Decentralization to facilitate mission

Bruce Bauer, *Andrews University*
Thank you for your interest in the

Seventh-day Adventist Missions Resources
Digital Library

Andrews University Digital Library

Please honor the copyright of this document by not duplicating or distributing additional copies in any form without the author’s express written permission. Thanks for your cooperation.
Chapter 30

* * *

DECENTRALIZATION TO FACILITATE MISSION

BRUCE L. BAUER

April 6-7, 2003

Over the past decades the Seventh-day Adventist Church has had a tendency to centralize the responsibility for mission, witness, and world evangelization. This centralization of the mission task has resulted in widespread disengagement by local membership from their personal responsibility for witness. This short paper will look at some of the factors that have impacted in this area and will suggest how a more decentralized approach to mission would have far-reaching impact on the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the twenty-first century.

Who is Responsible for Witness and Mission?

Who is responsible for mission, witness, and world evangelization? Some will tell you that the General Conference (GC) is, others will say that local fields hold that responsibility, while still others will say that public evangelists
and pastors are responsible. Let’s begin by looking at three myths concerning responsibility for world evangelization and witness in our world.

**Myth #1: The General Conference is Responsible**

Over the decades the General Conference took responsibility for calling the Adventist Church to mission and world evangelization. The magnetic personalities of Daniels and Spicer galvanized the church to action, to growth, and to the task of planting the Church in every country of the world. However, when the Daniels and Spicer era ended in the early 1930s, the vision for mission began to fade. Subsequent General Conference leaders had agendas and priorities other than mission.

One of the flaws of the reorganization of 1901-1903 was the lack of a mission board or mission department that would spearhead Adventist mission. As long as the General Conference prioritized mission, Adventist mission flourished; but without strong GC leadership mission from the 1960s on began to take a back seat. Notice the decline in Seventh-day Adventist supported missionaries.

### SDA Supported Missionaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rank &amp; Denomination</th>
<th>Total Sent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>#1 Southern Baptist (SB)</td>
<td>2,507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#4 Seventh-day Adventist (SDA)</td>
<td>1,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>#1 SB</td>
<td>2,906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#5 SDA</td>
<td>996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>#1 SB</td>
<td>3,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#6 SDA</td>
<td>1,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>#1 SB</td>
<td>3,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#10 SDA</td>
<td>842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>#1 SB</td>
<td>3,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#10 SDA</td>
<td>676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>#1 SB</td>
<td>3,482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#13 SDA</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mission Handbook, 10th – 17th Editions
This decline in SDA supported missionaries took place during the time when unreached people group thinking was impacting Christian mission, and most other groups were gearing up for a greater emphasis on sending missionaries to unreached people groups. At the very time when other evangelical groups were doing more, we started doing a lot less. Notice what was also happening to Adventist mission giving patterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total World Mission Giving</strong></td>
<td>29,046,380</td>
<td>42,631,642</td>
<td>48,574,082</td>
<td>50,254,923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAD Mission Giving</strong></td>
<td>20,020,123</td>
<td>25,257,684</td>
<td>23,577,783</td>
<td>22,677,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAD Mission Giving per capita</strong></td>
<td>46.54</td>
<td>42.73</td>
<td>31.52</td>
<td>24.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAD Mission Giving as % of Tithe</strong></td>
<td>19.53%</td>
<td>9.47%</td>
<td>5.50%</td>
<td>3.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAD Tithe</strong></td>
<td>101,859,859</td>
<td>266,483,542</td>
<td>428,185,701</td>
<td>685,051,304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World Tithe per capita</strong></td>
<td>69.54</td>
<td>125.54</td>
<td>116.25</td>
<td>102.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAD Tithe per capita</strong></td>
<td>236.79</td>
<td>450.79</td>
<td>572.47</td>
<td>742.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistical Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

What has resulted is a looking to the GC to lead in the area of mission, but when the GC becomes occupied with other pressing issues, the sense of urgency for sacrifice and sending of personnel and monetary resources to reach the unreached begins to diminish. A centralized approach to mission tends to give people the security of allowing the GC to lead in mission without much sense of personal responsibility on the part of the unions, local fields, and individuals. Today, few in our church sense any real personal responsibility to reach the unreached in our world. In many parts of the world only a few have a compelling desire to be active witnesses. Most Adventists spend little if any time pleading with God for breakthroughs in the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese worlds.

Divisions, unions and conferences are often too busy responding to the needs of their constituents (those who are already Adventists) to have much energy, personnel, or monetary resources with which to minister to the unreached in their territories or to commit resources to work in the 10/40 Window. Fortunately, the Global Mission initiative changed this to some degree, but there is still a sense within Adventism that mission is the responsibility of the GC. And if the General Conference does not act, does not mobilize the
church, and does not call the church to responsible witness, then too many at the various levels of our organization seem to think that they are not responsible and that they have no personal responsibility to witness or to evangelize.

**Myth #2: Public Evangelists Are Responsible**

The emphasis on public evangelism has also eroded the personal sense of responsibility for witnessing. Too much honor and glory is attached to the persona of the evangelist. They often arrive after months and months of hard, diligent work by lay members, but in the write up in church papers we see pictures of mass baptisms and mention is made of the evangelist, but too often little is said about the vital work of the many who studied and prepared the hundreds for a reaping series of meetings. Too often our church publications make it very clear that a large public campaign by high-powered professionals is the honored way to do evangelism. Again, this practice has impacted and diminished a personal sense of responsibility for witness. What is needed is not less public evangelism but more appreciation of the role of the many who make public evangelism successful.

**Myth #3: My Pastor Is Responsible**

Even at the pastoral level in many areas of the world we have long-established practices that have undermined the individual member’s sense of responsibility for personal witnessing. The paid clergy preach and teach while the membership lives a life without much sense that they are to be active in witnessing to neighbors and friends. In the book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* a strong statement says that “the minister who does not have the gift of training, does not belong to the pastoral ministry” (Ministerial Association 1988:211), yet the majority of our pastors in many parts of the world spend little time training the membership concerning effective witness and personal evangelism.

**Factors Leading to Disengagement From the Mission Task**

The three myths listed above have contributed to the problem. By placing responsibility for mission, witness, and world evangelization on the General Conference, the public evangelists and the pastor, many Adventist members...
have completely disengaged from any sense that they are personally responsible for completing the task of world evangelization. But there are other factors that have also contributed to the lack of a sense of personal responsibility for witness and outreach.

#1 A Lukewarm, Laodacian Condition

Many factors seem to combine to keep people from personal witness. There is no doubt that the conditions of the Laodacian Church infect Adventism in many parts of the world. Members are not hot for their faith, are not a shining light to those around them, and are not salty enough to flavor their neighborhoods.

#2 Influence of Post-Modernism

Even more dangerous is the degree to which many Western Adventists have partaken of post-modern philosophy when it comes to feeling that faith is personal, that one should not try to convince another of the rightness or wrongness of any one course of action, that one should just respect people’s religious views and not feel that any one faith system is the right one. In a post-modern climate, witness, evangelism, and sharing one’s faith has become suspect and viewed as inappropriate and anti-establishment.

#3 Materialism, Wealth, and the Desire for the Good Life

Another factor that mitigates against widespread involvement in witness is the grip of materialism on large portions of the Adventist membership. The disease of wanting a little bit more has driven many families to such hectic lifestyles that even the thought of spending one night a week at a Bible study is more than most can imagine. But busyness is only part of the dilemma. Wealth creates a softness and a desire for an even more pampered way of living. Fewer and fewer are even willing to consider that God may be calling them to work in some inconvenient part of the world in order to share the Good News with those who have never heard. Materialism and wealth seem to create attitudes where people are less willing to risk much for God and his kingdom. People seem to live almost entirely for self, for family, and not much for God.
#4 A Poorly Defined Theology of Witness

Perhaps another contributing factor is the weak theology of witness taught and believed by many Adventists. In the book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, there is a three-sentence section entitled “Witnessing—the Purpose for Gifts” that says: “Believers receive a diversity of gifts, an indication that each has a individualized ministry. Yet every believer should be able to witness about his faith, sharing beliefs and telling others what God has done in his life. The purpose for which God gives each gift, no matter what it may be, is to enable its possessor to witness” (Ministerial Association 1988:212). That’s all it says about witness in the whole book. Membership in the church is not conditioned on sharing the faith. Many pastors and most administrators have not led a person to Christ in years. It’s almost as if witnessing were an option that few take seriously.

#5 No Cultural Model

When you couple this weak concept of the Christian’s responsibility to witness with the fact that in many parts of the 10/40 Window where Adventism has struggled to grow there are no cultural models of witnessing in Hinduism or Buddhism. With no cultural models the church has struggled to become a witnessing community. In much of the Buddhist world a concept that one should witness to one’s faith is completely foreign. Buddhism has always been a cultural religion with most equating being a Buddhist with being a Japanese, Thai, or Korean. All the years I lived in Buddhist countries no one ever witnessed to me concerning the tenets of Buddhism; I was never approached and invited to study about Buddhist teachings. The same can largely be said about the Hindu world: Christians living in a Hindu culture see no cultural examples of witness. Perhaps we have taken too much for granted, believing that once a person became a follower of Jesus Christ they would automatically begin to witness concerning their faith. But in reality, in much of the Buddhist and Hindu world only paid workers and global mission workers on a stipend are active in witness.

#6 Incomplete Instruction by Missionaries

Another factor that is part of the equation is the failure on the part of early missionaries to thoroughly teach the people they were winning to Christ that
they now shared the responsibility to take the Good News to unreached and unentered regions. Too many Christians in too many parts of the world today do not sense any responsibility to engage in mission in the 10/40 Window. They still cling to the outdated notion that mission is a Western enterprise. The vital and dynamic Adventist Church in the southern hemisphere with several million from Central and South America and from the three African Divisions sends few to the task of world evangelization. Few from those parts of the world go, few give, and few pray for the unreached. How is it that the two-thirds world church has been able to mature with no sense of responsibility for reaching the unreached? How have we failed to adequately inform and teach concerning the responsibility of each follower of Jesus Christ to take personal responsibility for world evangelization?

#7 No Mission Structure that Easily Allows for Engaging in the Mission Task

One more factor that impacts the will to witness is the makeup of the denominational structure. Present Seventh-day Adventist practices and policies in many parts of the world (especially the Central and South American Divisions and the three African Divisions) actually discourage their membership from going as missionaries to the 10/40 Window. Where are the structures and policies that would encourage the recruiting, training, funding, and sending of hundreds of young couples from those five divisions to the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese worlds of unreached peoples? How long will we allow policies to exist that can more easily discourage and deny permission to the youth of the world divisions to engage in mission than to actively recruit and promote missions?

Recommendations

So what is needed? How do we move the church forward and out of this dilemma where members in the West are too busy, too wealthy, too lukewarm, or too preoccupied with the good life to witness? How do we encourage the church members in the Buddhist and Hindu world who presently are not witnessing and who do not have a cultural background or model for witnessing to begin to engage in outreach? What needs to be done in order to allow for easy accessibility for missionaries from the Inter American, South American,
and the three African Divisions to shoulder their responsibility for mission, witness, and world evangelization? I’d like to suggest four areas where improvement can be made and where action should be taken.

#1 Develop a Comprehensive Theology of Witness

The Seventh-day Adventist Church must develop a comprehensive theology of witness. This is not an option. Witness is vital if our church is to be faithful to its calling and prophetic purpose. Witness is vital if our members are to be drawn into an ever closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Witness is vital if we are to touch the lives of hurting, afflicted, suffering humanity in our communities. Witness is vital if we are going to make a difference in the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese worlds.

An Adventist theology of witness must begin to dismantle the many myths that have developed as to who is responsible for witness. An Adventist theology of witness must do away with the tendencies to centralize responsibility for witness and must teach clearly and biblically that each person, as they join the family of God, inherits a personal responsibility to witness both locally and globally (Acts 1:8).

An Adventist theology of witness cannot tolerate a situation where the various divisions could have many hundreds of thousands of members but no sense of responsibility for the unreached in the 10/40 Window. A theology of witness must stress the personal and individual responsibility for every member to witness and to engage in mission and world evangelization, even if presently the structure and policies of the Seventh-day Adventist Church do not encourage such participation. What would have happened to the members in Antioch if they had waited for policies and words of encouragement from the headquarters in Jerusalem before embarking on that first missionary journey (see Acts 13:1-4)?

Decentralization of the mission task will facilitate more effective mission in our church. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the Global Mission Issues Committee vote an official recommendation that a committee be formed to work on an Adventist Theology of Witness. I further recommend that within the next year that Global Mission organize a conference dealing with the issues raised by such a theology of witness.
#2 Hold Leadership Accountable for Personal Witness

Witnessing within Adventism suffers from the disease of everyone thinking that someone else should do it. One of the shocking things I observed after returning from working in Japan and Micronesia was that few pastors actually personally witnessed. Many pastors in the West often go for weeks and months without teaching a Bible class to unbelievers or without personally witnessing. The same could be said for administrators, teachers, and seminary professors. Too many of us are not in the habit of taking any personal responsibility for personal witness.

In a recent book by Thom Rainer entitled *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them*, it was found that 43 percent of the pastors of churches that were effective at reaching the unchurched had entered into an accountability relationship where they were asked weekly if they had been faithful in personal witness versus only 2 percent of the pastors of churches that had stagnated. Is it possible that one of the keys to lighting the fire of witness under our lay members might just be leadership, by example by pastors and administrators, teachers, and other denominational leaders? How can we expect widespread involvement in witness by the laity of this church if we as leaders never witness?

According to Thom Rainer the pastor of one of the fastest growing churches in Pennsylvania starts his Monday morning staff meeting with a time where all of the administrative staff can share about their personal witnessing during the previous week. Those who have been too busy to witness then have an opportunity during the prayer time to repent. Perhaps some of us need the encouragement of a similar accountability system in order to get us out front in the area of personal witness.

#3 Adjust the Structure and Policies of the Church To Allow for Easy Accessibility

We used to refer to parts of the world field as sending divisions, and I suppose that the rest would have been perceived as receiving divisions. Decentralization of the mission task means that we must do away with such thinking and utilize the resources in all the divisions to support Adventist mission. The Secretariat of the General Conference should be encouraged to work with each of the world divisions to develop a set of policies that encourage and give permis-
Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission

sion to the members of each division and union to engage easily in the global aspects of witness. Today, in many parts of the world, if a dedicated couple went to the leaders in the union and told them that God was calling them to service in a part of the 10/40 Window, the union leaders would have no easy way to help the couple become involved. Present policies do not easily give permission or provide a mechanism or structure for many to engage in witness outside of their local territories.

If the various divisions of the world church do not act to provide easy access I believe that we can expect to see many more supporting ministries established in order to provide those opportunities to serve. Supporting ministries are not an evil to be suppressed, but they do represent duplication of personnel and structure that divert funding from front line mission.

Divisions should realize that one of the marks of a mature church is the recruiting, funding, training, and sending of their sons and daughters to share the Good News with those who have never heard. Adventist mission must begin to practice what we have been saying for the past forty years that missionaries are not just from the West, but from everywhere to everywhere.

Again, I think that a recommendation from this committee requesting that the General Conference Secretariat work with each of the world divisions to write policies that will enable people from each division to easily engage in the task remaining would be very appropriate.

#4 Call the Church to Mission, Witness, And World Evangelization

Present practices, denominational structure, and the policies of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have shaped and formed the habits and ways that Adventists around the world view their responsibility for mission, witness, and world evangelization. Nothing short of a call from the highest levels of the church will bring about change in the way Adventists approach mission. The millions of members in the Inter American, South American and in the three African divisions will not engage in witness and mission at the global level in the unentered areas of the 10/40 Window until and unless there is a challenge and a call from none other than the General Conference president to send their own missionaries to that region of the world.

If Dr. Paulsen would challenge the world membership of our church and would call for at least 1,000 new missionary couples to enter the unentered and
unreached areas of our world over the next few years, I firmly believe that both the money to send them and the people to go would be readily available.

**Conclusion**

Decentralization of the mission task will take effort to overcome the mindset and policies of the past, but the promise of full engagement by all unions and divisions of the Church will be well worth the struggle. When every division and every union takes seriously the Gospel Commission and sees that commission as also applying to territory outside its local boundaries, then this church will be moving in the right direction. When individuals take personal responsibility not only for witness in their local areas, but also at the global level, then our church will begin to see more and more unreached and unentered areas in our world evangelized. When we as pastors, administrators, and teachers realize that we too are personally responsible for witness, then just perhaps our role modeling will become a source of encouragement and help to our members. When every individual has an adequate theology of witness that teaches clearly the personal responsibility for mission, witness, and world evangelization, then the positive effects of decentralization of mission will be realized.

**Reference List**

