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MISSION STRATEGY: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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Introduction

At the beginning of the third millennium, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church can do itself a great service by conducting introspection in the area of mission. How well has the Church carried out the mandate of the gospel commission? What lessons has history, experience, and research, *inter alia*, taught the Church with regards to the methods and strategies through which mission has been done? How seriously has the Church taken its past mistakes as opportunity for change to improve the present as well as the future practice of mission?

Obviously, the SDA Church should take a comprehensive inventory of itself from all possible angles. Other mission analysts will certainly need to address related areas in which the Church ought to carry out self-examination. The aim of this essay is to help the SDA Church to take a candid look at itself in order to map out effective ways of taking the gospel to the billions of people engulfed by secularism and world religions. It would be sheer ambition on my part to attempt to cover all methods that the SDA Church has employed from its inception. Even if such a venture were enthusiastically embarked upon, the range of the methods to be dealt with would render any meaningful depth of analysis impossible. Having said this, allow me to therefore spell out the scope of my current assignment.

Beyond a simple review, this paper intends to examine some tensions surrounding a few selected strategies and methods of mission. The conviction behind this paper is that a rigorous critique and analysis of some of the major

¹At the time the paper was presented. He has recently returned to the United States.

methods of mission in the context of their accompanying dynamics may hold clues to the most effective ways mission ought to be carried out in the new millennium. Instead of getting entangled with detail, a grasp of cardinal principles from which the details may be drawn should provide the most defensible starting point for a serious search for effective strategies of mission. A systematic reflection on the principles on which strategies of mission are based does not negate the practical aspects of mission. Rather, it gives substance and depth to all that the church does as it tries to make Christ known and loved by all peoples of the world. For, contrary to misconceptions that tend to elevate the practical dimension of mission above the theoretical, the two seem to have equal weight. Exceptional practice should be rooted in solid theory, and reliable theoretical knowledge must nourish the practical vitality of mission strategy. We need to invest time in thinking about mission, since this will improve the way we actually do mission. A preoccupation with the “practical” in mission methodology, to the exclusion of any careful examination of theoretical foundations, is counterproductive, for it short-circuits the practical dimension of mission that we often strive to emphasize. Given the pluriformity and multiplicity of strategies of mission that floods the missiological landscape, one wonders whether anything more in the form of strategies and methods for mission should or could be said.

Our reflection on mission strategy will take the following path. First, I will analyze some key principles that have shaped mission strategy over the years. Second, I will propose methods that the SDA Church should consider in the formulation of fitting and effective mission strategies for the current challenges.

Principles of Mission: The Reality Behind Our Practice of Mission

Over the years, Christians’ involvement in mission has always been guided by some principles. This is true whether or not the practitioners were aware of the basis of their mission practice. Some of the principles that backed the mission efforts were biblical, while others may not have traced their origin to any passage of Scripture, yet they are not necessarily against the Bible.² Like culture, some of the principles that we have followed in our mission practice over the years are a result of our response to the challenges that we have had to deal with as we have tried to spread the good news of salvation cross-culturally. Forged in the matrix of practical considerations, some “principles” of mission are a reflex action to the realities of witnessing to our faith in a culturally diverse world. Such “principles,” which are largely human responses to varying situations, may change with the passing of time when the circumstances change. Biblical “principles” of mission, too, though largely emanating from an immutable God may alter on demand of

²For a more detailed discussion, see Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 127-43.

changed circumstances. The point we are trying to make here is that we, as humans, perceive “principles” of mission because of our reflection on God’s word and humanity. We classify together what we consider to be principles, and this is good because it is God who has given us the capacity to do so. As we identify and craft principles for mission, we also gain a deeper insight into how we can do mission correctly.

Mission Methods: Text and Context

No sooner does one attempt to study methods of mission than one encounters chaos. The many methods that not only clamor for attention, while also enjoying wide endorsement from reputable missiologists, overwhelm any serious student of mission. While the chaos can be intimidating, it can also provide great opportunity for creativity. Some may allow the countless and confusing methods to immobilize them. Yet others may see in the chaotic proliferation of methods a clarion call to create new and more effective approaches to mission.

Success in fulfilling our task of mission will not come from a mere knowledge of the glorious methods that have graced mission in the past. The presence and mastery of information is not enough, for there are many who possess a lot of theoretical knowledge about mission who fail to apply what they claim to know. Is it not a paradox that the Western world that boasts some of the most productive publishing houses, universities, and mission strategies trails behind the non-Western world in church growth? Poor countries of the world which have meager resources are experiencing exponential growth.

The purpose of this section goes beyond the identification of some of the salient approaches to mission, important though that may be. Rather, at issue here is an analysis of the intersection of a selected pair of methods that are diametrically opposed. Among these methods are the metaphysical and empirical, and the deductive and inductive. The point here is that a balanced approach that brings together each pair of diametrically opposed methods has to be context-sensitive in order to remain effective. Fixation to any method, whether the method may have been good or excellent, is counterproductive, since that militates against adaptation to changing circumstances.

Metaphysical and Empirical Methods

Essentially, the metaphysical methods of mission, on the one hand, pertain to those approaches to mission that extol the spiritual and the transcendental. These methods tend to be more qualitative and are difficult to measure. Most of these methods have theology as their base. In other words, they articulate the spiritual and theological components of mission as paramount. The emphasis is on the intangibles that define the essence of the potency of these methods of mission.

On the other hand, we have the empirical methods of mission. These methods are scientific in nature, for they stress the measurable, the quantifiable. Under the empirical aspect of mission are statistics, ethnology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, history, geography, law, and pedagogics of both Christian and non-Christian nations.

Perhaps more than any other passages of Scripture, the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast that are recorded in Matt 13:31-33 and Luke 13:18-21 highlight the need for balance between the empirical and metaphysical understandings of and approaches to the kingdom of God. Since mission is about the actualization and expansion of the kingdom of God, these parables are particularly pertinent. Preliminary observations are quite in place for one to catch the drift of what Christ sought to communicate through these two parables. First, among the parables spoken by Jesus in relation to the kingdom of God, these two are among the shortest. In Luke, for example, each comprises only two verses. In Matthew, the parable of the mustard seed consists of two verses, while the parable of the yeast is condensed into one verse.

An allied point is that Jesus spoke these two parables, in immediate succession, as it were in a single breath. The impression is that before the words of the first parable could even sink into the minds of the hearers, with their echoes still reverberating, Jesus introduced the second parable.

It is also evident that the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast were given impromptu. This is not to say that all the other parables that Jesus told were rehearsed before they were spoken. However, a closer look at these two parables show that Jesus did not conceal the brainstorming that was going on in His mind in an effort to illustrate what the kingdom of God is like. In introducing the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?" (Luke 13:18).³ Again, he commences the parable of the yeast wondering, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?" (v. 20). The significance of drawing some attention to the impromptu aspect of the parables is that, while some people express themselves better with some prior preparation, others seem to bring out their best when placed under impromptu circumstances. Although Jesus would no doubt function equally well under any situation, this impromptu occasion seems to have given Him an opportune moment to reveal brilliantly two dimensions of the kingdom of God—dimensions that must always be kept in tension. These two are the empirical and metaphysical.

Why did Jesus follow up the parable of the mustard seed with that of the yeast? Was the first parable inadequate to illustrate his point about the kingdom of God? In view of the multifaceted nature of the kingdom of God, one metaphor obviously would be incapable of capturing all the dimensions of the kingdom of God. This point is supported by the other parables Jesus gave pertaining to the

³Bible quotations in this paper are taken from the NIV.

kingdom of God, for example, Matt 13:24,44,45,47; 18:23. The proximity of the two parables would imply that Jesus might have wanted to highlight the point that they are mutually corrective. Since each parable accentuates an opposite feature of the kingdom of God, a simultaneous focus on both aspects would promote a more balanced view of what the kingdom of God is like.

A comparison of the two parables shows that the parable of the mustard seed is more empirical in emphasis. Jesus points out that the kingdom of God is “like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.” An examination of this parable shows that here we are dealing with things we can count (“a mustard seed”), things we can observe and measure (“it grew and became a tree”), and things we can scientifically verify with ease (“the birds of the air perched in its branches”). Yet when we look at the parable of the yeast, the emphasis shifts. Here Jesus simply notes that the kingdom of God is “like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (v. 21). The essence of the second parable is the influence of the yeast, which, though more difficult to quantify, affects the flour, leading to the rising of the dough. The indeterminate amount of yeast (even women with a modicum of baking experience know that all it takes is a small amount of yeast to make a large amount of dough rise) represents the metaphysical dimension of the kingdom of God. Although it is difficult to measure, when this dimension is absent, all can tell because the dough refuses to rise. But when yeast is present, the flour responds and the dough is transformed into palatable bread.

More concretely, our understanding of the kingdom of God is incomplete unless we balance the empirical and the metaphysical methods that we should employ in extending the reign of God through the way in which we do mission. Mission methods that stress the gains for the kingdom along empirical lines (statistics) while ignoring the spiritual, metaphysical, or qualitative aspects of the people we evangelize are lopsided.

The opposite is equally undesirable. Focusing only on the metaphysical at the expense of the empirical produces hermits who become isolated from society. This inward preoccupation with spirituality prevents Christians from functioning as salt in a world that yearns for what Christians have to offer.

Ideally, a rich inner spiritual and metaphysical experience of God’s kingdom should translate into quantitative, empirical experience of God’s kingdom. When the behavior of Christians matches their inner experience of God’s grace, then the methods employed in the actualizing of the kingdom of God in human lives will be commended. On a corporate level, the structures, infrastructure, and numerical size of the church, which represent the empirical dimension of the kingdom of God, should correspond with the quality, devotion, excellence, and spiritual vitality of the members who form the body of Christ. An imbalance in the empirical and metaphysical aspects of the kingdom of God should take us back to the drawing board so we may re-evaluate our mission methods. If our methods place equal

emphasis on the empirical and metaphysical, the resultant quality of the kingdom will correspond to the vision Jesus has for His children.

Text, Context, and Strategy

As we try to discover ways of doing mission effectively in our time, we also need to understand the relationship between text, context, and strategy. In the deductive approach, the concept of mission as given in God's word becomes the starting point for engagement in mission. An inductive approach, on the other hand, makes the context the point of departure. In other words, instead of imposing a ready-made method, the missionary looks at and listens to the context before he can tailor a method that fits the situation. A more prudent approach is one which shies away from extremes by coming up with a balanced combination of the deductive and inductive aspects that meets the demand of each given situation. It is impossible to provide in one breath comprehensive and brief definitions of the deductive (text-oriented) and inductive (context-oriented) approaches to mission without sounding reductionistic. What needs to be mentioned here is that in real life a pure deductive or inductive approach is an illusion. The truth of the matter is that in any strategy of mission we have a predominance of one of the two basic approaches, either the deductive or the inductive, leaving the nonpredominant approach lurking in the background.

Having taken this precaution, it should be pointed out that contextualization, which refers to the attempt to apply the word of God with sensitivity to a given context, has always characterized the history of mission methodology. There are two basic perspectives from which this phenomenon may be analyzed. First, mission strategies have been contextualized diachronically, that is to say that throughout history strategies of mission have tried to adapt to the changing times. The basic point here is that the mission context has often influenced the strategies that have been employed in the spread of the Christian message.

At the various phases of Christian history, mission methods should also be contextualized synchronically. Whereas diachronic contextualization cuts through time, synchronic contextualization is done within a given period of time and takes into account the various facets of life on which the Christian message should be brought to bear. Synchronic contextualization would try to make the gospel relevant within existing political, economic, and cultural realities, among others. This is like taking a slice of time, say the year A.D. 2000, and then applying the gospel message in light of the various segments within any society.

Any synchronic approach will be sensitive to continuity, discontinuity, and creativity. With regard to continuity, synchronic contextualization will recognize that there are some time-honored methods of mission that are still viable. These do not need to be retired. Such strategies of mission should be perfected and adapted to the ever changing terrain of the missiological landscape to arrest lapses into traditionalism. Preaching, personal evangelism, and prayer, to mention but a few,

are mission methods that are timeless in their effectiveness, and these need no replacement.

In conjunction with discontinuity, synchronic contextualization is conscious of the fact that some methods of mission outlive their usefulness and thus stand in need of substitution. The ephemeral nature of these mission methods is evident when paradigms shift. In the face of new demands resulting from changing circumstances, these methods buckle and give way to more innovative approaches. Insistence on employing archaic strategies—strategies that in their heyday produced phenomenal outcomes—may only mock their former glory. Under such circumstances discontinuity is the right posture. In other words, a synchronic approach to mission will inevitably be eclectic by embracing those methods that are contemporary and effective while rejecting and retiring those which are no longer useful.

Synchronic contextualization sets great store by creativity. An awareness that times have changed should spur all engaged in mission to seek greater insight into the present “chemistry” of the world in order to call into being new and effective methods of reaching contemporary humanity. Creativity is key. Missiology should learn from the past, not in order to blindly imitate it, but to use it in crafting relevant approaches for our day. In addition, a synchronic approach to mission will acquaint itself with all spheres of life, thus rendering mission strategies relevant. Mission cannot be done on the periphery but at the center of human existence and activity. An approach to mission with its hand on the pulse of humanity will seek to have a voice in the market place, relating the eternal message of salvation to the transient issues that consume human time, money, and energy. The task of mission, then, is to identify where people are and find ways of getting their attention in order to convey God’s life-giving word.⁴

Mission Strategy: Prospect

Our current challenges demand strategies for mission that are commensurate with the task. Logically, the past will continue to provide a frame of reference for present and future methods of doing mission. Undoubtedly the greatest need of the church in the present, as well as in the future, is an open and venturing encounter with God in prayer for new and effective strategies that seek to go beyond a mere fixation on and imitation of the past. Mission strategies that will make a difference ought to recapture the biblical concept of mission as both metaphysical and empirical, both deductive and inductive. In addition, mission strategies should be conscious of the need for comprehensive contextualization and a clear insight into what actually constitutes a strategy.

⁴Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 70.

Balancing the Empirical and Metaphysical

Mission strategies that will make a difference are those that recognize the need to balance the empirical and metaphysical dimensions of mission. While we need to baptize more souls, we also need to nurture them so that the growth of the church is not only numerical but also spiritual. Those that are brought into the church should find within it activities that enhance their spiritual growth. What this means is that our mission strategies will remain partial if they only bring people into the church without ensuring that the same people experience continued growth in their experience with Jesus Christ. The point we wish to stress here is that mission strategy must be bifocal by looking at both the tangible and measurable (empirical) as well as the not-so-easy-to-measure (metaphysical) aspects of mission.

Balancing the Deductive and the Inductive

Another pair of dynamics that ought to be kept in perspective in our mission strategies is the deductive and inductive polarities. The Adventist message is clear, and nothing should dilute it. As we go into the whole world in response to the Gospel Commission, we should do so with great confidence. In a sense we know that the world needs the gospel in order to be saved, and this can be said to be a deductive approach. Yet we also wish to be sensitive to the circumstances in which the people to whom we bring the gospel find themselves.⁵ An awareness of the variety in human culture and situations requires mission strategies that try to communicate the gospel message inductively. Prayerfully, the balance between the deductive and inductive aspects of mission strategy should be upheld to ensure effective communication of the gospel to all the peoples of the world.

Synchronic and Diachronic Contextualization

Much is being said about contextualization in mission methodology.⁶ All that needs to be highlighted at this juncture is that contextualization is multifaceted. For practical purposes, two aspects of it need to be recognized, namely, the synchronic and the diachronic. A mission strategy that will bring fruits must seek to contextualize the Adventist message within given societies in specific periods of time across the different segments of the population. In other words, Adventism must be packaged for the youth, elderly, educated, rich, poor, and so forth, so that each group can resonate and identify with the message. Furthermore, Adventism

⁵Marvin K. Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 59-68.

⁶Steven C. Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1997), 13.

must be contextualized from one generation to the next without becoming outmoded. This balance should be reflected in our mission strategies for the present as well as for the future.

Creativity versus Fixation

Our mission strategies should shun fixation with the past by seeking the fresh guidance of the Holy Spirit in our current situations. The Holy Spirit is not limited in what He can do with a willing and committed church. If we as leaders and members of this church can entreat God on our knees, miracles will happen and many people will respond to our proclamation of the gospel. We should not insist that the Holy Spirit should reduplicate what He did in the past, although this is possible. Rather we should pray for the unction to function in unprecedented ways because the Holy Spirit longs to do much more than we can imagine. Mission strategy should realize the centrality of asking the Spirit to tailor-make approaches commensurate with the task before us as a church.

Evaluation of Our Strategies

Anything we call mission strategy is a distortion unless it includes the evaluation of what we are doing in our endeavors to bring the gospel to the peoples in our world. Most strategies comprise of an analysis of the context, the selection of one method among many, the implementation of the chosen method, and evaluation. Some strategies will have more phases than the four given here, but whatever the case, a strategy must have an evaluative phase in order to fit the current understanding of strategies. Our mission strategies should help us learn from both our successes and our failures.

Conclusion

To engage in mission in these last days is one of the greatest privileges. The same God who invited us into mission is waiting expectantly for men and women and the youth to evoke His wisdom and power as we explore the different strategies for our unique situations. May a reflection on what I have shared in this paper inspire all of us to relentlessly throw ourselves into mission, trusting in the Holy Spirit's guidance and strength. Let us review our strategies for mission, and pray for new possibilities as we try to do our part in spreading the good news of salvation.