet Woman of Revelation," which serves as one of the final calls to come out of "Babylon." The evangelist doesn't hold back any punches. He tells people that all denominations can't be right, and although people get upset about having to keep the entire Ten Commandments, they are what will take us to heaven. I am ominously reminded of the Jews Paul has to confront in Romans about their zeal for the law.

Noah's ark has often been used in this series as an example of how very few people will be saved in this world of wickedness. Only a few want to hear the harsh truth that the evangelist says he can preach in no other way but "with the sword." Personally, I think it is just an excuse to explain our poor attendance. If our attendance were high we would be talking about how this is like the Day of Pentecost.

FRIDAY 10/6

The sermon on the Three Angels Message is uneventful. However, things begin to heat up after the sermon. The evangelist starts talking to Gina and encourages her to use her gifts for God. Then, without her asking, he has her come to the front and anoints her. He then gives her a baptismal bag (which we give to all baptismal candidates to put their clothes in) in faith that she will take the plunge the next morning.

He then goes on to pressure all visitors in the audience who have not made a baptismal decision. First, he turns to the organist, who has played for the church for fourteen years but is Baptist. The evangelist tells him that now he plays on Sabbath but worships on Sunday and he needs to switch that around. He then asks if he could give him a baptismal bag by faith. The organist tells him he

will pray about it and does not accept the bag. One by one he goes through the group. Some accept the bags, although others don't.

Eventually he comes to another teen who is Adventist. He asks her if she has been baptized and she says Yes. He then asks her if she wants to rededicate her life to God through rebaptism. She responds that she will pray about it, which by now is the accepted way of declining the offer. I watch in shock as he basically forces the bag on her, informing her that the only reason she is saying that is because she has heard others say it.

I am disgusted and disappointed. Two teens and other visitors have been manipulated into baptism for the sake of union papers and camp meeting reports. Are these people really getting baptized because the Spirit is leading them, or have they just been manipulated and pressured into it?

SABBATH, 10/7

This morning, we are having a "Sabbath Celebration" in the church. It does not feel much like it though, since the sermon is on the unpardonable sin.

After the sermon, we have the final baptismal service. There are about twenty people who will be baptized, of whom five are young people. Gina is baptized today for the fifth time. Yes, she's been baptized that many times at the bidding of her mother. In looking over the group, it seems that about eight people are baptized as a direct result of coming to the evening meetings. The rest are people who have not come regularly, if at all, but have studied with Bible workers during our time here.

REFLECTION

The abrupt end to my diary is a direct reflection of how I feel about the series. I guess I should be rejoicing over all the baptisms, but I find that hard to do. I'm not convinced everyone was baptized through a freewill decision and a true acceptance of Christ. I also worry about the view of God and faith they have been provided and wonder if they are destined to a life where they fear God.

That month was one of the most difficult periods of my life. The worst part was being taken away from my wife for a month without the comfort and rest of my home. I can't stand the thought of sitting through another sermon, no matter how short it is. I've had my fill of church for a long time and I find myself feeling as far away from the Adventist Church as I've ever been.

I know there are many people who feel the same way I do, several of whom went through the series with me. Yet, I still find myself discouraged at the picture of Adventism that was presented. Although every evangelist has their own style and unique content, we were right in line with the typical topics used for traditional evangelism. I left the series with several reservations and questions about our evangelistic paradigm.

1. Is converting a Baptist to Adventism really evangelism?

Traditional evangelistic series are mostly effective at reaching other Christians. The topics and content assume a Christian worldview in which the Bible is the authority for their lives. Many of the topics attempt to discredit other denominations and seek to call people out of "Babylon." Our evangelism is targeted at church growth—not kingdom growth—with the unchurched largely untouched by our evangelistic efforts.

2. Have we lost Christ in focusing on what makes Adventism unique?

At our series the answer was clearly Yes. There were no messages solely on Jesus and what he has done for us. Throughout the series, he was largely absent. In the early days of Adventism, the Church focused on its distinctiveness because everyone was a Christian and its job was to get Christians to become Adventist.

In today's society, the message of Jesus is largely missing and misunderstood, but it should be our focus. I believe that Adventism has accepted the idea that the rest of the Christian world has Jesus but we have more than that and this is what we need to focus on. I would argue that taking the message and ministry of Jesus' life and death for us seriously can be the unique contribution we provide to the world in an age where religion has gone awry.

3. Are we answering the questions people are asking?

The Adventist evangelistic series attempts to answer the question, "How will the world end?" I believe this has been the definitive question of Christianity throughout the existence of the Adventist Church. However, I believe a new question has begun to emerge and people are beginning to ask, "How can true life begin?" The life expectancy of a male born in Hunter's Point is nineteen years. Factors such as a high infant mortality rate and gang violence have led to this unbelievable statistic.

In our series, we didn't even attempt to address any of

the issues the community is facing. The community needed messages about drugs, violence, relationships, and money management. Instead, we tried to preach about the twenty-three hundred days and the millennium. Does Adventism have a social message to offer, or do we just tell people to hang on until Jesus comes?

4. Is there a future for Adventism?

The interaction we had with the teens from the community revealed a huge disconnect between the messages and what the young people are facing. They speak an entirely different language and have vastly different concerns. Serious efforts need to be made to think about how to reach teens and young adults with the gospel. The issues Adventists care about are not even on the radar screen of young people today. The future of the Church is in jeopardy unless we learn how to speak their language.

5. Are we willing to do the hard work of contextualization?

It seems as though we've gotten lazy with our evangelistic efforts. We use Amazing Facts and Share Him material everywhere we go where everything has already been prepackaged for us. Instead, we need to start incarnational ministries that are relevant and contextualized for the needs and wants of the unique communities we minister in. New evangelistic paradigms and approaches need to be created that will not necessarily have wide application, but instead be extremely relevant for the local community they are used in.

6. Should we throw out traditional Adventist evangelism?

Although I have many reservations, I still believe that traditional Adventist evangelism is effective at reaching certain groups of people. There isn't a need to completely throw away what Adventism has been doing for decades. However, I believe that we are seeing that new approaches and methods are desperately needed for the cities and emerging generations in North America. As Ellen White has challenged us, "New methods must be introduced. God's people must awake to the necessities of the time in which they are living" (*Evangelism*, 70). ■

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