Section 3
HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

a man of
PASSIONATE REFLECTION
Empathy is more than feeling sympathy. It is attempting to enter into the experience and feelings of another. It is showing understanding and sensitivity to how others think and feel. To quote Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them” (Lee 1960:279).

The word *empathy*, which did not enter the English language until the early 20th century, is a translation from the German word *Einfühlung* (coined by the German philosopher Rudolf Lotz)—literally meaning passion in suffering or feeling.

Empathy is obviously not a term used in the Bible, but it is amply illustrated

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1 Sections of this paper were adapted from Krause 2008.
there. It is Jesus looking on the crowds with compassion, entering into the life and experience of the woman at the well, dealing with the woman with the issue of blood, protecting Mary who anoints his feet with oil. It is the ultimate empathy of the Holy Son of God being incarnated, bearing the sins of the world, and asking God to forgive those about to kill him—because they do not understand what they are doing.

Christian witness at its best is an act of empathy. It is looking at a fellow human being not just as an object to be converted to our way of thinking, but as a son or daughter of God who needs to experience God’s grace and forgiveness, and the life change it brings. It is giving another person our best love, our best respect, our best care, our best understanding, our best testimony about our God. Christian witnesses seek to enter into another’s worldview, to understand their ways of thinking and acting. They learn what they value, what they cherish. Witnesses seek to understand their context, their history. They seek their friendship, their trust. Witnesses seek to build bridges, not knock them down.

Empathy means refusing to accept caricatures or second-hand summaries of others and their beliefs. It means focusing on best reports, not worst reports. A witness of empathy invests time and energy—avoiding quick-fixes, guaranteed conversion methods, winning strategies.

According to Ellen White it is all about taking the time to mingle with people, and showing concern and best wishes for their good. It means showing sympathy and helping where we can. It means earning people’s confidence. It is only within this context that we dare introduce anyone to Jesus (White 1942:143).

Henri Nouwen, writer, theologian, and academic, held prestigious teaching and research posts at Yale University, the University of Notre Dame, the Menninger Foundation, and Harvard University. He was a prolific and highly respected writer on many topics, but his writings on spirituality are perhaps the most appreciated. But all this was not enough for him.

Throughout his career Nouwen looked for ways to help the poor and oppressed. In the 1960s he joined Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement. At one time he even traveled to South America to see if he could serve as a missionary.

Finally he quit academia and went to work for the Daybreak Community in Toronto, Canada—spending the last ten years of his life caring for six mentally handicapped children, helping them in their daily needs.

Author Philip Yancey recalls having dinner with a group of Christian writers, including Richard Foster and Eugene Peterson. At one stage Foster
and Peterson mentioned “an intense young man” who had asked them both for spiritual help. Foster and Peterson wrote back, suggesting reading materials that might help him spiritually. Foster had just heard that the same young man also contacted Nouwen. “You won’t believe what Nouwen did,” said Foster. “He invited this stranger to live with him for a month so he could mentor him in person” (Yancey 1996:80).

C. S. Lewis, despite heavy demands on his time as a prolific and famous author and academic, personally responded to each of the thousands of letters he received. He often prayed for people who wrote to him and would welcome walk-up visitors into his home and even serve them refreshments. Lewis also provided scholarships for many students who could not afford an education. During World War II, he opened up his home to children in need. On one occasion, a mentally disabled teenager stayed in his home for three months. After teaching elite students at Oxford University during the day, he would come home and help this troubled boy learn how to read (Staub 2007:133).

This type of winsome empathy must undergird any dialogue and witness to people from other world religions. In recent years the Adventist Church has grown rapidly in regions where non-Christian religions dominate. Partly by choice, partly by force of circumstances, and partly from the desire to work together in common causes such as religious freedom, Adventists have increasingly been drawn into interaction with non-Christian believers.

Today many Christians are eager to demonize those who think differently. In the wake of 9/11, for example, many sermons from Christian pulpits caricatured and stereotyped Islam. In the prescient words of philosopher Bertrand Russell: “Neither a man nor a crowd nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear” (Russell 1943:25). Adventist witness operates differently. It believes that perfect love casts out fear.

**Early Adventist Views of Non-Christian Religions**

The language of empathy is largely absent in early and even some later Adventist references to other religions. In 1898, D. A. Robinson wrote about “the hard, cold, Christless creed of fate of the Mohammedans” and “its blighting influence upon millions” (1898:436). In the same year, G. C. Tenney wrote of the “ponderous and soul-crushing establishments” of “Hinduism,” “Brahmanism” and “Mohammedanism” (1898:445). G. P. Edwards called Hindu priests “living incarnations of the character of the
evil one” (1900:458) and Carrie Stringer wrote of “the blight of heathenism, Buddhism and Mohammedanism” that made people’s lives “sad and hard” (1927:3). In 1912, J. E. Bowen described Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism as “baneful and false religions” (1912:5) and the Sabbath School Quarterly said that “Moslem influence on Christianity was as deadly as the sting of a scorpion” (Adult Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly 1974:87).

Evangelism and conversion were the dominant Adventist discourse about other religions, but within this there were occasional and growing hints of the need to add understanding, bridge-building, and empathy into the mix.

In 1946, the Adventist Church established the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) to promote religious liberty and freedom of worship (The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia s.v. International Religious Liberty Association). Over time this organization inevitably involved leaders from other religions in discussions and planning. World conferences of the IRLA now feature prominent leaders from non-Christian religions. Today it consistently calls for greater understanding and dialogue between world religions (See Adventist News Network 2007).

As early as 1902, American Guy Dail, then recording and corresponding secretary of the German Union, wrote of the need for missionaries to arrive “at a mutual understanding with our newly acquired neighbor” and added that one of the “first duties” is to “recognize whatever is good in them and in their institutions, and, with some nationalities, as the Chinese, and the educated Arabs and Hindus, it will be to our advantage to have an appreciation of their literature and history.” He concluded that the missionary “must study the art of pleasing others, of putting himself out for the sake of being agreeable and affable to them” (1902:207, 208).

A Broadening Perspective in the 1960s

During the 1960s there were significant Adventist moves toward building a better understanding of non-Christian religions. The General Conference Executive Committee voted in 1956 to start an orientation program for missionaries that would include studying “indigenous religions and educational systems” (Minutes of the General Conference Executive Committee, 1956). This did not happen until ten years later when the Institute of World Mission (IWM) and the Department of World Mission were established at the Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

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The IRLA grew out of an earlier International Religious Liberty Association, established in 1893, which evolved from the National Religious Liberty Association, established in 1889 (The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia).
Russell Staples, who joined the IWM as an instructor in 1971, recalls that “the need for a more informed interaction with non-Christian world religions was certainly a major issue” leading to these additions to the seminary. He adds, “The establishment of the Institute of World Mission opened the way for more direct and concentrated study regarding relationships with the world religions” (Staples 2009: e-mail to author).

In 1967, at the Adventist World Headquarters in Takoma Park, Maryland, the Home Study Institute (HSI) announced a new course in comparative religions. It involved a “careful study” of major world religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Animism. “A careful study of world religions can provide a sympathetic understanding of other faiths,” said HSI president D. W. Delafield (Holbrook 1967:3).

Despite its roots in the inter-denominational Millerite movement, Adventists have tended to be skeptical, if not suspicious, of ecumenical activities. But in the words of the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, the Adventist Church believes that “the ecumenical movement has promoted kinder interchurch relations with more dialogue and less diatribe and helped remove unfounded prejudices” (The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia, s.v. Ecumenism).

The Adventist Church has moved with even greater caution in the area of the interfaith movement with other world religions. But Angel Rodriguez, director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference, writes that “despite the potential dangers,” dialogue with other Christians also has “potential benefits.” He adds, “Therefore we should not discourage, formally or informally, approaching other Christians and even non-Christian religions” (Rodriguez 2003:8, 9). John Graz, director of the General Conference Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Association, says: “[interfaith dialogues] are indispensable if we are to develop understanding, good will, and peace” (Graz, 2008:101).

In January, 2007, William Johnsson, retired editor of the Adventist Review, was appointed as a part-time special assistant to the General Conference president for Interfaith Relations, particularly to help arrange dialogues with “non-Christian entities” (Minutes of the General Conference Administrative Committee, 2007). Later that year, Johnsson wrote that Adventists should “seek to engage leaders of Islam in conversation.” He added: “The reality is that both their religion and ours occupy the same territory, since we are world religions. We should seek to know them better and help them to know what we believe and stand for” (Johnsson 2007:10).

As a sidebar to Johnsson’s article in Adventist World, General Conference
president Jan Paulsen wrote: “What then are the values that should mark our relationships with those who do not share our faith? Respect, sensitivity, and a desire to move beyond caricatures toward mutual understanding—let this be our goal as we continue to engage in the mission that has been entrusted to us” (Paulsen 2007:8).

Rodriguez adds: “Only the truth is most effective in dealing with others. False stereotypes and the lack of correct information weaken witness. It is precisely the purpose of the conversation to create an environment in which we are willing to listen to each other in a Christian spirit of love and cordiality” (Rodriguez 2007:28).

Two Case Studies
Empathy with Buddhists

According to William Hutchinson, formal religious discussions between Christians and Buddhists did not really start until the 1980s (Hutchinson 2004:189). The Adventist Church was not far behind when in 1992 the Far Eastern Division, supported by the General Conference Office of Global Mission, asked Clifton Maberly to establish a Buddhist Study Center (information in this section is from e-mails sent by Clifton Maberly, February 2009).

At first Maberly was hesitant. “My first thought was that we didn’t know enough about Buddhism to begin authentically,” he says. “Yes, we had Buddhists in Thailand who had become Adventists, even Buddhist monks who were now pastors, but as far as I knew, no one had built bridges between the two disparate worlds.” He adds, “I was sure none of us knew who we were speaking to or what we had to say that was relevant.”

Maberly knew exactly where he wanted to establish the center, near the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), the largest public Buddhist university in Thailand, with more than 10,000 monks enrolled.

Maberly made an appointment to see the head Buddhist monk for Bangkok, the highest ranking member of the Sangha (the society of Buddhist monks) for Bangkok, also the abbot of Mahathat Temple. He explained to the monk that he was setting up a study center to explore the similarities and differences between Adventism and Buddhism, and asked for the monk’s blessing and suggestions.

The monk supported the venture, and suggested that a location near the university would best allow for getting to know each other properly and good interaction. Maberly found a place at nominal rent, on temple property,
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fifty meters from the main entrance to one of the most prestigious Buddhist universities in the world. He then met with the chancellor of the university, a leading Buddhist scholar. The chancellor was impressed with the project and encouraged university lecturers to assign their students to visit the center and do comparative studies under Maberly’s supervision.

Maberly set about establishing the center with room to study, debate, and dialogue. He began working on a library and set up a computer lab. Soon twenty to sixty monks were visiting the center—named the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture—each day. He encouraged university groups to use the center as their place of meeting, and various associations of monks began meeting regularly there.

“I soon learned that we learned the most if we assumed monks were our colleagues,” says Maberly. “When we exchanged notes as fellow-shepherd—fellow pastors—we got a measure of each other. We spent hours talking through the challenge of caring for congregations. I was even asked for tips on preaching—on homiletic skills needed to keep the attention and convict listeners. I became confident to talk to Buddhist monks anywhere about anything.”

It was important to Maberly to engage monks in the center and implement their suggestions where possible. Soon he had a group of what he calls monk “owners” who felt this was their center.

In 2002, Scott Griswold was appointed director of the center. He, too, has continued focusing on “walking in the shoes” of Buddhists. “Dialogue’s intention should be two-fold, focusing on commonality and recognizing differences,” Griswold says, “actually sharing [with] them in a helpful manner so they can see what we truly teach and its great value for them” (Griswold 2009: e-mail to author).

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4Maberly describes the center’s first steering committee attended by representatives from the Far East Division, Global Mission, the Thailand Mission and elsewhere. They came to see how the center was developing, and give input into its operation. But he had a “problem.” Three of the monk “owners” were sitting around in the center and showed no signs of leaving as the committee members arrived. He couldn’t ask them to leave, so he explained that some of the center’s sponsors were meeting to discuss its future role. The monks were delighted and pulled up their chairs to join the discussion. He says it was one of the most unusual steering committees he had ever chaired. The church administrators had to discuss goals and plans with monks as part of their audience. Maberly had no chance to “prep” them in any way, but says, “fortunately they were intelligent enough to read the situation.” Maberly still smiles at the finale. At the conclusion of the meeting, the church leaders rose to leave. The Buddhist monks leapt to their feet, opened the door, thanked them for their support, and invited them to come back any time.
Empathy with Muslims

Robert Darnell, Field secretary in the Middle East Union in the 1960s, was an Adventist pioneer in building bridges to Muslims. He called Muslims “our friends”—a theme echoed by others in the church in the Middle East at this time (see for example, Semaan 1964:6). In 1963, he wrote: “The true spirit of Christ is the spirit of love for our neighbors. We believe that among the Christians the Muslim has no more sincere friend than the Adventist. Adventist-Muslim friendship will be a demonstrated fact when we enlarge the circle of our love and take the Muslim in. Until then we will continue to be an unknown, unappreciated minority” (Darnell 1963:10).

In Tehran, Iran, Darnell pioneered a new approach to public meetings. “The lives and sayings of the prophets were treated in typically Muslim style and quotations were made from the Qur’an and Muslim traditions where appropriate,” reported the Middle East Messenger. “The lecturer spoke in an atmosphere of respect for Islam, its book and its prophet” (Darnell 1967:7).

In his work as the first director of Global Mission’s Global Center for Islamic Studies, Børge Schantz argued that Muslims should be treated with “Christian love, courtesy and respect” (Schantz 2008). It was a theme Jerald Whitehouse, appointed director in 1995, built on. Whitehouse renamed the center the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations (GCAMR), reflecting his priority on dialogue and building bridges to Muslims within their own socio-religious culture (New Directions 2006). According to Whitehouse, empathy must be at the heart of relating to Muslims. “Respect for the Muslim’s faith is a given,” he says. “They are not heathen or pagan” (Whitehouse 2006:73). He talks about the importance of a nonoffensive and respectful encounter and says that Adventists “must stand as a healing force, a force for reconciliation between peoples, and between humanity and God” (Whitehouse 2002).

In February 2003, GCAMR participated in a “Building Bridges Conference” sponsored by the Trans-European Division. Since then the center has been involved in many dialogues, including personal meetings with Muslim leaders, a dialogue with Sharia Muslims in England (2006), the “Yale Common Word Conference” (2008), interfaith conferences in Doha, Qatar (2007 and 2008) and a dialogue at Mindanao State University, Philippines (2008).

In Mindanao, Whitehouse and then-Adventist Mission coordinator for the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, Rick McEdward, joined fifteen Seventh-day Adventist leaders and scholars and fifteen leading Muslim scholars for
a two-day conference at King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies at Mindanao State University.

An influential Adventist faculty member at the university had approached McEdward and said, “Pastor we need to do something here, they respect us but they don’t know us.” She made the initial arrangements, and then invited GCAMR to care for the dialogue.

At the conclusion of the dialogue, the Muslim scholars said that according to the Q’uran, Christian groups are more similar to Muslims than any other group. But, they added, Adventists were the only ones they could relate to. They also said that if any tension ever arose between Muslims and Adventists over any issue, they would be happy to act as mediators to diffuse the problem (McEdward 2009).

Conclusion

As the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown in the 10/40 Window, and as migration has brought adherents of non-Christian religions to America and other areas where the Adventist Church is relatively strong, growth in interfaith interaction, whether planned or unplanned, official or unofficial, was inevitable. These can range from the Adventist-Muslim Relations Coordinator of the North American Division speaking at interfaith dialogue dinners, to Adventist laypeople in suburban Australia talking to Muslim neighbors over the back fence; from formal visits to the General Conference by non-Christian religious leaders to formal debates between Adventists and Muslims in Indonesia. In this growing contact with

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5McEdward reported that the Muslim scholars gave a “massive round of applause” after a presentation by the Mindanao Sanitarium and Hospital and Health Sciences College about how they work to accommodate the distinctive needs of the large Muslim population they serve.

6In 2007, for example, the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—with huge territories dominated by Islam—voted a major official Statement on Islam, designed to foster good relations and build bridges between the church and Muslims.

7Visit www.youtube.com and you’ll find dozens of videos of debates between Adventists and Muslims in various parts of the world, uploaded to the Internet by Adventists. These videos carry titles such as “Seventh-day Adventist vs Islam,” and tags such as: “Again, SDA won the debate.” Some dialogues occur at the institutional level with cooperation between various Adventist organizations, such as the “Our Father Abraham” Conference held at Andrews University in March 2006. Sponsored by the International Religious Liberty Association, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and Shabbat Shalom, the conference brought together Muslim, Jewish and Adventist scholars for a better understanding of each religion. Other meetings appear to just “fall into place,” but without consultation with other areas of the church that are also involved in interfaith dialogue. For example, in November 2008, a consultation entitled, “Sabbath in Text, Tradition, and Theology,” involving Adventist, other Christian, and Jewish scholars began in Boston. Co-chair Tom Shepherd, an Adventist theologian from Andrews University, says the goal of the conversation was “to foster an open and rewarding dialogue between Jews and Christians on
people from other religious traditions, the principle of empathy becomes increasingly important.

Twenty years sociologist Robert Wuthnow pointed to a “declining monopoly of specific religious traditions over the enactment of religious convictions” (1988:301). Today in the West Christian denominationalism is becoming less important, suspicion of specific truth claims by any organization is growing, and accepting all religious beliefs as equally legitimate is elevated to a virtue.

The dominant discourse about religion in the democratized world is pluralistic, and it is tolerant. In such an environment the words conversion, proselytizing, and missionary become dirty words—subverting the dominant discourse—while words such as co-existing, mutual respect, and working together fit comfortably.

The historical approach of the Adventist Church to its mission does not fit comfortably with this dominant discourse. While respecting the adherents of other religions and championing religious freedom, Adventism has historically always been concerned with discovering God’s truth and sharing that truth with others. For the Seventh-day Adventist there can be no compromise regarding the Great Commission. The question is whether Adventists go into all the world with a triumphalist, critical, and strident voice, or whether they go in the humility of Jesus, showing his empathy and love.

As official interfaith dialogue grows stronger, it is ironic that in practice Christians appear to be totally ignoring their non-Christian neighbors. Research by Todd Johnson and Charles Tieszen suggests that Christians are hopelessly and inexcusably out of touch with non-Christians in their communities. They found, for example, that in North America only 35.6 percent of Buddhists, 22.7 percent of Hindus and 67.8 percent of Muslims say they know even one Christian. They conclude that around the world, 86 percent of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslim do not know personally know even one Christian.8

These statistics give mockery to Christian claims of being salt and light in their communities—at least communities of non-religious people. Many Seventh-day Adventists and other Christians are living as if these people do not exist.

The time is more than ripe for Adventists to broaden their horizons to

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8In Europe only 31.8 percent of Buddhists, 57.6 percent of Hindus, and 18.5 percent of Muslims say they know at least one Christian. See Johnson and Tieszen (2007).
engage non-Christian believers in an open, empathetic, Christ-like way. Since the Adventist Church was founded in 1863, the Church has done a lot of talking, preaching, writing, and broadcasting—at people from various religious traditions. But has it also listened and learned? Has it worked to understand? Has it demonstrated Christ-like empathy?

In 2003, Malcolm Bull wrote, “If growth continues at the same rate in the next century, Seventh-day Adventism will become America’s single most important contribution to world religion” (Bull 203:279). Now is the time to humbly, and empathetically, rise to that high responsibility.

Thank you, Jerald, for your years of empathetic ministry.

Works Cited


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