

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

2005

Structures for Adventist World Mission in the Twenty-First Century

Gorden R. Doss

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



Part of the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

Chapter 22

* * *

STRUCTURES FOR ADVENTIST WORLD MISSION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

GORDEN R. DOSS

Christian denominations and mission agencies use different structural models for doing world mission. This article discusses four models and the ecclesiological and practical implications of each for Adventist world mission. The current structural model is analyzed and suggestions are made for adjusting it to better fulfill Adventist world mission in the contemporary context.

Introduction

Seventh-day Adventist world mission seeks to proclaim the Three Angels' Messages to all peoples. A century ago that meant leading about 75,000 members in mission to about 2 billion people around the globe. As Adventist leaders pondered this challenge, they realized that the existing structure was simply not up to the task. The reorganization of 1901 produced a human structure that the Spirit has used to bring dramatic growth. By 2002 the church had grown to 12.3 million members who sought to evangelize a very different world with about six billion people (*General Conference Annual Statistical Report 2002*).

As the twenty-first century commences, what church structures will best serve to engage God's world in mission? Do we need another major reorganization, or will a re-adjustment of the existing structure be enough? This article will advocate the latter option—an adjustment of parts of the existing structure for more effective mission to the unevangelized billions living around the globe.

For most of the twentieth century the General Conference Secretariat was the sole official agency sending missionaries around the globe. However, 1990 saw the birth of a major new agency, the Office of Global Mission. Today, the Secretariat sends full-time cross-cultural missionaries “from everywhere to everywhere” and coordinates the service of volunteers, such as student missionaries. The Office of Global Mission focuses on developing strategy and making new initiatives among unreached people groups. Within their own territories, the world divisions place workers among unreached peoples. Supplementing the official church is a growing number of unofficial Adventist mission agencies that specialize in particular areas or tasks.

Like most Christian groups, twentieth-century Adventists were so preoccupied with the practical realities of doing missions in the midst of two world wars, a global depression, a cold war, a shift from colonialism to political independence, and many other historical factors that we tended to overlook the theological underpinnings of mission (Van Engen 1996:17). However, the experience of the twentieth century and the fresh challenges of the twenty-first century have forced upon many denominations and groups the realization that they must work harder at bringing their theology, structure, strategy, and methodology for world mission into closer harmony.

The global reach and cultural diversity of our own denomination make the harmonization of theology, structure, strategy, and methodology for world mission especially urgent. Many other denominations have more members than we do, but only Roman Catholics are as spread out over the globe as we are within a single organizational structure.¹ The range of cultural, economic, and educational diversity within the Adventist Church is mind-boggling, yet we demand of ourselves a very high degree of unity.

Our demand for unity rests on twin imperatives, one practical in nature and the other theological. The practical imperative seeks unity for the sake of doing effective evangelism, or “finishing the work.” The theological imperative demands unity as part of our core identity. We would not remain who we are

if we were to become fragmented into separate national or regional organizations.

The relationship of structures for doing church and missions varies greatly between denominations and groups. Structures invariably reflect particular theologies of church and mission, even if they are not fully articulated. Conversely, a group's ecclesiology and missiology are invariably molded over the passage of time by its own structures. This being the case, it is vital that our theology of church and mission be clearly articulated and that our structures be intentionally constructed to reflect our theology. If we are to retain the unity within diversity that we consider theologically and practically essential, we dare not allow structure, strategy, and methodology simply to evolve in reaction to economic and political pressures, completely out of contact with theological reflection. Rather, we must seize the task of articulating and harmonizing all of the component parts of Adventist missiology.

Paul G. Hiebert, the renowned Mennonite missiologist, discusses two structural models used with variation by many different denominations (Hiebert 1985:249-52). Hiebert's models are the starting point for looking at Adventist structures for church and missions in this article.

Several working definitions will be helpful.² In this article, "mission" (singular), as in "world mission," refers to the whole work of the church, God's primary agency for the salvation of humankind, done in obedience to the Great Commission. "Missions" (plural), as in "doing missions," refers to the sending of people to minister in cultures other than their own and to the doing of cross-cultural ministry. Thus, "mission" is the broader work of the church, and "missions" is the specific work of crossing cultural boundaries in service for Jesus Christ. A "missionary" is a person sent by the church to do cross-cultural missions.³ "Doing church" refers to the ministry of believers in local congregations within the communities where they live and work.⁴ "Missiology" is used in different contexts to refer either to the "theology of mission" or to the "conscious, intentional, ongoing reflection on the doing of mission" (Moreau 2000:633) that I do as a "missiologist." "Ecclesiology" is the "theology of the church."

Model 1: Missions Separate from Church

The first structural model is the most common among Protestant groups. In this model, doing missions is seen as a separate activity from doing church. Mission boards are independent from local church or denominational structures.

Mission boards rely on spontaneous donations in the “faith-mission” tradition and on congregational or denominational subsidies in a variety of combinations. They are frequently interdenominational and often serve congregationalist churches that lack resources to sponsor their own mission boards.

On the field, missionaries emphasize church planting, moving to new areas when church plants are successful. Missionaries work with local churches but may or may not be members or officers therein. Missionaries are administered by separate mission councils that may or may not include local people. “Missions” is defined primarily as the evangelization of unreached peoples.

This model has advantages or strong points. It fosters a direct faith-response by members in support of specific missionaries and projects. People working in the organization have an undivided focus on missions that resists distraction. This approach fosters a strong connection between senders and missionaries that stimulates zeal and support for missions. It is well suited to specialized ministries like Wycliffe Bible Translators and media ministries.

There are also disadvantages or weak points in separating church and missions. First, some theological problems: Most significantly, this model rests on a weak ecclesiology or doctrine of the church. If the church is God’s primary agency for the salvation of humankind, placing missionaries within agencies that work at some structural distance from the church, either at home or on the field, is unacceptable. Secondly, this model fosters a dualistic theology of humanity, where mission focuses exclusively on “saving souls,” rather than on ministering to whole persons. Thirdly, missionaries who do not enter into and fully participate in local church structures cannot fully embody the ideal of “incarnational ministry.”⁵

At the practical level, this model also has problems. Relationships between missionaries and local church members on the field are ambiguous and potentially troublesome when they work within separate structures. When structures link senders with missionaries on the field, but not directly with the young churches they plant, the long-term potential for partnership in congregation-building and evangelization is diminished. The “plant-‘em-leave-‘em” approach that may result from an exclusive church-planting focus wastes human and material resources in the long term. Finally, transferring leadership to nationals is problematic when the departure of the missionaries includes the removal of a major structural element, the missionary council.

Clearly, this first model does not fit the Adventist Church. Our ecclesiology defines the church as one organic global fellowship. This rules out

“plant-‘em-leave-‘em” church planting that establishes autonomous congregations or groups of congregations and then severs their relationship with the planters. Our theology of mission is wholistic, ministering to whole persons instead of just saving their souls. There may be justification for a little structural distance on the field for some specialized official Adventist ministries and for parachurch or supporting ministries. However, both official and unofficial ministries should beware of the potentially negative consequences of allowing too much structural separation. In Adventism, missiology and ecclesiology are tightly interwoven, and this interweaving must be reflected in our organizational structures.

Model 2: Church and Missions Together

In this second model, the mission board selects, trains, sends, and administers missionaries from within main church structures. On the field, missionaries join and serve as needed as officers in local churches. Missionaries on the field serve within local organizational structures without having separate missionary councils. Missionaries may or may not occupy leadership positions on the field.

This model has strong points. It rests on a strong theology of the church as God’s primary agency of salvation. Wholistic ministry is best facilitated when all departments and agencies are linked within a common structure. The ideal of incarnational missionary service is best fulfilled as missionaries work within local church structures on the field. Transferring leadership to nationals is easier when they simply take over positions held by missionaries instead of having to fill the vacuum made by the departure of separate missionary councils.

There are also some disadvantages linked with this model. Firstly, as membership on the field grows, as national leadership takes over, and as missionaries depart, the missionary senders may lose contact with the field, and their general focus on missions may fade. When this happens, senders may lose the motivation and the pathways for making direct faith-responses to needs on the field. Secondly, the predictable trend toward the institutionalization of missions over time may be augmented by the structural linkage of this model. Thirdly, the denomination may lose its shared understanding of missionary service as a specialized ministry. The administration of missionaries can be perceived as a generic administrative task needing only brief experience in missions as a prerequisite, rather than as a specialized ministry. Church officials who combine

responsibilities for both church and missions in their portfolios may be easily distracted from the single-minded focus and specialization that cross-cultural missionary service needs and deserves.

Clearly, this model suits Adventism better than the first one. Our ecclesiology and missiology favor doing church and missions together. Our history demonstrates the advantages of this model. We have been a “missionary church” in a very real sense because we have done church and missions together. However, Adventism also demonstrates some of the challenges associated with this model.

First, our dramatic membership growth and leadership nationalization outside of North America have weakened the direct church-missions linkage, making North America’s participation in world missions problematic. Only about 8 percent of our membership resides on the continent of the denomination’s birth, and North Americans comprise a diminishing fraction of official missionaries. Many people have the misconception that “the day of the missionary is over.” There is a general inclination toward isolationism that waxes and wanes. Sabbath School mission offerings decline, and the Sabbath School mission report is seldom heard, yet both the human and material resources of North America remain vital for Adventist global mission.

Second, as the church has grown and become more complex and institutionalized, the official missions enterprise has become depersonalized. General Conference missionaries are invisible from within their home divisions. Giving Sabbath School mission offerings seems like supporting a multinational corporation. The offering-plate funding of official missionaries, for all the stability that the system provides, does not facilitate direct faith-responses to their work. Mission passion is redirected to special projects and short mission trips, and there is a movement toward a variety of unofficial mission agencies. As valid as unofficial Adventist mission agencies may be, warning lights begin to flash when the church’s official missionary program no longer focuses and channels the commitment and support of the membership as well as it did in the past.

Mixed Model A: Together at Home but Separate on the Field

As might be expected, the main models for doing church and missions are sometimes crossed with each other. In Mixed Model A, Models 1 and 2

are crossed with each other to produce the following features: Missionaries are sent by mission boards that function within church structures. On the field, however, missionaries serve under separate mission councils instead of within local structures. In other words, church and missions are done together back home but separately on the field.

Adventist missions partly resembled this mixed model during the colonial era. Missionaries on the field joined and served in local churches and were part of local organizational structures. However, administrative matters pertaining to the missionaries were handled by "Section 2" committees on which nationals did not serve. Thus, church and missions were partially separated on the field. Today, all official missionaries on the field are handled by the same committees that administer local church work.

Mixed Model B: Separate at Home but Together on the Field

In this model, doing church and doing missions are seen as separate activities, as in Model 1. Mission boards are independent of church structures. On the field, however, missionaries serve within local organizational structures.

At first glance, Adventist missions may seem to have nothing in common with this model. However, a closer look may indicate that the contemporary situation actually resembles this model. Nominally, missionaries are sent from within church structure in North America. However, a situation has evolved that has separated church from missions on the continent of the denomination's birth. Here is how it works:

The General Conference and the North American Division were barely distinguishable for a long time. However, with the dramatic growth of the church outside North America, the North American Division has gradually developed a separate identity. This development has increased the distance between the official missions program and the North American Division. Although North American Division officials at world headquarters may sit on committees that administer missionaries, their primary focus is on their own division.

The unions, conferences, and local churches of the North American Division never have participated formally in the administration of missionaries. In the past this was not detrimental because the division was intertwined with the General Conference. There was also an informal network that linked the large North American missionary workforce with their sending churches through

relationship and friendship. Today, North Americans comprise a diminishing fraction of the missionary workforce, meaning that a diminishing fraction of sending churches are linked with serving missionaries. No formal structures have been instituted to fill the vacuum that was created as the informal network evaporated. Thus, the North American missionary serves within church structures on the field but is virtually invisible and detached from North America. This detachment and invisibility is even more striking in parts of the Far East and Latin America, from where an increasing number of Adventist missionaries are sent. The detachment and invisibility of missionaries weakens Adventist global mission.

A Seventh-day Adventist Model for the Twenty-first Century

What structural model will best serve the Adventist church in the twenty-first century? The major features of Model 2 (Church and Missions Together) are consistent with our ecclesiology and missiology. However, the challenges of Model 2 and of Mixed Model B (Separate at Home but Together on the Field) need to be addressed. Several specific steps might be taken to maximize the good and minimize the problematic elements:

First, strong anchors are needed at both the sending and receiving ends of the missionary bridge. As we have seen, Adventist missionaries already have reasonably good anchorage at the receiving end when they serve well-established Adventist organizations. What we need is better anchorage at the sending end. Divisions, unions, conferences, and congregations need to have ownership and participation in all phases of the missionary enterprise—from initial selection to eventual permanent return. Missionaries should be formally linked with conferences and congregations in their homeland, to whom they send regular reports and make visits while on furlough.

Second, the key elements of missiology, strategy, missionary education, and missionary administration need to be united within one structure. Currently, missiology functions mainly as an academic discipline at some distance from the actual doing of Adventist world mission, with occasional consultations. The past decade has seen enhanced networking between missiology and administration. However, the complexity of mission in the twenty-first century demands not only the enhanced networking of full-time missiologists and administrators but also the development of administrators who are missiologists.

The current separation of mission strategy (in the Office of Global Mission) and missionary administration (in the Secretariat) needs to be overcome. As things now stand, the Secretariat is little more than a human resources office for missionaries, while the Office of Global Mission develops strategy without working with regular missionaries. Missiology, strategy, education, and administration could be best coordinated in a structure that others call a "mission board." The actual name is not as important as the bringing together of the various functions for the sake of more effective coordination. A "mission board" would function within the General Conference structure in keeping with Adventist ecclesiology and missiology.

Third, new and creative methods for funding world missions need to be implemented. With Sabbath School attendance declining in North America, we cannot retain Sabbath School as the sole location for the mission offering. A new pathway is needed to channel the faith-responses of Adventists who want to support the ministry of cross-cultural missionaries through the proposed mission board.

Fourth, our collective understanding of missionary service as a specialized ministry of continued legitimacy needs to be strengthened. Missionary service did not pass from the scene with colonialism. Two-thirds of the world is non-Christian and one-third (two billion people) is non-Christian with no established Christian witness in its midst. Only cross-cultural Adventist missionaries can bring the Adventist message to such people. Being a pastor (or doctor, teacher, nurse, or whatever) in a cross-cultural setting is different from doing that same work in one's native cultural environment. Cross-cultural missionary service is a calling and profession in its own right that overlays everything else. Cross-cultural work raises service to a higher level of complexity and intensity. Normal on-the-job stresses are ratcheted upward when one must constantly focus and refocus one's perceptions and communications to account for cultural diversity. Team building between cross-cultural workers demands a specialized set of knowledge and skills. All of this implies the need for a much-enhanced system of missionary care functioning from the proposed mission board.

Fifth, the particular challenges of mission among the peoples of the 10/40 Window require that the scope and quality of Adventist missiological education be significantly upgraded. The Adventist Church has already accomplished the easiest part of its mission by establishing vibrant and growing memberships

in the relatively more receptive regions of the world. The task we now face is much more demanding and even dangerous.

Humanly speaking, the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church is impossible. Existing budgets are inadequate, and the masses of unreached peoples seem almost beyond numbering. Even the most ideally organizational structures will not successfully complete the task. Yet, there are adjustments that need to be made so that the human element of God's mission to the world will be configured in the best possible way. Adventist men and women stand ready and willing to commit themselves and their resources to world mission. The church's task is to structure itself so as to unleash and channel the passion of its spiritually gifted members.

Notes

¹ Many Protestant denominations enjoy a global fellowship but operate within national or regional structures that are not globally linked.

² Working definitions may not be all-inclusive or exhaustive.

³ While every Christian is a "missionary" in a broad sense, this article focuses on a narrower meaning.

⁴ The boundary between "doing missions" and "doing church" can become a little "fuzzy" when multicultural congregations minister in multicultural and multi-religious communities.

⁵ The "incarnational" model is based on Christ's incarnation or coming into the world as fully human. The "incarnational missionary" enters into the life and culture of people he/she serves.

- _____. 2003b. Interview by the author. Albuquerque, NM, 7 August.
- _____. 2003c. "Vietnam Underground Church—Confidential Report," 5 July.
- General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. 1974. *Annual Statistical Report*. Silver Spring, MD: Office of Archives and Statistics.
- _____. 2001. *Annual Statistical Report*. Silver Spring, MD: Office of Archives and Statistics.
- Johnson, Lynda. 2003. "Vietnamese Christians Turn Fear into Love." *World Pulse* 38 (18): 3, 4.
- Nguyen, Si Tuyet Hoa. 2003. "Peace and Happiness Ministry, 10th Anniversary Report."
- Riches, Robin. 2002. "Letter to Church Friends and Fellow Believers." 21 January.
- Townend, Bill. 2003. Email to the author. 2 September.
- Watts, Ralph S., Jr. 2004. Telephone interview with the author. 26 May.

Chapter 22

- Hiebert, Paul G. 1985. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Moreau, A. Scott, ed. 2000. *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Van Engen, Charles. 1996. *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.