

Adventist
Mission
in the
21st
Century

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Adventist
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21st
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The Joys and Challenges of Presenting
Jesus to a Diverse World

Jon L. Dybdahl, editor



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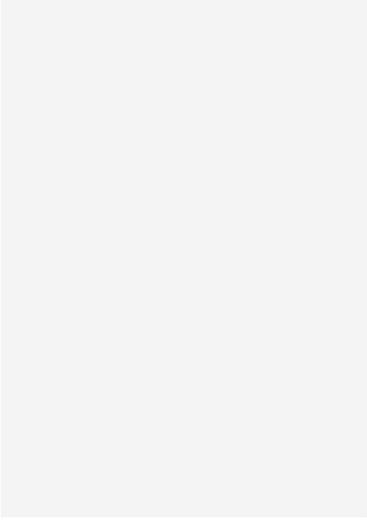
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Dedication

To the committed band of Adventist cross-cultural missionaries who have gone *from* many nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples to share Christ and His second coming.

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

I. The Background

CHAPTER 1 **Jon L. Dybdahl**

Adventist Mission Today—Taking the Pulse / 17

CHAPTER 2 **Russell L. Staples**

Historical Reflections on Adventist Mission / 26

II. Biblical and Theological Issues

CHAPTER 3 **Reinder Bruinsma**

Missionaries, Go Home! Are Cross-cultural Missions Still Valid? / 39

CHAPTER 4 **Gottfried Oosterwal**

Adventism Faces the World Religions / 45

Chapter 5 **Jon L. Dybdahl**
Is There Hope for the Unevangelized? / 54

Chapter 6 **Humberto M. Rasi**
The Challenge of Secularism / 62

Chapter 7 **Barry D. Oliver**
Can or Should Seventh-day Adventist Belief Be Adapted to Culture? / 72

Chapter 8 **Rudi Maier**
Evangelism and Development—Friends or Foes? / 80

Chapter 9 **George R. Knight**
Remnant Theology and World Mission / 88

Chapter 10 **Børge Schantz**
Seventh-day Adventist Mission Finance: Is Reform Needed? / 96

Chapter 11 **Walter Douglas**
Vocation as Mission / 105

III. Strategies and Methods

Chapter 12 **Tim Crosby**
Wind in the Sails: Prayer in Mission / 117

Chapter 13 **Pardon Mwansa**
Healings and Miraculous Signs in World Mission / 125

Chapter 14 **Erich W. Baumgartner**
The Church Growth Movement and the Value of Research / 132

Chapter 15 **Bruce Campbell Moyer**
A New Mission Concept With a Long History / 143

Chapter 16 **Erich W. Baumgartner**
Megachurches and What They Teach Us / 150

Chapter 17 **Bruce L. Bauer**
Structure and Mission / 159

Chapter 18 **Werner Vyhmeister**
What Can Laypersons Do in Mission? / 167

Chapter 19 **Patricia Gustin**
Student Missions—An Army of Youth / 174

Chapter 20 **Nancy Vyhmeister**
Women in Mission / 182

Chapter 21 **Jerald Whitehouse**
Reaching the Muslim World / 189

Chapter 22 **David R. Syme**
Crossing Boundaries—ADRA and AWR / 198

Chapter 23 **Bruce Campbell Moyer**
God So Loves the City! / 206

Chapter 24 **Randal Wisbey**
Involving Young People in Mission / 213

IV. Case Studies

Chapter 25 **Judy Aitken**
Refugee Sorrow/Christian Joy: Reaching Buddhists With Christ's Love / 225

Chapter 26 **Clifton Maberly**
Buddhism and Adventism: A Myanmar Initiative / 232

Chapter 27 **Eugene Hsu**
China—The Accomplishments and Challenges / 241

Chapter 28 **G. T. Ng**
Reaching Asia: The 1000 Missionary Movement / 248

Chapter 29 **Cathy E. Morgan**
A Case Study: Adventist Frontier Missions / 255

Chapter 30 **Bruce L. Bauer**

A Case Study: GO Mission Conferences / 263

Chapter 31 **Rowland C. Nwosu**

The Tragedy in Rwanda and Beyond / 270

Chapter 32 **Charles Teel, Jr.**

Fernando and Ana Stahl—Mediators of Personal and Social Transformation / 278

Chapter 33 **Mike L. Ryan**

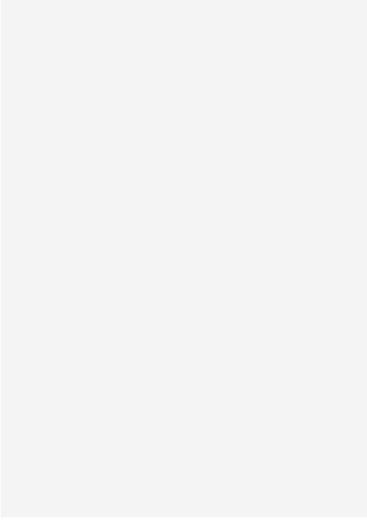
Global Mission Reaches Out / 286

Chapter 34 **John McGhee**

The Good Neighbor Story / 291

Chapter 35 **Børge Schantz**

Adventism in a New Eastern Europe / 298



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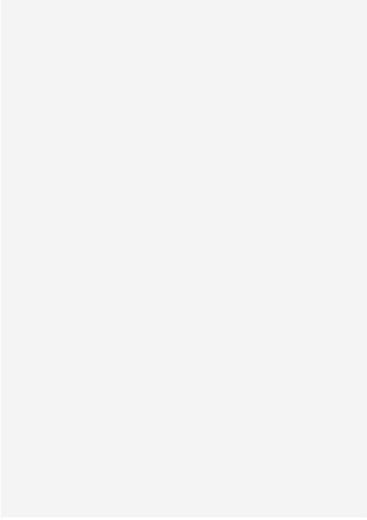
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Praise most of all to the divine Author of mission.

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Introduction

It began with a simple phone call from Tim Crosby at the Review and Herald® Publishing Association. He wondered if the church might need to take a look at our mission as we entered a new millennium. As I pondered the call, the conviction came strongly that any such effort shouldn't be undertaken by one or even several persons. The project must be that of an international team, representing the breadth of Adventism.

You hold in your hands the result of that worldwide effort. Africans and Australians, Asians and Europeans, South Americans and North Americans, are here together. So are women and men, scholars and administrators, pastors and teachers, as well as laypeople, all involved in some way in the cross-cultural mission of the church. Not only are General Conference entities represented but also dedicated supporting ministries. We wanted at least a sample of the broad spectrum of the Adventist family.

You can see from the table of contents that after two introductory

chapters, these essays cover three main areas: (1) biblical/theological issues, (2) strategies and methods, and (3) case studies. While the classification does allow some overlap, this seemed the most logical way to give structure to the book. You can begin with the section that interests you the most. We wanted to create more than a mission story but less than a theoretical volume.

We wanted to be positive about what the church has done in mission while at the same time honestly confronting challenges and questions. In short, we desired to appeal to both heart and head of mainstream Adventism. We desire our church to have an ongoing, fervent, intelligent commitment to mission as we enter into Century 21. If this book helps to that end, we'll feel satisfied.

SECTION 1

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The Background

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CHAPTER 1

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John L. Dybdahl

Adventist Mission Today— Taking the Pulse

Physical examinations play an important part in health. They force us to take a look at ourselves. They evaluate our well-being. Any problems uncovered can be dealt with before they become serious.

For the very same reasons the church needs periodically to take its pulse in the area of mission. As mission goes, so goes the church. Problems in mission are *serious* issues that affect the entire body of Christ. Healthy mission makes the whole body vibrant and alive.

Mission is the English form of the Latin word meaning “to send.” Missionaries (the ones sent) go out with the message of Jesus. The only barrier that a missionary needs to cross is between faith and unbelief. Mission can thus be a same-culture or a cross-cultural endeavor. While much of this book talks about cross-cultural mission, this broad understanding of mission as both home and foreign is foundational.

Mission is central to our identity. Jesus did not create a church and then give it mission as one of its tasks. The divine sending plan comes prior to the church. Mission gives birth to the church and is its mother. The very essence or nature of the church is mission. If the church ceases to be mis-

ADVENTIST MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

sionary, it has not simply failed in its task, but has actually ceased being the church. It becomes only a religiously oriented social organization.

If mission is so crucial, then how are we doing? What does an examination show? Let's look first at the general situation in the church at large and then zero in on some specifics that the "physical exam" has turned up.

MISSION OVERVIEW

Adventists are growing worldwide at 5 to 6 percent a year. At that rate we double about every 12-14 years. The year 2005 should find us with about 16-17 million members. That is slightly more than the projected number of Jews and 4 or 5 million fewer than the total number of Sikhs.

Our growth rate is fractionally higher than the rate for all evangelical Christians, but far below the 9 percent growth rate for Pentecostals. Donald McGavran, father of the church growth movement, considers a growth rate of 50 percent per decade to be a gauge of church health. He advocates pouring resources into churches growing at that rate. We as a church fit in that category.

Numerically, of course, world population growth and the number of unbelievers is growing faster than the church. The optimist, however, would talk about *rates* and *proportions*. In 1950 there was one SDA for every 3,300 people in the world. In 1975 the figure was one per 1,480, whereas by 1994 it was one per 700. Clearly the growth rate of Adventists exceeds the rate of world population growth.

At present Adventists are the largest Protestant group in Belize, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, French Guiana, Guam, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Peru, the Philippines, and Venezuela.¹

While we rejoice in these accomplishments, two facts must be kept in mind: 1. Numbers don't tell the whole story. Although they are important, mission is more than calculations. 2. This is an overall picture. Careful examination of details often reveals a more mixed picture. To those details we now move.

MAJOR MISSION TRENDS

1. Mission Malaise of the First World Church

The church of Western Europe, Australia/New Zealand, and North America is in general slowing considerably in growth. In 1988 the General Conference Archives and Statistics Office reported that the average

annual growth from 1960 to 1988 was .9 percent for Western Europe, 2.9 percent for North America, and 2.2 percent for Australia/New Zealand. If converts from new immigrant groups and from those with non-European backgrounds were not counted, the figures would decline even more. Contrast this with the growth rates of 7.1 percent for Africa and 7.6 percent for Latin America that were reported in the same statistical survey.

If other Christian groups were not growing in these Western areas, we could blame it all on modern society and its decadence. The fact is some Christian churches are progressing rapidly in these areas. So we cannot simply blame the social condition. The good news is that signs of hope are appearing on the horizon. The appearance of churches that operate with worship formats designed to attract unchurched people shows we still care about reaching others. The enthusiasm generated by the 1996 Seeds church planting conference demonstrates that people are willing to take risks to develop new methods. NET '95 and NET '96 have given new hope to churches in the West. They have shown that people are still winnable when we use new communication techniques. One can only pray that the openness to using satellite technology will also lead to openness in message packaging. While truth remains eternal, we need to express it in a way that will communicate beyond our normal Bible-believing viewer to the vast secular population of the world.

2. Decline in Western Missionaries and Mission Giving

In 1973 the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists ranked fourth among the 10 largest Protestant mission agencies in North America, having only 69 fewer missionaries than number three, the Churches of Christ. By 1993 we were tenth, with less than half the missionaries we had in 1973. In fact, if some other agencies had not also declined, we would have ranked even lower and been off the top 10 chart! Global Mission and other factors have stabilized the downward trend, but unless drastic steps are taken, I see no major reversal of this trend on the horizon.

Sabbath school and mission giving have also declined. The decline becomes precipitous when adjusted for inflation. Tithe per capita in North America increased between 1950 and 1990 from \$84.42 to \$537.58. Adjusted for inflation (1982 dollars), that is still an increase from \$353.22 to \$404.20. Sabbath school and mission offerings actually declined per capita for the same period—from \$30.05 to \$29.59. Adjusted for inflation, the figures drop dramatically from \$125.73 to \$22.25. Similar trends in mission giving, while not as stark, also exist in other divisions.²

This trend in some ways is good. Other divisions are becoming more able to provide their own church workers and finances. No one would argue that this should not happen. The truth is that the Seventh-day Adventist cross-cultural mission endeavor has largely become an intrachurch help organization. Whereas this is not necessarily evil, such a strategy is a departure from our original mission plan and tends to neglect the vast number of social (people) groups with no Adventist presence. If we expect to reach these people, the decline in personnel and giving must be reversed.

3. Growth of Non-Western Mission

When my wife and I first arrived in Thailand in 1968, the Bangkok Adventist Hospital mission compound was a little America. With only one or two exceptions the non-Thai staff were missionaries from the United States. That same compound has now become a mini-United Nations. Adventists from the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India, and Australia serve together with their Thai colleagues. The same trend is manifested all around the world. Japanese missionaries serve in Brazil, and Argentinians work in Switzerland. Egyptians minister at the division office in Moscow. Thus the ideal of “from everywhere to everywhere” is really happening and is, I believe, a strength of our organization.

Another way that this non-Western mission is happening is by sending nationals from one area of their own country to another area with no Adventists. Global Mission pioneers are doing this. Donors are encouraged to give so that Indians can go to Hindu areas of India with no Adventist members and raise up churches.

In many ways this strategy is a good one. People are reached who have not heard the good news, and it seems to be an efficient use of money. It would be even better if the money to support these missionaries came from within the country rather than from abroad. The danger also exists that richer areas of the world will see their only mission as giving money. Unless Europeans and Americans send their own sons and daughters along with their money, the close personal connection to mission will disappear and the impetus to give will be lost.

4. Diversity of Sending Organizations

When Kathy and I first went overseas in 1968, the only way we knew of Adventist missionaries being sent was through the regular General Conference organizational channels. That situation is in the midst of radical change. The past decade has seen the rise of numerous new mission-sending organizations. I know of more than 30.

These organizations range from semi-independent church entities such as ADRA to programs run by local church structures, such as the English language schools in Korea and the primary and secondary schools of Guam-Micronesia. They include supporting ministries who are organizationally and financially independent but cooperate closely with the church, such as Maranatha Volunteers International and Adventist Frontier Missions. Today if you want to serve cross-culturally, you will find numerous possibilities. You can go on a short-term mission trip with Maranatha or a local church entity. You can serve a year as a volunteer in an English language school, or you can go for six years to a frontier church planting site with Adventist Frontier Missions. There is something for everyone. The choices are increasing yearly.

The trend is not limited to North America. A Filipino-run and headquartered branch of Adventist Frontier Missions is already sending missionaries. The 1000 Missionary Movement, with headquarters in the Philippines, is even now sending hundreds of Adventist Asian students throughout the territory of the Asia Pacific divisions. Funded mainly by Korean money, this movement is a major player in the Asian Adventist missionary scene.

Rather than viewing such organizations as a threat, we should see them as signs of life and hope. People are seeing needs and taking real action to fill them. As long as such organizations continue to cooperate closely with the church structure, they must be seen as allies, not enemies.

5. Renewal and Change

In the past few years some very important new initiatives have arisen in connection with the church's mission. Unfortunately many church members do not know about or understand them. Among them are Global Mission, the tentmaker program (Global Partnerships), the GO conferences, the Center for Volunteerism, and the Seeds (church planting) initiative. The first three of these are so crucial that an entire chapter in this book is dedicated to each of them.

Global Mission (initially called Global Strategy) was first proposed in the late 1980s and is clearly a world evangelization strategy. It differs in two major ways from previous strategies.

First, earlier evangelistic/mission programs emphasized number of baptisms. Different church entities were encouraged to baptize a target number of people. The goal of Global Mission is *church planting*. Church entities were to start new bodies of believers. To use a common fast-food

franchise analogy, the church switched from emphasizing the number of vegeburgers it sold to trying to establish as many local vegeburger-producing franchises as it could in places where there had been none before.

Second, the emphasis moved from counting countries, that is, geopolitical entities, to people—*unreached* people. The churches planted were to be in places where there were none before. Initially the world was divided into million-person population segments with the goal of a Seventh-day Adventist church in each segment. Later calculations have suggested that people groups (socio/cultural/ethnic groups) be considered as well.

If Global Mission is taken seriously and made a priority, the church's practice of mission and evangelism will be radically changed.

Another major change taking place in Adventism is the birth of the tentmaker or Global Partnerships program. Taken from Paul's support of himself in his mission work by the practice of his trade of tentmaker, this program redefines the term *missionary*. Instead of a missionary being a person paid by the church to do church work, missionaries find *jobs* with a company or a government. Their calling is to work for God even while their paycheck comes from IBM or a university in China. Teaming with other people, a tentmaker uses contacts made on the job and free time to make an impact for God. Trained in mission, tentmakers are undercover agents for God's kingdom, going places where regular missionaries could never go. Such teachers, technicians, business professionals, and medical personnel constitute the missionary wave of the future as they go out in numbers not limited by the church's missionary budget.

Three other new initiatives deserve brief mention.

A. The General Conference has recently established a *Center for Volunteerism*. This center will coordinate the diverse calls available and make it possible for people to find out the wide range of mission service openings at one contact point. It also seeks to promote mission initiatives at the local church level. Plans see such centers in all world divisions.

B. *GO young adult mission conferences* are spreading from North America around the world. These conferences, which began in 1991 at Andrews University, seek to inspire young people to serve in mission and to help them contact mission recruiters firsthand. Be sure to see the chapter in this book on the topic.

C. *Seeds and Church Planting*. While a key goal of Global Mission is church planting, until recently it was not taken seriously in North

America in practice or as a subject for serious discussion and study. The Seeds '96 conference on church planting at Andrews went a long way toward changing that trend. Such conferences that encourage, inspire, and instruct on church planting should take place worldwide.

6. Lack of Knowledge About Mission

I find a general lack of mission education in the church at large. Our young people study Bible, doctrine, history, and Spirit of Prophecy in our educational system, but mission is *not* part of the curriculum. Many churches in the West have abandoned the mission story in Sabbath school. And those who use it learn little of substance beyond the anecdotal level. Even beginning seminary students—present and future ministers—know little about mission. Only about 10 percent know what Global Mission means when they enter the seminary. How can the church hope for a renewal in mission when so many leaders know little about the subject?

I am continually amazed to hear educated people say the day for missionaries is over. Either they don't believe people need to know about Christ, or they are just uninformed of the fact that about 40 percent of the world's population cannot hear the gospel unless someone is willing to move across cultures to reach them.

Realizing this problem, evangelical churches have designed a program called Perspective. The class is taught on the local church level and introduces church members to the broad field of missiology. Numerous positive results come from such education. We should do something similar.

7. Meeting Mission Theological Challenges

The church has usually responded promptly and vigorously to challenges it has faced regarding its key doctrinal beliefs. For example, the events surrounding the controversy that rose in the late 1970s and early 1980s over the sanctuary doctrine led to quick action. The church has not always shown as much interest in mission theology. I believe that two of the biggest theological questions the church will face as it enters Century 21 are mission theology questions. Failure to relate seriously and responsibly to these two issues will be extremely detrimental to the church and its mission in the new century.

Issue number one is the question of the non-Christian religions. How are Christians to view Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam? Are these religions all false? Is there truth in them? Can salvation be found outside Christianity? If so, on what basis? Is Christianity and/or Adventism unique? If so, how?

ADVENTIST MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The answers given to these questions radically affect not only how one views Christian mission but also how Christianity is defined. Strange as it may seem, Adventists have given little thought, at least in writing, to this issue. Much more press has been given to Adventist relationship to other Christians. This must change.

Issue number two is the question of culture as it relates to the beliefs and practice of Adventism. How much of traditional Adventism is eternal truth that transcends culture and how much is temporary and the result of one's cultural background? How does our culture affect the way we interpret the Bible? Even more crucial for mission is How much belief and practice can or should be adapted to communicate to those of another generation or culture? What principles should guide a world church in its mission to a world of diverse cultures and languages?

Our answers to these questions will affect all areas of church life from the content of evangelistic literature to the kind of music we use in our churches. The answers will also determine how creative our mission approaches will be to those not of our faith.

CONCLUSION

We are *not* entering the twilight of missions. We are in the dusk of the present era of mission. The glimmers of light from the dawn of a new *post-colonial, truly international* missionary era are already lighting the horizon.

To embrace this new dawn I suggest that at least two things need to happen in the church.

First, mission must be seen as the priority and essence of the whole church. East and West, rich and poor, first and third world, Asian, African, and American are included. Not only are all parts of the world essential parts of the mission symphony, all believers in Christ in each local church are part of mission's music. Old barriers between laity and clergy, paid and unpaid, male and female, mission field and homeland must disappear as the "missionaryhood" of all believers is manifested. No occupation, social or economic status, gender or role, is excluded from God's call. Baptism into the body of Christ is ordination for mission. If this were taken seriously, what a revolution would come to the church!

Second, education *about* and *in* mission must take place. From the cradle to old age, from kindergarten to graduate school, mission must be part of our curriculum and practice. The more we know, the more intelligently we can act. As we act, our hearts change.

ADVENTIST MISSION TODAY—TAKING THE PULSE

As humans taking part in God's mission to reach people, we can do three things: go, give, and pray. No one can say there is nothing for me to do. Our hope and prayer is that this book will inspire you to do all three. Only as *you* are involved in mission will the revolution God wants to see in mission begin to happen.

¹Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

²Ann Gibson, "Divisional Winners in the Growing World Church," unpublished paper.