Reclaiming Our Purpose: Becoming a Missionary Movement Again

The Adventist Church was designed to be a movement—a group of people working together to advance a shared passion; a people motivated by a sense of destiny and purpose; a missionary enterprise.

The Adventist Church was not organized merely to be the custodian of an organizational system, to control and maintain institutions. “It was the mission of the church that demanded an adequate church structure (emphasis supplied) (Knight 2001:65). Upon the relocation of the headquarters to the Washington, DC area, Ellen White remarked that the headquarters should represent “this message as a missionary movement” (emphasis supplied) (1977:498).

This was God’s purpose for ancient Israel. “Placed at the head of a nation that had been set as a light to the surrounding nations, Solomon . . . might have used his God-given wisdom and power of influence in organizing and directing a great missionary movement for the enlightenment of those who were ignorant of God and of His truth” (emphasis supplied) (White 1977:498). Today it is essential for the Adventist Church, especially in Western cultures, to re-embrace its call to be a missionary movement.

Missiologists as a whole agree that North American Christianity is losing ground (Adams 2010:15). Notice these quotations from the dissertation of Dr. Milton Adams, which received the Andrews University 2010 DMin Excellence in Research Award (157).

The U.S. ranks third behind China and India in the number of unsaved people. Evangelical churches have failed to gain an additional 2 percent of the American population in the past 50 years. In other words, we are not even reaching our own children” (in Kreider and McClung 2007:62).

American Christians tend to believe we are the most churched country in the world. The reality, however, is that the United States is
the fourth largest unchurched population in the world.

Approximately 3,500 to 4,000 churches close their doors for the last time each year, while 1,100 to 1,500 churches are started each year.

Three times more churches are closing than opening (in Tenny-Brittian 2005:2).

There are also alarming trends from within our own faith community. In a recent *USA Today* article, it was stated that Adventists are growing faster than any other American church—probably because many denominations are in decline. While we are thankful to at least be growing (at an annual rate of growth of about 2 percent), the Adventist leader interviewed on behalf of the church spoke with transparency. ‘‘We don’t feel that we’re growing very much, and that is a source of concern, especially for North America,’’ said Ron Clouzet, director of the North American Division Evangelism Institute at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. ‘‘Hispanic Adventists are the one group that is growing very well,’’ he added. ‘‘If we didn’t have that group, we would look even more dismal’’ (MacDonald 2011).

Even when one factors in the total growth for the world church, this comment from the 2010 Annual Council calls for reflection. ‘‘The Church’s growth rate is simply not keeping pace with the world’s burgeoning population. An honest evaluation of our current evangelistic impact on the world leads to the conclusion that unless there is a dramatic change we will not complete heaven’s assignment in this generation. In spite of our best efforts, all our plans, strategies, and resources are incapable of finishing God’s mission for His glory on earth’’ (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2010).

Something has to change. As Adventists, we must re-embrace becoming a missionary movement.

In his book, *Movements that Change the World*, Steve Addison uses the illustration of Patrick of Ireland. We do not know much about Patrick’s life except that he lived about 300 years after Jesus and began a missionary movement in the British Isles and on the continent. He is remembered on March 17, the day of his death. We know more about those who followed him and the movement that he is credited to having birthed.

Patrick lived in an affluent family and Britain, where he resided, was a province of Rome. His father was a magistrate for the Roman government and his grandfather had been a Christian priest. Kidnapped at the age of 16 and sold into slavery by marauders from Ireland, he was taken to Ireland and forced to work as a shepherd. The Irish people were a cruel people, superstitious, and mired in paganism. Living a hard life and suffering from destitution, he remembered his Christian heritage and turned
to Jesus Christ. His faith sustained him over the coming years.

One night, at the age of 22, he dreamed that there was a ship waiting to take him back to England. He escaped and made the trip to the coast where indeed he found a ship that took him to his homeland.

Once Patrick was back with his family, he could not forget the people of Ireland. Finally, he returned as a self-appointed missionary. We know little about the rest of his life but we do know a lot about the fruitage of his labor. His followers Christianized Ireland. They sent missionaries to Great Britain and other parts of Europe and were a missionary church-planting movement (Addison 2009:15). They were known as Bible-believing Christians who rejected papal authority. They kept the seventh-day Sabbath (Andrews 1912:534) and carried a sense of purpose and destiny.

As one reviews the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, one can see that it was infused with a sense of purpose and calling. As has already been mentioned, from the beginning, a missionary culture pervaded the church. It was imbedded within the DNA of Adventism.

What are the characteristics of a movement? According to Addison, movements have distinct characteristics (2009:22-24):

1. **Movements have a white-hot faith.** George Muller’s ministry is a fitting illustration of a ministry powered by a “white-hot faith.” He started and operated orphanages for decades, without soliciting financial assistance, nor going into debt (Steer 1997:27). During his life he cared for 10,000 children.

On his way across the Atlantic to speak in Canada, a thick fog lay across the ocean. Muller went to the captain and told him that he needed to be in Canada in 2 days. The captain told him that there was nothing that could be done and that he would miss his appointment. Muller asked the captain if they could go to the chartroom to pray. Muller prayed and then the captain started to pray but Muller laid his hand on the captain’s shoulder. “You don’t need to pray.” “Why?” “Well, you don’t believe the Lord is going to answer our prayer anyway and secondly, He has already answered our prayer.” They opened the door of the cabin and there was a clear sky (Steer 1997:27). His was a white-hot faith.

Early Adventists had deep, powerful prayer lives—both personally and corporately. In describing prayers on behalf of her husband, James, Ellen White gave the following description:

Three times a day we went alone before God, and engaged in earnest prayer for the recovery of his health. This was the whole burden of our petitions, and frequently one of us would be prostrated by the power of God. The Lord graciously heard our earnest cries, and my husband began to recover. For many months our prayers ascended to heaven
three times a day for health to do the will of God. These seasons of prayer were very precious. We were brought into a sacred nearness to God, and had sweet communion with him. (1945:198,199)

In describing meetings of early Adventist believers Ellen White describes intense seasons of intercession and invites believers to emulate those times today:

We must be much in prayer if we would make progress in the divine life. When the message of truth was first proclaimed, how much we prayed. How often was the voice of intercession heard in the chamber, in the barn, in the orchard, or the grove. Frequently we spent hours in earnest prayer, two or three together claiming the promise; often the sound of weeping was heard and then the voice of thanksgiving and the song of praise. Now the day of God is nearer than when we first believed, and we should be more earnest, more zealous, and fervent than in those early days. Our perils are greater now than then. Souls are more hardened. We need now to be imbued with the spirit of Christ, and we should not rest until we receive it. (1948:161)

2. Movements have a compelling sense of purpose. Movements contain people gripped by something worth investing their lives in. When James and Ellen White began their ministry, traveling incessantly, and encouraging people who believed in the Second Coming of Jesus, they were materially destitute but passionately committed. Notice this description:

We are just getting settled in Rochester. We have rented an old house for one hundred and seventy-five dollars a year. We have the press in the house. Were it not for this, we should have to pay fifty dollars a year for office room. You would smile could you look in upon us and see our furniture. We have bought two old bedsteads for twenty-five cents each. My husband brought me home six old chairs, no two of them alike, for which he paid one dollar, and soon he presented me with four more old chairs without any seating, for which he paid sixty-two cents. The frames are strong, and I have been seating them with drilling. Butter is so high that we do not purchase it, neither can we afford potatoes. We use sauce in the place of butter, and turnips for potatoes. Our first meals were taken on a fireboard placed upon two empty flour barrels. We are willing to endure privations if the work of God can be advanced. We believe the Lord’s hand was in our coming to this place. There is a large field for labor, and but few laborers. Last Sabbath our meeting was excellent. The Lord refreshed us with His presence. (White 1940:143)
Historically, Adventists were people with a vision so compelling that sacrifices were gladly made to advance the cause of Jesus. Everything in life was subordinated to the work of carrying the gospel into the entire world, and preparing people for the coming of Jesus. Joining God in working where he was leading was that which defined the purpose of life. They were consumed with a passion to see God’s Kingdom come and God’s will to be done.

3. Movements understand networking and connecting through preexisting relationships. Movements do not depend upon impersonal, programmatic approaches.

Joseph Bates found himself in Battle Creek, looking for a way to open up that small community for the gospel. At that time, Battle Creek was a town of only 200 residents. Bates went to the post office and asked, “Who is the most honest man in town?” “David Hewitt,” was the response. So Bates went to the home of David Hewitt and asked if he could talk. They spent the day together, studying the Bible. David Hewitt kept the very next Sabbath. Hewitt, a Presbyterian, was the only Sabbath keeper in Battle Creek in 1852 but one year later, in 1853, there were eight people meeting in his home each week. A few months later Hewitt’s house was full. For two years, Hewitt’s home was the meeting place for this growing group of believers that later became the Battle Creek Church (Spalding 1961:255).

We do not know how David Hewitt went about sharing his faith but since he was well respected in the community and Battle Creek was a very small town at the time, it is very likely that those invited into his home to hear the message were people who were networked relationally with Hewitt and other new believers. Informal networking and connecting through pre-existing relationships is a powerful strategy for spreading the cause.

4. Movements mobilize people without a lot of formal training. Adventists, at the beginning, were self-taught, committed people. Today Adventists are much more educated. Formal education is extremely helpful and should not be disrespected or undervalued. But the power for accomplishing the mission does not come from formal training. The power for extending the Kingdom of God comes from the equipping strength of the Holy Spirit. In addition, the equipping power of the Spirit will empower lay people to become great emissaries for the gospel. It is incumbent upon ministers to look for, inspire, and train them.

William Carey is recognized as the father of the evangelical missionary movement. He had a passion to heed the command of Christ, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” But some churchmen believed that the command to go to the nations was given only to the original apostles and that “the heathen” had already rejected the gospel. Others taught that God in
his sovereignty would save the heathen when he was ready and without the involvement of believers.

Carey, a poor village cobbler and Baptist lay preacher, argued that Jesus intended for all Christians to act upon the Great Commission. He argued that it is incumbent upon all followers of Jesus to accept the mandate and act as decisively as did the New Testament believers. “In 1793 Carey and his family left for India as the first missionaries of the newly formed Baptist Missionary Society.”

“Carey once described himself as a plodder for Christ. One-step at a time he pioneered effective strategies that fueled a worldwide missionary movement that changed the course of history. Devoted to India, he never left it” (Addison 2009:105).

William Carey’s approach was to translate the Scriptures into as many indigenous languages as possible. He tirelessly pursued this task. “More than any other individual, Carey turned the tide of Protestant thought in favor of world missions. As reports of his work reached home, others took up the challenge of world missions. Carey laid a foundation for the most expansive spread of the gospel the world has ever seen” (Addison 2009:105).

On the night of April 17, 1906 Ellen White dreamed about the San Francisco earthquake, which occurred the next morning, April 18, at 5:12 a.m. This earthquake is still considered among the top three natural disasters to befall the United State—comparable to the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 and Hurricane Katrina of 2005 (1906 San Francisco Earthquake).

God used that experience to impress Ellen White’s mind with the importance of focusing missionary effort upon the great cities of the world. This event was the context for an article that appeared on July 5, 1906 in The Review and Herald. Against the backdrop of her counsel to work the great cities, Ellen White emphasized that people will be called from secular vocations to be gospel missionaries. She stated that they will be “educated” in connection with “men of experience” and that they will learn to proclaim the truth with power. Further, she expressed that “mountains of difficulty will be removed.” Notice this paragraph in its entirety:

There is to be, at this period, a series of events which will reveal that God is master of the situation. The truth will be proclaimed in clear, unmistakable language. As a people we must prepare the way of the Lord under the overruling guidance of the Holy Spirit. The gospel is to be given in its purity. The stream of living water is to deepen and widen in its course. In all fields, nigh and afar off, men will be called from the plow and from the more common commercial business vocations that largely occupy the mind, and will be educated in connection with men of experience. As they learn to labor effectively, they will
As the Adventist movement gains momentum, it must recruit people without formal training to work under the guidance of workers “of experience.” These people will not be professional clergy. They may likely continue their vocations. But God will use them as missionaries to reclaim the passion, energy, and effectiveness of a missionary people.

5. **Movements adapt to the challenges at hand in order to carry forward the work of the gospel.** A compelling example is the work of the Adventist Church in China. When General Conference President Jan Paulsen visited China in 2009, the *Adventist Review* reported, “More than half of the Adventist pastors in China are women, and a large majority of the members are also female. Some pastors have earned formal degrees through seminaries sponsored by the China Christian Council, the umbrella organization that coordinates the affairs of the nation’s estimated 20 million Christians, but an increasing number are emerging from training centers established by local congregations” (Finding Faith in China 2009).

Even though circumstances continue to be extremely difficult, God is blessing his work as his people adapt to the challenges before them. “Church planter extraordinaire Zu Xiu Hua, who has personally started 380 congregations in the northeastern province of Jilin, spoke with Paulsen through an interpreter over an evening meal hosted by Adventist leaders from the city. Her congregations, now totaling more than 20,000 persons in the mostly rural region, are served by dozens of volunteer women whom she trains to conduct Bible studies, preach, and offer spiritual care. One of her converts, Lan Yong Shen, now also an Adventist pastor in the same region, joined her in meeting with Paulsen and the other leaders. He manages more than 300 congregations with a total of 7,000 members” (Finding Faith in China 2009, emphasis supplied).

A movement called by God and empowered by his Spirit may be led in surprising ways. New methods may push us out of our comfort zone. But God will lead and guide his people to be faithful if they are open to the leading of the Spirit. The words of Isaiah are apropos: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa 55:8, 9 NRSV).

This begs the question. “Are we receptive to innovative ways that the
Spirit may direct us in order to reach the vast numbers of people in Western society who are unresponsive to traditional methods of evangelism and church ministry? Adventists adopted a whatever-it-takes posture during the early years of the church’s existence. George Knight mentions several innovations pioneered by Millerite Adventists in the early 1840s:

Himes unleashed what historian Nathan Hatch has referred to as “an unprecedented media blitz.” 10,000 copies of The Midnight Cry newspaper were sold or given away on the streets of New York City for a number of weeks and the Millerite newspaper was sent to every minister in the state of New York.

A collection of pamphlets, tracts, and books was packaged under the title, “Advent Library” and sold for 10 dollars so that folks could send a “library” of biblical materials to disseminate the message within various communities.

Great conventions (General Conference of Christians Expecting the Advent in October 1840) were held in the major cities of America. There were at least 16 such events conducted before 1844.

It is estimated that one out of every 35 Americans attended an Adventist camp meeting. Joshua Himes began using a tent for such gatherings. With a seating capacity of 4,000, the Millerite tent was apparently the largest of its kind in the United States up through that time. The novelty of the “big tent” of course also attracted listeners.

Millerites would place their publications on ships bound to various seaports. Thus by the summer of 1842 Himes could write that Millerite publications had been “sent to all the Missionary stations that we know of on the globe” (Knight 1993:12).

But this whatever-it-takes spirit did not conclude with the Millerites. Seventh-day Adventists continued to be on the forefront of creative missional methodology:

Within 10 years after the church was organized, the Adventist Church opened a school in Battle Creek. Ellen White encouraged the school program to emphasize the development of the spiritual, mental, and physical aspects of development and to include “a practical education that connected physical labor with academic work” (Knight 1993:12). Today Seventh-day Adventists operate the largest Protestant system of education in the world, to a great extent, utilizing this philosophy. Much of the success of our world mission program is attributable to Adventist Christian education.

Battle Creek Sanitarium became a world-class health reform institution and the forerunner of Adventist health-care ministries. Innovations from Battle Creek revolutionized the breakfast cereal industry.

H. M. S. Richards began the Tabernacle of the Air in Long Beach, Cali-
fornia in 1930 and “later [it] became one of the first religious programs to enter the national broadcasting field” (Knight 1993:111).

“In a world in which TV was still a new and largely untried medium of communication, William Fagal’s ‘Faith for Today’ program was first aired on May 21, 1950” (Knight 1993:111).

It may be that most Seventh-day Adventists do not realize that the reason that the Adventist Church developed the practice of sending the tithe to the local conference was because all pastors were itinerant missionaries (Burrill 1998:168, 169). “With the world so hostile to their message they quickly developed a missionary strategy for their existence” (1998:161). Since the Adventist Church was fully focused upon teaching and preaching God’s message of grace and truth, very little tithe money was spent on maintaining or shepherding. Much of the pastoral care was in the hands of lay volunteers. The sense of urgency encoded within Adventism compelled the church toward an apostolic role for clergy.

Particularly within the United States, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has drifted from its resolve to be a whatever-it-takes missionary movement. But because Jesus is coming soon, the Church can no longer afford to close its mind to ways in which the Spirit may lead it to adapt for the sake of preaching grace and truth to contemporary culture. If the Church is going to be faithful, it must re-embrace the call to be a missionary society. It must step up and be counted. It must return to what made it what it is today—a missionary movement.

All of us are called to be missionaries. We are not called to ourselves, corporately or individually. We are not called to simply be a maintainer in a programmatic, institutional system. We are called to take risks. Early Adventists were risk takers. They would do irrational things. They would leave their homes, go far away, and never return home again, in order to preach the gospel in South America, or Asia, or Australia, or Africa. They did this because they loved Jesus. It has never been about paid people, educated people, or sophisticated methods; It has always been about people who are willing, humble, and dependent upon Jesus. So God is calling us today to re-embrace his call to be a missionary movement.

Joe Lewis said, “You only live life once. But if you do it right, once is enough.” We only have one chance to step across the stage of life and fulfill our calling. And our response must be intentional. So, what will your response be?

Works Cited


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