

In the Footsteps of the Stahls:

Thoughts on Adventism | BY MIKE TYLER



Above: Ana and Fernando Stahl traveling in Peru; right, with Peruvian villagers.

In late March, I stood in front of a bronzed statue of three men and I finally began attempting to answer decade-old questions. I am a Seventh-day Adventist of twenty-two years: from the womb, to Adventist elementary, middle, and high school, all the way to La Sierra University.

Yet never had I answered the question: Why am I an Adventist? Never had I challenged my religion to keep

me in the fold. Like many from my Adventist-born generation, I had toyed with the idea of leaving the Church. I had faded in and out of Sabbath morning attendance. I had gone through the phase of refusing to call myself an Adventist, preferring the title "Christian" or, better yet, "follower of Christ." However, for one like me—born, raised, and educated in the Church—Adventism is an incurable disease. Or perhaps an unshakable blessing.



It was not until a pilgrimage to Peru that I finally began answering the question of disease or blessing. It was not until that trip that I finally looked to Adventism's past to find hope for

its future. Without the hope of a church I can believe in, a church that attempts to make God's Kingdom present on earth, the scales would be tipped away from blessing toward disease.

The men frozen in bronze—Adventist missionary Fernando Stahl, Adventist convert Manuel Camacho, and a generic peasant farmer—represented a story that brought many out of poverty and ignorance. It is the story of Fernando and Ana Stahl that inspired Charles Teel, professor of religion and society at La Sierra University, to lead annual study tours to Peru. It was on that trip that I sought to find my identity in Adventism. As I asked questions of my faith, the example of the Stahls hinted at answers.

Adventism and Missions

The Stahls arrived in the Andes as self-funded missionaries, looking to win souls for Christ in South America. Fernando began by handing out literature before realizing that the local people could not read. The Stahls found themselves in a society where an 8 percent white and mestizo social elite dominated the 92 percent Aymara and Quechua peoples. The Aymara and Quechua not only lacked the ability to read, they could not vote or hold onto their land either.¹

Manuel Camacho, the second bronzed figure, held a passionate vision for education of the Andean peoples. The Stahls moved in with the Camachos their first year. That connection has been viewed as the "beginning of the Lake Titicaca Mission."² At that point, the key focus of the Stahls' mission became not only the soul, but also the mind and body. Their first step was to teach basic hygiene. As well, they weaned the Aymara

and Quechua from their addictions to alcohol and cocaine. They also taught reading skills.³

In an attempt to explain why the Stahls were so successful in Peru, Latin Americanist Dan Chapin Hazen writes in his Yale doctoral dissertation:

The missionaries minimized imposition by only expanding on villager requests. Doctrinal controversies were played down—Saturday worship, an end to idolatry, and the second coming were stressed, but more complex issues were for the most part overlooked. Instead the missionaries insisted on new standards of cleanliness and morality....Coca and alcohol were declared taboo, personal hygiene was taught for the first time, and improved modes of living, house building, etc. were encouraged. Rudimentary medical facilities provided cures for simple ailments which had previously gone untreated, and mission-sponsored markets circumvented the abuses which characterized those in mestizo towns. Most important, literacy was actively fostered.⁴

This quote provides me with a few interesting observations about the Stahls and their success. First, education was essential. The Stahls armed the Aymara and Quechua with the ability to read and clean themselves. In addition, physical needs were attended, with simple medical attention to compliment the education in hygiene being taught. Third, economic betterment was encouraged. The Stahls gave the people opportunity to avoid the oppression of the higher class with these "mission-sponsored markets." Finally, the Stahls' main mission was not simply to convert. Hazen notes that doctrine was played down and the missionaries made an effort not to impose, responding only to the people's requests.

Mission work has always been a central item in the Adventist Church. You would be hard pressed to find an Adventist who hasn't heard countless mission stories or been presented with the opportunity to do missions abroad. Often missionaries act as guest speakers in our churches and at our schools. I myself will be partaking in this mission program by teaching English in Korea next year.

Because mission work is such an important aspect of our faith, we must look at how we do missions. I think the Stahls are a spectacular example of what Adventist missionaries ought to be. Indeed, I would suggest, Adventism is successful in emulating the Stahls in many of its mission opportunities. We have medical mission-

aries in Uganda, Malawi, and other locations in Africa and throughout the world. Language institutes in South Korea, Japan, Poland and elsewhere provide the tool of the English language to many. I have heard countless stories of missionaries going to Mexico or Central America to build houses, schools, and churches to facilitate physical, educational, and spiritual needs.

Yet I have also heard countless mission accounts telling of a numbers game, where hundreds if not thousands have been baptized and supposedly converted. In Peru, I overheard a conversation discussing Adventist mission work. One member of that conversation stated that there are places we can "save a soul" somewhere in Southeast Asia for forty some-odd cents. Hearing these stories, I cannot help but ask, "What do you mean by saved?" Are these scores of new converts being provided for once the missionaries leave? Is their conversion caught up in a spiritual high that will inevitably fall when the hardships of life in poverty continue to weigh heavily? What exactly are our nickels and dimes buying that this soul might be saved?

Though the Stahls began by passing out tracts, they quickly recognized other needs, needs of the body and mind that were inherently tied up with needs of the soul. The Aymara and Quechua were being oppressed by landowner and priest alike, kept ignorant and dependent. The Stahls did not merely rely on sermons to communicate the love of Christ. Rather, they demonstrated the love of Christ by tending to the needs of these oppressed people; they provided them with a means to live healthy lives and come out of ignorance.

Because the Stahls did not stop at baptism, their mission did not lead to temporary soul savings. Nor should ours. The mind, body, and soul are connected. Jesus fed and healed, spoke out against religious and political oppression. That is the center of Christ's love: helping people live a better life here in preparation for later. That should be the center of the Adventist mission, at home and abroad.

I find mission work one of the most important things a church can do. However, the purpose of missions should never be strictly to win souls. In the loving Adventism I envision, our missions will not only try to save the soul, but also the body and mind. The Stahls' work in Peru finally gave me hope that this was indeed in our past and can also be in our future.

Adventism and Social Structures

A mob of two hundred men, led by Bishop Ampuero, arrived one day at the mission the Stahls had set up outside Puno city. Their purpose was to force the Adventist locals to participate in Catholic feasts and kiss the bishop's hand. When the locals refused, six of them were bound, beaten, marched more than twenty miles to the city, and then imprisoned. Upon hearing this, Manuel Camacho immediately went to speak with the bishop, which led to his imprisonment as well.

When the Stahls heard the news, they, too, immediately went to the city. Their first action was to bring food to the imprisoned. Then they "called upon the most prominent people of the city in their behalf... We visited the judges, and other prominent officials of the court..."⁵ The lobbying of the Stahls was not in vain; the judge set the prisoners free. This event is cited as the triggering incident that led to freedom of religion in Peru.⁶

This attitude of social concern is also seen when examining the beginnings of Adventism. "While our denominational forbears are indeed otherworldly and premillennial, theirs is not a mentality which prepares for end times by withdrawing to a Vermont commune," writes Teel.⁷ John Preston Kellogg is said to have had a station on the Underground Railroad. Joseph Bates helped organize antislavery movements in his hometown. Ellen White even called for civil disobedience in response to the Fugitive Slave Act.⁸ Not only do we see these major Adventist figures providing for the needs of escaped slaves via the Underground Railroad, we also see them taking controversial stances against the government.

Both the Stahls and the pioneer Adventists took action out of love. The Stahls freed wrongfully imprisoned brethren, and Kellogg, Bates, and White fought to free slaves. Love for individuals translated into changing societies.

Often I have found the attitude of Adventists to be one of isolationism, an attitude that calls for the Church to stay out of state matters, to let the world turn as the world will turn, while the remnant stays protected in isolation. We prepare to run for the hills when Sunday laws come, but other than that, our church as a whole seems to have little to say about political matters.

The Stahls, however, did not hesitate to lobby government officials. Their call for justice came directly on the heels of tending for the victims.

This story, I think, represents exactly how the Adventist Church should approach social injustices. The examples of Kellogg, Bates, and White affirm this notion in their fight for abolition in the century previous to the Stahls' work. It is not enough just to tend the personal needs of the victims. As well, it is not enough just to try to take political action. The two are inseparable: we must attempt to change oppressive systems while simultaneously tending to the needs of those oppressed.

There is, of course, a risk in mixing religion and politics. Within Adventism, there are diverse worldviews. On La Sierra's campus alone, I am not surprised to find not only Democrats and Republicans, but Libertarians, as well. One may even encounter a socialist. And, of course, there will always be a plethora of the apathetic. I personally would not like to see Adventists mobilize to the right, as have many churches, throwing their weight around on issues such as abortion, gay rights, and prayer in schools. Simultaneously, I'm sure much of the Adventist Church wouldn't want the General Conference coming out on issues to the left. Adventism should never seek conformity in its members' political activity.

I recognize that involvement in politics is a sensitive subject. But I believe it is also a necessity to a church that strives to make bring God's love fully to the world. When blatant injustices arise, Adventism should be on the front lines fighting it, as the Stahls were in Puno and as the pioneer Adventists were against slavery.

Adventism and Institutionalization

In the city of Juliaca, just a bus ride away from where the Stahls worked in the 1910s, our tour group visited the local Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) headquarters. There we were given a brief overview of what ADRA is doing in Peru. At least one of their programs is a money-lending project. Women supported by ADRA are lending money to women all across the nation. From the seven agencies in the country, they have loaned out almost three million dollars. More surprising, in all of Peru, less than one-third of 1 percent of the recipients has defaulted on these loans.

Another long-term result of the Stahls' mission is the plethora of schools that have cropped up in the Lake Titicaca region. Hazen's research indicates that there may have been as many as two hundred Adventist schools in the area.⁹ The results are astounding.



Fernando Stahl

According to a study by anthropologist Ted Lewellen, the Adventists in the region, which comprise an 18 percent minority, have much of the political power, better schooling, and larger families. Interestingly, Lewellen also notes that the Adventists generally choose education over profit.¹⁰

These are the results of Adventism's institutionalization in the Puno region of Peru. From this, it would seem that as Adventism grew in Peru it did not fall victim to some of the hardships of institutionalization. As sects grow into churches, there is a tendency to favor structure over service, a selfish choice, and the risk of idolatry seeps in. These are just a few of the dangers of institutionalization.¹¹

This is a process that Adventism has struggled with since its early days. At Adventism's beginnings, we considered any form of organization equivalent to Babylon, for only God had the power to organize another church.¹² However, as time passed, the notion of a "Gospel Order" began to be debated. James White called for some structure, and he redefined Babylon not as organization, but as confusion.¹³

Though there was opposition to White's "Gospel Order," by 1863 Adventism had begun to organize, embracing a business-like ownership of property, though still resisting the "great iron wheel" of organization that had been identified with Methodism. White cited "servant leadership as the indispensable check against the abuses of power which accompany

complex and specialized institutional structures...."¹⁴ However, after White's death, the nightmare of the "great iron wheel" seems to have become a reality, with fewer people making decisions for the entire church body.¹⁵

Personally, I have long been uncomfortable with the notion of institutionalized religion. It tends to lend itself to the shallowness that leads to forty-five cent conversions. The larger a structure becomes, it seems to me, the more it turns inward on itself. And what good is a mission-centered religion out of touch with society and social issues?

However, I cannot deny the benefits of Adventism's institutionalization. I am a product of its education system, without which this article would not exist. The Adventist institution has provided family, friends, and even me with employment opportunities, as well as an enriching global community. This institutionalization is very much responsible for Adventist culture, that incurable disease or unshakable blessing with which I am struggling.

Teel concludes that a "creative tension" between sect and church provides a give-and-take system that ultimately benefits.¹⁶ However, I do not entirely understand what he means by "creative tension." Or perhaps I cannot see it. Has our motivation for justice across the globe reminded the massive structure of conferences, unions, and divisions how the Stahls reached out in love and changed a society? Have we made an effort to impact society, as did the Stahls? Or have we fallen in on ourselves, content to educate and indoctrinate within the structures we have built?

Unfortunately, I cannot answer these questions, for how can I be objective when I am a lifelong product of the institution? How can I fairly decide if Adventism is a disease or a blessing? I won't pass judgment on what has happened in the past, but I will give advice for the future. We must always be aware of Teel's creative tension, never fooling ourselves into thinking that our structures might be perfect or that our ideals can function without organization. Most importantly, though, we must strive to be like the Stahls, standing against injustice and healing the wounds of the

oppressed. This is Christ's love in action.

I come back to that original question in front of the three bronze figures: why am I an Adventist? I suppose the only answer I can give is "because I have hope for Adventism's future." I have attempted to address a few of the issues that the Adventist Church faces today and will face tomorrow. They are difficult issues that no one person can fully answer. But my ideal Adventism of the future must face the difficulties in missions, social structures, and institutionalization. The Stahls made sure that Christ's love was at the center when they faced these things. No matter where our mission takes us, no matter what governments we find ourselves under, and no matter what our structure, we must always find this love at the center. ■

Notes and References

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3. Teel, "Radical Roots," 6.
4. Dan Chapin Hazen, "The Awakening of Puno: Government Policy and the Indian Problem in Southern Peru, 1900-1955" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1974), 111, 113.
5. Stahl, *In the Land of the Incas*, 162-64.
6. Herbert Money, *La libertad religiosa en el Perú* (Lima: Antartida, 1965), 37.
7. Charles Teel Jr., "Withdrawing Sect, Accommodating Church, Prophesying Remnant: Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Adventism" (paper presented at the 1980 Theological Consultation for Seventh-day Adventists and Religion Scholars), 38.
8. See Roy Branson's three-part series in the *Review and Herald*, volume 147: "Ellen G. White-Racist or Champion of Equality?" Apr. 9, 1970, 2-3; "Slavery and Prophecy" Apr. 16, 1970, 7-9; "The Crisis of the Nineties" Apr. 23, 1970, 4-5.
9. Hazen, "Awakening of Puno," 180.
10. Ted Lewellen, "The Adventist Elite," *Peasants in Transition: The Changing Economy of the Peruvian Aymara: A General Systems Approach* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1978).
11. Ernst Troeltsch, *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).
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13. *Ibid.*, 16-18.
14. *Ibid.*, 21-22.
15. *Ibid.*, 22.
16. *Ibid.*, 54.

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