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Mission and Interchurch Relations: Separate, Connected, Blended? Insights for Contemporary Adventist Theological Education

The shape and development of theological education, in particular Christian traditions, reflects several influences, including denominational emphases, current conceptions of theology, the inherited shape of theology as an academic discipline with its more or less rigidly separated sub-disciplines, and particular cultures. These influences are also seen in the Adventist context. The overall picture of the denomination's theological curricula shows a strong emphasis on Biblical Studies and Pastoral Theology, a somewhat weaker representation of Church History, Systematic Theology, and Mission Studies, and little if any emphasis on such areas as religious studies and interchurch relations.

This is hardly surprising. A shift from instruction for evangelism to a more sophisticated Adventist theological training may be observed around World War II in the United States and from the 1970s onward in much of the remaining world. This shift led to diverse results, but in many schools the upgrading of theological education brought about a focus on what Adventists had always considered their strength—Biblical Studies—and a professionalization of ministry in the areas of homiletics, counseling, and youth ministry. Only in a few institutions was an emphasis on mission studies added, possibly because traditional patterns of sending Western missionaries to the Two-Thirds World changed in the same period. Subsequently some schools tried to interact with the theological discourse outside the Adventist context more consciously, while others conceived their task to be of a more apologetic nature. Altogether, the denomination's theological training has come to resemble programs of other faith traditions.

2013, no. 1

The early 21st century outcome of these developments calls for reflection on various aspects of this task. This article focuses on the connection between two of these: mission and interchurch relations. Adventist theological education tends to deal with the study of interchurch relations (i.e., the discipline of ecumenics) mainly in the context of general church history or systematic theology, especially ecclesiology. This reflects the picture in some non-Adventist theological faculties as well. However, many European Protestant theological faculties associate missiology with the study of ecumenism and of non-Christian religions, their common denominator being external relations of a denomination or Christianity. This raises the question of whether Adventist academic programs should also highlight this connection.

In the vast literatures on mission and interchurch relations viz. ecumenism,¹ one finds a frequent assumption that mission and ecumenism are closely related or even inseparable (see, e.g., Verstraelen et al. 1995; Dahling-Sander et al. 2003). Interestingly, the nature of their relationship is rarely discussed anywhere. This article, therefore, has a twofold aim: (1) to survey options of the interface of mission and interchurch relations from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective, and (2) to discuss consequences for contemporary Adventist theological education. Thus this paper seeks to address both a gap in the general missiological discussion and a nexus that has hardly been noted in the Adventist discourse on theology and mission (for exceptions, see Schantz 1983:144-186, and the well-balanced 1996 statement entitled "Our Mission and Other Christians" in Bauer 2006:176-177).

Two observations can serve to underline the need for an Adventist reflection on this connection. One is denominational history and mission history. In fact, the history of Adventism has often been written as a history of mission. This is evidently a useful way of viewing Adventist denominational history given that the denomination has considered itself a missionary movement since its establishment in 1863.² At the same time, proclamation is only part of the picture. In reality Adventist history, even the denomination's mission history, is replete with processes of giving and taking, dynamics of negotiation with people groups with different cultural and religious backgrounds including various Christian traditions, and relationships in which true exchange occurred. Therefore, reflecting on the interface of Adventist mission and interchurch relations, as well as on Christian mission in general and its relation to ecumenism, is a mandate of mission and church historiography.

A second observation concerns Adventist interchurch relations. For a few decades, Adventists have developed increasingly elaborate ways of official relations with other denominations, including international dia-

logues with a number of churches, participation in interdenominational Bible translation projects, and different types of relationships with national councils of churches. Remarkably little academic literature exists on this topic (cf., the bibliography in Hörschele 2010:181-184), although academic reflection on these interactions is certainly desirable, especially in conjunction with inquiries into Adventist missionary activities and theology of mission. Without claim to comprehensiveness,³ I will now discuss twelve models of how mission and ecumenism relate.

Separate Spheres

1. Mission *independent* of interchurch relations. Theoretically, it is conceivable that a denomination engages in interchurch relations in a manner that is quite separate from its missionary engagements, with different specialists in these fields pursuing different agendas. However, despite the fact that in academia ecumenics is viewed at times as a discipline of its own with little connection to mission studies, this view is unrealistic. Even if mission were construed as including witness only to non-Christians, as is often done among mainline Protestants, any missionary endeavor implying conversions to Christianity raises the question of which church tradition new converts should join—and this is an ecumenical question because the answer will depend on aspects of ecclesiology which are foundational to ecumenical thought.

2. Mission *opposed* to ecumenism. This second option has long been a prominent concept among Evangelicals, mainly because of some types of activities promoted by the World Council of Churches (WCC). Even in the Adventist tradition this is a widespread view. The reasoning behind this position is that dialogue with other churches might endanger denominational identity. Whether this is true or not in specific cases, evidently significant tension between some views of mission and much of what is called “ecumenical” can arise. At the same time, it is important to note that Adventists have never profiled themselves as opponents of conversations with other Christians. While they did not join the ranks of ecumenical enthusiasts, they always advocated constructive interchurch relations (cf. Graz 2008). Therefore, rejecting activities in the realm of interchurch relations as potentially dangerous for a mission is not the official stance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; in fact, the denomination engaged in discussions and drafted statements on mission and the relationship to other Christians already in the early 20th century (cf., Hörschele 2010:31-36).

The third and fourth types of perspectives are not very common; therefore I will discuss them only shortly:

3. *Everything is mission*. The position that everything churches do is mission can lead to the view that even their relationship to other churches

is in essence a dimension of their missionary existence and therefore does not play any role of its own. However, in reality in such a model ecumenism is *included* in mission (cf. no. 10 below) because one cannot *not* relate to other denominations; therefore, the two actually belong to one sphere.

4. *Everything is ecumenical.* This position would imply that mission either does not exist as, or should not continue to be (cf., e.g., the sentiments of Hogan and d'Arcy May 2011), a category of theology and church life. In this case, the Christian faith is conceived as fundamentally ecumenical, even in the widest (i.e., inter-faith) sense; thus, there is at least no explicit mission, only a Christian presence and relations to other faith persuasions. Such a position may be adopted by those who view the very term "mission" as being fraught with the historical baggage of colonialism and "meliorist," ethnocentric notions of superiority. However, this perspective overlooks that the very confession of a faith is a missionary act; one cannot *not* witness; everything humans do and say is a form of witness and, therefore, part of mission. Thus in reality some type of mission is always *included* in ecumenism (which is option 9, where the two again belong to one sphere).

Connected Spheres

After distinguishing four different ways of separating mission and ecumenism, this section considers mission and ecumenism as connected spheres.

5. *Mission leading to ecumenism.* From a historical perspective, this perspective correctly mirrors the fact that the 19th and early 20th century Protestant missionary movement birthed the Ecumenical Movement. The impetus of evangelizing the world translated into a quest for reducing friction between Protestant churches particularly after the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910.

Yet in spite of this nexus, one should not overlook the fact that mission does not *automatically* lead to ecumenism. In the 20th century, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians all experienced many instances of interdenominational rivalry and attempts at winning over each other's adherents. Mission often leads to an encounter between denominations, but whether this encounter is a dialogical and constructive one depends on the way mission is conceived. Still, the historical connection between mission and ecumenism is one reason why the study of these two phenomena is often done in conjunction.

6. *Mission resulting from ecumenism.* The idea that a positive relationship between Christian denominations enhances Christian mission is a major motif in the modern Ecumenical Movement. Probably the most-quoted biblical text in publications on ecumenism is John 17:21: "that all

of them may be one . . . so that the world may believe." Yet empirically, it has been difficult to verify the concept that visible organizational unity across denominations enhances missionary impact. By way of contrast, a tendency in ecumenically-minded Christians to downplay proclamation appears to have resulted in a weakened emphasis on evangelism among them (cf. the criticism in Hoekstra 1979). At the same time, a broad vision of mission certainly results from an open-minded and constructive relationship with Christians of different backgrounds, in which learning from them helps one's missionary perspective and practice mature.

7. Mission and interchurch relations *overlapping*. When situating mission and ecumenism in theology and in academia at large, the overlap metaphor is certainly justified. Both themes relate to the church and its operations; thus missiology and ecumenics are both closely connected with ecclesiology. At the same time, these disciplines, like the practices that they reflect upon, reach into different realms of theology and beyond (mission: soteriology, pneumatology, and cultural anthropology; ecumenism: all of systematic theology, church law, and sociology).

8. Mission *complementing* interchurch relations (and vice versa). In this view, the two realms are seen as twins covering an area that is divided but not separated, like the two sides of a coin. Thus, mission is thought of as not being opposed to good interchurch relations and vice versa. Ideally every Christian denomination would give every other denomination the liberty to preach its message, to agree to disagree and still respect the other as brothers and sisters in Christ. However, inasmuch as religious liberty is undermined in some societies, this view does not always reflect reality. Likewise, difficulties do arise if constructive interchurch relations are excluded in principle—for example, when other Christian churches are branded "sects," "anti-Christian," "fallen," etc.⁴ Yet from an Adventist perspective, this would be a helpful manner of juxtaposing mission and ecumenism because both are viewed as fundamentally positive attempts of a Christian church to relate to the world around.

One Sphere

The last four ways in which mission and ecumenism can relate all characterize them as belonging to a single sphere in which they are blended in a way that they cannot be fully distinguished.

9. Mission as *part of* ecumenism. When viewing mission as part of ecumenism, the latter is the leading paradigm. Missionary activities must fit in with ecumenical attitudes and practices, a kind of thinking common in the sphere of the WCC. With such an approach, the question of truth and the proclamation of distinctive teachings is subordinated to interchurch peace, which is certainly in tension with the Adventist understanding of

mission. At the same time, in this framework mission theology includes a comprehensive view of God's work in this world. When such a perspective is taken as a point of departure, the disciplines of ecumenics and mission studies are necessarily closely connected.

10. Mission *contains* interchurch relations. This is probably the concept that comes closest to Adventist thinking. When viewing the church as essentially being identical with mission, the relationship with other churches functions as part of it. The strength of this thinking is the well-defined connection of the two principles. Ecumenical relations are neither rejected nor elevated as an independent factor but serve as an aspect of a larger goal. On the level of academic theology, with such a framework ecumenics would play a well-defined but minor role while missiology is dominant.

11. Mission and ecumenism as *marks on a continuum*. If one thinks of mission and ecumenism not as opposites or prioritized items but points in a spectrum, the general tendency of valuing one over the other will remain. Therefore, as the preceding two views, this model suggests a hierarchical relationship. The difference is that here both contain one another, only to different degrees. This kind of approach takes into account the dialectical relationship of mission and ecumenism and does not try to dissolve it into either an antagonism or an identity. The advantage of this approach is that the practices of both mission and interchurch relations are taken seriously in their own right, and that various types of connections between the two may be appropriately depicted by the dynamic metaphor of a continuum or spectrum.

12. Mission being *identical* to ecumenism. Here the overlap reaches a maximum. This view necessitates very broad definitions of both mission and ecumenism; it is common especially in those fields of academia where the lines between the two are blurred anyway, like the emerging field of Studies in World Christianity.⁵ While pioneers of ecumenics as an academic discipline held similar views (cf., Mackay 1964), this approach is evidently not appropriate in the context of Adventist theology.

Implications for Adventist Theological Education in a Postmodern Setting

Not all of the twelve options listed above are acceptable in an Adventist perspective. Several give undue weight to ecumenism to the extent that it becomes the overarching paradigm (view 4: everything is ecumenical, view 9: mission as part of ecumenism, and view 12: mission as identical to it). Others arise from a one-sided view of cause and effect (5 and 6). Depending on the kind of mission and interchurch relations that various theologies imply, there can be considerable debate on whether certain op-

tions are adequate; a very narrow view of “mission” and “ecumenism” would, for instance, correspond to view 2, which regards the two as being mutually exclusive or opposed. By way of contrast, an overly broad view of mission (view 3: everything is mission and view 12: identity of mission and ecumenism) ignores the realities of denominational structures, histories, and relations.

On the basis of typical Adventist missiological thought (see, e.g., Dybdahl 1999 and Bauer 2005-2012) and the denomination’s practice of cautious yet constructive interchurch relations, I suggest the following may be viewed as appropriate for Adventist reasoning: overlapping (7), complementing (8), mission containing ecumenism (10), and both as marks on a continuum (11). What these four have in common is that they are metaphors implying both difference and shared concerns. As a group, they show that the two objects of mission studies and ecumenics cannot be construed as independent spheres or as implying a one-way causal relationship. They are so closely connected that it would also be advisable to pay particular attention to the way they are linked in theological education.

This becomes particularly clear when we relate these views of mission and ecumenism to postmodern thinking. This is not the place to discuss postmodernism at length;⁶ it seems to be more an atmosphere or fashion of thinking rather than a new epoch, yet it does influence the current generation of students considerably. May it suffice to note here that among the major traits of postmodern thinking are the rejection of meta-narratives and, therefore, truth claims; a particular philosophy of language, that is, a somewhat elaborated Wittgensteinian idea that our thinking is “language games”; and a radical pluralism, which raises the importance of imagined or real peripheries in society and globally, and is connected with the loss of traditional belonging and eclectic individualities.

This thinking evidently has an impact on the way we conceive mission, ecumenism, and their relationship, and how we teach these subjects to those who grew up in an environment saturated with such an approach to reality. Two voices of eminent interpreters of mission and ecumenism shall serve as examples for such a conception. One is David Bosch. In his magisterial work *Transforming Mission*, he elaborates a comprehensive contemporary mission paradigm, which he actually calls the “postmodern paradigm” as well as “ecumenical missionary paradigm” (1991:chaps. 10 and 12). Although he does not actually formulate a radically postmodern mission theory, Bosch demonstrates that contemporary concepts of mission must be pluriform (language games!), take inculturation seriously (peripheries!), focus on mediating salvation rather than mere content (criticism of meta-narratives), and involve the whole people of God (thus partly counteracting, partly taking account of individualistic eclecti-

cisms). Interestingly, Bosch also emphasizes the eschatological dimension of mission, which relativizes our language games but also challenges the postmodernist dogma that there is never any firm ground on which we can base our reasoning. Some of these motifs (eschatology, people of God) are easily compatible with Adventist thinking; others (pluriformity and the need to mediate more than content) pose a challenge to some traditional Adventist evangelistic and missionary approaches, and both mission practitioners and theological educators would do well to take this challenge seriously.

A voice that asks whether postmodernity may mean the end of ecumenism is the leading French sociologist of religion Jean-Paul Willaime (2001). As surprising as the question may seem, his logic is compelling: ecumenism is very much an *organized* endeavour taking place in entities such as the WCC or national councils of churches. Such organizations, according to Willaime, are necessarily facing a crisis in an atmosphere that is less willing to support any organization with their respective meta-narrative. The self-confidence of ecumenists had already diminished in the early 1990s (cf., e.g., Birmelé 1994); what remains almost one generation later, after the end of modern ecumenical certainties, is the search for new models of ecumenicity, that is, of constructive interchurch relations. It may well be that some of these new models, which have a stronger participation of denominations from Evangelical and free church backgrounds, are more akin to the type of interchurch relations Adventists can reconcile with their particular missionary ethos.⁷

What does this mean for the relationship between mission and ecumenism? From Bosch's and Willaime's observations, we can conclude that certain types of *both* mission *and* ecumenism will not fit in well with a postmodern thinking. Any seemingly or truly imperialistic type of mission do not make sense in a postmodern atmosphere, just like claims that certain organizations are the one true embodiment of national or global ecumenism. Views of mission as propagating ideologically closed systems of an exclusive salvific agency would not qualify as well as official ecumenisms centering on official dogmatic dialogues conducted by specialists with the aim of producing consensus documents to be "received" by the "laity." Why looking for such consensuses if this may mean creating an even grander narrative than before?

What concepts of ecumenism and mission that do not appeal to postmodern thinking have in common is the failure to combine two principles that serve as their basis: dialogue and witness. In other words, it is only when witness is dialogical and when dialogue contains elements of witness that they are grounded in authentic experience and relationality. This relationality is also visible in the four views on mission and interchurch

relations that fit in with Adventist thinking. In these four, both principles enhance each other because they both emphasize a constructive relationship with the Other. In regard to theological education, this would mean that a missiology is called for at the core of Adventist theological education that is deeply rooted in faith experience and emphasizes relational aspects.

Moreover, the study of ecumenical dimensions of mission in the context of Adventist missiological education and research will likely produce helpful insights. Particularly the emerging field of Studies in World Christianity indicates that global denominations like the Seventh-day Adventist Church contain a considerable extent of ecumenicity in themselves. Discovering the richness of a missionary-oriented global movement in its manifold relations to other Christian movements as well as inside its own growing body is a significant dimension of theological education.

Finally, while ecumenics is not yet an established part of Adventist theological education, the denomination's theologians and missiologists would do well to reflect on the relationship to other Christians in a more systematic manner. This is particularly true in the context of the academic discourse on Adventist mission. While the insights of non-Adventist theologians and mission scholars are frequently used for missiological reasoning, the relationship of Adventist mission to Adventist interchurch relations has not been made a subject of reflection very frequently, not even in studies of mission history and mission theology. Providing space for this reflection will certainly enhance contemporary Adventist witness.

Notes

¹To simplify terminology, I will use the terms "interchurch relations" and "ecumenism" as synonyms. In spite of the negative connotations that the terms "ecumenism" and "ecumenical" carry in a few contexts, including some conservative Evangelical and Adventist discourses, "ecumenical" has a variety of meanings, as Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft's oft-quoted explanation shows: "(a) the whole (inhabited) earth; (b) . . . the whole of the (Roman) Empire; (c) . . . the whole of the Church; (d) that which has universal ecclesiastical validity; (e) . . . the world-wide missionary outreach of the Church; (f) . . . the relations between and unity of two or more Churches (or of Christians of various confessions); (g) that quality or attitude which expresses the consciousness of and desire for Christian unity." (Visser 't Hooft 1954:735). This article uses the terms as formulated in (f).

²Cf., e.g., the titles of the two denominational histories *Tell It to the World* (Maxwell 1976) and *Light Bearers* (Schwarz and Greenleaf 2000).

³The organizing scheme for the following reflection is derived in part from mereology. When one generalizes two items such as mission and interchurch rela-

tions as “spheres,” there are only three principal options for relationships: they can constitute separate spheres altogether; their spheres may be connected but distinguishable; or they may be part of one larger sphere. Mereology, a subdiscipline of ontology, deals with parts and their relation to a whole; on mereology in general, see the excellent introductory article Varzi 2009.

⁴This complementarity model does not preclude the necessity to distinguish which religious traditions belong to Christianity and which do not. Some religious movements such as the Latter-day Saints may claim Christian status but are rightfully considered extra-Christian by those adhering to the historic tenets of the Christian faith.

⁵Cf. the journal *Studies of World Christianity* (1995ff), the *Journal of World Christianity* (2008ff), and several book series in “World Christianity” or “Global Christianity” (e.g., by Lutheran University Press, Rodopi, Regnum, and Blackwell).

⁶For discussions of the meaning of mission in postmodern contexts, see Olsen 2011; for helpful reflections on the impact of postmodernity on Adventism, see Bruinsma 2005.

⁷One such initiative, in which Seventh-day Adventists have actively participated (and an Adventist serves as a Steering Committee member since 2012), is the Global Christian Forum. It provides open space for church representatives to interact without institutionalization and membership; see Hörschle 2008.

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