Over the past three decades there has been an increased interest in house churches, which has been accompanied by a proliferation of both scholarly and popular publications. Roger W. Gehring, in his landmark volume says, “On one point nearly all NT scholars presently agree: early Christians met almost exclusively in homes of individual members of the congregation” (2004:1). What does this mean for congregations today? Should Christian churches replicate the New Testament model in our day? How much? How little? What should be the goal? Is following the New Testament house-church model the goal? Is advancing God’s Kingdom work here on earth the goal? Or, is there yet another goal?

A Theology of Missions


By my reading of the scriptures, ecclesiology is the most fluid of the doctrines. The church is a dynamic cultural expression of the people of God in any given place. Worship style, social dynamics, liturgical expressions must result from the process of contextualizing the gospel in any given culture. *Church must follow mission.* (2006:143)

Gram Cray agrees with Hirsch in that starting with the existing church skips the foundational work. “Those who start with the questions about the relationship to the existing Church have already made the most common and most dangerous mistake. Start with the Church and the mission will probably get lost. Start with mission and it is likely that the Church will be found” (2005:116). Hirsch would correctly argue that Christian mission begins with Jesus, who He is, and what He came to do. Jesus is
our constant reference point. And it is Jesus who determines the Church’s mission, which is where we get our sense of mission to “go into all the world.” Although Hirsch would not disagree, based on a shared theology of the Trinity, that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are the reference point, all participate in mission, and each One plays their unique part.

**God: The Inventor of Mission**

When Christians think “mission,” they usually begin with the Gospel Commission, “go and make disciples” (Matt 28:18-20) with an ultimate goal of saving lost people.

When God, the inventor of mission, thinks about mission, He begins with creation (Gen 1:1-2:25). His ultimate goal was/is to create a new community which flows out of his existing community. Gailyn Van Rheenen, in his book entitled *Missions*, says, “Mission does not originate with human sources, for ultimately it is not a human enterprise” (1996:14).

Genesis 1:26 records, “Then God said, ‘Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves (italics supplied).’” God’s mission for community comes out of his own existing community. He longed for a relationship with us before we even existed. So, God goes on a mission of creation.

The story is continued in verse 28, “God blessed them and told them, ‘Multiply and fill the earth.’” Unique to God’s mission, is how He creates a community that has the ability to procreate community. Not only is there an ability to procreate community, there is an express command to “multiply and fill the earth.”

However, within two chapters, God’s mission needs a revision. Adam and Eve acquiesce to Satan’s temptations in the Garden. Sin is introduced, and true to his mission for community, God takes the first step. “Toward evening they [Adam and Eve] heard the LORD God walking about in the garden, so they hid themselves among the trees. The LORD God called to Adam, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen 3:8-9). It might appear that all is lost, but there is hope! God’s mission always brings hope.

“If from now on, you and the woman will be enemies, and your offspring and her offspring will be enemies. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15).

These observations clearly show that in this pronouncement is compressed the record of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, a battle that began in heaven (Rev. 12:7-9), was continued on earth, where Christ again defeated him (Heb. 2:14), and will terminate finally with Satan’s destruction at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:10). (Nichol 1953-57:1:233)
Here, in this promise, the next phase of God’s mission is unveiled.

**Jesus: The Illustration of Community**

“Mission is rooted in the nature of God, who sends and saves” (Van Rheenen 1996:14). God sends Jesus Christ on a mission of salvation, but this mission is different than our mission. Jesus is the mission, and he is sent on a mission. He is God incarnate.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). As a baby Christ entered the very community he created. He felt our pain and suffering. The very essence of his presence and power brought healing, hope, and salvation to all who would receive him. Yes, Christ was/is on a mission but, he is also the mission. He is the Spring that brings forth living water. He is both the Source and Inventor of mission. While Christ lived among us, he introduced the next phase of his mission.

**Church: The Expression of Community**

“The most critical issue facing the expansion of the North American Church today is a theological issue” (Payne 2008:18). J. D. Payne is not the only one who expresses this concern. Daniel R. Sanchez says, “One of the most crucial issues pertaining to church planting movements in North America has to do with the definition of church that is employed” (2006:35). Both Payne and Sanchez invite all to rethink what “church” means.

The New Testament uses the Greek word, *ekklesia* to describe church. *Ekklesia* is a compound word consisting of *ek*, meaning “out of,” and *klesis*, “a calling.” *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* agrees, “In Scripture the word *church* is a translation of the Greek *ekklesia*, which means ‘a calling out’” (Damsteegt 1988:136). *Ekklesia* is used one hundred and fourteen times. Sometimes it is translated as “assembly” (three times), “church” (seventy-four times), “churches” (thirty-five times), and “congregation” (two times).

The Bible compares “the church” to a human body (1 Cor 12:13). This metaphor emphasizes unity and the functional relationship each person plays to the whole (Dansteegt 1988:136). A body suggests something that is alive, vibrant, and healthy. The *ekklesia*, or the “called out ones” of the New Testament is described by Peter:

Come to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God’s temple. He was rejected by the people, but he is precious to God who chose him. And now God is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple.
What’s more, you are God’s holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ. As the Scriptures express it, “I am placing a stone in Jerusalem, a chosen cornerstone, and anyone who believes in him will never be disappointed.” Yes, he is very precious to you who believe. But for those who reject him, “The stone that was rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone.” And the Scriptures also say, “He is the stone that makes people stumble, the rock that will make them fall.” They stumble because they do not listen to God’s word or obey it, and so they meet the fate that has been planned for them. But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God’s holy nation, his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. “Once you were not a people; now you are the people of God. Once you received none of God’s mercy; now you have received his mercy.” Dear brothers and sisters, you are foreigners and aliens here. So I warn you to keep away from evil desires because they fight against your very souls. Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world. (1 Pet 2:5-12, italics supplied)

Jesus uses this same kind of language when he says, “In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father” (Matt 5:16).

The church is “called out” to both “be” and to “show.” They are to be the kingdom of priests, God’s holy nation, and all that encompasses this high calling; and they are to show to others the goodness of God by being the people God intended his church to be.

It is most interesting that “unbelieving neighbors” come to believe because of what they see in the everyday lives of the believers. Tom Wolfe gets right to the point.

The basic thrust of New Testament evangelism was not individual evangelism, not mass evangelism, and was definitely not child evangelism. The normative pattern of evangelism in the early church was oikos evangelism . . . sharing the astoundingly good news about Jesus in one’s sphere of influence, the interlocking social system composed of family, friends and associates. (1980:166)

Wolfgang Simson in his book, Houses That Change the World, captures the essence of this way of life and thinking that was foundational among early Christians (1999).
George Kretschmar points out, that “the recruitment to faith was never institutionalized, there was no organizing the congregation for missions.” The impact of the church as an entity was so strong that most early Christians did not even pray for the conversion of pagans, but, according to Yves Congar, a Dominican scholar, they prayed for the prosperity and peace of the people. There is, says Norbert Brox, an “astonishing absence of thinking and talking about missions.” The reason for this ‘absence’ is the same as for the ‘absence’ of evangelism: the church in itself was the mission. The ‘missionary journeys’ of Paul and his companions were not understood as ‘missions’ as we know it by Paul himself: the expression only emerged as the title to hand-drawn maps of the Mediterranean in the appendix of Bibles centuries later. Paul was simply doing apostolic and prophetic ministry, and so was the church that had been planted and emerged through these ministries. Since the church was the mission, it did not send out special ‘missionaries’ as such: it literally sent out itself, in the form of units, embryonic units of two and three from a local church, which carried within themselves the vision and virus of church, ready to infect whatever they touched. (Simson 1999:44, 45, italic supplied)

Banks and Simson are not alone in this understanding. Robert Jewett echos this when he says in his critical and historical commentary on the Bible,

In contrast to modern usage, the word ‘church’ did not refer to a distinctive building until centuries after the writing of Romans. The definitive study of house congregations and house churches by Hans-Josef Klauck opens with a citation from Heinz Schurmann, “The living space of the congregation is the house.” These and other widely accepted studies investigate the references to houses as the meeting places of early Christian congregations and usually assume a free-standing building owned or rented by the patron or patroness of a house church. Although the term oikos can refer not only to a Roman atrium, a Greek peristyle home, a Hellenistic style of courtyard with adjoining rooms, or even an apartment in an insula building that has shops on the ground floor, the standard conclusion is that “Private houses were the first centers of church life.” (2007:958)

It is only the indwelling, life-changing power of the Holy Spirit that can empower a community of believers to live their lives in such a way so as to cause unbelieving neighbors to take note. It is to the Holy Spirit that we next turn our attention.
Holy Spirit: The Empowerer of Community

It is well recognized that before Jesus returned to heaven, he gave his followers the work of making disciples; he gave them something to do (Matt 28:18-20). But prior to this, Jesus had given other instructions. In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4-5).

On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

This outpouring of God’s Spirit filled his church, his people, with the ability to be living testimonies to the life-changing power of God, and to continue to be the mission of Jesus, both in being and doing. Larry Kreider and Floyd McClung articulate this by saying, “The New Testament church, as encountered in the book of Acts, was defined as people. Believers did not go to church or join the church—they were the Church” (2007:9). Simply said, wherever there is a community of God-honoring people, there is church. Robert and Julia Banks capture this somewhat “both-and” theology of mission in their book, The Church Comes Home. “In summary, we cannot simply define the church as existing primarily for others and for mission. It exists primarily for God and for community. It is not just a means to some missionary end. It is an end itself, not the end only for itself. In other words, it is not an end purely for itself so much as for others (1998:230).

The church, empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit in peoples’ lives, is both the continued expression of Jesus Christ as “the mission,” as well as the continuation of his salvific mission to earth.

Adventists: A Missional Community

Seventh-day Adventists believe they are “called out” for a special mission. This mission grows out of God’s mission, a mission for community, and now a mission to restore the Eden-like community that existed before sin entered this world. The Adventist Church not only has a mission and message to share with the world, Adventists must first show this mission
and message. And to show it, Adventists must become the message by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. This is what, like in the early church, will cause “unbelieving neighbors” to take note.

This is not so much a new paradigm, as it is an old paradigm re-emerging from its lost place in the early church and in the 19th century history of the Adventist Church, says Sahlin (2003:20). Ellen White’s paradigm for missions was two-fold: “First meet the temporal needs of the people, and relieve their physical wants and sufferings, and you will find an open avenue to the heart, where you may plant the good seed of virtue and religion” (1948:5:227). Sahlin further explains.

She did not favor an approach which focuses exclusively on proclamation. In fact, she wrote that “preaching is a small part of the work to be done for the salvation of souls.” (Review & Herald, August 22, 1899.) Appealing to the example of Christ’s incarnational approach to ministry, which brings Christian witness into the secular areas of life, Ellen White states that “the followers of Christ are to labor as he did. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the suffering and afflicted. We are to minister to the despairing and inspire hope in the hopeless.” In another place in Desire of Ages, a biography of Jesus Christ, she makes the point that the Christian mission is to focus on the life and needs of the unreached. “When we love the world as He loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished.” (Pages 350 and 641.) Ministries of compassion are just as central to her conception of Christian mission as are ministries of evangelism. The role of social concern and public service in the mission of the church is no more clearly stated than in Ellen White’s most paradigmatic passage on mission strategy, first published in Ministry of Healing, 143, and reprinted in many other places. “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then he bade them, ‘Follow me.’” (2003:20, 21, italics supplied)

Talk about success, this alone should cause one to stop and take note. Given the cultural value system in North America, including other Western cultures, that is often reflected among God’s people (the church), Adventists seem to be obsessed with fast, measurable success. White’s opening sentence re-frames “true success.” Notice the order of progression given to all who would carry out God mission of recreation and redemption:

First, Christ mingled. This does not fit the fast-food approach in Western culture. People intuitively know if you really care about them. Mingling is not an item one usually checks off the “to do” list. It is a way of life, and for this to become a way of life, one has to simplify and re-prior-
itize. Mingling takes time. Mingling requires one to have time to “waste” with unbelieving neighbors. Mingling is a prerequisite. No mingling, no ministering; no ministering, no winning of confidence; no confidence, no context to bid one to follow Jesus Christ; and therefore, no “true success.”

Second, Christ showed sympathy. Peter’s counsel to “show others the goodness of God” has already been considered. Now White continues in this same direction. To show the goodness of God means to be his hands and feet, to continue God’s mission of recreation, of redemption, to show sympathy. It is impossible to show sympathy if one has not learned about the pain and sorrow that exist in the lives of others. And even though it might be possible to sympathize from a distance, the context of White’s reflection comes in the context of community.

Third, Christ ministered to their needs. It should go without saying that if one mingles with unbelieving neighbors, then one should be able to recognize felt needs and minister to them. This does not require classes, surveys, and highly organized strategies. It requires meaningful involvement in the lives of those that God has brought across our paths. All sympathizing and ministering should be authentic. It needs to be done because of Christ, who is in us and in his church, in his people. It is this no-strings-attached and no-score-kept ministry that causes unbelieving neighbors to take note.

Fourth, Christ won their confidence. Winning confidence is not something one does. It is the natural result of authentic mingling, sympathizing, and ministering to the needs of people. In other words, winning confidence is not the next item on the “to do” list. It naturally happens when one allows God to transform our lives, to live in and through our lives, to show the goodness of God, and to be the people God wants us to be.

Fifth, Christ bids us, “Follow me.” Adventists are at risk for minimizing the first steps, and silently think that now we have arrived at the activity that really counts. For the past number of years our evangelistic models have tended to completely ignore mingling, sympathizing, ministering, and winning confidence. We have tended, rather, to shortcut the process and too soon bring in professional evangelists to bid people to follow Christ. It is rather like trying to harvest a garden before you plant and tend it. Is this method considered “true success?” Of course, it will bring success. Sahlin recognized this problem, but uses language that describes it as an overseas missionary problem. Could it be a problem Western cultures face as well?

There is a false success that can result from a different approach in the place of the “true” success that will result from this divinely approved approach. The professional literature of missiology is familiar with
this false success. If a missionary arrives in an unreached community and engages almost entirely in proclamation of the gospel message, directly confronting non-belief, there will be “success.” Some will accept the message and be baptized. But, over time the missionary will discover that these early adopters of the message are mostly individuals who are perceived as marginal to the community—needing a place to belong and be accepted—and that their acceptance of the message creates a barrier that makes it impossible for most of the community to hear the message. An infiltration approach [incarnational approach], such as that advocated by Ellen White, does not have the same immediate results, but in the long run opens up a far wider audience for the message. (2003:21)

Charles Kraft, in his book, *Christianity in Culture*, recounts a telling story of where true success was replaced by a false success.

In attempting to discover a dynamic equivalent form of preaching I once asked a group of Nigerian church leaders what would be the appropriate way to present a message such as the Christian one to the village council. They replied: “We would choose the oldest, most respected man in the group and ask him a question. He would discourse, perhaps at length, on the topic and then become silent, whereupon we would ask another question. As the old man talked, other old men would comment as well. But eventually he and the others would do less and less of the talking and we would do more and more. In this way we would develop our message and it would become the topic for discussion of the whole village.” I asked them why they didn’t employ this approach in church. “Why, we’ve been taught that monologue is the Christian way,” they replied. “Can this be why no old men come to church?” I asked. “Of course!” they said. “We have alienated them all by not showing them due respect in public meetings.” (2005:252)

**Summary**

When God thought mission, he created a procreating community out of the context of his community. When sin entered this community, mission was modified, and he sent Jesus, who is the mission, and is on a mission to redeem our fallen community. As Jesus finishes his mission, he invents the church and sends the Holy Spirit to empower his church to mingle, sympathize, and minister to unbelieving neighbors, showing them God’s love, and inviting them to follow Jesus Christ.
Notes

1 All Bible verses are taken from the New Living Translation, 1996, unless otherwise noted.

2 Sanchez raises a number of questions: “This basic question spawns other related queries: Is a church defined in terms of its membership? If so, how many members does it take to make a church? Does a congregation need to have its own building in order to be considered a church? How much financial strength does a group need in order to be considered a church? Does a congregation need to have a full-time formally trained pastor and staff in order to be a church? Is there a minimal number of organizations that a group needs to have to qualify for church status? Is there a standard number of elected officers that is needed? Is a church determined by the number of functions it carries out? If so what are they? Are there other criteria that need to be employed to ascertain if a group is truly a church?” (2006:35).

3 Payne uses the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

4 Some might argue that this is a reference to Christ’s second coming, but a strong case can be made to show a current contextual application. Greek Episkope, “a looking over,” perhaps by the heathen as they scrutinize the “good works” of church members, or by God when he “looks over” the records of men in the judgment. Because one purpose of the Christian life is to reveal the character of God and thereby cause the heathen to consider their own relationship to Him, the first explanation may harmonize best with the context. By “looking over” the noble character of a genuine Christian the heathen will have sufficient cause to “glorify God.” The best way for the heathen to glorify God is to submit to his grace and to his power to transform character (Nichol 1953-1957:7:564).

5 “Missional” has become a very popular word that has developed a meaning of its own. The author uses this word in the context of a community that has been called and given a unique mission.

6 “If the goal of the Adventist’s mission is to produce the people described in Revelation 14:1-5, then their evangelistic strategy must follow the pattern of Revelation 14:6-12. Adventists must preach this unique message in the context of the eschaton. The evangelistic mandate, originating out of the Great Commission and elaborated by the distinctive message of Revelation 14, must be the guideline for the accomplishment of Adventists mission. Hence, Adventists can never be content with merely bringing people to initial faith in Christ and not into full discipleship. The Adventists mission can be understood only against the backdrop of Revelation 14 and the disciple-making mandate of the Great Commission” (Burrill 1997:53). For an extended discussion of the unique mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, see Seventh-day Adventists Believe, 161-169. For additional information on the Adventist mission read (White 1911:9).

To some leading evangelists’ credit they have spent significant amounts of time and money organizing seminars to train lay people six to nine months before an evangelistic series. This author’s most recent participation in this process observed over 100 lay people who were training as lay Bible workers, but when it was time for the visitation, professional Bible workers were hired. It is unclear if the lay Bible workers did not follow through thus creating the need for hired Bible workers. As the series closed lay Bible workers were called upon to carry on with Bible study interests. Being part of this process, approximately twenty lay-trained Bible workers responded to this call. This was a good start but it was not sufficient to carry the load. As of late, more professional Bible workers are being hired to follow up and rekindle a spiritual interest in people who at one time responded favorable. Adventists need to ask, is this what Ellen White had in mind?

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