



Guarding the Line Between Contextualization and Syncretism

Editor's Note: No statement explaining the Adventist church's approach to mission has existed within the official Working Policy, delegates to the 2009 Annual Council were told. The following is the text of the statement that was proposed and adopted at that meeting.

Roadmap for Mission Voted at 2009 Annual Council

GOD'S MISSION for this world motivates and informs our mission. For this reason, mission is the lifeblood of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Mission is woven into our identity; mission defines who we are and why we exist. Early in our movement, we took the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 18–20) as our divine mandate motivated by the vision of the everlasting gospel reaching every nation, tribe, language, and people (Rev. 14:6–12). The genuine quest for God in world religions provides a pathway for the proclamation of the gospel.

Under the blessing of the Lord, our Church has grown, reaching to Earth's farthest bounds. When we began, our mission placed us among people who had traditions of Christianity. Today, however, mission takes us to populations that are rooted in other world religions. Furthermore, in some areas of the world, conversion to Christianity is frowned upon or even runs the risk of threatening one's person and life. The history of Christianity indicates that this has practically always been the case.

At the same time, the spirit of the age encourages acceptance of all world religions as valid expressions of the human spirit and discourages efforts to persuade people to turn from one religion to another. Some Christian theologians even argue that the task of missions is to affirm people in their own religion—to make Hindus better Hindus, Muslims better Muslims, Buddhists better Buddhists, and so on.

Among Seventh-day Adventists, one finds a variety of initiatives and methodologies toward people of different

religions and cultures. While the concern for mission is commendable, the proliferation of approaches makes it all the more imperative for the organized Church to articulate simply and clearly the nature of our mission—what it is and how we go about it—firmly grounded in the authority of the Scriptures.

We must find our roadmap for mission in the specific instructions and acts of Jesus and the apostles as recorded in the Scriptures. In His sovereignty, the Lord takes initiatives to reveal Himself to men and women through a variety of means. For instance, in the Old Testament, we read of people outside the circle of the chosen people who were followers of God—Meichizedek (Gen. 14:18–20), Jethro (Exod. 18:1–27), Naaman (2 Kgs. 5:1). Likewise, the New Testament tells of the Magi (Matt. 2:1–12), of Gentiles who were “God-fearers” (Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17), and of others who obeyed God's law through following their conscience (Rom. 2:14–16). Such examples, however, do not provide a template for Seventh-day Adventist mission; they simply provide laudable examples of the Lord's working.

The Mission

Seventh-day Adventist mission is centered in God's loving gift of His Son to be the Saviour of the world. We are to share this good news with all people, telling them that “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), and that “whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

At its core, mission is bearing witness through word and life and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the Lord commanded Israel of old, “You are my witnesses ...and my servant whom I have chosen” (Isa. 43:10), so the Risen Lord commands us, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Seventh-day Adventist mission is comprehensive in its scope. It involves proclaiming the good news to the whole world (Matt. 24:14), making disciples of all nations by going, baptizing, and teaching them (Matt. 28:18–20), and inviting them into the *ecclesia*—the end-time community of believers in Jesus who worship God the Creator and Redeemer (Rev. 12:17; 14:6–20 7).

This community, the Church, is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12, Eph. 1:21, 22; 4:4–6). In this fellowship where Jesus is confessed as Savior and Lord, and where the Scriptures provide the foundation for instruction, members experience the transforming power of the new life in Christ. They love one another (John 13:31, 32); they are united, despite differences of race, culture, gender, or social standing (Eph. 2:12–14; Gal. 3:28); and they grow in grace (2 Peter 27 3:18). They, in turn, go out to make disciples of other people, and they carry forward Jesus' ministry of compassion, help, and healing to the world (Matt. 10:7, 8).

Although other Christians also preach the gospel, Seventh-day Adventists understand our special calling as proclaiming the good news of salvation and obedience to God's commandments. This proclamation takes place during the time of God's judgment and in the expectation of the soon return of Jesus, bringing to an end the cosmic conflict (Rev. 14: 6, 7; 34 20:9–10).

Seventh-day Adventist mission, therefore, involves a process of proclamation that builds up a community of believers "who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12). They live lives of service to others and eagerly await the second coming of the Lord.

Fulfilling the Mission

Our mission remains unchanged wherever we find ourselves in the world. How we fulfill it—how we go about it—however, takes a variety of forms depending on differences in culture and conditions in society. Fulfilling the mission where non-Christian religions prevail often entails significant modifications in approaching the task. We encounter cultural differences, other writings that are deemed sacred, and sometimes restrictions in religious freedom.

The Example of the Apostles

The conditions Seventh-day Adventists face in sharing the message of Jesus to people of other religions largely parallel

those that the apostles encountered. How they went about the mission is instructive for us today.

The first Christians faced a world of many deities. It was also a dangerous world, as the Caesars in Rome increasingly demanded not only respect, but worship as divine. Yet they risked everything they had, even their lives, and many lost it, in an unbreakable commitment to their Savior.

In this environment, the apostles always uplifted Jesus Christ as mankind's only hope. They did not shrink from proclaiming who He was and what He had done. They announced forgiveness and new life through Him alone, and they called people everywhere to repentance in view of judgment to come and the return of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:4; 1 Cor. 2:2). And they proclaimed that only one person could rightly be adored as Lord—Jesus Christ: "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father... and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 8:5, 6).

Although they modified their approach in keeping with the audience, they never deviated from proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus as the hope of the world. They never suggested that they had come to help their hearers find a deeper spiritual experience within their own religions; on the contrary, they challenged them to turn to the salvation provided in Christ. Thus, the Apostle Paul in Athens began his discourse on Mars Hill by referring to the gods the people were worshipping, but led them to the message of Jesus and His resurrection (Acts 17:22–3 1).

Writings of Other Religions

Paul made references to non-biblical writings in his speech in Athens and his letters (Acts 17:38; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12), but he gave priority to the Scriptures (the Old Testament) in his proclamation and instruction to the new Christian communities (Acts 13:13–47; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; 4:2).

In Seventh-day Adventist witness, the writings of other religions can be useful in building bridges by pointing to elements of truth that find their fullest and richest significance in the Bible. These writings should be used in a deliberate attempt to introduce people to the Bible as the inspired Word of God and to help them transfer their allegiance to the Scriptures as the source of faith and practice. However, the nurture and spiritual growth of new believers must be accomplished on the basis of the Bible and its exclusive authority (see "Guidelines for Engaging in Global Mission").

Contextualization

Jesus, as our model, was the perfect example of love in His relationships with others. As we imitate Him in our mission, we should open our hearts in honest and loving fellowship. The Apostle Paul described how he adapted his approach to his audience: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:19–22). The apostles did not make it difficult for people to accept the gospel and join the fellowship of the Christian community, but they did not shrink from declaring the full purpose of God for them (cf. Acts 15:19; 20:20–24).

From Paul’s example arises contextualization: the intentional and discriminating attempt to communicate the gospel in a culturally meaningful way. For Seventh-day Adventist mission, contextualization must be faithful to the Scriptures, guided by the Spirit, and relevant to the host culture, remembering that all cultures are judged by the gospel.

As the Church seeks to adapt its approach to mission in a very diverse world, the danger of syncretism—the blending of religious truth and error—is a constant challenge. Contextualization should be done within a specific cultural location, close to where the people live; it is a process that should involve church leaders, theologians, missiologists, local people, and ministers.

Openness and Identity

Paul sought to be open and honest in his presentation of the gospel: “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor 4:2). Likewise, we are to carry out our mission, and identify ourselves as Seventh-day Adventists, in a manner that avoids creating formidable barriers.

In seeking to find connections with people from other religions, the theme of cosmic conflict, which is found in various expressions, may be a useful starting point. Other areas that can prove helpful are prophecy, modesty and simplicity, and healthful living.

Transitional Groups

In some situations, Seventh-day Adventist mission may include the formation of transitional groups (usually termed Special Affinity Groups) that lead the people from a non-Christian religion into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In forming such groups, a clear plan that emphasizes the end result should be followed. These groups should be established and nurtured only with the endorsement and collaboration of church administration. Although some situations may require an extended period of time to complete the transition, leaders of these groups should make every effort to lead the people into membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church within a deliberate time plan.

Any ministry or group that is formed with the intention of representing the Seventh-day Adventist Church in any part of the world will endeavor to promote both the theological and organizational unity of the Church. Although the theological dimension may be given the chief emphasis in the initial stages of the group, the leader of the group should intentionally lead its members to a sense of Seventh-day Adventist identity and an awareness of Church organization, with growing participation in the lifestyle, practices, and mission of the Church.

Baptism and Church Membership

Candidates for baptism shall confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Rom. 10:9), accept the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as summarized in the Fundamental Beliefs, and understand that they are joining a worldwide fellowship that is loyal to God and awaits the second coming of Jesus.

Opportunities and Needs

Today, because of immigration and other factors, followers of world religions are found throughout the world. In this new context, leaders in all the world divisions should develop specific plans to bring the Seventh-day Adventist message to these peoples.

For the fulfillment of the mission globally, the Church needs to help people develop expertise in the writings of other religions, along with literature and programs to train clergy and lay members in reaching adherents of these religions. The Global Mission Study Centers should play a major, but not exclusive, role in these endeavors. Worldwide, our pastors and members need to be educated to accept new believers from world religions. This will require

the developing of competence among leaders, local elders, pastors, missionaries, and frontline workers. In the allocation of human and financial resources, the needs of the mission to people of other world religions should be included as part of strategic planning.

Where Freedom is Restricted

Our mission takes us at times to societies where religious freedom is severely restricted. These areas of the world are not to be abandoned; rather, new methods of fulfilling the mission are to be attempted. These include the “tentmaker” approach, which is when individuals use their occupation to support themselves financially, usually in a challenging mission area for the purpose of Christian outreach. Another approach is to simply encourage those from such countries who have become Seventh-day Adventists in another society to return to their home countries as ambassadors for Christ. And even where a human presence is not possible, the witness through radio, television, or the Internet may, like the altars left behind by Abraham on his wanderings (Gen. 12:7), be used by the Spirit to lead men and women to accept the Advent message.

Conclusion

The mission to reach followers of world religions poses substantial challenges. However, the mission itself remains unchanged because it is God’s mission. Through whatever approach we follow, its end result is to lead men and women into membership with those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who embrace the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, demonstrating the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and looking forward to the soon coming of Christ. They shall identify themselves with the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church in doctrine, life values, hope, and mission.

God, the Lord of the mission, is free and sovereign. He can and does intervene to reveal Himself in various ways, drawing people to Himself and awakening them to His majesty and sovereignty. But to His Church He has entrusted His mission (2 Cor. 5:18–21). It is a comprehensive mission, but it is a single mission. He has not established parallel or multiple tracks for us to follow, which is to say, we should all be committed to the same beliefs and be organized and work in harmony with the world Church. ■

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New Director Merklin Takes Reins of Adventist Muslim Study Center

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FORMER MISSION INSTITUTE director Lester Merklin (left) assumed his new post December 1 as head of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations.

The center is one of five Global Mission religious study operations by the church’s Office of Adventist Mission established to build bridges of understanding between the Adventist Church and major world religions. The center consists of Merklin, who will also continue as a faculty member at Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Merklin, 61, has served as a pastor and seminary professor in the United States, Belize, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Most recently he was the director of the church’s Institute of World Mission, which offers training for the church’s cross-cultural workers. He holds a master’s of divinity from Andrews University and a doctorate in ministry from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. Merklin replaces Jerald Whitehouse, who stepped down as director in June.

“The center has an important role to play in helping Adventists understand Islam,” Merklin said. “We are in a unique position to converse with our Muslim friends because of our mutual emphasis on doing God’s will, looking for the coming of Christ, expecting a day of judgment, and following scriptural health laws.”

Islam is the world’s second largest religion with some 1.5 billion believers. As the dominant religion in many countries in the Middle East and Asia, Islam is also experiencing growth in Europe and North America, Merklin said.

“His experience in cross-cultural communication will be an asset in helping church members develop skills to reach the unreached,” said Ganoune Diop, director of the Study Centers for the Office of Adventist Mission.

The other four Global Mission religious study centers operated by the Office of Adventist Mission are the World Jewish Friendship Center in Israel, the Buddhist Study Center in Thailand, the Hindu Study Center in India, and the Center for Secular and Postmodern Studies in England. ■