

MISSION PRIORITY: OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO MISSION TO THE UNREACHED

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Abstract

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has an enviable history of evangelism and mission. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is at the core of the church's ecclesiology. From small beginnings 150 years ago to a global church of 18 million, the church has reaped the rewards of active mission. However, there are nearly 3 billion people who have never been evangelized by any Christians. Why are we not reaching these people? This chapter suggests there are four major barriers for the church to overcome in order to begin reaching these unreached peoples. Each of these is dealt with in brief; but major emphasis is on the need to contextualize the messenger, the message, and the fellowship if we are going to meet the mission priority of reaching the unevangelized.

Keywords: Unevangelized, Unreached, Contextualization

Introduction

We all know the mission texts; almost every Christian knows the key mission texts in the Bible, so I know all of you who have come to a mission conference like this know the texts. From memory!

- Matthew 28:18 - 20 Make Disciples of *all nations*
- Acts 1: 8 You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth
- Rev 14:6 -7 every nation, tribe, language, and people
- Matt 24:14 before the end, the Gospel must go to *all* the world.

We not only know those texts; we live by those texts. Our church has a bright history of evangelism. We have been witnesses for God. This division is one of the strongest! However, I think we all know that we have fallen short of the “*every* people”, “the *whole* world”, and “the *ends* of the earth” parts! It is the “*every*” people that we still need to reach that I want to turn our attention to today.

Every time I look at the mission statistics I am astonished all over again. If the estimates are correct, there are nearly 6,000 unreached groups of people, containing a total of 2.9 billion people (Joshua Project 2014); that means more than 40% of the world’s population has never really heard the Gospel. At least 1.6 billion of these are Muslims, and most of them have never been approached by an Adventist—or other Christian—about their salvation in Jesus.

Yes, the majority of the unreached are in what some have referred to as the “10-40 window,” which is technically north and northeast of here; but there are groups all over the globe that have been missed in our telling of the Gospel. Many of them are in this Division. In fact, why don’t we agree to move away from using the term “10-40 window” and use the more accurate term “least-reached people” or “least-evangelized people”? They are not just somewhere else; they are probably in our neighborhood!¹ Sometimes we need reminded that God “is not willing that any should perish” (1 Pet. 3:9 KJV). Any! Sometimes we need to contemplate the fact that Christ died for everyone (1 Cor. 5:15). Everyone!

What Are The Barriers?

Let’s take time to look at some of the reasons that we haven’t done very well in reaching these least-reached people and consider how we might do better at reaching every tribe, every people. There are many reasons, I’m sure, but for now we will look at four.

- We have gone for the easy fruit. We like numbers, so we spend time and money on quick results
- We sometimes choose the people we would prefer to be fellow members
- We are not representing Jesus well
- We try to use familiar methods

¹ For further information concerning the unreached and Adventist mission, see: Merklin and Barer 2007.

We have Focused on the “Easy Fruit”

Reaching the people of the world’s religions is not easy. The post-modern people with no religion are no easier. People with Christian backgrounds have been easier, and in much of the world we have focused on these people. In most cases where we hear of large numbers coming into the Adventist church, they are from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds. Even the mass baptisms in India that we hear about are not people from the active Hindu populations.

The Inter-American Division has the largest membership of any of our church divisions, and is one of the fastest growing. I attended a Division mission weekend in 2012 where the keynote speaker was the Division President, Elder Israel Leito. He acknowledged the attendees for their evangelistic fever, which makes the Division the largest; but then he reminded them that the Division was not at all involved in reaching people like Muslims and Hindus. He admitted that they had been going for the low-hanging fruit, which is the easiest to pick. I was thrilled to hear a Division President say “It is time for us to change.”

I suspect that our desire for good baptism numbers has helped us take the easy route. Of course, we do want as many people as possible to come to a saving relationship with Jesus. We are right in desiring the largest number possible to be a part of God’s last-day movement, preparing for His coming and telling the good news to others. Numbers are good, unless we overlook the others Christ died for while we look for numbers. Numbers are perceived to be an indication of successful ministry, but in mission to the least-reached people, success might not mean big numbers.

May God help us begin to focus more on these people, who need to hear of Jesus—even though we may see fewer numbers, at least at first.

We Prefer Witnessing to Certain Types of People

Peter, along with the rest of the first believers, didn’t even think of witnessing to Gentiles. God had to send him a vision to change his mind! Who are we leaving out when we share the good news?

It may be that there are personal reasons that this hurdle is of special interest to me. My mission heart is directed toward our brothers and sisters in the Islamic faith. There we have people who are sincere in their worship of the creator God. They desire to do the will of God. They know that Jesus is a special messenger of God. And if there is anyone better able to share Jesus with them, it is Adventists. We are not like Christians who eat pork, drink alcoholic beverages, discount God’s law, and live immorally or

immodestly. Yet, as I am involved in training events and mission conferences around the world, I find that many Adventists just aren't motivated to share with Muslims.

I lived and worked in Pakistan for several years and now I spend time in Muslim countries in my ministry. I can understand why Adventists in these Islamic countries find it hard to have a heart for Muslims. In Pakistan, for example, Christians are only 2% of the population and feel like they are oppressed. The government is supposed to be a secular government, but it is obvious which religion is favored. Even in countries here in this Division, where Islam is in the minority, there are fundamentalists who make life hard for Christians. Yes, if we choose to do mission according to our own feelings we may like to work with people whom we perceive as friendlier. And if we do that, we will not witness to these least-reached people. Can we afford to allow personal feelings to hinder us from sharing the gospel among those for whom Christ died?

Jesus says "Whosoever will" (Rev 22:17 KJV) may come. That means everyone who wants to come should have that opportunity. What groups of people in your local regions are forgotten, overlooked, or even avoided? Is it time for us to remember that these people too are part of every tribe and people that Jesus wants us to reach with the Gospel?

We are not Representing Jesus Very Well

We have suggested hurdles that have kept us from witnessing to the least-reached people, but let us turn now to two areas that have affected the success of the witnessing which we have done. We will be more detailed about these, since we are now on the topic concerning mission strategy—a major focus of this conference.

First, we need to be reminded of the key mission statement by Ellen White from the book *Ministry of Healing*. "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. [He] mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed sympathy for them, ministered to their needs and won their confidence. Then he bade them 'Follow me'" (MH 143).

This is true for mission to all peoples of the world, but it is especially relevant to mission to those that are most resistant to what we want to share. Unless we win "their confidence," we have no audience for our witness. This method is also the only one that truly reflects the character of our God. He draws people to himself because of His character of love. True witnessing must do the same. In fact, I believe that is the real mission of the remnant church. Let me explain:

The biblical mission commission for the remnant church is Revelation 14:6- 12. While the text infers the teaching, baptizing, and discipling of Matthew 28, its specific message is to give “glory” to God and worship him as the creator. How do we bring glory to God through mission? I agree with the professor who said: “To glorify God simply means to bring his innate glory to light, to expose it, manifest it, reveal it, demonstrate it, make it known. It is to put God on display and show him off for who he is... We make his attributes prominently known” (Strause 1997). How well are we doing that? Are we not sometimes better at presenting the Truth than we are at living the Truth? God needs you and me to reflect His character, to show his love, to draw people to worship him because they have met him through us.

“The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of his character of love” (COL 415, 416). “The people of the world are worshipping false gods. They are to be turned from their false worship not by hearing denunciation of their idols, but by beholding something better. God’s goodness is to be made known” (COL, 299). “The members of the church...are to show forth His glory...and through the church will eventually be made manifest... the final and full display of the love of God” (AA 9).

That is our mission! And it is a mission we can all be involved in. In fact, we might even be able to do it better than the evangelist! The evangelist can help the person understand some good biblical information, but it is you and I who have led the person to know God and want to worship him. Can you imagine the witnessing power of a beautiful Adventist living God’s love in his life? One who mingles, and sympathizes, and helps just like Jesus did. That is the type of person who will “gain their confidence” so that they come to want to know the Biblical information.²

There is nothing that the Savior desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and His character. There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Savior’s love” (AA 600). “Your success [in mission] will not depend so much upon your knowledge and accomplishments as upon your ability to find your way to the heart. By being social and coming close to the people, you may turn the current of their thoughts more readily than by the most able discourse” (ML 233.2).

² For a fuller explanation of the Glory of God model of mission, see: Merklin 2008.

We Try to Use Familiar Methods

There are methods of evangelism and mission that have proven themselves with tremendous results. It is for that reason that we continue to use them. We even invite the best soul winners from far away countries so they can have success here, too. Not necessarily. After all, evangelistic methods are not specified in the Bible. They have been chosen in our history because they reached people. Some people, at least! And therein lies the problem. The least-reached people are not often reached by our traditional methods or, even, by preaching.

How, then, should we reach out to these unreached people? May I risk using an often misunderstood word by saying we need to “contextualize”? When I use the word “contextualize” I am referring to the contextualization illustrated in the Bible, not what the church of the middle-ages did!

My doctoral advisor, Dr. Hesselgrave, says that Biblical contextualization is “a necessity” since Christ has given us a mandate that the whole world be evangelized, and “however world evangelization is defined, at the very least it entails an understandable hearing of the Gospel.” To be both understandable and the true Gospel, contextualization must be “true to the complete authority and unadulterated message of the Bible on the one hand, and it must be related to the cultural, linguistic, and religious background of the respondent on the other” (Hesselgrave 2000, xi).

The lack of biblical contextualization in our witnessing has become one of the major barriers to reaching the unreached. I realize that some attempts at contextualization have actually been theological adaptation or distortion. Maybe you are thinking right now of some mission strategies that seemed to be of this type. However, to avoid the incorrect use of contextualization by locking the gospel up in foreign cultural concepts is not the answer! You and I, the church, must tell the gospel story in such a way that each culture—each person³—will understand it, be drawn to it, and changed by it.⁴

³ Charles Kraft reminds us that “within any given society, there is great variability among individuals” (Kraft 1996, 157). Not only must we contextualize for Muslims; you need to contextualize for the Muslims in your country and contextualize for the individual family whom we are in contact with.

⁴ Contextualization is not just so we get a hearing, it is to make sure that the new believer changes their worldview. “Too often conversion takes place at the surface levels of behavior and beliefs; but if worldviews are not transformed, the gospel is interpreted in terms of pagan worldviews, and the result is Christo-paganism” (Hiebert 2008, 69).

The Contextualized Life of the Witness

How did Jesus contextualize? Consider this: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1,14 ESV). Can you imagine any greater contextualization? Of course, Jesus did not change or modify Truth; but he chose the method and manner of communicating the Truth so we could grasp it.

First of all, he contextualized his own person. Philippians 2:6-7: “Jesus has always been as God is. But He did not hold to His rights as God. He put aside everything that belonged to Him and made Himself the same as a servant who is owned by someone. He became human by being born as a man” (NLV).

Then, as man, he took on himself the culture of the Jewish people so as to live their life. Jesus’ method, as we have seen, was after all to “mingle”, and by becoming like those he came to communicate with, he was able to do so to the fullest. He went to their weddings and celebrations. He visited with them on fishing boats, at their celebrations, and even at the well.

Paul followed Jesus example as he went from one context to another. He wrote it about it in this way:

I became as a Jew to the Jews so I might lead them to Christ. There are some who live by obeying the Jewish Law. I became as one who lives by obeying the Jewish Law so I might lead them to Christ. There are some who live by not obeying the Jewish law. I became as one who lives by not obeying the Jewish law so I might lead them to Christ. This does not mean that I do not obey God’s Law. I obey the teachings of Christ. Some are weak. I have become weak so I might lead them to Christ. I have become like every person so in every way I might lead some to Christ. Everything I do, I do to get the Good News to men. I want to have a part in this work (I Cor. 9:20-23 NLV).

Somehow you and I must have the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:5). If we only associate with our own kind, and intend to stick with our own cultural ways of doing things, then there will be no contextualizing of the Gospel so that it is observable and understandable by other cultures. We must overcome this barrier to cross-cultural mission if we are to reach the unreached peoples.

The Contextualized Approach

But there is more to true Gospel contextualization. Jesus and Paul didn't just mingle and become one with the people they witnessed to; they contextualized what they did and said as well. Although we must live like Jesus in order to attract people to him, we must also adapt our methods to best reach those who are unreached by traditional biblical messages. Jesus met Peter, Paul, James, and John on their fishing boats. He invited them to follow him by asking them to throw in their nets at a time of day that any fisherman knew would result in no fish—and yet Jesus filled their nets miraculously. Can you think of a better way to tell fishermen that you will provide them with everything for life and mission than what Jesus did?

There is a reason that we find Jesus healing people more than he preached. It was important to his mission approach. The lame could now walk; the blind could now see; the sick were made well. Those who were under the control of demons were set free. It was the “sympathizing” and “meeting their needs”, part of “Christ’s method”, which we are told is the only method that brings success.

We definitely need to resurrect the Adventist tradition of bringing health to the community. It is an evangelistic approach. This is especially true in reaching those who have no Bible or Christian background—the unreached. Let us look for needs and meet them—smoking, AIDS, nutrition, hygiene, and even circumcision clinics like there are in the Philippines. But let us not think that this is the one and only way to approach an unreached community. “Just as [we] translate the Bible into local languages, so also [we] must use methods of evangelism and church planting that are adapted to the social and cultural contexts in which [we] serve” (Hiebert 1995, 233). Let’s be creative as the Spirit guides us in finding just the right approach for each community and each family who needs to hear the good news.

The Contextualized Message

Have you thought of the significance of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) to mission strategy and contextualization? As we know, it is theologically unsound! When a real Lazarus and an actual rich man die, can they talk to each other? Not if the rest of the Bible is right about the state of the dead. But Jesus told the story as if they could. Why? It is because it was based on a story they already knew and made the point Jesus wanted to convey—“if they do not respond to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead”

(vs 31, NET) – a very true message presented in a contextualized way to help the listener take notice and understand.

When Paul and the other Apostles witnessed to fellow Jews, they often went to the synagogue and interpreted Scripture in a manner familiar to their audience (cf., Acts 13:4; 14:1,2; 17:2; 18:7; 19:8); but they approached other audiences differently. It seems that “throughout the book of Acts, Luke takes pains to demonstrate how the gospel was proclaimed in various key contexts and to different kinds of people” (Flemming 2005, 57). Luke tells how Paul adapted his method and message within a single city as he met different people: “He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there. He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers” (17:17-18 NLT).

Acts 17 doesn’t tell us what he shared in the synagogue at Athens, but in the same chapter we are told that in Thessalonica, “As was Paul’s custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. He explained the prophecies and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. He said, ‘This Jesus I’m telling you about is the Messiah’” (17:2-3 NLT). That seems very appropriate for the synagogue, does it not? The audience believed that the Bible was the revealed word of God. They believed that God had prophesied that a Messiah would come. Paul showed how Jesus was the fulfillment of those prophecies. Contextualized messages.

We aren’t told what he talked about among the people he met in the market, but I am glad Luke gave us a little more detail what happened with the philosophers when they asked Paul to share what he believed at the *Areopagite*. He did speak of how Jesus “rose from the dead,” but he didn’t mention Scriptures, prophecies, or the Messiah. Instead he talked of their spirituality (“I notice that you are very religious in every way”—vs 22); spoke of God philosophically, like they did (“[The unknown God] whom you worship, is the one I’m telling you about”—vs 23), and even used their literature as evidence for his argument (“As some of your own Poets have said...—vs 28). Not only was his content chosen for his audience; he also formatted his whole speech after the Greek philosophers’ model of rhetoric (see Losie 2004). Paul is definitely giving a contextualized message. He is placing before them the Truth of Jesus’ resurrection for their sins, but he is doing it in a way that will catch their attention and also help them understand. This is mission!

People will understand the gospel in terms of their own culture. This is not an option. If we do not communicate the Gospel in a way they

understand and can assimilate, we haven't preached the gospel to them. "The people of every country have their own peculiar, distinctive characteristics, and it is necessary that men should be wise in order that they may know how to adapt themselves to the peculiar ideas of the people, and so introduce the truth that they may do them good"(TM 213).

These bible contextualization examples have shown, I believe, that it isn't a matter of "right or wrong" whether we do or do not use the Qur'an (as Paul did the Greek philosophers' writings) to bring a Muslim to the Bible and Jesus, or use an animistic myth (as Jesus did with his Lazarus parable) to illustrate truth to people of a traditional religion; it is rather a decision we make for mission depending on its possible effectiveness in a specific situation to properly convey the Truth. My associate has baptized Muslims and many more are preparing for baptism because they were shown how the Qur'an directs them to the Bible for God's revealed will. On the other hand, my pastor friends in North Africa tell me that the Muslims there want to hear what the Bible says, rather than hear what the Qur'an says.

We have a great tradition of evangelistic presentation of Bible truths. But this has become a barrier to bringing the Gospel to the unreached. We must present the message in ways that reach the hearts and change the worldviews of those who have no biblical foundation. We must contextualize the message so we can communicate the Truth.

The Contextualized New Community of Believers

We now come to possibly the hardest step in contextualizing. To some extent, we have contextualized how we communicate to different people. But many of us think that when a person becomes a believer, he or she will now become like us. No more contextualization. Shouldn't all Seventh-day Adventists worship somewhat alike?

When I lived in Pakistan, a leader from the world headquarters of our church held a sermon at the hospital church. In his opening remarks he said, "I am so glad I'm a Seventh-day Adventist! Everywhere I go in the world I feel at home because all of our churches are the same." There is some truth to that if we look at our institutional churches, I suppose; but is this good? In fact, if the church leader had visited the churches in little rural villages, he would have found things quite different!

We don't have a detailed description of a church in the New Testament, but there are some glimpses of the fellowship and worship of the first believers. The first is in Acts 2:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (2:42-47 NIV).

Some aspects of that early community are most certainly universal concepts for believers of all cultures—teaching, fellowship, prayer. It is interesting, though, that they met daily in the “temple courts.” This is without a doubt a cultural inclusion. As Gentiles came to Jesus they, too, met in homes together (e.g., Acts 16:5); but the temple courts were not a part of their culture or a requirement of the early church.

This is only the first hint of a significant difference between the church in Jerusalem and the Gentile church in Asia. The believers in Jerusalem and their fellow Jewish-Christian brothers throughout the empire practiced circumcision—not as a health or medical choice but as a deeply spiritual rite indicating their belonging to the family of God. The Gentile church did not include circumcision in their religious duties. Some of the Jewish believers wanted to make it mandatory for them, too. Acts records that: “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (15:1 NIV).

The church council came to a different conclusion. Acts informs us that the apostles and early church leaders realized that it was acceptable for the two groups to have different cultural practices and still be approved by the “Holy Spirit” (vs 8, 28). A few years later, the church council asked Paul to take part in a Jewish ritual in the temple to prove that he was still a Jew, but they made it clear that they didn't expect the Gentile Christians to do this. They said to Paul:

“So here is what we want you to do: There are four men from our company who have taken a vow involving ritual purification, but have no money to pay the expenses. Join these men in their vows and pay their expenses. Then it will become obvious to everyone that there is nothing to the rumors going around about you and that you are in fact scrupulous in your reverence for the laws of Moses. In asking you to do this, we're not going back on our agreement regarding non-Jews who have become believers. We continue to hold fast to what we wrote in that letter...” (Acts 21:22-25a MSG).

When one attempts to find specific rules for church and worship in the Bible, it might be surprising how few are to be found. Baptism by immersion is quite clear. The requirement to partake of the emblems of Christ's death for us—the bread and new wine—is asked of us by Jesus himself; but other than the specific mention of grape juice and bread, the details of a “communion service” are not given. Nothing, of course, is suggested concerning a church building or even details of a worship service.

I trust it is clear, then, that most of what we do in church and in Christian fellowship has developed from basic principles of worship (giving glory to God, supplications, listening to his word, and submission), and these then took on forms that helped the church do these acts of worship. In mission we need to do what the early church did: allow cultural expressions of these worship principles in order for the new believer to fully understand reverence, worship, and submission. The form these take will be different in various cultures. In America, we men take off our hats to show respect and leave our shoes on, but many cultures would understand covering the head and removing the shoes to indicate respect and reverence. If we insist on the American way, are we not teaching the new believer not to respect God? How would a sincere Muslim ever want to come to the Christian God if he isn't worth our respect? Thus, another barrier for mission to the unreached must be removed! Years ago we were advised that “The contextualization of the Gospel can never take place apart from the contextualization of the church” (Padilla 1985, 91). The church in every context must correctly reflect the characteristics of God, and our worship of him must use forms that can be understood in the local context.

Sometimes we have heard “contextualized” as a synonym for an “insider movement.”⁵ Yes, insider movements have definitely tried to contextualize church for their context; but don't allow that fact to derail us from the necessity of planting fellowships of believers everywhere in a contextual way that will correctly represent the gospel in their specific context. Whether we feel comfortable or not with an insider church, we cannot use them as a model of what contextualization looks like! Since one of the greatest barriers to proclaiming the Gospel to the unreached has been our presentation of the church as a foreign religion, we must allow the Spirit to guide us to planting contextualized churches—churches that

⁵ “Insider movement” is a term often used for groups of believers in Jesus who do not publically identify with the church but remain within their religious culture to such an extent that they look like a different kind of Muslim or Hindu rather than a “Christian.”

portray the Gospel in an understandable and inviting way to people in its context.

Conclusions: Overcoming the Barriers

We need studies of mission in our universities—as well as lessons in mission in our primary and secondary schools. We need mission conferences like this one. We need articles in the *Adventist World* on overcoming barriers for mission to the unreached. But we also need our church leaders to be brave and let God use them to lead the church away from just doing things like we always have. Let's have a contextualized church structure in West Africa that can allow and assist the church in creating contextualized ways of doing mission, contextualized messages, and contextualized churches. Let's not do this so we can feel proud of doing mission the West African way, but let us do it because we have the heart of Jesus that longs for everyone to hear the good news in a way that will attract them, teach them Truth, convince them, and change them. Hopefully during this conference we will hear some solutions suggested!

We must lift up Jesus in every corner of the world—including this one. We need his Spirit to help us become people that represent him fully. We need his Spirit to guide us to share him in the right way at the right time to the right people. This isn't a numbers game; it is a fact that we know someone that they need to know! It is eternal life we have to share, so the way we share has eternal consequences. This is a serious business we are in! It is time for us to overcome the barriers and spread the Gospel among the rest of those God calls us to reach.

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