

Andrews University

## Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Memory, Meaning & Life

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

---

5-10-2010

### The Teacher's Notebook: Missions and the Challenge of Conversion Part II

Lisa Clark Diller  
*University of Chicago*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Diller, Lisa Clark, "The Teacher's Notebook: Missions and the Challenge of Conversion Part II" (2010).  
*Memory, Meaning & Life*. 27.  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml/27>

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Memory, Meaning & Life by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

# Memory, Meaning & Faith

[Main](#)

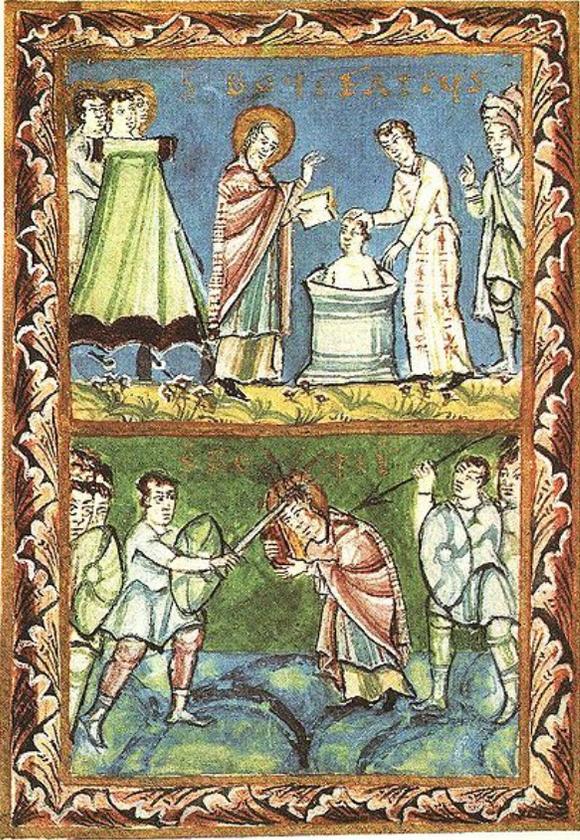
[About](#)

[Archives](#)

May 10, 2010

## The Teacher's Notebook: Missions and the Challenge of Conversion Part II

By Lisa Clark Diller



In my [last post](#) I discussed my students' and my growing realization that we had often harshly judged the missionaries of the past for making cultural accommodation regarding their Christian faith. Our second conclusion was that it seems hard to separate conversion from attraction to a more powerful political and cultural entity.

### Missionaries As Reformers

Third, we realized that missionaries are often reformers. In the past, at any rate, they seem to have been people who were dissatisfied with the state of their own local church and after feeling frustrated by attempts at reform, finally decided the most effective way to make sure that Christians were really and truly Christian was to start from scratch. *It sometimes appeared easier to create true churches from the ground up than deal with the politics and complacency of those who were already believers.*

(The [Jesuits](#) were a great example of this—concern for what was happening in Europe led them to go out to the rest of the world to make sure that people would be converted to the “correct” view of Christianity as developed in the Roman Church.)

Now, they universally found that it was actually *not* easier to create a “pure” church from scratch. Many of them came back home at the end of the day to re-try reforming the home church. But the churches of Ireland and Saxony and the American Southwest still all betray the temperaments and concerns of those early missionaries.

### The Highest Standards

So the answer to “What does it mean to be a Christian?” was deeply connected to missions. The eighth century Christian leader [Boniface](#) was very exacting regarding Christian standards and it was his discontent with the reformation of his Frankish church that provoked him to go to the mission fields of Saxony. Others also looked around their local communities and decided that these people weren't the Christians they should be, that they had compromised too much and were too materialistic, too concerned with this world and political power to really be good Christians; and then felt called to go and tell people about what it really meant to be a Christian. *Often missionaries were actually those with the highest standards of what this meant—which did not mean that they were always successful according to their own standards.* But they were often quite bold in calling sin by its name and by making strong claims for the faith.

We found that these concerns were also connected to the behavior of the new Christians—were they still venerating pagan deities, abusing Christian rituals, or indulging in the sins of the flesh? The answer was too often, “Yes,” and missionaries could spend years working on these problems with few rewards. The problems they chose to work on, the issues they emphasized, were often reflections of their own personal priorities.

And in the end, it was monastic communities of believers that we most effective in making mature Christians. Part of what I learned from this was that we make disciples best in communities—the lone Christian missionary has a hard time. New believers need to see what Christianity looks like in action—in its lived experience.

### **Integrating Faith And Culture**

Ultimately, it took Europe about 1000 years to become Christian. By that time each culture had found ways to integrate their new faith with the ways they had lived their lives for a long time. The Americas have been working on it for close to five centuries now—and one might argue that Native American peoples are still trying to find a way to retain their own identity and fulfill the claims of Christianity. Mission work isn’t straight-forward. *Somehow we find ourselves much more inclined to judge the Christian work of the past as flawed compared to our own.*

My class’s assumption (and my own) that Christians in Peru and New Mexico in 1600 or Saxony in 800 were inferior in their faith is informed by our own position as 21st century Protestants shaped by the evangelical tradition. Can illiterate people be Christians? How much of one’s past culture (which is steeped with religious activity and meaning) does one have to give up in order to become a Christian? How “pure” do one’s motives have to be—if the evangelist comes from the world’s great superpower (whether that is Spain, Rome or the USA) how can that be separated from the good news of forgiveness and redemption?

Should we give up on missions if they aren’t done just right or if it takes decades/centuries to mature? Most of all, why does “mission” work seem to always involve going to a different culture? What might it look like if it were centered on my own community?



Professor [Lisa Clark Diller](#) (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 2003) teaches on and researches the early modern world at Southern Adventist University. She and her husband Tommy live and put their faith into service in downtown Chattanooga, TN. Diller enjoys crossing cultural, geographic, and socio-economic boundaries whenever possible.

Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on May 10, 2010 in [Church History](#), [Missions and Ministry](#) | [Permalink](#)

[Save to del.icio.us](#) | [The Way...](#)

### **Comments**

 You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the [comment feed](#) for this post.

Lisa Clark Diller, it's good to hear your voice on this blog! Now, ahem, to my more objective commentary.

Both parts 1 and 2 of this reflection on missions were thought-provoking and very much resonated with some deep thinking I've been doing myself lately. One point in particular, though, stood out. "It sometimes appeared easier to create true churches from the ground up than deal with the politics and complacency of those who were already believers." No less true today, is it? I'm a big believer in evangelism/missions and in particular I'm a big fan of church planting. But when I think about why this ministry is so appealing to me, if I look past the layers of good theology and research studies I find that there's an underlying fear of being sent (apostle-ized?) to some stodgy, lukewarm church. I think it would be easier to create a true church from the ground up than deal with the politics and complacency of an established congregation. As church planters are fond of saying, "It is easier to give birth than to raise the dead."

But then I start to wonder about the righteousness of appeasing my own fear and doing the easier thing.

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [May 12, 2010 at 02:11 AM](#)

As a person who is part of a church plant myself, I confess that the less-admirable motives have been part of the picture for us, too. Those of us with strong vision for what we want the church to be are more attractive to the mission/evangelism element, I think. And that includes the pastoring of new churches where you get to set the tone from the get-go. We can't avoid all the pitfalls of global evangelism just from staying local, apparently.

Lovely to exchange ideas with you in digital form, Kessia!

Posted by: Lisa Clark Diller | [May 12, 2010 at 11:49 AM](#)

## **Verify your Comment**

### **Previewing your Comment**

Posted by: |

This is only a preview. Your comment has not yet been posted.



Your comment could not be posted. Error type:

Your comment has been posted. [Post another comment](#)

The letters and numbers you entered did not match the image. Please try again.

As a final step before posting your comment, enter the letters and numbers you see in the image below. This prevents automated programs from posting comments.

Having trouble reading this image? [View an alternate.](#)



[Contact](#)

[Archives](#)

[Feeds](#)

[Powered by TypePad](#)

Copyright © 2010 Andrews University