

TRAINING CHURCH MEMBERS IN AFRICA FOR SPIRITUAL WARFARE

ABNER P. DIZON, DMISS

(Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Philippines)

1. Introduction

Adventism in Africa is growing phenomenally. Statistics from the three world divisions overseeing the continent of Africa (namely East Central Africa Division, Southern-Africa Indian Ocean Division, and West-Central Africa Division) remarkably supports that statement. From 1.3 million members in 1987, Adventist membership in Africa multiplied more than five times in 27 years (Nyaundi, 2007). In fact, in 2014, there were more than 7 million Adventists in Africa. This number constituted 38% of the then Adventist world membership (ASR, 2014).

With the burgeoning number of new members however comes the challenge of discipling them. Consider for instance the number of ordained and licensed pastors in the three African divisions. In 2012, they had 6.7 million members, yet there were only 4,970 ministers. That's an average of 14 churches per pastor or 4,032 members per pastor. Obviously, pastors alone cannot effectively disciple so many members. The lack of adequate pastoral care will naturally affect the religious experience of church members.

There is, however, another challenge when it comes to discipling converts in Africa. That challenge has to do with the persistent influence of African traditional religions. Together with this challenge is the question of whether our pastors are prepared or trained to teach church members how to deal with evil spirits, witchcraft, sicknesses, deaths, success/failure in life (often met through charms and amulets) in a biblical Adventist way.

2. Identifying the Problem

An African Adventist Problem. One researcher surveyed 200 pastors from the East African Union, who were studying at the University of Eastern Africa (Kenya). The researcher asked three central questions.

First: "How often do you confront an African cultural problem?"¹ 47% answered "often," 47% "once in a while," and 17% "rarely." Putting together the responses for "often" and "once in a while" shows that problems with animistic practices are prevalent (Nyaundi, 2007).

Second: "Have you heard of a case where a member has gone to look for the services of traditional beliefs, such as from a diviner, soothsayer, or magician?" In other words, do church members believe that "services of African traditional personalities are efficacious in tackling challenges of daily living"? 89% said Yes. "They had heard of Adventists who had sought the services of a diviner, soothsayer, or magician."

Third: "Who are the members who get involved in traditional beliefs and practices?" The answers: 77% said "both new and old members;" 18% said "long time members"; and 5% said "recent converts."

What was the conclusion? A significantly high percentage of members in the churches where these pastors worked engage in traditional spirit-world related practices to cope with the stresses of daily living.

A Small Survey of Other African Countries. For this paper, I conducted a small informal survey to get an idea of how prevalent demon possession and spirit world related practices are among Adventists in 18 countries in Africa.² Based on the results of that survey I draw the following conclusions:

1. Witchcraft, charms and amulets, demon possession, or other spirit-related or animistic practices tend to be common in the 18 African countries surveyed (56% responded that they are *moderately, definitely or extremely common* while 44% answered that they are *slightly common or not common at all*).
2. The manifestation of demonic oppression or attacks on SDA church members, though not frequently happening, seem to be

1 By "African cultural problem", the researcher meant "indigenous beliefs and practices which are not compatible with biblical teaching" (Nyaundi, 2007). Nyaundi used the words cultural and traditional interchangeably.

2 71 respondents from Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

common enough particularly among new converts. (47% responded that they occur *occasionally, often* or *extremely often* while 52% responded that they *seldom & never* occur. Also related to this, 45% indicate that *new members* are more prone to demonic oppression or attacks, while 32% indicate that *old or long-time members* also get oppressed or attacked by demons).

3. Majority of those surveyed (81%) believe that teaching church members how to deal with evil spirits, witchcraft, sicknesses, success or failure in life (through charms and amulets) in a biblical Adventist way is *definitely important* or *extremely important*. Yet, more than half of those surveyed (58%) have never attended any class or seminar on how to deal with African traditional religious beliefs and practices, such as witchcraft, demon possession, curses, charms, amulets, etc. (Only 42% remember attending a class or seminar on this topic).
4. Consequently, more than half of those surveyed (63%) believe that pastors and teachers in their country are either *not prepared* or just *somewhat prepared* to teach church members how to deal with evil spirits, witchcraft, sicknesses, success/failure in life (through charms and amulets) in a biblical Adventist way. (23% think pastors and teachers are only *moderately prepared*, while 14% think their pastors and teachers are *definitely* or *extremely prepared*).

3 Addressing the African Traditional Religious Worldview

Do pastors and teachers in Africa need training on how to deal with the spirit world beliefs and practices of African traditional religions? Do they need to be equipped to train church members in Africa to engage in spiritual warfare when confronted by witchcraft and demon possession?

Mathema observes that African traditional worldview “often hinders the internalization of [the] Christian message and practice among” Adventists in Africa (Mathema, 2007, p. 5). This observation is true, not just for African Adventists, but for African Christians in general. Operation World states that

Christianity has grown to become the religion of almost half of Africa’s population, and nearly two-thirds of sub-Saharan Africa. From 1900 to

2010, Christian numbers grew from 9.1% of the population to 48.8%, and from 7.5 million to 504 million (Operation World).

However the Pew Research Center reports that “side by side with their high levels of commitment to Christianity ... many people in the countries surveyed retain beliefs and rituals that are characteristic of traditional African religions” (Pew Research Center, 2010). For instance:

half or more of the population believes that sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm. In addition, roughly a quarter or more of the population in 11 countries say they believe in the protective power of juju (charms or amulets), shrines and other sacred objects

. . . upwards of 1-in-5 people in every country say they believe in the evil eye, or the ability of certain people to cast malevolent curses or spells . . .

. . . in 14 of the 19 countries surveyed, more than 3-in-10 people say they sometimes consult traditional healers when someone in their household is sick. (Pew Research Center).

Idowu observes that “there is a common Africanness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices in Africa” (Idowu cited in Amanze, 2007, p. 13). Traditional African religions “involves the whole of the African’s life: the environment, values, culture, self-awareness” --- “it permeates all phases of life”(Amanze).³ To a certain extent, practitioners of African traditional religions can easily accept Christianity because one of their five core beliefs includes belief in a supreme God. That belief resonates with the Western Christian worldview. However, there are aspects of the worldview that have been overlooked and in fact continue to be overlooked by Christian and Adventist mission and ministry practitioners. For instance, there are four other aspects of the African traditional worldview, which translate into individual as well as communal actions. These core beliefs are 1) belief in lesser gods, 2) belief in spirit beings, 3) belief in the ancestors, and 4) belief in magic, charms, faith healing and witchcraft (Amanze, 2007, p. 13). These aspects of the African traditional worldview were not factored in when the early missionaries began discipling African traditional religionists. As Mathema points out “during the early missionary thrust on the African continent . . . the traditional African worldview was not factored in the process of

³ “Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is a part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so [belong] involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community” (Amanze, 2007).

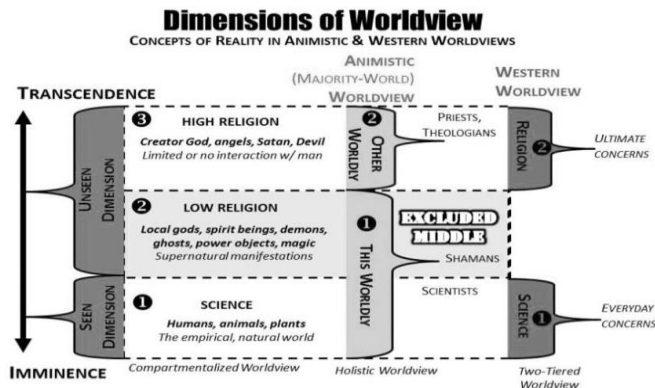
discipling many Africans and in many situations [it] still happens today” (Mathema, 2007, p. 5).

Unfortunately, Adventist evangelism and ministry failed to address the comprehensiveness of the African religious worldview. Not only are most Adventist pastors unprepared to deal with the “spiritualistic phenomena”, they are also untrained to equip their members to overcome the attraction of shamanism. As a result, “the people who are being disciplined frequently regress or revert to unchristian practices, and some may even manifest spiritualistic phenomena that warp and twist human life” (Mathema, 2007, p. 5).

Amanze suggests that before doing evangelism among traditional African religionists, Adventist pastors should first get to know the religion with its beliefs and practices. Indeed, a knowledge of the basics of traditional African beliefs and practices will do lot to prepare Adventist pastors to minister in the African context.

4. Bridging the Western Adventist and African Worldviews

Adventists are often unprepared to deal with people who are in various levels of demonization. Missionaries and pastors often do not have any training to deal with the demonized. Add to this the tendency among Western missionaries (the expressed trainers and role models of Adventist mission and ministry) to ignore the reality of the spirit world when ministering cross-culturally and we can understand why many Adventists are



unprepared to biblically and spiritually respond to the reality and activities of demonization in their various cultural contexts.

The Adventist Church is strongly affected by the Western worldview. This western worldview, according to Wonsuk Ma, “collapses the world of angels, demons and miracles into a two-tiered worldview, the

supernatural and the natural worlds." Consequently, such a worldview produces a theology that "naturally ignores or 'demythologizes' the supernatural" (Ma W. , 2007, p. 22). Just like other Western churches, Adventists in the majority-cultures of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, have received a "sanitized version of Christianity" (Ibid.) which included little discussion of angels, demons, demonization, healing and miracles. In fact, most of the time, these things have been deliberately avoided in Adventist theological reflection.

4.1 Importance of Modeling Spiritual Warfare & Power Encounters

However, "encounters with witchcraft, spiritism, and demon possession" (Hiebert, 2000, p. 163) make it difficult for Adventist missionaries and pastors to deny the realities of the spirit world. In Africa, for instance, a region similar to Asia where "the underlying religiosity . . . is animism," (Ma J. , 2007, p. 5) it is crucial to have "a visible, practical demonstration that Jesus . . . is more powerful than the false gods or spirits worshipped or feared by the members of a given . . . people group" (Hesselgrave, 2005, p. 176). In other words, it is not enough to speak of a Christ who has power to save from sin. We need to demonstrate His past, present and future power to heal and deliver from physical and spiritual bondage. The phrase "Jesus is Lord" should mean more than just the "Lord of the individual convert's world view, standards and relationships" but also "Lord of the . . . principalities and powers (1 Pet. 3:22)" (Willowbank Report, 2009, p. 518). There is often a need for "a confrontation demonstrating that Jesus's power is superior to that of the old gods" (Ott, Strauss, & Tennent, 2010, p. 254). There is a need, not only to teach the "reality and hostility of demonic powers" but also to proclaim, in word and deed, the supremacy, authority and power of Jesus Christ over and against magic, voodoo, the curses, evil eye, and of evil spirits (Willowbank Report, 2009, p. 519).

Kraft feels that "a knowledge-truth brand of Christianity that pays little if any attention to power encounters" is inadequate to deal with "people who have grown up in spirit-oriented societies" (p. 450). He complains that while missionaries are strong on the truth and commitment encounter approaches, most are not addressing the issues of power:

We encounter allegiances to other gods and spirits with the challenge of commitment to Jesus Christ. But when the people need healing, or seek fertility, or when there isn't enough rain or there are floods, too often our answer is the hospital, the school and modern agriculture.

We provide secular answers to what to them (and the Bible) are basically spiritual issues. (Kraft, 2009, p. 450)

Hiebert explains the effect of Western Christianity on converts from a traditional religious background. He writes:

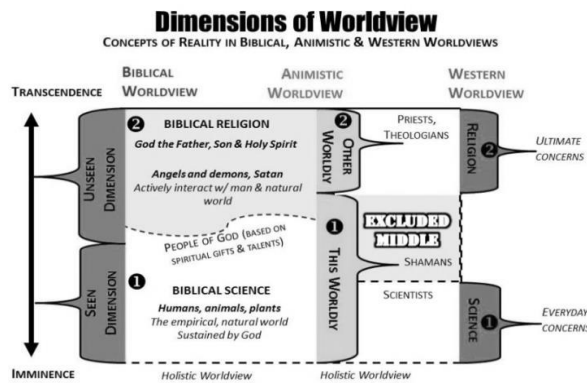
Because the Western world no longer provides explanations for questions on the middle level, many Western missionaries have no answers within their Christian worldview. What is a Christian theology of ancestors, of animals and plants, of local spirits and spirit possession, and of principalities, powers, and rulers of the darkness of this world (Eph. 6:12)? ...Given no answer, they return to the diviner who gives definite answers, for these are the problems that loom large in their everyday life. (Hiebert, p. 413)

Kraft (2009, p. 450) reminds us that confronting "Satan's counterfeit power with God's power" is the "the missing element" in many mission contexts. He goes on to say that "truth and commitment alone won't do" (Kraft).

He suggests that in order "to succeed in our world mission" we should not merely deal with truth and commitment issues, but also with power issues (Kraft 2009, 447). As Love points out,

"power encounter certainly is not *the* key to the kingdom...but it is an essential key to unlocking doors" (2005, p. 209).

Kraft shows that the worldview of Western peoples (i.e., Americans and other North Atlantic peoples) is naturalistic while the worldview of non-western peoples is supernaturalistic, i.e., it usually revolves around the activities of supernatural beings (Kraft, 1990, p. 27).



5. How to Help Pastors Equip Church Members

So how can we prepare pastors to train church members to deal with the above-mentioned aspects of the African traditional worldview? Below are

five suggestions to include in ministerial and missionary training curricula.

1. **Study and Teach African Traditional Religious Worldview.** Pastors and missionaries need to understand the traditional African religious worldview. Specifically, the beliefs and practices that relate to the spirit world. Courses in African Traditional Religions and Folk Religions should be part of every Bachelor in Theology or ministerial training program.
2. **Learn and Explain Biblical Guidelines for Adventist Spiritual Warfare.** Pastors and missionaries should become acquainted with what the Bible says about demonic and demon-related activities, like demon possession, witchcraft, divination, sorcery, magic, amulets, etc.
3. **Be Exposed in "Spiritual War Zones."** Spend time with pastors and missionaries who successfully minister in villages or towns where there are clear spiritual power encounters. Interview and observe experienced pastors who have dealt with or who always engage in spiritual warfare activities. There is no replacement for actual combat experience.
4. **Practice and Facilitate Effective Spiritual Disciplines.** Pastors and missionaries should know by experience as well as by theory different spiritual disciplines that will strengthen spirituality and prepare people for spiritual warfare. Spiritual disciplines should be taught (by word and deed) such as prayer, Scripture meditation and memorization, fasting, repentance, forgiveness, confession, etc. These practices should be in the level of application or practicum, not just through lectures and readings.
5. **Focus on the Holy Spirit and a Spirit-Empowered Ministry.** Pastors and missionaries should be encouraged and mentored to focus on the Holy Spirit's role, work, and power. They need to be well founded on a Bible and Spirit of Prophecy based teaching on how to be Spirit-empowered.