Under the Sacred Bo Tree: Enhancing a Ministry That Is More than Preaching

Introduction

In Adventist missions we are very much concerned to “convince” people to accept Jesus and prepare for his coming. This is a very noble endeavor and is the essence of Christianity. Far too often we have tried to present to people the simple “truth” by arguing that we have that truth and we are disappointed when people do not “see” the beauty of our message.

Unfortunately too many times we have not taken the time to understand the belief systems of the group we are focusing on. The Buddhist philosophical worldview is not so much concerned about the hereafter or what we would call heaven; rather, they are interested in how to live their lives today. They call it following the “Eightfold Path.”

In this article I want to show how we as Christians can help Buddhists to walk such a path but also to outline a way for us Christians to find ways to share God’s wonderful truth with them.

Love Will Always Win

He was what we would call a mutelali in Sri Lanka, a local shopkeeper. And Piasena was also a small vegetable farmer and the deacon at the local Buddhist temple just across from the Adventist school.

He was well acquainted with our school—Lakpahana Adventist Seminary—and with the Adventist faith. He used to be an Adventist, you see, and had worked at the school. But several years before, he had left. He loved flowers, and the garden around his house testified of this. He grew the best selection of flowers in the whole village.

I had heard about his past and the reasons he had left the church. But our conversation most of the time did not center on the past. We talked, rather, about his beautiful garden and his skills.
He knew I was the new pastor at the school. Having been an Adventist himself, he also knew Adventist practices, and soon he provided our home with a beautiful bouquet of flowers every Friday afternoon. “For Sabbath,” he told me. I suggested to him that I would use them Friday night at the house and Sabbath morning for church—since we were not able to buy such nice flowers for the sanctuary. In the afternoon, I explained, we would take them back to the house. The next Friday we received two bouquets—one for the church and one for our home.

Soon Piasena came to church himself, first to check on the flowers. Then he began to stay behind to listen to the sermon, and after a while he became a regular worshiper again.

As my translator and I got ready to enter the pulpit one Sabbath (after we had been at the school for nearly two years), Piasena slipped a note to my translator. It was a note from the local Buddhist priest. He knew that Piasena attended church services on Sabbath mornings regularly, since Piasena lived next to the temple. I had made every effort to become friends with the monk, knowing that over the years he had often made life miserable for the school. (Two years before we arrived, he had instigated the villagers around the school to forcefully place a statue of Buddha overnight on the school property, then claim that portion of land as a Buddhist temple.)

This time the situation was different. The note carried a request from the monk. For the upcoming temple celebration, Poya day (which happened also to be a Vesak, the most important of all the full moon days, because of three momentous events connected to the life of the Buddha), the people wanted the Seventh-day Adventist pastor from Lakpahana—me—to preach the regular evening sermon.

And so it was that that night in the Buddhist temple, before the shrine dedicated to the local god Kataragama, under the bo tree—the sacred tree of the Buddhists—I, the pastor of the local Seventh-day Adventist Church, preached my first officially sanctioned sermon to the people of Mailapitiya.

I say my first “official” sermon, because for months I had lived among the village people and visited them in their homes. At funerals we sat together. We dug trenches together for the local water supply system. My ministry over the years did not center around the pulpit in a church, but around people—in most cases people who did not know what Adventism or Christianity was about. They associated Christianity with colonial powers; and in their minds, Adventists had something to do with America. They called our school the American mission, because of the constant presence there of American missionaries.

Most of the people from the village would never have come to my church, even if I had invited them. They were too many for our small
seminary chapel to hold, anyway. But what an audience I had that night—not only those present at the temple, but also those listening to the sermon over the public address system in the village, including my own congregation at the school.

The Example of Jesus

In John 4 we find the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. He was returning from Judea to Galilee, and to do that he had to cross Samaria. For a Jew, Samaria was hostile territory, to be entered only in cases of necessity, taking care to avoid, by all means, any communication with the locals.

It was midday in the desert. Tired and thirsty, Jesus sat down at the edge of the well of Shechem, which tradition associated with the patriarch Jacob.

When a Samaritan woman from the nearby town came out to draw water, Jesus simply asked her for a drink. This surprised the woman, and for three important reasons:

1. A Jew addressed her, contrary to the culture and custom of the times. Jews despised Samaritans and did not communicate with them.
2. She was a woman (and women at the time were generally ignored by men in public places).
3. The Jew asked her for a favor. In so doing, he was socializing with her and humbling himself before her, as it were. After all, receiving a service from a Samaritan woman had to be humiliating for a Jew.

For Jesus, however, there was nothing abnormal or artificial in what he had done. It was simply his way. He made no exceptions; he discriminated against no one. His manner, in fact, was so natural that it captured the admiration and interest of this woman of the desert. She opened up to him, a conversation ensued, and her affection was won.

This midday outreach had been made possible by the attitude of Jesus. In his presence, the woman sensed her value, her dignity. He had broken down prejudice. He had given her the security of his true concern. She witnessed in him what should be the fundamental Christian testimony, the testimony of divine love that transcends all discrimination and division.

Jesus’ testimony at the well was not planned and artificial. He was simply himself, acting naturally. It was authentic witnessing.

The testimony of genuine love in mission cannot be improvised or “fabricated.” It has to be the result of a love that’s incorporated into one’s natural way of being.
Our Greatest Need

The greatest need in the church is not that of accomplishing the most precise interpretation of biblical teachings. Rather, it is a full application and implementation of the gospel in our own lives and ministry. I believe in scholarship, of course, and the church has produced excellent treatises and publications of which I am proud. Many of them have been part of my library for years. But what we need today more than anything else is the caring spirit of Christ in our lives. “The Caring Church” should be not only be a slogan but a manifest reality in our daily lives.

I have never felt at ease standing in a pulpit to preach, and I have to admit that I have not done very much of it in my ministry. But I love evangelism the way Jesus did it: meeting people with their needs wherever they are. Jesus loved to mingle. He loved to meet people one on one. And he loved to provide for their needs.

The Sad Condition

Being invited to preach in a Buddhist temple does not come overnight, especially if the community is hostile to anything Christian. When my wife and I arrived on the scene in Sri Lanka, we found a situation that I have since seen in various shapes and forms around the world. Our Adventist institutions are not always appreciated by the people around us.

I will not go into all the reasons I have heard for this (and some of them are valid). But there is one for which we have no excuse: Our institutions and churches are too often havens of rest for the saints who bathe in the river of life themselves, instead of opening the gates so that the water of life can nurture and strengthen those who live in the desert of this world (which in many cases is right around us).

Mission is a work for those who have not only tasted of the water of life, but who are overflowing with it.

On Their Own Ground

I remember the first meeting we had with the local Buddhist monk, in which I told him I wanted to become a part of the village community, that I wanted to work together with him to solve the problems of the people. How surprised he was that a Christian—an Adventist, a member of the Lakpahana Seminary staff—would be willing to “help.” (Keep in mind Lakpahana actually means “The Light of Sri Lanka.”)

I remember the time we met the leaders of the village—not at the school, but on their own ground—and told them that we wanted to work together with them. There was a lot of suspicion. I remember one who wanted to know if this was a new Christian plot to convert them. No, it
was not a new one, it was an old one, which we can learn from Christ’s own example. I can still hear the response of one of the villagers present, to his questioning neighbor: “Maybe if they truly care for us, a dose of Christianity would be good for our village.”

A dose of common concern, a dose of Christian commitment would be good for our own church, for our own lives. But mission that is concerned with “seeking those who are lost,” and mission that is willing to search where the people are, will not be easy. The people in my newfound community did not ask me for Bible studies. How I wished they would have asked. I was the local expert in that field. I had the studies all prepared and ready to go.

But they told me about the needs of their children who died of diarrhea and the need for safe water. They pointed to their infectious wounds that depleted not only their physical energies, but their financial resources as well. And soon I found out that there were family feuds that not only kept families apart but hindered the progress of the village as a whole. I had to walk from “Judea to Galilee” in the midst of the monsoon rains. I rubbed shoulders with the “Samaritans” of my newfound community, dug wells, and broke stones. It was hard work. My hands formed blisters; my mouth got dry. It was unbearably hot. I soon found out that my fellow workers in the village knew better than I how to survive.

Yes, to fulfill the mission of Christ means sacrifice. But the reward is one you cannot measure in human terms. I sat with dozens of villagers observing the mourning period, and they would ask, “Pastor, tell us what will happen to our friend and neighbor.” And they were not satisfied when I tried to tell them what I had learned about their Buddhist religion in regard to death, thinking to enter into a religious non-confrontational “dialogue” with them. “No,” they replied, “tell us, what do you believe?”

What a joy it was to share the Christian hope with those people. We are often so busy to finish God’s work that we have no time to live out his life.

In Front of Kataragama

My preaching in front of Kataragama under the sacred bo tree came as a result of following the method of Jesus, of mingling with people and finding their greatest needs. After the cistern and pipes had been installed and the pump was in place to provide for their daily water needs, then they were willing to listen.

As the headman and I walked through the village one day shortly before my family left the island, we were remembering the work we had done together and what we had accomplished. We were proud of those straight water pipes dispensing clean and healthy water, of the toilets that were clean and well protected, of the fun we had together and the time we shared sorrow and pain.
Then he turned to me with an earnestness and respect that only a headman can express, speaking words that still burn in my mind: “Pastor, for more than 30 years we have been afraid of sending our children to your school, because we were afraid of Christianity, and we did not want our children to become Christians. But now we have seen what Christianity is all about, and we like it.”

No Other Hands

As John 4 shows, Jesus walked in the heat of the day, when most of the great rabbis would be resting in the shade of their synagogues and homes. It may have been high noon, but he knew there was a sinner to meet, someone who needed the living water. He did not call her to an audience with him in Jerusalem or in a nearby synagogue. He met her where she was.

Jesus wants us to follow that same method, not only in Sri Lanka, but in South Dakota. Not only in Mailapitiya, but in Moscow. Not only meeting the most promising ones, but also the ones in greatest need. Not only those who have the greatest potential to understand our message and follow Jesus right away, but also those who are confused and ill-informed. He wants to reveal himself to them through our lives.

The Lord has no other hands but ours in this world. He has no feet but ours. He asks us to use them for his cause.

“As Christ is the divine channel for the revelation of the Father, so we are the channel for the revelation of Christ. While our Saviour is the great source of illumination, forget not, O Christian, that He is revealed through humanity. Every individual disciple is Heaven’s appointed channel for the revelation of God to man” (White 1904:1).

The Unlikeliest Missionary

You might well say that Sumanajoti Thero is the “unlikeliest” of missionaries. He was the chief monk of a Buddhist temple. From his teen years, he had been interested in people. They were his “mission” and he sought for himself a role of service. In time he became one of the most influential monks in his region.

Establishing relationships is a central part of Christian mission and ministry. My friendship with this Buddhist monk and his “witness” fashioned an outstanding and illuminating experience in my life as a missionary. Our story illustrates what lies at the center of what makes successful evangelism and mission.

We became friends, though we were by all indications unlikely partners. He, the Buddhist monk, and I, the Adventist Christian pastor, were
different in many ways: in religion, in culture, and in age. But we shared a common interest in the welfare of the villagers around us, and we respected each other for our spiritual commitment. This personal respect for and recognition of each other bonded us together.

As we traveled together to various parts of the country, our relationship grew, and we shared our common interests with each other. One day when he was coming home from a week-long stay in the hospital, I invited Sumanajoti to stay with us for a few days to “recuperate” before returning to his busy place at the temple. He agreed. I brought him home that evening along with two of his junior monks. They stayed with us for four days.

This visit provided us an opportunity to involve them in our daily activities, including worship. Soon they “discovered” the health and Bible courses we had intentionally placed in their way. Thus seeds were planted.

Handling the Prejudice

Soon after, Sumanajoti proposed that we should change the inaccurate picture many in the community had about our Adventist school, and work toward removing the hostility the village had toward Christianity. The monk had a plan. He wanted me to invite the key leaders of the village for a meal at our school—actually at our home.

We invited 12 leaders. As soon as our invitation letters reached them, they sought the advice of my friend, the chief monk. They had never been invited to the school before. Was this a trap or a plot?

We brought them to our campus and gave the group a tour of our school. Many of them had never been on the campus during the school’s 32-year history. They were impressed with our work program as being part of our educational system.

As the guests came into our house, I washed the feet of the monk, Sumanajoti. This custom, so well known from the time of Jesus, still thrives in many parts of the East. My act of hospitality provided a message: We as Christians knew how to be respectful.

After a pleasant meal, it was time to talk. Everyone had something nice to say about what they saw and what they had experienced. Sumanajoti just listened. Finally it was time for him to speak. “I have been your leader for many years,” he began. “Most of you I have known from childhood and early youth. All of you come for special occasions to my temple. We have talked together about many things in life.” He paused, and as he surveyed his people one by one, they wondered what would come next.

“You have said nice things about this place,” he continued, “but this is not what you are saying in our village when you speak about this school.”

Silence fell over the group. Embarrassed looks went around. But the monk continued with his remarks, indicating that this was not really the
main point of his speech. “For many years I had the same feelings. I was against the plan to sell this land to the Christians. But their money spoke louder than our objections.”

He paused for a moment as if to straighten out the facts in his mind before he began again.

“But I had to change my mind. Several years ago we were involved in a major community project. We needed tools and we were looking for equipment, and I approached most of you. In fact I hoped you would get involved with us in such a noble effort, but you all had excuses why you could not give us the shovels, pickaxes, and wheelbarrows. So I decided to lay all my prejudices aside, put on my newest robe and come down to this school. I knew in my heart that the Christians would never assist us in our work. But the principal, to my utter astonishment, agreed not only to loan us the tools but even to bring them to us with his own vehicle.”

There was silence. Everybody could sense that the monk was not finished with his report. As he faced them, he confronted them with this question: “Who do you think were the true Buddhists?” He did not expect an answer, because he himself gave the answer with a kind but firm voice. “We are only Buddhists by name, but they have been Buddhists through their actions.”

Visit to a Buddhist Temple

Perhaps the most imposing challenge in sharing my faith came on the occasion of my visit to a temple complex. Sumanajoti wanted to “step in for a few minutes.” While there, the people at the complex offered me a quick tour of the compound. It was an impressive temple, and I realized I was probably touring an important Buddhist location. I asked my guide if he was the chief monk of the temple. “No,” he said. “But the chief monk wants to see you.”

I was led with Sumanajoti into the residence of the temple. There on an elaborate mahogany couch sat the chief monk. “So you are a missionary?” was his first question to me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Is it right that you are here in this country to make Christians out of Buddhists?” I sensed that this was going to be more of an arraignment than a “get acquainted” session. But what was I to tell him? I was called not only to be the Adventist pastor and Bible teacher at our school, but also to “organize and supervise the evangelistic work in the area.”

At that moment, a short, silent prayer was all I had time to manage. But I was not the only one who talked to God that afternoon. The prayer of my friend, the monk Sumanajoti, undoubtedly sounded as sweet in the ears of God that day as that of the most eloquent preacher in Adventism. As I
stood there with shaking knees and nervous voice, I believe God fulfilled his promise to give us words to witness for him.

For two hours that afternoon I tried to explain to this monk that I could hardly make a Christian out of a Buddhist, because that work was not in the hands of human beings, but in the hands of God. For two hours I shared with him what it meant to be a Christian. All that time it did not dawn on me to ask him who he was. It was only at the end of the session, after his whole attitude had changed, that I dared to ask.

He told me that he was the chief monk of one of the three orders of monks in that country. In fact, his order was the most prestigious of the three. When I learned that, I praised God, not only for giving me the opportunity but the words to share in such a situation.

All this was made possible by my monk friend, Sumanajoti Thero, for it was he who wanted to share; it was he who opened the door for us to do so.

When we left that country, Sumanajoti and I kept in close contact with each other. After a year I received an unexpected telex informing us that the chief monk at the temple complex we had visited was ill and that he wanted to see us one more time. Unfortunately I could not afford to go immediately because school was back in session. Knowing what I know now, we should have gone anyway.

The Impact of Showing Respect

Three weeks later we received a large bulky envelope. Inside it, we found a second envelope. In the envelope was a letter that explained that though he had held out as long as possible, the monk had finally died. He had wanted me to speak at his funeral.

The letter also stated that in a second envelope was a part of his cremated ashes. His successor and his disciples realized that the deceased monk was close to our family, and they felt that part of his remains should stay with us. I have returned to that country a number of times and the remaining monks still treat me as their brother. Showing respect opens minds and hearts!

The ashes of the monk that were sent to us are now resting in a small sandalwood box in our home. No, we do not worship that box. We handle it with respect. But who knows how many others have received a glimpse of Jesus because of my friend Sumanajoti and because of the willingness of the chief monk at the temple to take risks as he shared what he did before he died?

And what of us? God has given us a great opportunity to be involved in preparing the world for the imminent coming of Jesus by proclaiming the Good News to the people around us.
While we may rejoice with all our hearts that God can use a Samari- 
tan woman and a Buddhist monk—the unlikeliest missionaries of all—the 
question still confronts us: Have we caught such a vision of God and Jesus 
that we too will be moved to share our faith?

Works Cited


Born in Germany, Rudi Maier served in overseas work for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Pakistan and Sri Lanka for eight years. He studied at the Paradeniya University, Sri Lanka (Buddhism), University of Chicago (MA in Cultural Anthropology and Buddhism), and the American University in Washington, DC (PhD in Sociology and International Development).