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by Denis Fortin

A LIFE-CHANGING WITNESS

If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of.

- Fred Rogers

Who are the people we meet? And how important are we to them?

Typically, Seventh-day Adventists have not had a good opinion of the ecumenical movement and have not cultivated any relationship with other churches. We have been taught an end-time scenario that has created in us fear and suspicion of other Christians. We are told that Sabbath keepers will be persecuted by their Christian neighbors after a Sunday law is passed. They will come at night and arrest us, take over our possessions, and even kill many of us. Catholics and mainline Protestants are the ones we should fear the most.

I remember listening to a group of Roman Catholics discussing this scenario (they had heard about it) and they were totally incredulous, dumbfounded that they would ever attempt such a thing. “We are no longer in the Middle Ages,” they said to one another. They did not know I belong to a church that teaches this.

I think that our witness to people around us is often impaired by our improbable eschatology.

I have attended a fair number of ecumenical meetings. For many years, I represented the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Although we are not a member of the National Council or the Commission, the organizers of the Commission have

routinely extended an invitation to non-member denominations to send a (non-voting) representative to their meetings to offer points of views and helpful insights into the theological and cultural topics and issues the Commission is asked to address.

I remember attending the October 2009 meeting of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission of the World Council of Churches, which took place in Kolympari, on the Island of Crete in Greece. A special request had come for a Seventh-day Adventist theologian or church leader to attend the meeting.

Just before lunch one day during this meeting, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches asked if I could eat lunch with him. I gladly agreed—not knowing what was in store for me!

During the great conversation we had, he asked if the Seventh-day Adventist Church would be willing to join the World Council of Churches. Before I replied, he said that they had been observing our church and had seen great things happening. We have a vast network of hospitals and schools. We care about the lives of people where we establish churches. We are growing while many churches in the Council are declining.

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And then the general secretary said something about the Sabbath; that, although our observance of the Sabbath is odd when looking at the rest of traditional Christianity, it seemed nonetheless to be an aspect of the Christian message that others need to hear about. And if we were on the Council our Sabbath observance would not be an issue. Our presence on the Council would bring an unheard voice from an important sector of Christianity. He said our witness and our experience were needed; others needed to see and hear what we believe and do.

I was sad to have to say that I did not foresee my church joining the World Council of Churches in the near future.

My response surprised them, and it seemed they thought that their invitation would be a welcomed gesture.¹

It has been many years since that conversation happened, but I still wonder about what was said about us. These Christian leaders wished that Seventh-day Adventists would be more involved in relationships with them so we could share our experience, and witness what we believe.

This conversation has helped me shape a more positive understanding of my faith in relationship to other Christians and what really matters.

I'd like to say that we ought to be this kind of Seventh-day Adventist Christians who will witness positively of their faith to the rest of the Christian world, to the extent that others will say to us that our message is a blessing to them.

In my perspective, there are three essential values of the Seventh-day Adventist faith that make a difference in our lives and in the world in which we live. Beyond the special doctrines and beliefs we hold, these three essential values really make a difference. The world awaits our witness of these important values.

The Sabbath as Day of Rest

Which day of the week is the biblical day of rest?

Honestly, most scholars I know no longer challenge the fact that the biblical day of rest is the Saturday Sabbath and that the early generations of Jesus' followers kept this day. History shows that the change of day of rest for most of Christianity happened in the third and fourth centuries for various reasons.

A hundred years ago, our Seventh-day Adventist pioneers debated over and over with other Christians which day of the week is the biblical Sabbath. For most of the scholarly world today, this is no longer a point of contention.

Although there are a lot of people in the world who don't know which day of the week is the real Sabbath, and, frankly, most don't care, it seems to me that much of western society is ready to hear about the benefits of the Sabbath as a day of rest. Many books and articles have been published recently on the need for a Sabbath day in our lives.

Our society is stressed. Almost every week I see articles on my news feed about tips for a less stressful life or about how

to live a more meaningful life. The daily cycle of work, eat, and sleep seems to take away meaning and satisfaction from so many people.

For decades, Seventh-day Adventists have known a divine solution to this unpleasant reality. The value of the Sabbath is a blessing we need to share with this restless world.

God's Ultimate Solution to Mankind's Problems

Despite all good government interventions and programs, it is obvious that our world is not only restless, but it is also, for many people, hopeless.

Jesus predicted that at the end of time, just before his return, our world would be overwhelmed with conflicts, natural disasters, and disease. Nations and agencies are doing their best to overcome the social damages created by these events but, in the end, our world does not seem to be getting any better. Perhaps, one day, all will be well. But that is very unlikely.

Seventh-day Adventists have been conscious of this reality since our very beginning. And we have done our best to respond to human needs in times of crises. Our generosity of time and money through local community services or through our international Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) have touched the lives of millions of people. We have shared the gospel with our hands and feet as Jesus invited his followers to do (Matthew 25:31-40).

As stewards of the world entrusted to humanity at creation (Genesis 1:26, 28), Seventh-day Adventists have also been conscientious to help save our planet for the next generation—if time were to last longer than we expect. Our participation in recycling programs, saving energy, and reducing our carbon footprint are helping. But in the end, we have a sense (from our reading of Scripture) that the ultimate response must come from God.

God has promised that he will recreate our world after the return of Christ. And that is good news. Seventh-day Adventists expect this ultimate intervention of God.

So, while we collaborate in making our world a better place for all people, we also look to the future when God will fulfill another promise.

Part of our name witnesses to this dimension of the Christian faith. The glorious hope of the return of Christ.

In fact, our name Seventh-day Adventist witnesses to both of these human needs: we believe that the Sabbath provides now rest for a restless humanity while we hope for the advent of Christ for a hopeless world.

Wholistic Lifestyle

A third essential aspect of a most positive witness Seventh-day Adventists offer is our biblical understanding of wholistic living.

Life is a gift of God, and we believe it is our obligation to live in ways that will glorify his name and uplift humanity. To that end, Seventh-day Adventists have encouraged a healthy lifestyle, eating wholesome food, exercising, living in a good environment, and abstaining from substances and lifestyles that can cause harm. The recent interest in blue zones, in which centenarian residents of Loma Linda, California, is showcased, is evidence that this aspect of our message gives a most positive witness to the rest of the world.

Along with this we have also established schools and universities, hospitals and clinics to benefit people and attend to their needs. And leaders of other churches have noticed this positive influence we have had on our communities.

Adventists have a beautiful vision with its biblical focus on rest, hope, and life that we can share with the rest of Christianity. We should value the positive witness these essential qualities generate. To me they are the ones that matter the most. And we should heartily witness about them in whatever context we can. In fact, some Christians are anxious that we bring out such a witness.

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1 In the 1960s and early 1970s, leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and of the World Council of Churches discussed whether our church would join the Council, and, for various reasons, we came to the conclusion that we could not.