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ABSTRACT

**ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY
OF THE HAMILTON COMMUNITY CHURCH
TO THE UNCHURCHED**

by

Mark C. Bresee

Adviser: Douglas R. Kilcher

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY OF THE
HAMILTON COMMUNITY CHURCH TO THE UNCHURCHED

Name of researcher: Mark C. Bresee

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Douglas R. Kilcher, D.Min.

Date completed: June 1996

Problem

During my first eight years in the ministry I was troubled that members did not feel comfortable inviting unchurched seekers to our weekend worship services. I was concerned about the fact that most churches, including mine, were not reaching the unchurched.

Method

In 1990 I attended a Pastor's Conference at the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, Illinois, where I learned how their philosophy and strategy for

ministry had resulted in great success in reaching the unchurched. In September of 1991 we planted the Hamilton Community Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee using some of the philosophy and strategy of the Willow Creek Community Church to reach the unchurched. Our services included contemporary Christian music, drama, multi-media and other modern forms of communication. We also have offered a wide variety of adult classes.

In order to be able to determine whether or not our approach was sound I did a case study in which I reviewed the sociological, cultural, and religious factors related to the unchurched and how they led to the planting of the Hamilton Community Church. Next I explored what the Bible says concerning the methods God has used to reach the lost to determine if what we were doing was in harmony with Scripture. I also reviewed church history to see if there was any others who contextualized the presentation of the gospel as we have been doing. I also examined the writings of Ellen White to find out her views on our type of ministry.

Results

There was considerable controversy in our community over the methods we were using, particularly in the areas of music and drama. Our attendance averages around 400. We have had 60 baptisms, twelve of which came from unchurched backgrounds. Approximately 100 inactive Seventh-day Adventists have begun attending church again.

Conclusions

In my opinion, the Bible, the writings of Ellen White, and church history all support the contextualization of the presentation of gospel message as we have done when trying to reach the unchurched. The Hamilton Church is headed in the right direction, but our methods need improvement in order to reach larger numbers of unchurched people.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY
OF THE HAMILTON COMMUNITY CHURCH
TO THE UNCHURCHED

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

Mark C. Bresee

June 1996

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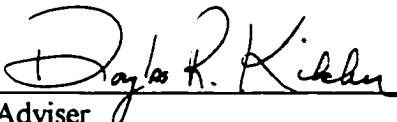
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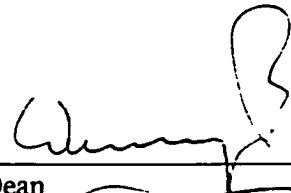
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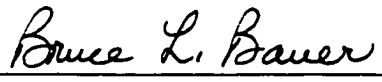
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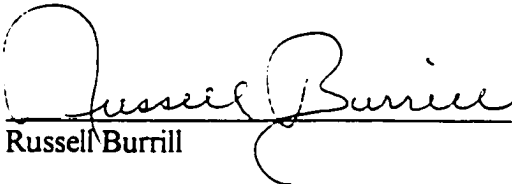
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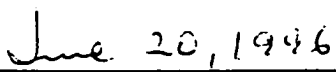
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Bruce L. Bauer



Russell Burrill



Date approved

To my lovely wife Sharon who has
worked harder and sacrificed more
than anyone will ever know,
for a cause we both
love dearly

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PART I: DESCRIPTION

CHAPTER 1

CASE PRESENTATION

Case Background

During my first eight years in the ministry I was troubled that our Sabbath morning worship services were not attracting seekers.¹ Members did not seem comfortable inviting their non-member friends to church. Occasionally someone would call ahead of time to see if it was a "safe" week for visitors to come. This concerned me, but I did not know how to go about solving this problem.

I learned one method of developing a seeker-oriented church service in February of 1990 at a Pastor's Conference at the Willow Creek Community Church in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Bill Hybels, Willow Creek's senior pastor, shared his story of having similar concerns about inviting friends to his church as he was growing up. As Hybels cast the vision for the kind of church God led him to establish, I felt that my prayer for a church format that would be safe for seekers was being answered. One year later I had the opportunity to plant just such a church, the Hamilton Community Church of Seventh-day Adventists.

¹A *seeker* in this paper generally refers to a person who is not in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and usually applies to people not meaningfully connected to any church.

The Case: The Hamilton Community Church of Seventh-day Adventists

After attending a Pastor's Conference at the Willow Creek Community Church in February of 1990 I sensed the need to plant a new congregation designed to reach the unchurched in Chattanooga. I wrote out my plans and presented them to our conference leaders. My proposal was rejected for financial reasons. Approximately one year later, however, a second request to start a new church in Chattanooga was approved.

The Hamilton Community Church began officially on September 7, 1991, with 225 in attendance, and within three months attendance increased to over 400. I was teaching in the religion department at Southern College, but due to the heavy demands this created, at the end of the school year I returned to full-time pastoral ministry at the Hamilton Church.

Our worship services follow a contemporary format designed for unchurched seekers. We place a high value on creativity and excellence. Each service contains a variety of elements such as exaltation,¹ prayer, a Scripture reading, a dramatic sketch, a multi-media presentation,² a personal story, special music, and a sermon. Usually the various elements highlight the theme of the sermon.

During the offering we invite children ages four through eight to attend Children's Church. This is an optional service designed especially for them. A nursery is

¹Our exaltation is ten to fifteen minutes of singing worship songs with words projected on a screen.

²The multi-media presentations are either slides combined with music or short video clips.

provided for children from birth through age three. A parents' room with a television monitor showing the service is also available for families with small restless children.

We offer a variety of adult Sabbath School classes. Some of the class options we have used are as follows: Lesson Quarterly, Pastor's Bible Class,¹ Last-Day Events, The Truth as It Is in Jesus,² PrimeTime,³ Home Improvement,⁴ Divorce Recovery, Parenting Adolescents, Personal Growth,⁵ Jesus, Hope of the 90s,⁶ and Money Management.⁷ Classes meet for one hour, and there is no superintendent's Sabbath School program.

We offer a 9:00 a.m. worship service designed specifically for members. The message is generally expository and deals with themes related to the spiritual needs of Seventh-day Adventists. We added elements we thought would be meaningful to members, such as a mission emphasis.

¹A class on church beliefs for new members.

²Our twenty-seven fundamental beliefs are covered in this class.

³A Bible discussion class for college-age and young adults.

⁴A class primarily on marriage and parenting.

⁵This class functions much like a support group, helping people who are going through difficult or confusing experiences.

⁶This class studies the life of Christ.

⁷This class uses Larry Burkett's materials and is offered twice a year. A new ministry called Community Resource Network grew out of this class. Our financial counselors help people in financial trouble design budgets, and make financial resources from the church available if they are needed.

Our communion services are usually on Friday nights, and are done in a wide variety of ways.

Small groups that meet in homes during the week for Bible study, prayer, and fellowship are an important part of our ministry.

Controversy in our community arose over the worship format of the Hamilton Church. Many expressed concern that we were a "celebration" church, and according to the John Osborne videos¹ they had been watching and some printed materials they had been reading, this was very bad. Their concerns included fear of Pentecostal and Catholic influences. Contemporary Christian music and the use of drama have been primary targets of criticism.

Local conference administrators remained supportive, and much of the agitation has died down. We have received numerous favorable comments concerning our ministry.

We purchased property near the Interstate highway and a large mall. We want the church to be easy to find and identify.

As a result of our church, an estimated 100 inactive Adventists have begun attending church again. Sixty individuals have been baptized, rebaptized, or joined by profession of faith, and only twelve came from nonchurched backgrounds. Our membership and worship service attendance have plateaued at approximately 400.

In addition to myself, our paid staff currently includes a full-time

¹John Osborne is a former Adventist minister who produced some videos critical of several new churches using the celebration theme.

associate pastor, and two part-time positions: a secretary and children's ministries director.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

At least 55 million adults in the United States are unchurched.¹ Christians all across the nation are trying to decide how to relate to them.

One approach being taken is that these people have chosen to be disconnected from the church, and there is little we can do about it. The gospel is being preached in churches every week. There are plenty of churches around. If they wanted to attend, they could. It is their choice and their problem. This could be called the "take-it-or-leave-it" approach.

On the other hand, many believe those of us in the church can do something to facilitate the return of the unchurched to our congregations. They say that one of the keys to reaching those disconnected from the body of Christ is responding constructively to change. They point out that Western culture has changed rapidly and dramatically, especially in the past four decades.

The prescription recommended by this second group is that we need to change the way we communicate the gospel to the unchurched. In order to gain a hearing we must speak their language. William Easum, in *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, says we must

¹George Barna, *Never on a Sunday: The Challenge of the Unchurched* (Glendale, CA: Barna Research Group, 1990), 2.

"learn a new language, understand new customs, and find new ways to make the timeless gospel relevant to our culture."¹

In order to do this, I believe it is necessary to plant new churches designed to reach the unchurched.² Older established churches may have difficulty making the changes that would probably need to be made in order to effectively reach this unique target audience.

While technology such as television, magazines, and computers can be useful tools helping us connect with the unchurched, the greatest need, says this second group, is for Christians to carve out a place in their hearts and in their schedule for the unchurched. We must stop attacking them as the enemy, and make them our friends. Coming close to them will require us to enter into their world, come as close to them culturally as we can, without compromising the integrity of the principles of the gospel.

Missionaries have been doing this for years. Ed Dobson writes:

Because we are trapped in an evangelical subculture, we must understand the larger culture and use its language to communicate Christ. We understand this principle when we send missionaries to other countries. These missionaries seek first to learn the language and the culture of the places to which they go. Only then do they attempt to communicate the gospel.

We would never send an English-speaking missionary to a Spanish-speaking country to minister exclusively in English. That would be irrational, not to mention stupid. Yet we continue to preach the gospel in the United States in evangelical language to a skeptical, secular-speaking audience. And the tragedy is that they don't understand what we are saying, and we don't understand that our

¹William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 13.

²Roger L. Dudley and Clarence B. Gruesbeck, *Plant a Church, Reap a Harvest* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1989), 17-27.

message is couched in a foreign language.¹

But this sounds very suspicious to the first group. They point to the fact that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).² Paul strongly reminded the Galatian Christians that the gospel does not change (Gal 1:6-9). While there might need to be some minor modifications made in the way the gospel is presented in today's world, in the opinion of these critics, some are going too far by using methods of communication that violate biblical principle. The concern is that marketing the gospel means watering down the truth in order to make it palatable to the unchurched. Leith Anderson gives voice to these concerns:

When we talk about major changes and human responses, do we risk sinful manipulation of Christ's church? Is it possible that we will adapt to the ways of the world and forsake the ways of the Lord? Is there enormous danger in reshaping the church for the twenty-first century? Yes. There is risk, and there is danger.³

Leith Anderson is an advocate for change in the church,⁴ but he too is well aware that serious compromises may be made. Therefore, as we make changes, he says,

¹Edward G. Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 15-16.

²All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

³Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 235.

⁴See Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1990).

"we must take great care to be sure that we have the mind of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5) and are obedient to the direction of the Holy Spirit."¹

Theological Issues

The basic issue presented by the case is determining the best way to present the gospel to the unchurched. Therefore, this study searches for biblical answers to the following questions:

1. Who are the unchurched and why do they avoid the church?
2. What biblical principles should guide Christians who wish to share the gospel with the unchurched?
3. What can be learned about outreach to the unchurched from the experience of the Hamilton Community Church?
4. What can Christian leaders do to facilitate biblically appropriate ministries to the unchurched?

Methodology

The primary method of research used in this paper is the case study. Four steps are involved in this method: observation, analysis, interpretation, and action.

Step 1 is the careful observation of the events involved in the case followed by a written description of them in chronological sequence. The primary source for the data in this case is my personal involvement in the experiences described.

Step 2 is a careful analysis of the events and other data of the case, using disciplines such as psychology and sociology. The cultural, religious, economic, and

¹Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, 235.

political dynamics are also considered. This is primarily an analysis on a horizontal, human level. Books and articles from the James White Library at Andrews University, McKee Library at Southern College, and from my own personal library are the principle sources of information for this phase of the study.

In step 3, the case is interpreted in the light of the Bible, Christian theology, and church history. The emphasis here is primarily vertical and focused on God's view of the case. In order to do this, the issues of the case are compared with the Scriptures to gain affirmation, or correction, or both.

Step 4 calls for a development of appropriate action by church leaders. The results gleaned from the other stages of the study are summarized and then serve as the framework for the development of this plan of action.

Delimitations

This dissertation is not a definitive study on the unchurched or the Hamilton Community Church. The purpose of this study is to determine the appropriateness and the effectiveness of certain methods the Hamilton Community Church has used in its outreach to the unchurched. Is what we are doing right and is it working? From this investigation it is hoped that recommendations for other pastors, local church leaders, and denominational officials can be developed.

Significance

No study of the methods the Hamilton Community Church is using to evangelize the unchurched has been done.

This study is expected to produced several benefits. The most significant are as follows:

1. Hamilton Community Church leaders will have a clearer understanding of the appropriateness and effectiveness of their ministry to the unchurched. Some solutions to problems may come to light.
2. The result of this research may be of help to other pastors and other local church leaders who are considering reaching out to the unchurched.
3. This study may also be of service to denominational officials who wish to facilitate evangelistic ministries to unchurched people.
4. Information gleaned from this research may be of assistance to seminary professors who are training ministers and other individuals who are interested in this type of evangelism.

Definition of Terms

When using the term *unchurched*, this study is referring to those who attend church less often than once a month. However, according to a survey by the Barna Research Group, the vast majority of those who say they have not attended church worship service in the previous month admit they have not been in church for more than six months.¹ Some may come at special occasions such as Easter and Christmas. Their name could even be on the membership list of a congregation, but they do not have a meaningful connection through regular attendance or involvement. *Contextualization in*

¹Barna, *Never on a Sunday*, 1-2. George Gallup, Jr., defines unchurched as not having been to church in six months, except for weddings, funerals, and other special occasions.

this study is the process of developing ways of presenting the gospel in a culturally relevant manner.

Descriptive Outline

This study is divided into four parts: Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Action.

Part I is divided into two chapters. The first chapter gives the background to the case and presents the actual case. Chapter 2 is an introduction to the study. It includes the statement of the theological issues, method of research, delimitations of the study, and the potential significance of the research.

Part II has three chapters which analyze the social, psychological, political, and economic factors involved in this case. The first chapter in Part II examines the social and cultural dynamics of the unchurched. The second chapter in this section reviews the spiritual dynamics of unchurched baby boomers and baby busters. The third chapter analyzes the perceived need for a church to reach the unchurched, the social and political opposition to it, as well as the economic challenges that the Hamilton Church faced at the beginning.

Part III focuses on the theological and historical aspects of the study and is divided into two chapters. The first discusses the desires and plans of God for reaching the lost in the Old and New Testaments. Specific attention is given to the life of Christ and the Apostle Paul. The second chapter of this section considers how God's plans for reaching the unsaved have been carried out through history. Methods involving contextualization down through the ages are explored.

Part IV of this study is a plan of action. It summarizes the other parts of the study, providing the basis for recommendations to church leaders involved in outreach to the unchurched.

PART II: ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 3

SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Hamilton Community Church came into being to address the unique needs of the unchurched in Chattanooga, Tennessee. In order to minister to this group it is important to understand the cultural, sociological, psychological, and spiritual factors that impacted them, helping make them who they are.

Culture

Culture in the broadest sense "includes the total pattern of human life in society. . . . Our culture teaches us how to act in standard ways in normal situations. We do not have to think about what we are to do with forks and spoons and knives when we sit down to eat. Our culture has trained us."¹

Culture varies from place to place. Thom Hopler quickly found this out as a missionary to Africa. Following are two of his experiences that illustrate this point:

How much did you pay for your wife?" the old man asked during the first month Marcia and I spent in Kenya. When I explained that we don't sell women in America, he laughed and said, squeezing Marcia's thin arm, "I wouldn't give a goat for her either. . . ." On another occasion in my first months in

¹Thom Hopler and Marcia Hopler, *Reaching the World Next Door: How to Spread the Gospel in the Midst of Many Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 14.

Africa, I waved hello to a friend across the street. Immediately he ran over to me asking, "What's the matter? What do you want?" I spent the next ten minutes trying to talk my way out of that innocent cultural misstep. My hand signal did not mean "Hello" but "Come quickly. I need you."¹

Culture has a powerful influence over what people like and do not like, what makes them comfortable and uncomfortable. Music is a powerful example. Hopler writes:

You may not know how to play the violin, but it is part of your culture if you recognize and appreciate it when you hear it. The five-toned flute of India, on the other hand, may sound strange to your ears. While it and the music an Indian plays on it may be just as sophisticated as violin music, you think it is peculiar because it not part of your experience, not part of your culture.²

In most cases cultural differences are not a matter of right and wrong ethically or morally speaking. People just get used to doing things one way, hearing a certain kind of music, tasting a particular type of food.

The cultures of the world are shaped by many factors. One of the forces to impact Western culture is secularism.

Influence of Secularism

During the past four centuries, and especially in the past forty to fifty years, there has been a gradual shift toward secularity. Secularism is the result of a process called secularization. In *Present Truth for the Real World*, Jon Pauline describes what secularization is and how it affects the church:

Secularization means that a society is becoming more and more inclined to view life without reference to God or religion. There is a gradual erosion of belief in the supernatural, a perception that whatever happens is limited to this world and to sense experience. Religious values and practices are increasingly

¹Ibid., 13.

²Ibid., 14.

discarded. And the church, as an institution, declines in its influence on the larger society.¹

The Western world started out as the center from which missionaries were sent. Now, due in part to the secularization process, the West is a mission field. George Hunter notes, "The secularization process, by which the Church lost the central place and influence it enjoyed in the centuries of 'Christendom,' has produced a vast mission field in the Western world. . . . The Church now faces the challenge of reevangelizing Europe and North America."²

To better understand this change it might be helpful to briefly review church history. Christians in the first century were in a distinct minority, and saw the evangelization of their world as their mission. In the fourth century, beginning with the Roman Emperor Constantine, this attitude began to change. The Roman empire became nominally Christian. Over time the church exerted a stronger and stronger influence over nearly every area of life, including philosophy, science, law, and the arts.³

People were born into a Christian environment. Tim Wright notes that during this era "the Church of Christendom . . . saw its mission as nurturing the believers born

¹Jon Pauline, *Present Truth in the Real World* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 8.

²George G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 41.

³Tim Wright, *Unfinished Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 25.

into the empire. Evangelism happened in other parts of the world and was carried out by professionals."¹

The rise of Rationalism² and the Enlightenment³ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought about the gradual reduction of the influence of the church on all aspects of culture, science, and society. The results of Rationalism and the Enlightenment were especially evident in France where "the substitution of secularism for the Christian world view was at the core of the movement, although religion was usually considered a social and moral necessity for the generally despised common people."⁴ No longer was the church looked to as the supreme authority on these matters. The influence of secularism continued to increase in Europe and North America.

¹Ibid.

²Rationalism is the philosophy that regards reason as the primary means and test of knowledge, and it had a great impact on the church and the way people regarded the authority of the Bible. "A . . . wave of religious rationalism occurred in the early 19th century and spread outward from Germany. Its leading spirit was Georg W. F. Hegel. Under his influence a group of theologians, notably David Friedrich Strauss and Ferdinand Christian Baur, developed a 'higher criticism' of the Bible in which its supernatural elements were systematically explained away as products of mythology." Brand Blanshard, "Rationalism," *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1994 ed., 268.

³"The Enlightenment was marked by a questioning of tradition and a growing trend toward individualism, empiricism, and attempts at scientific reasoning. . . . Committed to free men's minds from the oppression of dogma and authority, the Enlightenment especially challenged theology and the church." Lester G. Crocker, "Enlightenment," *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1994 ed., 468.

⁴Ibid.

Today the influence and credibility of the Christian church in North America are quite low. It is not looked to as an authority in science, the arts, or business. While the political influence of some segments of the Christian population has increased in recent years, it still is nowhere near what it was in the Middle Ages. Much of this decrease in influence is the result of the secularization process.

Three major influences have facilitated the secularization process in North America: science, pluralism, and privatization.¹

The scientific method teaches us to rely upon our five senses for gathering information. When faced with a problem, science-oriented people gather data, consult with other individuals who may have knowledge about the issue, and make a decision. God is not a part of the equation.

In pluralism a high value is placed on tolerance. People "do their own thing" and nobody is supposed to care. Our society is now filled with a large variety of people with all kinds of religious ideas and practices who do not support Christianity or its values.

Privatization has also had an indirect secularizing influence. In our culture today it is not politically correct to publicly express faith in God. Everybody is supposed to keep their religious views to themselves, decreasing the opportunity to express one's faith in God.

Secular people are not necessarily hostile toward religion. Most are not atheists. The more typical secularist simply believes that religion is not relevant to his or

¹Pauline, 53-59.

her life. The process of secularization has happened at a much more rapid pace in the past four decades. This can largely be explained by the powerful role of the media in our culture.

Impact of the Media

The world has become a global village. People may know more about what is taking place in the White House than they do in their neighbor's house. Through satellites and televisions we can watch events taking place on the other side of the world. We see the news as it unfolds, live!

The values of secularists are quickly and easily transmitted through music, movies, magazines, and television programs. In the past, people could move into the rural countryside to escape the perceived negative influences of city life. Now, multimillion dollar entertainment shows communicating many anti-Christian themes are available to almost everyone in the Western world.

Religion is included in the news occasionally, but it is often because of some scandal committed by a religious leader or cult. In movies, the clergy are frequently portrayed as either inept, immoral, or both. Some television evangelists have managed to enhance this negative image by their unusual behavior. All of this serves to inoculate people against authentic Christianity by exposing them to distorted or diluted forms of Christianity.

The media have had a profound influence on our culture, especially on the two most recent generations, often called baby boomers and baby busters, who have spent thousands of hours watching television. As we consider the unchurched, it is important

to focus on boomers and busters because they make up the majority of those who have disconnected themselves from local churches. In order to understand them, it is necessary to study the people and events that contributed to their identity.

CHAPTER 4

SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS

Baby Boomers

In order to understand the spiritual dynamics of the unchurched, it is important to briefly review the background of the baby boomer and baby buster generations.

Baby boomers by definition are those born in North America between 1946 and 1964. Following World War II a significant rise in the birth rate occurred, hence the name Baby Boomer. Seventy-six million people were born during that time,¹ and today they represent the largest segment of the population.

They were raised during a period of economic prosperity and affluence. Their parents tended to be very materialistic. Major events that made an impact on their outlook and attitudes include the Vietnam War, Woodstock, and Watergate. Two leaders who captured the imagination of many boomers in a positive sense were John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Unfortunately, both were assassinated.

During the sixties numerous boomers rebelled against the moral and materialistic values of their parents. A sexual revolution took place, and illegal drugs

¹Doug Murren, *The Baby Boomerang* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 28.

were commonly used. Many opposed the Vietnam War, and protests on university campuses were common.

Baby boomers do not see everything exactly the same, but they frequently have much in common. Doug Murren, a baby boomer who does a great deal of research on his generation, writes:

Unifying our outlook and attitude is the fact that we all share a common cultural experience. Most of our generation remembers the days of the Berkeley free speech riots and the Kent State shootings by national guardsmen--memories which still bring anger. Psychedelia, Jefferson Airplane, marijuana, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones and Mustang convertibles all ring familiar to the generation coming of age in that era.¹

Music played a central role in shaping the boomer generation and giving expression to its values. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, and numerous other rock groups sold records by the millions. Drugs, sex, love, and freedom were common themes. At Woodstock, a little town in New York, 500,000 people, most of them young, gathered for several days in the summer of 1969 for a "raucous, orgylike celebration of rock 'n' roll music."²

Murren believes that this experience at Woodstock has religious implications:

Woodstock continues to strike a common chord of fond remembrance for most baby boomers. For us, Woodstock proved that religious citadels and stained glass weren't necessary in order to have a "religious experience" of unimaginable proportions. Yet at Woodstock, there were no laws, no priests, no Bibles---just a lot of music, mud, drugs, sex and people.

From that powerful experience emerged the theology of Woodstock: human love and unity, equality, respect, an appreciation for differences, and a total abandonment to celebration. People needed and helped each other; camaraderie's were formed. For those present, Woodstock was a fantasy dreamworld for a few,

¹Ibid., 31-32.

²Ibid., 50.

mesmerizing days.¹

This experience illustrates what many boomers would like to see in church.

Murren continues:

Secretly, I think we thirtysomething folks believe that the myth of Woodstock is what the Church, in a sense, ought to emulate. Church ought to be celebrative, informal and spontaneous. People sharing and helping each other should not only be an expectation, but a reality.²

During the sixties and seventies millions of boomers opted out of church attendance. It seemed irrelevant, confining, and boring. They were looking for an experience, something that would touch them as a whole person. Church tended to be primarily a cerebral event, and that was not enough.

In the eighties and nineties attitudes toward spiritual matters began to change. Many had burned out on the pop culture. Drugs, alcohol, sexual freedom, and rebellion did not meet their deepest needs. As boomers matured they realized that something was still missing, and some decided that maybe they should give God a second chance.

Another motivator to try church again was the fact that boomers were raising families, and they sensed a need for help in communicating moral values to their children. Not feeling up to the task themselves, millions of unchurched baby boomers have been returning to check out church again. Their children, often called baby busters, are also a unique group, deserving specific attention. George Barna writes:

From a purely sociological perspective, Busters comprise a very different breed of Americans than we have previously witnessed. They were raised differently; they communicate distinctively; their aspirations are unique; they allocate their resources in unique ways; and their numbers position them as a force

¹Ibid., 53.

²Ibid.

to be reckoned with.¹

Baby Busters

The children of the baby boomers, those born between 1965 and 1983,² are often called baby busters or Generation X. They are called busters because the boom went "bust" with fewer babies being born than during the years of the boomers. However, this is a misnomer because they were the second largest group ever produced in this country and constitute a huge segment of our population, second only to their boomer parents.³ They are sometimes called Generation X because they have not been as noticed by society as their boomer parents, giving them no specific identity. As of this writing they are those ages twelve to thirty.

One of the characteristics of many busters is a sense of aloneness and brokenness. Many baby busters grew up in homes where both parents worked long hours outside the home leaving their children to care for themselves, often called "latch-key kids." And worse yet, approximately 50 percent of the baby buster population grew up in homes broken by divorce, causing incredible pain.

These experiences help explain why busters tend to be more interested in relationships than their parents. Dieter Zander, who has spent considerable time working with this age group, says, "Many busters are searching for the family they never had. . . .

¹George Barna, *The Invisible Generation: Baby Busters* (Glendale, CA: Barna Research Group, 1992), 17.

²Dates vary among the experts. This study follows the dates used by the Barna Research Group in *The Invisible Generation: Baby Busters*, p. 19.

³Ibid., 20-21.

Thus community--open, safe, inclusive relationships in which people help each other rather than compete--is the highest value of this generation."¹

Another distinction between boomers and busters is in their attitude toward work. Some have suggested that they are not as motivated to work as they should be. However, the issue may simply be priorities and balance. Barna puts it this way, "The difference between Boomers and Busters may be summed up in this statement: Boomers live to work, while Busters work to live."²

When it comes to spiritual matters busters are not tied to any particular values system. In fact, for the average buster, "there is no such thing as absolute truth. Statistically, seventy percent claim that absolute truth does not exist, that all truth is relative and personal."³ Only 44 percent strongly agree with the statement "The Bible is the word of God and is totally accurate in all that it teaches."⁴ In *Life after God*, a novel about baby busters, Douglas Coupland describes the attitude of many busters through one of his buster characters who said, "Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the pioneers--life after God. A life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven."⁵

¹Dieter Zander, "The Gospel for Generation X," *Leadership*, Spring 1995, 38.

²Barna, *The Invisible Generation: Baby Busters*, 120.

³*Ibid.*, 81.

⁴*Ibid.*, 159.

⁵Douglas Coupland, *Life after God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 273.

However, busters are looking for something transcendent beyond themselves to give them meaning. Zander says,

They don't believe that science alone--the empirical method--can solve problems. They believe that something is wrong with the world, and that there must be something beyond what they can see, feel, touch, taste, and smell. This makes them as open to Christian revival as in any generation.¹

During a typical month 50 percent of the busters surveyed said they had attended church.² When Dieter Zander began trying to reach unchurched baby busters, those he invited often shook their heads and said, "I don't want to go 'cause it's boring, irrelevant, and there's no one there like me."³

However, they showed an above average interest in serving the needs of the community. They say they are interested in helping the community but, according to Barna, "busters are less likely to donate money to causes or charities than were prior generations at a similar stage in their life cycle."⁴

Zander gives a list of his top-ten generational contrasts between boomers and busters, as shown on table 1.⁵

Busters generally are not as optimistic as boomers, and, perhaps, for good reason. Andres Tapia explains why this might be: "A composite statement of Xer frustrations might go like this: 'Boomers had free love; we have AIDS. They had the

¹Zander, 39.

²Ibid., 156.

³Ibid., 37.

⁴Barna, *The Invisible Generation: Baby Busters*, 105.

⁵Zander, 38.

War on Poverty, we have a trillion dollar debt. They had a booming economy, we have downsizing and pollution."¹

TABLE 1

TOP-10 LIST OF GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Boomer	Buster
"Me" generation	"We" generation
Live to work	Work to live
Jay Leno	David Letterman
Enlightenment world view	Postmodern world view
Institutions	Relationships
Propositional truth	Relational truth
Excellence	Authenticity
Growth	Community
Lonely	Alone
Success	Wholeness

Source: Dieter Zander, "The Gospel for Generation X." *Leadership*, Spring 1995, 38.

Boomers and busters have some unique characteristics, but one thing they have in common is that many of both generations are not attending church. Following are some helpful observations about all the unchurched, including boomers and busters.

¹Andres Tapia, "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation," *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, 19.

Observations About the Unchurched

A great deal of formal and informal research has been done on the unchurched.¹

Demographic studies have helped us get a clearer picture of the 55+ million unchurched adults who live in the United States. For example, research tells us that the unchurched:

- *Are more commonly male than female
- *Frequently are either single or married to a person of another religious background;
- *Are likely to live in a Western state;
- *Have a median age of 35, two years younger than the average American.
- *Have an income of \$32,800 a year, \$4,200 more than the typical American.
- *Are more educated than the norm, with 32% composed of college graduates.
- *Almost always have some church experience in their background, a slight majority being Protestant.¹

Moving to the spiritual profile of the unchurched we find that many are biblically illiterate and essentially ignorant of basic Christianity. George Hunter says they are "not 'churchbroke'--that is, they don't know how to act in church."² In some cases this ignorance of biblical knowledge has gone on for several generations, making it harder for them to attend church. Hunter quotes Alan Walker who recognized this problem many years ago:

So today there is almost complete ignorance of what the Christian gospel really is. You see, Christian knowledge and awareness are now the echo of an echo of an echo--too faint to be heard. This means, for example, a feeling of awkwardness, even embarrassment, at entering a sacred building. There is ignorance in the ways of Christian worship. Therefore such people no longer desire to enter churches. It means an almost complete ignorance of Christian stories, biblical references, the traditional language of the pulpit.³

¹Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 44-45.

²Hunter, 41-42.

³Alan Walker, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World* (New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 29-30, quoted in Hunter, 45.

The unchurched are seeking life *before* death. Before, modern medicine history was dominated by famines, epidemics, and plagues. Funerals were common and people were concerned about life after death. Modern medicine has helped double the life expectancy since those times. Now the average secular person is concerned more about life in the here and now.¹

Doubt is frequently more of a problem than guilt for those not attending church. Hunter says, "There are several causes of this 'age of dubiety,' including the plural truth claims confronting people, the extensive spread of the enlightenment ideas, the low credibility of the institutional church, and various cultural and peer group influences."²

Lee Strobel was unchurched for many years and knows from personal experience what it is like to be on the outside looking in. Since his conversion to Christianity he has also had opportunities to have contact with thousands of unchurched people. Following is a summary of some of his observations about the unchurched in his book, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*.³ Harry and Mary are the names he uses when describing the unchurched.

Observation #1: Harry has rejected church, but that doesn't necessarily mean he has rejected God.

¹Hunter, 45.

²Hunter, 46-47.

³Strobel, 44-81.

The unchurched often consider themselves "religious," and may in fact be interested in spiritual things. Strobel refers to an article on prayer in *Newsweek* in 1992 which says 91percent of American women and 85 percent of men pray.¹ Strobel concludes, "For many unchurched people, their motto seems to be, 'I believe in God; I just don't believe in church.'"²

The unchurched are frequently turned off to the church because they perceive it to be archaic and irrelevant. For example, 91percent of non-Christians believe that the church is not very sensitive to their needs.³ Unfortunately, most of them are speaking from personal experience, since research indicates that most unchurched people have attended church in the past. Strobel quotes from George Barna, who regularly does research about the unchurched and notes that this is a significant problem: "Thus, most unchurched adults have made a *conscious decision* not to attend church. It is the rare adult who avoids the local church out of lack of experience with such religious behavior."⁴

Observation #2: Harry is morally adrift, but he secretly wants an anchor.

In *The Day America Told the Truth* we find this note: "In the 1950's and even in the early 1960's, there was something much closer to a moral consensus in America.

¹Kenneth L. Woodward et al., "Talking to God," *Newsweek*, January 6, 1992, 39.

²Strobel, 46.

³Ibid., 47.

⁴Barna, *Never on a Sunday*, 3 (emphasis his).

... There is absolutely no moral consensus in the 1990's. Everyone is making up their own personal moral codes--their own Ten Commandments."¹

This way of life has its drawbacks. Strobel quotes from Gary Collins and Timothy Clinton who did research on baby boomers and concluded that millions of them feel like they are drifting, with no absolute values or beliefs to which they can anchor their lives. Many feel empty inside, without firm standards of right and wrong, and with no valid guidelines for raising children, maintaining a marriage, building careers, doing business, or finding God. Now, perhaps more than at any time in baby boomer history, these core-less people are looking for truth, identity, and something to believe in that will give their lives a real center.²

Observation #3: Harry resists rules but responds to reasons.

Using the Bible to say "Thus saith the Lord" does not work well with the unchurched. They are not sure the Bible is really God's inspired revelation with absolute truth for their lives.

However, Harry is often open to reasoning. Strobel says, "When we as Christians lay out for him the underlying thinking behind the moral boundaries that God has drawn for us, and when he understands the benefits of abiding by God's commands, he's much more receptive to following them."³

Observation #4: Harry doesn't understand Christianity, but he's also ignorant about what he claims to believe in.

¹James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hill, 1991), 25.

²Gary L. Collins and Timothy E. Clinton, *Baby Boomer Blues* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 39, quoted in Strobel, 49.

³Strobel, 50.

Surveys indicate that the general population does not know very much about the Bible. For example, "Most Americans can't even name the four gospels; six out of ten don't know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. When non-Christians were asked if they knew why Christians celebrate Easter, 46% couldn't give an accurate answer."¹

Not only are the unchurched unfamiliar with the Scriptures, most of them have not developed any clear philosophy of life. They are not sure what they believe in. Strobel says, "Lots of times I've found that Harry has never really thought through his own belief system well enough to be able to articulate or defend it. Sometimes it seems that he's making up his beliefs as he tells them to me."²

Lastly, the unchurched are uninformed about the various branches of Christendom. Few would be able to give a clear description of what it means to be an evangelical, Catholic, charismatic, and certainly not an Adventist! They know little about us, and truthfully, most of us know little about them.³

Observation #5: Harry has legitimate questions about spiritual matters, but he doesn't expect answers from Christians.

The unchurched often have many questions about life and Christianity, but their experience has been that Christians react negatively to their questions. After

¹Ibid., 51.

²Ibid., 52.

³On a personal level I must admit that I learned very little in college or seminary about the unchurched. Their unique perspectives and needs were unaddressed. I grew up in the home of an Adventist minister and I attended our schools and I do not recall hearing about the unchurched.

encountering many unchurched people who did not think Christians were open to questions, Strobel has concluded, "Many Harrys look at churches and imagine a sign out front that says, No questions allowed."¹

Observation #6: Harry doesn't just ask, "Is Christianity true?" Often, he's asking: "Does Christianity work?"

Strobel discussed this issue with Martin Robinson, a commentator in Britain.

Robinson's observations are probably germane to the United States as well. He writes:

At one time the most important question in our society was, "Is this true?" That is the question that most Christian apologetics are designed to answer. . . . However, the impact of secularism is such that many no longer ask that question in the field of morals and faith. It is assumed that since all faith and morality are firmly in the area of opinion and that all opinions are equally valid, the only thing that really matters is whether or not they work: "Does it work?" is the question that arises again and again. Never mind if the suggested formula is derived from Hinduism, Buddhism, the occult, or Christianity--the main question is, "Does it work?"²

People these days tend to believe something is true if it works. This is illustrated by a lady who lived in Northern California who followed New Age thinking and worshipped nature. She said that she did not want to hit any deer while driving at night, so:

As she sets out in her car, Anne imagines a blue light circling her vehicle clockwise three times, then silently chants, "Three times around, three times around/A world within, a world without." Then she adds a silent prayer to Artemis, goddess of the hunt, "to protect the deer and tell them I'm coming. I imagine this as a psychic warning system." Anne believes wholeheartedly in this practice. "It works!" she says. "I have a friend who's hit twelve deer in five

¹Ibid., 54-55.

²Martin Robinson, *A World Apart* (Turnbridge Wells, England: Monarch, 1992), 99, quoted in Strobel, 57.

years. I've never hit one."¹

Strobel points out the fallacy of this kind of thinking when he writes, "To deduce on the basis of a few missed deer that a belief system is valid turns logic on its head. As far as Christianity is concerned, we're not saying it's true *because* it works; we're saying Christianity is true *and therefore* it works."²

Observation #7: Harry doesn't just want to know something; he wants to experience it.

To illustrate this observation, Strobel cites the experience of Rex who was asking questions concerning whether or not there was a God and what the ultimate meaning was in life. He read many books and interviewed friends, but was not satisfied. After his intellectual excursion failed, he turned to experiences to find the truth. Numerous trips on LSD followed. Speaking of his drug use, Rex commented that "those experiences have had a profound influence in terms of my view of the world."³

Strobel concludes, "For many Unchurched Harrys who are on a spiritual journey, experience--not evidence--is their mode of discovery."⁴

However, this goes deeper and is not all bad. Many people are searching for a personal experience with God. Strobel quotes baby boomer expert Doug Murren, who

¹Drew Kampion and Phil Catalfo, "All In the Family: What Do You Tell Your Children About Faith, Spirit, and the Meaning of Life," *New Age Journal*, July/August 1992, 56, quoted in Strobel, 58.

²Strobel, 58, (emphasis his).

³Ibid., 59.

⁴Ibid.

says, "We want, as a generation, to move beyond philosophical discussions of religions to the actual experience of God in our lives. The boomer heart, like every human heart, has always cried out for a personal experience with God."¹

Observation #8: Harry doesn't want to be somebody's project, but he would like to be somebody's friend.

Strobel comments that "Harry is hungering for close friendships. He desperately wants a confidant who cares about him."² John Naisbitt points out in his book *Megatrends* that our high-tech culture has produced the need for high touch, that is, close meaningful relationships with other people.³

If Harry detects that there are strings attached to the relationship with a Christian, that the friendship decreases when he does not respond to his friend's overtures to attend church, then he is going to be resistant.

Observation #9: Harry may distrust authority, but he's receptive to authentic biblical leadership.

Americans tend to be skeptical of many institutions and organizations as a result of Watergate and numerous other political and religious scandals. According to one survey in 1989, only 20 percent of the population has considerable confidence in organized religion.⁴

¹Murren, 155, quoted in Strobel, 59.

²Strobel, 61.

³John Naisbitt, *Megatrends* (New York: Warner Books, 1984), 35-42.

⁴Patterson and Kim, 216.

However, there is hope. Strobel says,

Chances are that he'll [unchurched Harry] respond positively to those who are accountable and open in their financial dealings; moderate in their lifestyle; humble in their demeanor; modest about their achievements and who use their influence to serve people in need.¹

Observation #10: Harry is no longer loyal to denominations, but he is attracted to places where his needs will be met.

Noted church consultant Lyle Schaller gives a number of reasons why loyalty to denominations is decreasing:

1. The sharp rise in interfaith marriages since 1945;
2. The growth of ecumenicalism, which has made denominations seem archaic;
3. The shedding of old loyalties as people have become upwardly mobile;
4. The decision by some denominational leaders to make public pronouncements that have alienated members;
5. The denominational mergers since 1950 and the failure to engender new loyalties;
6. The proliferation of parachurch organizations that gain the allegiance of members of church denominations that may not offer anything equally attractive;
7. The emergence of large independent churches that offer high-quality programs.²

Strobel concurs: "Today, Unchurched Harry is a comparison shopper, even in the spiritual arena. . . . Foremost on his mind are issues of quality, creativity, and relevance to his felt needs. If he finds them elsewhere, that's where he probably will go."³

¹Strobel, 65.

²Lyle E. Schaller, *It's a Different World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 26-27.

³Strobel, 67.

Observation #11: Harry isn't much of a joiner, but he's hungry for a cause he can connect with.

Unchurched boomers who were around in the 1960s were attracted to leaders such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., because they cast a vision for a more just society and better world in which to live. Today many are still interested in "helping the poor and needy, offering education, attacking prejudice and oppression, providing financial and material relief to victims of disaster, etc."¹

According to a study by Barna, when unchurched people were asked what would attract them to a church, the second most common answer (after better preaching) was for the church to become more involved in its community.² However, even though they may be attracted to the church and participate in its activities, boomers and busters are still reluctant to sign up and become members.

Observation #12: Even if Harry's not spiritually sensitive, he wants his children to get quality moral training.

As mentioned earlier, the boomers, who left churches in droves in the 1960s and 1970s, now want their children to have some good religious training. Researchers in one study found that "55% of unchurched baby boomer men said they definitely have no plans to join a church in the next five years--but 73% of them said they want their children to get a religious training."³

¹Barna, *Never on a Sunday*, 24.

²Ibid.

³Strobel, 72. See "Here Come the Baby Boomers," *Emerging Trends*, June 1991, 5.

They not only want the church to provide opportunities for this instruction, they want it done with excellence. Organizations such as Disney World and Sesame Street have helped set the benchmark for quality very high.¹ This may also help explain why "only one out of three church-going adults rate their own church's ministry for children as being excellent."² Any church wanting to reach baby boomers should be serious about caring for its children at church, something the Hamilton church tried to do.

Not wanting religious instruction for themselves, but desiring it for their kids seems very contradictory. But this underscores the importance of carefully studying the unchurched. Basic logic alone is not enough. If the unchurched appear to be a little confused, it is probably because they are, as the next observation demonstrates.

Observation #13: Harry and Mary are confused about sex roles, but they don't know that the Bible can clarify for them what it means to be a man and woman.

Many in our culture are confused about masculinity and femininity. Men, on the one hand, feel the pull to be macho. On the other hand, there are others who are encouraging them to be sensitive, nurturing, and caring. Opinions clash in the women's movement as well. Some champion freedom from slavery to the home and parenting, while others campaign for a return to the home, being a mother and supportive wife.

¹Strobel, 73.

²George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991), 280, quoted in Strobel, 74.

The media have portrayed a wide variety of roles for men and women, leaving them somewhat confused.¹

The tendency in our culture is to turn to the media or professional counselors for answers. The church is not usually considered the place to turn for resolution for these issues, even though it may have a lot of information to offer.

Observation #14: Harry is proud that he's tolerant of different faiths, but he thinks Christians are narrow-minded.

Christ's claim that He alone is the way to a relationship with God bothers many of the unchurched. They tend to believe that different religions are just different pathways to the same God. Christians who say their way is the only right way turn off unchurched Harry and Mary, because they pride themselves on being open and broad-minded.²

Observation #15: There's a good chance Harry would try church if a friend invited him--but this may actually do him more harm than good.

This observation has good news and bad news for those concerned about the spiritual well-being of the unchurched. The good news is that according to a national survey by the Barna Research Group, one in every four unchurched persons says he or she would attend church if invited to do so by a friend. On a national scale this means that between 15 and 20 million people are sitting at home on the average weekend, rather than going to church, because no one invited them.

¹Strobel, 74-75.

²Ibid., 77-79.

The question that some are concerned about is what will happen when an unchurched person, who dropped out of church because services were boring, predictable, irrelevant, and greedy for money, comes back and finds that little has changed? Will they leave again and be even harder to convince to return?

Some statistics are pointing to the fact that this may be true. Boomers, who were coming back to church, have started to leave again. According to findings published in *Ministry Currents* in March 1992, the number of baby boomers attending church dropped from 50 percent in 1991 to 40 percent in the first part of 1992. The reason given by a majority of adults for the decline was that the local church was still "irrelevant to their everyday life."¹

Some would like to suggest that the research must be wrong. But George Barna, whose firm conducted the study, stands behind the figures and challenges the church to take this seriously:

This decline cannot be explained away by sampling error, given the number of boomers who were interviewed. Since boomers are among those leading the cadre of adults who charge that local churches tend to be irrelevant, this possibility of a generational retreat from the church must be taken seriously.²

Summary

Millions of baby boomers and baby busters have abandoned the church in the last few decades. In their eyes the church has been irrelevant and out of touch with their needs. The need for change in the way the church approaches the unchurched seems

¹"The Case of the Missing Boomers," *Ministry Currents*, January-March 1992, 1, quoted in Strobel, 81.

²George Barna, *The Barna Report, 1992-1993* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 92, 94, quoted in Strobel, 81.

clear. Churches can no longer assume that people attend church because of their loyalty to their congregation or denomination. The preceding observations highlight the fact that unchurched people have unique needs and perspectives that deserve earnest reflection and attention.

Having looked at the unique needs and perspectives of the unchurched, we now turn to the actual events that led to the establishment of the Hamilton Community Church and its ministry to the unchurched.

CHAPTER 5

**SPIRITUAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC,
AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES**

That there are spiritual issues involved in reaching the unchurched is not surprising. The presence of political, economic, and emotional issues may be less expected. However, the reality is that these issues are also involved.

The Need for a New Church

Some have been aware of the need to address the unique needs and concerns of the secular unchurched people for a number of years. William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, quotes Neal Wilson's speech at the 1980 General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Dallas, Texas, when he highlighted the need for giving special attention to the unchurched:

Another phase of advance whose time surely has come is the inauguration of an ongoing study designed to achieve a desperately needed breakthrough in how to reach the secular-minded and non-Christian peoples of the world with the gospel. This is a science all its own, to which we have given only token attention.¹

¹William G. Johnsson, "The Challenge of Secular Thought," *Meeting the Secular Mind*, ed. Humberto Rasi and Fritz Guy (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985), 15.

One of the results of Wilson's concern about the secular people of our world was the book *Meeting the Secular Mind*.¹ Our denomination has tried to reach secularized people through the Faith for Today television broadcast, now called Lifestyle Magazine. Magazines such as *Vibrant Life* and *Signs of the Times* have also targeted unchurched people. Though these may reach the masses, some of us in Chattanooga sensed that a local church was needed that focused on the needs of the unchurched.

I came across a sheet advertising several seminars offered by Andrews University.² The paragraph on one seminar indicated that according to one study of baptisms among Caucasians in the North American Division, 85 percent came from our own children, 14 percent were of people from other Christian denominations, and only 1 percent of our baptisms came from the unchurched. Those numbers had a deeply profound affect on me. I knew that the unchurched made up a large segment of the population in North American, and obviously we were not very successful in evangelizing them.

Another event that heightened my interest in planting a new church was my attendance of the Pastor's Conference at the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, in February 1990. At that conference Bill Hybels, the senior pastor,

¹Ibid.

²Andrews University: Seminary Workshops for the Summer of 1990. The workshop was called "Issues in Church Growth." The paragraph read as follows: "With 85% of baptisms among Whites in North America coming from among Adventists' children, 14% from other Christian denominations, and only 1% from the nonchurched population, we as Seventh-day Adventists need to take a new look at our methods." Pamphlet in my possession. While some may doubt the study upon which these figures are based, it seems clear that we are doing an inadequate job of reaching the unchurched.

and other staff members of the church cast a vision for a new kind of church especially designed to reach secularized unchurched people. They demonstrated how they successfully carried out this vision.

Several of their techniques for communicating with the unchurched appealed to me. One was their use of drama-- brief sketches on the theme of the message for the day. I was very impressed by the sketches I saw, and it was obvious to me that these would appeal to a very visually oriented culture. It helped to make the service more than a cerebral exercise.

Though I was a bit uncomfortable with some of the music they used at Willow Creek, I could see the wisdom of using up-to-date music styles to which ordinary people could relate.

The multimedia productions were also very powerful, and I knew that these could be used in an Adventist context without any major problem. Their emphasis on excellence, authenticity, and vulnerability was also appealing to me. Later I learned how important they are to our culture.

The strategy at Willow Creek also included a seven-step process that could lead an unchurched person from being disconnected from Christ and the church to being what they called a "fully devoted follower of Christ." I could tell that commitment to Christ and His church was strong throughout the church, and I longed to see that in my church.

It seemed to me that there was much in their methodology and philosophy of ministry that I could use in reaching unchurched people in Chattanooga. However, I had serious reservations about doing much of it in the church where I served as pastor.

Nevertheless, I began preaching about some of the principles I had learned at Willow Creek in the First Seventh-day Adventist Church of Chattanooga where I served as pastor. We began using a few contemporary worship choruses in the worship service. The Youth and Young Adult department started using some mild contemporary Christian music. Some liked the changes, but many older members strongly resisted. I soon came to the conclusion that the only way to really implement the ministry to the unchurched that I believed was needed was by planting a new church. Transitioning the Chattanooga First Church to a new model of ministry seemed impossible.

Concerns for Adventist Youth

During this time in the *Adventist Review* I came across some statistics from the Valuegenesis¹ study of over 12,000 youth, parents, and teachers concerning the attitudes of Adventist youth toward their local church that deeply impacted my thinking. While some of the statistical findings were positive about our educational system, there were indicators that the local church was not relating well to its high-school-age youth. That our youth were not totally satisfied with their local church did not surprise me. But I was greatly distressed that they were more negative about their local church in all the areas mentioned than all the other churches represented. In the *Adventist Review*² a

¹The *Valuegenesis* study, sponsored by the North American Division, included more than 12,000 youth in grades 6 through 12, 1,900 parents, and over 700 pastors. For the complete *Valuegenesis* report see Peter L. Benson and Michael J. Donahue, *Valuegenesis: Report 1* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990) and Roger L. Dudley and V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992).

²Andrew Leonie, "Nurturing Our Next Generation Through the Church," *Adventist Review*, January 3, 1991, 14-15.

report on the Valuegenesis study of Adventist youth gave the following results, as shown in table 1.

It was clear to me that our youth needed special attention for two reasons. First, we needed to develop a ministry that would help keep them from becoming unchurched. Second, I wanted to be able to reach out to the many Adventist youth who had already dropped out of church fellowship. And based on my experience in the Chattanooga Church, I did not believe we would be able to do the kind of ministry I felt would be helpful to them without starting a new church.

During the time I was thinking about the needs of the youth, our conference president made an interesting comment about the need for a new church in our area.

Lack of Pew Space

Our conference president, Elder William Geary, said that an influential member in the Collegedale/Chattanooga area had commented to him that he felt a new church was needed in our area because there was not enough pew space. This church member had visited several of the churches in the Collegedale area and found it hard to get a seat. Several of the churches were already running two services, and it was the member's opinion that a new church was needed. Elder Geary shared this comment at a minister's meeting one day, and it caught my attention.

TABLE 1
DENOMINATION YOUTH COMPARISON

Statement	SDAs %	Mainline Denominations %	Southern Baptists %
“True” or “Very True”			
Religious education programs at my church are interesting	31	66	74
Religious education programs make me think	27	62	64
My church offers enough things for kids my age	29	54	39
I look forward to going to things at my church	36	56	76
I can be myself when at church	45	77	82
“Often”			
My teachers or adult leaders care about me	57	79	84
I experience the feeling that adult in my local church care about me	29	37	82
I experience the feeling that other youth in my church care about me	35	39	54

Property for a New Church

During this time members of the Chattanooga First Church were also discussing the possibility of relocating our church facility. The church had been broken into four times and four cars had been stolen from our parking lot during the time I had served there. The neighborhood was rapidly changing from Caucasian to African American. Several attempts were made to reach the community, but there were some in the church who were prejudiced against this group. I came to the conclusion that changing the church enough to adequately reach out to the community was not possible.

I was looking for a suitable site to which we could relocate and came across what I thought was an excellent place. However, I thought it would be a strategic time to plant a new church using the concepts I had learned at Willow Creek.

I developed a plan for a new church and presented it to the Georgia-Cumberland Conference officers. I reminded them of the need for a church due to the crowded conditions of the churches in our area. The church I was proposing was in Chattanooga, but near enough to Collegedale to help with the pew shortage. However, there were some money problems.

Financial Barriers

The conference leaders noted that I had no resources with which to purchase the \$310,000 piece of property I had found. Their recommendation was to relocate the First Church there. The members had been talking about relocating for nearly ten years, and this seemed like a good time.

I returned and led the members through a decision-making process and they voted in favor of relocating the church to this new site. However, we lacked the financial strength to take on a loan large enough to acquire the property. The value of property in that area was increasing rapidly, and so the conference purchased the property at our request, with the understanding that we would buy it from them when our facilities sold.

Several months later we received offers on the church and school facilities. Neither were as high as we wanted, but they were well within reason in my opinion. However, the offers were rejected by the church, and the members reversed their decision concerning relocating. Saddam Hussein had just invaded Kuwait, and the members did not think it wise to sell and move when Armageddon might be upon the world.

I was devastated. I felt very embarrassed and betrayed. I served on the conference building and finance committee and the conference executive committee. I had assured them that we had voted to purchase this property as soon as our facilities had sold. I felt like a failure as a leader and became very discouraged.

About a month later some friends suggested the idea of starting a new church on the property the conference had bought. They were new in the area and to my knowledge knew nothing of my request to the conference leaders about planting a new seeker-oriented church. In my discouragement I had forgotten all about it. Their suggestion rekindled my dream, and I returned to the conference leaders asking for permission to start a new church. They still owned this valuable piece of property and

needed to do something with it. This time they were more receptive to my proposal for a new seeker oriented church. However, there was another problem: salaries.

The conference budget did not include an additional salary for this new church. My first plan was to continue to pastor the Chattanooga First Church while the new congregation got started. When it was large enough to merit a salaried pastor I would switch over.

This was unsatisfactory to the members at Chattanooga First. They were used to having a full-time pastor, and, on occasion, a pastoral intern. They were not about to have only one part-time pastor.

Around this time I received an invitation from the Southern College Religion Department to join their faculty full time. They felt the new church would serve well as a lab for religion majors. The conference officers were also willing to go along with the plan, and I accepted the offer to teach.

Adventists Dissatisfied with Traditional Church

We began talking with others in the community about the possibility of planting a new church to see if there was really adequate interest to make it a reality. We found that there were quite a few Adventists who were attending churches in the area, but were not finding the experience meaningful. In the greater Chattanooga area it was estimated that there are several thousand former and inactive Adventists who might find attractive a new church with a contemporary ministry. We determined that there was sufficient interest to launch the new church.

However, some others in the community heard about this new church and became very unhappy.

Opposition to the New Church

The planting of the Hamilton Community Church caused a great deal of controversy. One man wrote our conference president telling him that he was sending \$1,000 of tithe to a nearby hostile independent ministry¹ because the president was allowing this new celebration church to exist.

John Osborne, a television evangelist and former Adventist minister, had produced some videotapes on so-called "celebration churches"² that had gotten many people in our area stirred up against anything non-traditional. They claimed the celebration churches were leading us into Pentecostalism.

Lloyd Rosenvold did not live in our area when the Hamilton Community Church was planted, but his ideas reflect the general attitude of many who opposed the establishment of our church.

Subtle and dangerous departures from truth lurk within the celebration fanaticism. The very pillars of the everlasting gospel and the third angel's message are being defaced and even lost in the excitement of the creeping Pentecostalism of

¹A hostile independent ministry is a group of individuals who call themselves Seventh-day Adventists, but are not a part of the denominational organization and are very critical of it. In this case the man sent the tithe money to Charles Wheeling.

²At that time there were two churches, the Celebration Center near Loma Linda in Southern California and the New Life Celebration Church near Portland, Oregon, that used a non-traditional worship format. This included a band, with drums and guitars, and some expressive forms of worship such as clapping and raising hands during the worship music.

the celebration phenomenon in Adventism.¹

Some believed the Catholic Church was behind this slippery slide into apostasy. Two individuals told me they heard that I was a Jesuit. Rosenvold echoes this concern, "This whole celebration excitement had its origins in the plans of the Papacy in the Second Vatican Council which convened in 1962."² The new worship design is connected with Babylon according to Rosenvold: "The celebration format (music, drama et cetera) does not contribute to a 'holy stillness,' but rather resembles 'a perfect Babylon of confusion.'"³

A couple of months before the Hamilton Church actually began one man told me that he had heard that I had flown out to Oregon where I had gotten special training at one of the Celebration churches. The conference had sponsored this trip and was helping get this celebration church started, according to the rumor. He was very agitated about this. This was totally false.

My theology was also called into question. Rumors circulated that I did not believe in the inspiration of Ellen White, nor did I hold the year-day principle valid interpreting prophecy. It was assumed that because I did not quote from the writings of Ellen White that I did not believe them to be inspired. Where the rumor about the year-day principle got started I have no idea. Another concern of a few was perceived competition.

¹Lloyd Rosenvold, *Adventist Carnivals* (Hope, ID: Rosenvold Publications, 1991), 1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 21.

Perceived Competition

The property we were going to build the church on was four miles from another Adventist Church. Some members of that church expressed concern that we were too close and would be stealing their members. I tried to explain that our ministry was so different that we would be appealing to two entirely different groups of people. As it turned out, a few from that church did join us, but they were not happy there anyway.

After we began, some rather large blocks of members began leaving some of the area churches and joining ours. The treasurer of the largest church in our area express deep concern in one of their board meetings that their finances were going to suffer because of all the members who were leaving their church destined for ours. However, the pastors of both these churches were supportive of our ministry.

Change

One last barrier was the psychological resistance that some people have to change. It is quite well known that when change is proposed to a group of people, a portion of the group will quickly adopt the change, others will take some time to accept change, and some will be automatically opposed to any change. Some people are almost never comfortable with change, and will oppose it whenever it comes. Our church represented a change from the status quo, and no matter what we did some would be opposed. Marvin Mayors notes:

There is so little understanding of cultural differences the church and its mission extension refuse to prepare for multicultural confrontation and thus any adjustment or adaptation to more than one life-way is banned on the grounds of compromise of belief. Even innovation within the church arouses suspicion, since it resembles that which exists outside the culture or the subculture of the church. If it has not been done before, its soundness is questioned. The end result is a

static world view that places high value on changelessness and on the continual reinforcing of 'form' or the way something is expressed, instead of on the meaning. This approach to life constructs a body of culture-based rituals that one is supposed to follow to have the life of Christ.

Since biblical Christianity is a dynamic process born in a change setting and since it introduces change in the life of individuals and society, it resists being bound by the narrow ethnocentrism and restricting legalisms that often characterize the established church. Thus there arises in each congregation a reformation.¹

However, opposition is not always bad.

Free Advertising

As a result of all the opposition to our church there was no need to spend a lot of money publicizing our grand opening. I had considered sending a brochure to all Adventists in our area, but the controversy had helped spread the news and I felt no need to advertise to the Adventists. We were counting on Adventists bringing their seeker friends, so we did not spend any money on advertising.

The rumors and opposition we faced did take their toll on me. However, while the opposition from those outside our group was challenging, it was not unexpected. I was taken by surprise when conflict came from within.

Conflict from Within

By far the most painful conflict came from within our group. There were some who joined us, but who were unclear about the type of ministry we were developing. I had not spelled out our music and drama ministry clearly or often enough, which turned out to be a mistake. Everyone knew drama and contemporary music would be part of

¹Marvin K. Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture: A Strategy for Cross-cultural Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Assn., 1974) [I lost the page number, but will get it from the library when I am on campus for my defense.]

our ministry, but none of us knew what it would look and feel like when we did it. A group within the church frequently expressed their great discomfort with some of the drama and music we were using. This was particularly difficult because some of them were among the first to join our core group as we began, and were very influential in the church.

Family Turmoil

On one hand, I was extremely happy. Many things were going very well. But one of the problems was the depletion of my emotional reserves. Due to the heavy load of teaching at Southern College, pastoring the Hamilton Community Church, struggling with conflict from without and within, and trying to raise a family, I hit bottom emotionally. My doctor put me on medication that I take to this day.

My wife was also under a great deal of pressure as director of a rapidly growing children's ministry, mother of two small children, pastor's wife, and much more. She too suffered some emotional damage during this time.

The stages of burnout were also evident in several other church leaders. The job was large, and it was hard not to overdo it. But we all believed it was for a good cause, making the sacrifices worth it all.

Summary

We have looked at some of the sociological, psychological, historical, economic, and political factors that have helped shape the values and attitudes of people in the United States toward the church. Some of the reasons millions have dropped out

of church attendance have been noted. The unique religious needs and perspectives of baby boomers and baby busters have been analyzed.

I have also discussed the establishment of the Hamilton Community Church and its attempt to minister to the unchurched in Chattanooga. While there was some opposition to its arrival, many have come to find it a meaningful ministry. Now we change our focus to theology and history to determine if the Bible supports the ministry format of the Hamilton Community Church, and to learn from others in Christian history who have adopted a similar philosophy of ministry.

**PART III: BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL,
AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION**

CHAPTER 6

GOD'S PASSION AND PLANS TO REACH THE LOST

From the fall of man God has been passionately reaching out to His wayward children. God's love for the lost and His plans to bring them back into fellowship with Himself are the subject of the entire Bible. In this section we will note God's love for the lost and explore some of the methods He has used to communicate His message of salvation to us. This survey is not intended to be exhaustive, but suggestive. It focuses on principles that apply to the methods used by the Hamilton Community Church.

The Nature and Character of God

The need for change is a primary concern of this paper. However, we should note there are some things that cannot be altered. First, God's character does not change. Through Malachi God declares, "I the Lord, do not change" (Mal 3:6). The author of Hebrews states, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).

Second, the gospel message does not change. Paul strongly admonished the Galatian believers to be wary of anyone who preached a different gospel: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned" (Gal 1:8). Finally, John the revelator wrote, "I saw

another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth" (Rev 14:6). The gospel is eternal, it does not change.

Third, God's love for His children does not change, nor does it end. The psalmist says, "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him" (Ps 103:17). Through Jeremiah God said, "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3).

God's Pursuit of the Lost

Another characteristic of God is that He is the pursuer and initiator in redemption. God did not wait for Adam and Eve to come looking for Him. He came seeking them in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:8-9). This theme continues to the New Testament. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

This truth is portrayed in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:3-10). In both cases something of value was lost, and an all-out search was made to find it. When it was found there was great rejoicing, emphasizing the fact that the item lost was valuable and implying that the search for it was intense.

The preface to these two narratives speaks of Christ's attitude toward "worldly" people: "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus did not consider sinful worldly people to be the enemy. His life was spent in loving service for them.

In the parable of the lost boy the emphasis is on the unending and unconditional love of God for the lost (Luke 15:11-32). God's heart for the lost was especially revealed when the prodigal son came home: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). A welcome-home party followed with great rejoicing over the lost son who returned (Luke 15:22-32).

One of the implications of this story is that God's concern for the lost is more than an intellectual exercise or duty. God is passionate about His lost children. He loves them deeply and wants desperately to have them home. When they do respond to His invitation He is very happy.

Not only is God's love passionate, it is unconditional. The boy did nothing to merit his father's love. He simply came home, acknowledging his great need. The fact that the father saw his son when he was still "a long way off" suggests he was watching the road closely. His love for his son had continued, reminding us that God's love for us is also unending.

The Great Commission

Just before His ascension to heaven, Jesus gave this all-important mandate:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt 28:18-20).

It took several years for Adventist pioneers to catch the vision of a worldwide proclamation of the gospel. In 1874 J. N. Andrews sailed for Europe, signifying that they understood that our mission had expanded beyond North America.

For many years church leaders focused on developing a presence in every country in the world. Today in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination there is an emphasis on reaching every people group. Recognition has been given to the fact that different cultures and people groups exist within the same nation. It is widely accepted that God's plans call for extending the gospel invitation to every person.

Emphasis is given in the great commission to a full-message ministry. The entire body of Christ's teaching in the Bible is to be presented.

The gospel commission calls us to make disciples, not merely announce the message. Discipleship requires a relationship with God and other people. A disciple follows his master and conforms his life to his master's teachings in a process of spiritual growth.

In connection with the command to go into all the world comes the promise of Christ's abiding presence. The sense of having Jesus with us will give us courage to continue when times are tough and comfort us when things go wrong. Sharing the gospel with the entire population is a daunting task, but possible in the power of God.

In Acts, Luke highlights this emphasis on power. At His ascension Jesus promised, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Methods and programs alone will not successfully push the gospel around

the world and into every receptive heart. God's message, messenger, and methods must be infused with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is crucial to receiving the power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles "joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Throughout the book of Acts is a strong emphasis on prayer and the part it played in releasing the power of the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel.¹

If the Hamilton Community Church is to be successful in its mission it should reflect the passion of God in reaching out to lost people. Coupled with that passion must also be a dependence on the power of God.

Planting a New Nation

God was intentional and strategic about the way He reached out to His wayward children. God called Abraham out of Babylon to Canaan to start a new nation. Israel was strategically located at the crossroads of many who traveled from east to west. It seems that it was God's intention that as people journeyed through Palestine they would come in contact with His people and would be led to want to know more about the God who abundantly blessed them.²

We see this being fulfilled in a unique way on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 were converted. People from many countries and cultural backgrounds listened to

¹Acts 2:42; 3:1; 4:23-31; 6:3-6; 10:2, 9; 12:5; 13:1-3; 14:23; 16:13, 16, 25; 21:5.

²See Deut 4:6-8; 7:6; 28:1.

Peter's sermon and went back to their respective cities and shared what they had heard (Acts 2:5-11). While God is certainly able to use anyone to reach across cultures to share the gospel, it is done more readily through people of the same country and culture.

We should not limit God's work to only one nation or family. He chose to work in a unique way through the nation of Israel. But in the Bible we see evidence that God is at work in other people and places. Melchizedek was king of Salem and a priest of God in a pagan Canaanite city to whom Abraham paid a tithe (Gen 14:18-20). Jethro, a Midianite priest, gave spiritual and administrative advice to Moses (Exod 18:1-27). Gentile magi from the east were impressed by God to search for the Messiah (Matt 3:1-3). God is working in a variety of peoples and places to reach all people (John 1:9).¹

Having established God's passion for the lost and reviewed the scope of His work, we now turn to some of His chosen methods to reach people with the message of salvation.

God's Use of Visual Aids

Some have questioned our use of dramatic sketches in our services. Is there any evidence that God or other Bible characters used drama in presentations of truth?

Sanctuary Services

Ceremonies conducted as part of the temple services were visually oriented and very dramatic. At the heart of these services were the animal sacrifices, which vividly

¹See also Jerald Whitehouse, "Contextualization and Adventist Mission II: The Prophetic Model for Mission," May 1992, Unpublished Ms, Heritage Room, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 1992, 5-6.

pointed forward to the most visual and dramatic presentation of all time, the crucifixion of Christ. God knew that the gospel would need to be made visible. Telling us that He loved us was not enough. He wanted to demonstrate it in the most dramatic way possible.

Joab's Drama

Joab worked to reconcile David with Absalom. He arranged to have a woman pretend to be a mourner who had a son who was killed. Through the acting and words of the woman she and Joab convinced David to see Absalom (2 Sam 14:1-23). Drama proved to be an effective communication tool.

Prophetic Drama

Several of the Old Testament prophets dramatized the message from God for His people. Ezekiel used a brick to represent Jerusalem, against which he pretended to lay siege (Ezek 4:1-8). As a part of the illustration he laid on his side a certain number of days. Ezekiel performed several dramatic prophetic presentations (Ezek 5:1-7; 12:1-13). These caught the attention of the people and led them to ask important questions that God would answer (Ezek 37:15-19).

God instructed Jeremiah to wear a linen belt and then to bury it in the ground. After it decayed He told Jeremiah to dig it up and use it to warn Israel and Judah that if they continued pursuing their idols they would perish like the belt (Jer 13:1-9).

God asked Hosea to marry a harlot. Later when she ran away he was told to take her back. God dramatized the fact that Israel was committing spiritual adultery, and indicated that if they returned He would take them back (Hos 1:2).

God used drama on many occasions to communicate with His people. It can be used by God to communicate truth and can be harnessed by the Devil to declare falsehood. The medium is neutral. The content of the message is what makes the difference.

The Incarnational and Relational Ministry of Jesus

One of the building blocks of the Hamilton Community Church philosophy of ministry says we should strive to be culturally relevant in our methodology while remaining doctrinally pure in the message we present. This calls for a strategy that emphasizes identification with those being reached. The process of taking the everlasting, unchanging gospel and adapting its presentation to make sense to another culture or time period is called contextualization. Is this in harmony with heaven's way of doing ministry?

One of the pivotal passages of Scripture describes the incarnation of Jesus: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). For centuries Christians have discussed this amazing transformation. Although complete comprehension of this divine act of love is not possible, we can appreciate that it was love that motivated the incarnation of Christ. The extent of the incarnation reminds us of the infinite extent of His love. James Bell notes:

The Lord God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, cared so much for the creation that He identified with it to the utmost by being born into this world as *vere deus, vere homo* (very God, very man). Through Christ, God entered our world, identified with human frailty, became vulnerable to temptations and pain, bore the sins of the world, and died on its behalf. In other words, God could not

have identified with humankind more completely.¹

To make the gospel understandable Jesus became one of us. He did everything He could to identify Himself with us, without compromising with sin. Jesus spoke in parables, using the common things in life to teach profound spiritual truths. His teaching was deep, yet uncomplicated. Jesus used the known to teach about the unknown. After giving several parables in a row Mark noted:

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when He was alone with His own disciples, he explained everything (Mark 4:33-34).

Jesus did careful audience analysis and shaped His teaching to fit his hearers.

Ellen White comments on the connection between the incarnation and His teaching in parables:

In Christ's parable teaching the same principle is seen as in His own mission to the world. That we might become acquainted with His divine character and life, Christ took our nature and dwelt among us. Divinity was revealed in humanity; the invisible glory in the visible human form. Men could learn of the unknown through the known; heavenly things were revealed through the earthly; God was made manifest in the likeness of men. So it was in Christ's teaching; the unknown was illustrated by the known; divine truths by earthly things with which the people were most familiar.²

People need to hear the gospel in terms and ways with which they are familiar.

¹James Bell, *Bridge Over Troubled Water: Ministry to Baby Boomers--A Generation Adrift* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993), 87-88.

²Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 17.

Mrs. White wrote, "Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity."¹

Jesus not only spoke in ways the common people could understand, He did His best to make His message attractive. White again notes:

In Christ is the tenderness of the shepherd, the affection of the parent, and the matchless grace of the compassionate Savior. His blessings He presents in the most alluring terms. He is not content merely to announce these blessings; He presents them in the most attractive way, to excite a desire to possess them. So His servants are to present the riches of the glory of the unspeakable Gift.²

Jesus designed His presentation of truth for the people whom He met. To Nicodemus He spoke about being "born again" (John 3:1-8). When describing salvation to the woman at the well Jesus talked about "living water" (John 4:1-14).³

The writers of the gospels followed the example of Jesus in adapting their presentation of the life of Christ to the original intended audience. Matthew began his story of the life of Jesus with a lengthy genealogy, tracing Jesus' roots to Abraham and David. He used many Old Testament quotations, showing that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. This type of presentation would have been meaningful to a Jewish audience.

Mark, on the other hand, does not have a genealogy. He quotes very few Old Testament passages. At times he explained Jewish customs, indicating his intended audience was probably more Gentile than Jewish (Mark 7:1-4). Rick Warren writes,

¹Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 34.

²*Ibid.*, 826.

³See Roger L. Fredrikson, *John*. The Communicator's Commentary, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 92.

“Almost all of the stories and teaching in the gospel of Mark are covered in the gospel of Matthew. Why do we need both books? Because Matthew’s gospel was targeted for the Hebrew reader and Mark’s was targeted for the Gentile reader.”¹

Luke’s gospel also gives evidence that Gentiles were his primary target.

William Barclay comments:

Luke begins his dating from the Roman emperor and the current Roman governor. Unlike Matthew, he is not greatly interested in the life of Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. He very seldom quotes the Old Testament at all. He has a habit of giving Hebrew words in the Greek equivalent so that a Greek would understand.²

John’s gospel is more universal and deliberately uses terminology familiar to both Jews and Greeks. For example:

Greeks used this term [Word] not only of the spoken word but also of the unspoken word, the word still in the mind--the reason. When they applied it to the universe, they meant the rational principle that governs all things. Jews, on the other hand, used it as a way of referring to God. Thus John used a term that was meaningful to both Jews and Gentiles.³

We have noted that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John adapted their presentation of the gospel story to their intended audiences, using terminology and imagery familiar to them. They targeted their gospels “in order to be effective, not to be exclusive.”⁴

¹Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 158-159.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 3.

³NIV Study Bible note on John 1:1.

⁴Warren, 158.

Paul's Unique Mission

When God called Paul into the gospel ministry He gave him a unique mission. Paul noted the difference in emphasis between himself and Peter. "For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles" (Gal 2:8). Paul did not ignore the Jews, but his primary focus was on reaching Gentiles. God gives each person, and at times even churches, a unique niche in His work.

Paul's Evangelistic Philosophy and Methodology

Paul carefully crafted his presentation of truth to help his hearers understand it.

He said:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1Cor 9:19-23).

It was Paul's goal to win as many as possible.¹ He not only wanted to be faithful, but to be effective as well. He was not content to simply go through the motions of reaching out. In our work we often limit what we do, because we do not want to offend a few. But what about "the many"?

To reach as many as possible Paul worked to identify with people. Kenneth Chafin commented:

¹See Dobson, 54.

This posture also creates great flexibility and the ability to identify with people where they are. There is not a finer statement of what it means to really love people than Paul's declaration in verses 20-22 that he is able to identify with all kinds of people. He included in his illustration the Jews, the Gentiles, and the weak, but a study of his life as recorded in Acts would indicate that he was at ease with women, with people of all sorts of vocations, nationalities, and lifestyles, as was true of his Lord. Paul was not a chameleon who took on the moral and spiritual climate of his environment. Rather, he was a people-lover who did not let cultural or religious differences become barriers between him and persons for whom Christ died. Because he was the servant of Christ he was able to identify with and love different kinds of people as his Lord had.

The church would be more effective in her evangelism if all those of us who are members could learn really to identify with all kinds of people.¹

On one Sabbath Paul attended the synagogue service in Pisidian Antioch.

After the reading from the Law and Prophets he was invited to speak. He began by referring to their common history.

The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; He made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power He led them out of that country, He endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert. . . . After this God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet (Acts 7:17-18, 20).

Paul went to Athens and used a different approach when speaking to the Athenians than he did when speaking to Jews in a synagogue. Ed Dobson notes that in his presentation to the Greeks,

Paul did not quote one verse from the Old Testament, review an Old Testament story, or even use the Hebrew name for God. Rather, he spoke in the language of the pagan philosophers and his only quotation was from pagan poets. Yet he concluded on the same theme as in the synagogue--the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he chose a completely different route to get there. Different people, different culture, different strategy--same gospel.²

¹Kenneth L. Chafin, *1, 2 Corinthians*, The Communicator's Commentary, Vol. 7 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 118-119.

²Dobson, 56.

Commenting on Paul's sermon to the Athenians, Ellen White wrote:

Paul's words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. He was in a position where he might easily have said that which would have irritated his proud listeners and brought himself into difficulty. Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown.¹

However, it is possible to dilute the gospel. In the sermon on Mars Hill there is no direct, clear presentation of the cross. Later Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:1, 2.)

Commentators have noted that after reflecting on his experience in Athens and the meager results, Paul determined not to leave out the cross. Tact, and adapting the message to the hearers is fine, but the gospel must still be clearly given.²

Identifying with his hearers and trying to win as many as possible were not just nice ideas that Paul thought he would try once in a while. He says, "I make myself a slave to everyone." This suggests Paul felt he was under obligation to do these things.³

¹Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 241.

²See "1 Corinthians," *SDA Bible Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953-1957), 6:669. See also Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 214.

³W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 245-246.

Ed Dobson notes that many of us “say that our style of worship, preaching, and teaching is the only right way and that the unchurched must meet us on our terms. Paul refused to moralize methods and chose to meet nonbelievers on their turf.”¹

Just because Paul did careful audience analysis does not mean that he always told people what they wanted to hear. He continued to aggressively share the gospel, which was very unpopular with some people, but he tried to do it in an inoffensive way.

Evangelism on Sabbath

One part of Paul’s evangelistic strategy was using Sabbath services for evangelism. For example, in Corinth, “every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). But even when there was no Jewish synagogue, they evangelized. Luke, who traveled with Paul, wrote about their experience in Philippi: “On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there” (Acts 16:13).

Seventh-day Adventists typically think of the Sabbath primarily as a day of worship. Paul also used it regularly for evangelism.

Summary

We have noted that God has been reaching out to the human race in love, wanting very much to save us from our sins. The Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and Paul worked to come close to those whom they were trying reach, without

¹Dobson, 58.

compromising principle. The principles of contextualization have been followed for a long time.

CHAPTER 7

LESSONS FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Having explored some biblical methods and principles of evangelism, we now turn to how they have been applied throughout history. We will focus especially on attempts at contextualization from the days of the early church fathers until the present time.

Evangelism and the Early Church Fathers

We have seen that Paul contextualized his proclamation of the gospel. Did this continue as the Christian church developed?

The early church fathers were very creative using Greek epics, Homeric myths, and even Stoic and Epicurean philosophy when it seemed helpful.¹

Writing of Justin and other early church Fathers, Michael Green says:

This is the characteristic aim which the Greek exponents of the gospel set themselves: to embody biblical doctrine in cultural forms which would be acceptable in their society. *Not to remove the scandal of the gospel, but so present their message in terms acceptable to their hearers, that the real scandal of the gospel could be perceived and its challenge faced.*²

¹Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 141-143.

²*Ibid.*, 142-143, emphasis mine.

But there were problems. For example, one of the terms used by Christians and non-Christians was Logos. Christians referred to Christ as the Logos and non-Christians had a variety of meanings for the term. Different groups, however, read into the word or took from the word different meanings, resulting in confusion for some. Trying to contextualize the gospel message has risks, but, as Green notes, it is worth it.

Harm was done when the linguistic illustration became an identification, particularly as the Logos became a veritable storehouse from which thinkers of widely differing schools drew what they wanted! The perils of this translation procedure were very real. But the risk was worth taking, even though it was fraught with many disasters. *Of course* it was worthwhile, otherwise Gentile Christianity would have perished as Jewish Christianity did.¹

It is possible to be too conservative, trying to save as much as possible of the culture of the biblical message and there are dangers in being too liberal about adapting it. As Green points out, we need people in the middle who can adapt the message without changing it.

It is a salutary reflection that the greatest enemy of Jewish Christianity was undo conservatism (in which Jesus was a complement, so to speak, to the Law); whereas the greatest danger to Gentile Christianity lay in undue adaptation to the thought forms of the day (in which Jesus was seen as the key to wisdom and heavenly enlightenment). If conservatism stifles authentic Christianity, liberalism dissipates it. Mercifully there were plenty of Christians in the second century who stuck fairly closely to the apostolic message while adapting its presentation into terms familiar to their contemporaries.²

Adapting the message to the culture sounds dangerous to many.³ Should we be doing it? Michael Green answers,

¹Green, 141.

²Ibid.

³“It was, in the preaching of the early missionaries to the Gentiles, and the same would hold good (with reservations) for many of their second century successors. At all

If Christ is for all men, then evangelists must run the risk of being misunderstood, of misunderstanding elements in the gospel themselves, of losing out on the transposition of parts of the message so long as they bear witness to him. Christians are called to live dangerously. The principle of the incarnation must be carried into Christian preaching.¹

Jesus, the gospel writers, Paul, and the early church Fathers presented the gospel message in a way that was understandable by the culture of their day. Yes, there are dangers in contextualization, but there are dangers in not doing it as well.

The Protestant Reformers

Not all of the Protestant reformers believed the same thing regarding evangelism. But most of them had strong opinions and felt free to share them. Their courses of action may shed light on many situations today.

Bible Translations

One of the greatest contributions of the Protestant reformers was their translations of the Bible from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew into the language of the common people: English, German, French, Danish, Dutch, and Swedish.² Catholic clergy resisted these changes. In recent years many Bible translations and paraphrases

events they took the risk, and insofar as they were centered in Jesus Christ, his incarnation, death and resurrection, God honored their witness. It is all too easy for us with hindsight to fault their ethics and their Christology, their failure to preserve the balance between adaptability and conservation, but it would be good to be able to feel confident that the Churches of our own day were succeeding half as well, and were displaying anything like the same courage, singleness of aim, Christcenteredness and adaptability as those men and women of the first Christian century." Green, 142-143.

¹Ibid., 143.

²Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 88, 245-247, 193-194, 214, 242, 238, 244.

have entered the market. The primary supposition behind all these is that we must give the gospel in the language of the people. While not all have been equally accurate, the fact that they exist supports our contention that biblical truth must be presented in a way that common people can understand.

Musical Transitions

The reformers also made dramatic changes in sacred music in order to reach the masses. Because this was a crucial area of discussion surrounding the Hamilton church we will spend some extra time here.

First, they developed music that could be sung in their native languages, rather than the Latin sung by the clergy of the day. Luther, the Wesleys, and others began using some of the well-known, much-loved secular tunes of their day and added religious words. Steve Miller noted Martin Luther's attitudes about music.

Luther marveled that in secular art there were "so many beautiful songs, while in the religious field we have such rotten, lifeless stuff." He concluded, "The devil has no need of all the good tunes for himself," and proceeded to release these tunes from their secular or unbiblical words and unite them with words consistent with the evangelical faith.¹

That these hymns were successful in making an impact on the lives of many people is evident from this comment by one of his enemies, Jesuit Adam Conzenius, "Luther's hymns have destroyed more souls than his writings and speeches."²

¹Steve Miller, *The Contemporary Christian Music Debate* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 113-114.

²Hymni Lutheri animos plures, quam scripta et declamationes occiderunt (1620), cited by Koch, vol. 1, 244; quoted by Theodore Hoetty-Nickel, *Luther and Culture*, Martin Luther Lectures, vol. 4 (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1960), 170, quoted in Miller, 115.

Luther was not the only one borrowing from the popular music of his day. In a letter to Frederick III of Saxony, the seniors of the Bohemian Brethren described their songbook:

Our melodies have been adapted from secular songs, and foreigners have at times objected. But our singers have taken into consideration the fact that the people are more easily persuaded to accept the truth by songs whose melodies are well known to them.¹

Of course, not everyone concurred with this approach to sacred music. In addition to Catholic censure, some fellow reformers voted thumbs down to this marriage of secular and sacred texts.

John Calvin rejected the use of any instruments and he would not allow songs be sung except those found in the Bible, that is, the Psalms. However, the tunes that were used were often the

airs drawn from popular melodies of the time, and this psalter became a store of song for the people. The psalms were heard in castle and cottage. They were sung by workers in the fields and the mills, they were the first lessons imparted to children, and frequently became the last words heard on the lips of the dying.²

Calvin's popular psalm-tunes were not always well received. Some people even disdained them as "Geneva Jiggs."³

¹Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 34, quoted in Miller, 115.

²H. A. L. Jefferson, *Hymns in Christian Worship* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1950), 33, quoted in Miller, 117.

³Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1981), 134, quoted in Miller, 117.

As time passed these tunes became identified with church worship. The resulting attitude was well stated by an old family servant who promised she would "sing the Psalms of David to the tunes of David and nothing else."¹ The passage of time had given a sacred status to the once secular tunes. Man's secular music had become God's sacred music.²

Isaac Watts, when about twenty years of age, came home and complained to his father about the boring lifeless music at church. His dad responded that if he did not like the music at church he could write some himself. So Isaac did. He paraphrased the Psalms and put them to new music.³

Some opposed this change. It seemed sacrilegious to change the Bible and sing his own words. Churches divided and pastors were fired who allowed this new kind of music.⁴ Today many of his hymns are still being sung in churches all over the world, and Isaac Watts is considered to be one of the greatest hymn writers of all time.⁵

John and Charles Wesley began their ministries shortly after Isaac Watts. Many of the churches of their day were cold, formal, lifeless. They introduced very warm personal worship songs, and often combined sacred words with secular tunes. "It was

¹Robert Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Worship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1953), 302-303, quoted in Miller, 118.

²Miller, 118.

³Edward E. White, *Singing with Understanding* (Warburton, Australia: Signs Publishing Company, 1981), 481.

⁴Miller, 123.

⁵Edward White, 481.

[Charles] Wesley's practice to seize upon any song of the theater or the street the moment it became popular and make it carry some newly written hymn into the homes of the people."¹ For example, Wesley wrote *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* and the tune he used was written by Mendelssohn for a song to praise the printing press!

In 1865 William Booth resigned from his position as a Methodist minister to begin working among the poor in London. The result was the Salvation Army, which soon spread worldwide.

His use of musical instruments began when two members of a brass band were converted. Pretty soon they were using all kinds of instruments in what they called their "Hallelujah Bands." They played the popular style of music of their day, using many secular tunes and adding religious words to them.

The Midland Free Press described the hymns as "tunes that go with a swing and a bang--with a chorus that will force one to sing--and they did seem to strike a tender chord in many a breast that might never have vibrated to any other touch."²

Booth challenged his followers with these words:

Music has a divine effect upon divinely influenced and directed souls. Music is to the soul what wind is to the ship, blowing her onwards in the direction in which she is steered. . . . Not allowed to sing that tune or this tune? Indeed! Secular music, do you say? Belongs to the devil does it? Well, if it did, I would plunder him of it, for he has no right to a single note of the whole gamut. He's a thief! . . . So now and for all time consecrate your voices and your instruments. Bring out your harps and organs and flutes and violins and pianos and drums and

¹Harold Myra and Dean Merrill, *Rock, Bach, and Superschlock* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1972), 93, quoted in Miller, 126.

²Robert Sandall, *The History of the Salvation Army*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1950), 106-107, quoted in Miller, 135.

everything else that can make melody! Offer them to God and use them to make all hearts about you merry before the Lord.¹

Some of our most respected music today received a cold response by many. When “Silent Night” first came out, George Weber, music director of the Mainz Cathedral, called it “vulgar mischief and void of all religious and Christian feelings.”² One of the most surprising criticisms came for Handel’s *Messiah*. Some churchmen in those days called it “vulgar theater.”³ Like some of the contemporary worship choruses it was condemned for its use of too much repetition and not enough message--it contains nearly one hundred repetitions of “Hallelujah!”⁴

Ira Sankey, the music director for D. L. Moody, wrote a great deal of music for use in their evangelistic campaigns. The tempo and style of music was similar to that of some of the popular songs of that day. After Sankey sang “What Shall the Harvest Be?” “someone critically remarked to Moody that if he kept singing songs like that, he ‘would soon have them all dancing.’”⁵

The Catholic church was the first to use the organ. As a result many of the Protestant reformers refused to use it because it was associated with Catholicism. To

¹Ibid., 112, quoted in Miller, 136, 137.

²Warren, 283.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ira D. Sankey, *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 62, 64, quoted in Miller, 133.

many it was "the Devil's bagpipe."¹ Numerous organs were destroyed by zealous reformers. Organs were used at circuses and gladiator combats and church people did not think they should be in churches.² Eighteenth-century Moravian churches used a variety of instruments, but rejected the violin since it was associated with dancing and was labeled "the devil's fiddle."³

Music plays a key role in almost all churches today. Rick Warren believes choosing the style of music "may be *the* most influential factor in determining who your church reaches for Christ and whether or not your church grows."⁴ If we want to reach people, we would do well to use a similar style of music as they listen to in their culture.

The objections being used against contemporary Christian music are about the same that have been used for hundreds of years against all types of new music in the church. Our review of Reformation history suggests we should be slow to condemn sacred music being used in popular forms to reach the general population.

Now we move forward to the ministry of Ellen White.

Ellen White's Evangelistic Philosophy

The incarnational principle of meeting people where they are with a view to leading them to where God wants them seems clear in Ellen White's counsel. She says:

¹Miller, 140.

²F. E. Kirby, *A Short History of Keyboard Music* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 5, quoted in Miller, 139.

³Ibid., 288, quoted in Miller, 141-142.

⁴Warren, 280, emphasis his.

The servants of Christ should accommodate themselves to the varied conditions of the people. They cannot carry out exact rules if they meet the cases of all. Labor will have to be varied to meet the people where they are.¹

Commenting on 1 Cor 9:19-23 Ellen White wrote:

Thus the apostle varied his manner of labor, shaping his message to the circumstances under which he was placed. . . . The laborer for God is to study carefully the best methods, that he may not arouse prejudice or combativeness. This is where some have failed. By following their natural inclinations, they have closed doors through which they might, by a different method of labor, have found access to hearts, and through them to other hearts.

God's workmen must be many-sided men; that is, they must have breadth of character. They are not to be one-idea men, stereotyped in their manner of working, unable to see that *their advocacy of truth must vary with the class of people among whom they work and circumstances they have to meet.*²

Her counsel warns us not to compromise principle: "Propriety of deportment is at all times to be observed; wherever principle is not compromised, consideration of others will lead to compliance with accepted customs; but true courtesy requires no sacrifice of principle to conventionality."³

Attitude Toward New Methods

Ellen White advised evangelists and pastors to use new methods. To an evangelist working in a new area she wrote, "Whatever may have been your former practice, it is not necessary to repeat it again and again in the same way. God would have new and untried methods followed. Break in upon the people--surprise them."⁴

¹Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1948), 255.

²*Ibid.*, 118-119, emphasis mine.

³Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 240.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1945), 125.

On another occasion she counseled, "The prevailing monotony of the religious round of service in our churches needs to be disturbed. The leaven of activity needs to be introduced that our members may work along new lines, and devise new methods."¹

Change often brought criticism, and Mrs. White did not want it to slow down the work. She said, "Means will be devised to reach hearts. Some of the methods used in this work will be different from the methods used in this work in the past; but let no one, because of this, block the way by criticism."²

Ellen White did not want the presentation of the gospel to be lifeless and boring: "Do not let the teaching be done in a dry, abstract way, which has been the manner of teaching in too many cases, but present the truths of God's Word in a fresh, impressive way."³

The writings of Ellen White have been used to criticize the Hamilton Community Church and its use of new evangelistic methods. The following is an examination of the concerns of some of our critics.

Concerns About Liberalism and Worldly Compromise

Some Seventh-day Adventists see innovations in worship, such as contemporary Christian music and drama, as steps toward liberalism. However,

¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), 204.

²White, *Evangelism*, 129-130.

³*Ibid.*, 195.

according to Ellen White, being conservative may not be as good as some think. After reading the *Testimonies* Helen Pyke concluded:

It was during this reading that I came to realize that in the writings of Ellen White, the word *conservative* is used almost invariably, in a negative sense. She applies it in reference to people who resist progress, refusing to adopt innovations designed to foster more-effective ways of spreading the gospel.¹

To illustrate her point Pyke quotes from the *Testimonies*. As the final crisis breaks upon the church, "the superficial, *conservative* class, whose influence has steadily retarded the progress of the work, will renounce the faith."² Perhaps going back to "historic Adventism" is not the direction we should be heading. Pyke again quotes Ellen White:

But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's Word and discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures. They become *conservative* and seek to avoid discussion.³

As a result of her reading in the writings of Mrs. White, Pyke asked the following rhetorical questions:

Is it possible that . . . we too could confuse cultural patterns--and even personal likes and dislikes--with the abiding principles of righteousness? In "conserving-holding," might we be hanging on to outdated clothing, hairstyles, and methods of work--thinking that by so doing we are fulfilling our duty? In reality, do we not thereby stand in the way of the rapid movements we have been told to expect? Does God have to ask our permission to implement innovations in soul winning?⁴

¹Helen Pyke, "Hold Fast Till I Come," *Adventist Review*, December 26, 1991, 9.

²Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:463, emphasis hers.

³*Ibid.*, 706-707.

⁴Pyke, 9.

On the other hand, being considered liberal may not be all bad. An interesting study in the writings of Ellen White could also be made of the word "liberal." For example, the Pharisees "thought Christ was too liberal. His ways did not agree with their ways."¹

Concerns About Using Methods from Non-Adventists

John Osborne and others have criticized "celebration" churches because they sometimes incorporate ideas from non-Adventist churches. We will now explore Mrs. White's attitude about using methods from people outside the realm of Adventism. After Ellen White had received information from God concerning health reform in vision on June 5, 1863, she decided to visit Dr. Jackson's "Our Home on the Hillside" in Dansville, New York. James and Ellen White spent three weeks at "Our Home" listening to lectures, eating their health food, etc. She was particularly interested in the women's dress at Dansville, and believed that "with some modifications it could be recommended to her Adventist sisters."²

Some questioned whether going to non-Adventist institutions was appropriate. White said those who stay at non-Adventist health reform institutes needed to be careful not to follow everything done there. She counseled, "They have to carry

¹Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 1993), 16:319-321.

²Richard Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1979), 110.

along with them at all times the gospel sieve and sift everything they hear, that they may choose the good and refuse the bad."¹

It is now well known that in her books and magazine articles Ellen White frequently used materials from sources outside of Adventism. This indicates that her attitude toward using ideas from people of other denominations was positive.

Concerns About Theatrical Performances

Some have used quotations on theatrics from the writings of Ellen White to show that she was against using dramatic sketches. A commonly used sentence is this one: "Not one jot or tittle of anything theatrical is to be brought into our work."² Users of this comment fail to note the wider context. "Do not encourage the men who are to engage in this work to think that they must proclaim the solemn, sacred message in a *theatrical style*. Not one jot or tittle of anything theatrical is to be brought into our work."³ Ellen White seems to be talking about a style of presentation, not the use of actors or drama. On another occasion she wrote,

Ministers in the desk have no license to behave like theatrical performers, assuming attitudes and expressions calculated for effect. They do not occupy the sacred desk as actors, but as teachers of solemn truths. There are also fanatical ministers, who, in attempting to preach Christ, storm, halloo, jump up and down, and pound on the desk before them, as if this bodily exercise profited anything. Such antics lend no force to the truths uttered, but, on the contrary, disgust men and women of calm judgment and elevated views. It is the duty of men who give themselves to the ministry to leave all coarseness and boisterous conduct outside

¹ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:489-490.

²White, *Evangelism*, 137.

³Ibid., emphasis mine.

the desk at least.¹

This does not mean that all acting and drama are intrinsically evil. In December 1888, the Battle Creek children's Sabbath school presented a Christmas play. Ella M. White, Mrs. White's six-year-old granddaughter, was in the program, dressed to typify an angel. Although Ellen White was concerned that too much time and effort had been put into some aspects of the play, she was not against the dramatic presentation performed by the children. Speaking of the play she wrote, "I was pleased with the lighthouse. . . . The part acted by the children was good. The reading was appropriate."²

Mrs. White sat near an actress once and made the following comment:

In the seat next us in the car was an actress, evidently a woman of ability, and possessed of many good qualities, *which if devoted to the service of God, might win for her the Saviour's commendation, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."* This woman and myself are both actors on the stage of life, but oh, how vastly different is our work!³

Would it be possible to devote acting talent to the service of God? It is difficult to know for sure if she had this in mind, but it is a possibility.

The theater, actors, acting, and drama are neutral terms, and can be used negatively and positively. For example, "The world is a theater, and the actors, its inhabitants."⁴

¹Ibid., 640.

²White, *Manuscript Releases*, 2:235.

³Ellen G. White, "Notes of Travel," *Review and Herald*, 6 November 1883, 373, emphasis mine.

⁴Ellen G. White, "The Result of Forgetting God," *Signs of the Times*, 21 November 1906, 437.

Although she was opposed to pastoral theatrics, Ellen White did not advocate lifeless and boring services. “Our meetings should be made *intensely interesting*,”¹ she said.

Concerns About Extreme Emotionalism

Some have expressed concern that nontraditional services may get out of control and slip into emotionalism. An example of this potential problem is the Holy Flesh movement in Indiana in 1900. The compilers of *Selected Messages*, volume 2, included an explanation of what occurred.

A fanatical teaching termed by its advocates “The Doctrine of Holy Flesh” was started in 1900 in Indiana, carrying away the conference president and various workers. Claiming that when Christ passed through the agony of Gethsemane He obtained holy flesh such as Adam possessed before his fall, this theory alleged that those who follow the Saviour must also acquire the same state of physical sinlessness as an essential preparation for translation. Eyewitness accounts report that in their services the fanatics worked up a high pitch of excitement by use of musical instruments such as organs, flutes, fiddles, tambourines, horns and even a big bass drum. They sought a physical demonstration and shouted and prayed and sang until someone in the congregation would fall, prostrate and unconscious from his seat. One or two men, walking up and down the aisle . . . would drag the fallen person up on the rostrum. Then about a dozen individuals would gather around at the same time. When the subject revived, he was counted among those who had passed through the Gethsemane experience, had obtained holy flesh, and had translation faith. Thereafter, it was asserted, he could not sin and would never die.²

Ellen White made several statements in response to the Holy Flesh movement which are instructive for our day. For example, she wrote:

The things you have described as taking place in Indiana, the Lord has shown me would take place just before the close of probation. Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated. There will be shouting, with drums, music, and dancing. The senses

¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:518, emphasis mine.

²Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 31.

of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions.¹

Emotionalism is a definite danger. Many have pointed out that the modern charismatic movement is the primary place where these activities can be seen. However, we should note that none of the things she mentioned--shouting, drums, music, and dancing--are sinful in and of themselves. In the Bible all of these are modeled and recommended, yes, even dancing. Miriam led the women in a dance of victory after crossing the Red Sea (Exod 15:20). David danced before the Lord and suggested the same for others (2 Sam 6:14-16; Pss 149:3; 150:4). Jesus went to the Feast of Tabernacles where He saw "gray-haired men, the priests of the temple and the rulers of the people, united in the festive dances to the sound of instrumental music and the chants of the Levites."²

Our early pioneers had some experiences that had what might be termed a charismatic flavor and they too were criticized. But Ellen White came to their defense:

God would have a people on the earth that will not be so cold and dead but that they can praise and glorify Him. . . .With such a prospect as this before us, such a glorious hope, such a redemption that Christ has purchased for us by his own blood, shall we hold our peace? Shall we not praise God, *even with a loud voice*, as the disciples did when Jesus rode into Jerusalem? Is not our prospect far more glorious than theirs was? Who dare then forbid us glorifying God, *even with a loud voice*, when we have such a hope, big with immortality and full of glory?³

On another occasion she describes weeping and shouting in the same service:

With brokenness of spirit, with their faces bathed in tears would these servants

¹Ibid., 36.

²White, *Desire of Ages*, 463.

³Ellen G. White, "To the Brethren and Sisters," *Review and Herald*, 10 June 1852, 18, emphasis mine.

of God entreat that a deep work of grace might be wrought in their own hearts. Shouts of victory, and praise to God ascended to heaven for His tokens of love and acceptance.¹

It is not uncommon for a concert band to play at a worship service, including the percussion section. Drums have been played in many a church service. The problem is not if drums are played, but how.

Done at the right time and in the right way, shouting, dancing, drums, and music have their place. The difficulty lies in choosing when and where and how.

While the danger of emotionalism certainly exists, there are other potential problems in worship services such as lifelessness and formalism. Mrs. White comments: "The evil of formal worship cannot be too strongly depicted."² On another occasion, "God is displeased with your lifeless manner in His house, your sleepy, indifferent ways of conducting religious worship."³

At times she seemed very comfortable with enthusiasm. During a speech at a temperance meeting she says, "I was stopped several times with clapping of hands and stomping of feet. I never had a more signal victory."⁴ She chides God's people for not being more enthusiastic, and compares them with sports fans:

The world is full of excitement. Men act as though they had gone mad, over low, cheap, unsatisfying things. How excited have I seen the streets of Sydney densely crowded for blocks, and on inquiring what was the occasion of the

¹Ellen G. White, "Our Late Experience," *Review and Herald*, 27 February 1866, 71.

²White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9:143.

³Ellen G. White, "The New Heart," *Review and Herald*, 14 April 1885, 513.

⁴Arthur White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years 1876-1891* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1984), 46.

excitement, was told that it was because some expert player of cricket had won the game. I felt disgusted. *Why are not the chosen men of God more enthusiastic?* They are striving for an immortal crown, striving for a home where there will be no need of light of the sun or moon, or of lighted candle.¹

Summary

In this review of the writings of Ellen White we have noted that she approved of new methods and did not condemn all uses of drama. Though she was concerned about extreme emotionalism, Mrs. White advocated being enthusiastic about the grace of Christ and the message of redemption.

We now turn for a moment to foreign missions.

Contextualization and Foreign Missions

Contextualization literally means “to put into context.” When applied to evangelistic work it means that we present the gospel “within the framework of the local culture.”² The word came into use in 1972, although the principles involved have been used for thousands of years.

Missionaries have at times carried the message of the gospel to new territories, but they have also imparted much of their culture.

James Hudson Taylor, long-time missionary to China, probably would not have recognized the term contextualization, but he lived it out. Bell writes,

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Yorkshire missionary, James Hudson Taylor, left the shores of England to begin a historic ministry in Inland China. At

¹Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies on Education* (n.p., [1890]), 81, emphasis mine.

²Borge Schantz, “One Message--Many Cultures: How Do We Cope?” *Ministry*, June 1992, 11.

first his ministry bore little fruit until he identified with the ordinary people by living with them, speaking their language, practicing their customs, and wearing similar dress.¹

Hudson Taylor was one of many foreign missionaries to find success following this philosophy of mission work.

Innovative Evangelists

Like missionaries to foreign countries, Adventist evangelists frequently used innovations to capture the attention of their audiences, using methods of communication familiar to the masses. When H.M.S. Richards was preaching on creationism in Hollywood, California, he invited Manuel Mancuso, a Hollywood stuntman, who had a remarkably real looking ape suit to help dramatize the sermon. He was led “down the aisle on the end of a big chain by a local strong man. Sometimes women would faint as he got close to them.”²

While in California, Richards began using the radio as a means of making the gospel message available to the masses. However, his daughter, Virginia Cason, remarked that “very few church leaders spoke in favor of the idea. Others vehemently opposed it.”³

This view was not unique to Adventism. Ed Dobson, pastor of the Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, noted that “when the church began broadcasting on

¹Bell, 88-89.

²Virginia Cason, “Los Angeles Hears HMS,” chap. in *H.M.S. Richards Man Alive!* (n.p.: Freedom House, 1974), [non-paginated].

³*Ibid.*, chapter “Father and Son United in God’s Work.”

radio, many Christians in the community were critical because they felt that Satan controlled the air waves ('the prince of the power of the air')."¹

William Fagal, founder of the Faith for Today telecast, received a similar reception, as will be noted later in this paper.

Modern Attempts to Speak to the Unchurched

Theologians have entered the arena to help make Christianity understandable to our secularized society. A discussion of two--Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich--follows.

Rudolf Bultmann

One of the classic attempts to reach secular people was by Rudolf Bultmann.

Vincent Miceli summarized Bultmann's position as follows:

Basically Bultmann's theology takes its orientation from two deeply subjective preoccupations. First, there is Bultmann's concern for making the message of the Gospel meaningful and relevant to modern, scientific society. Secondly, and perhaps consequently, there is Bultmann's historical skepticism about the reality of the New Testament events. In his effort to gain for the Gospel a relevancy acceptable to scientific man, Bultmann developed a theology which called for the confrontation between the Christian message and myth.²

Bultmann believed modern scientists would not accept the stories and events of the Bible that contain references to the supernatural. He taught that the miracles of Jesus and His resurrection were invented by early Christians to give authority to the Bible. The idea that God would destroy His own innocent Son to save people is barbaric

¹Dobson, 68.

²Vincent P. Miceli, *The Gods of Atheism* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1972), 329, 330.

and repulsive to reasonable human beings, according to Bultmann.¹ To keep Christianity from becoming obsolete, he believed we must demythologize the Bible and present the core message in modern terminology.

What Christianity needs, says Bultmann, is "an existential interpretation of the New Testament."² He depended upon the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who wrote that humans must

accept the dereliction of being thrown into existence from nothing and their destiny through death toward nothing. They realize that human existence is trapped in temporality from its superfluous birth to its annihilating death. Despite this radical absurdity and finitude, such men courageously give meaning to their lives and world, projecting themselves constantly forward into a future made meaningful through their serious, reflective, responsible exercise of liberty."³

Bultmann used Heideggerian concepts and terms to help reveal the meaning of the gospel to modern man. In Jesus we see how precarious our existence is. The purpose of the cross and the resurrection is not historical, but to help us encounter God and achieve authentic existence. Bultmann believed that the preacher should stress this understanding of the Bible message, even using Heidegger's terms rather than traditional teaching to expound the roles of God, Jesus, and men in salvation.⁴

¹Ibid., 330, 331.

²Ibid., 332.

³Ibid., 333.

⁴Ibid., 334.

Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich also made an attempt to make the gospel relevant to modern-day humans. He did not believe God entered into the events of this world. Like Bultmann, Tillich insisted that "Christian faith becomes relevant to life only when it is expressed in existentialist terms."¹

Tillich's theology is concerned with correlation. He wrote,

Theology must explore man's existential situation and the human questions evoked therein, together with what men as a rule find thinkable and acceptable in this situation. But above all, theology must compare these human questions and their humanly acceptable solutions with the understanding of God contained or implied in the gospel message. When the individual comprehends that his existential queries are dramatically related to the Christian biblical understanding of God, then, and only then, does he attain existential awareness of God.²

The ultimate question for humans is said to be, "What must I do to become myself, to become a New Being?" Tillich's answer is that the New Being was attained in Jesus Christ. He said we should accept "the symbolic meaning of the historical Jesus who merely manifests in Himself, or is the occasion for, the manifestation of the New Being in other men."³

Tillich did not believe the New Testament gave us accurate historical facts. It is important he says to "separate historical facts from their meanings."⁴ What really mattered to Tillich was not history or truth, but personal existence. All of the classic,

¹Ibid., 348.

²Ibid., 349.

³Ibid., 350.

⁴Ibid., 351.

traditional truths such as creation, the flood, the cross, resurrection, the kingdom of God, and even the Trinity were mere symbols to Tillich. They must all undergo radical reinterpretation if they are to become acceptable to the modern world.¹

Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich are two examples of twentieth-century theologians who have tried to make the gospel message relevant to secular minds, but who have made significant changes in it. Eternal life, miracles, and all other supernatural events are gone. These extreme changes make their approach unacceptable.

Vatican II

The Roman Catholic Church also recognized the need to adapt their outreach to different cultures. Catholic author, Avery Dulles, commented:

Thanks to the acquisition of new skills and the advancement of human knowledge, it is possible and necessary for the Church to find new ways of conceiving and expressing the Christian message and to engage in a "living exchange" with the diverse cultures of people.²

At Vatican II, Roman Catholics were trying to update their liturgy and doctrinal formulations so that they would make sense to modern people. For example, vernacularization of the liturgy was allowed in the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy document. This did not mean, however, that Western culture was to become the new norm. Dulles wrote:

The modernization of the Church, therefore, can hardly mean an uncritical adoption of the latest fruits of Western civilization. Rather, it must mean a more serious effort to address the modern world in language that will be understood and to speak to the concerns of people involved in contemporary

¹Ibid., 353.

²Avery Dulles, *The Resilient Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Co., 1977), 35.

secular life, with all its accompanying temptations, anxieties, hopes, and opportunities.¹

Realizing that different people would accept change at a different pace, Dulles noted the need for educating members concerning change:

Finally, two recommendations must be directed to the faithful--that is to say, to the great majority of Christians who are neither theologians nor pastors. On the one hand, they must exert themselves not to look upon change in itself as evil. They must not cling irrationally to outdated forms and structures, as though every modification to language and procedure were an assault on the deposit of faith.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to pursue change for its own sake.²

Significant reinterpretation of the Bible can lead to major mistakes. Dulles reminds us that "some Christians, friendly to Hitler's regime, reinterpreted the Christian message in such a way as to support the Fuhrer's claims."³

Liberation and Psychological Theologies

Evangelical author and speaker John Stott spoke of the challenge of being both faithful and relevant:

¹Ibid., 64.

²Ibid., 44.

³Ibid., 60.

Now it is comparatively easy to be faithful if we do not care about being contemporary, and easy also to be contemporary if we do not bother to be faithful. It is the search for a combination of truth and relevance which is exacting.¹

Stott noted his concern over two particular kinds of theology that attempt to make the gospel relevant, but are not completely consistent with the biblical record. Liberation theology is one example. It speaks of the people of China "being saved by Mao" and others in the world "being saved by Jesus Christ,"² a view rejected by Stott.

Others have turned theological truth into psychological terminology.

Commenting on the views of Bishop John Robinson, Stott writes,

Having dispensed with a transcendent personal God and replaced Him with 'the ground of our being', he asks what 'reconciliation' can mean when there is no God to be reconciled to. In answer he seizes on the phrase in the Parable of the Prodigal Son that 'he came to himself' and proposes that, since God is the ground of our being, salvation is coming to ourselves. Salvation becomes a kind of psychology, the wholeness of a balanced personality.³

Liberation theology and psychological theology both want to be relevant to the needs of people living today. However, neither is faithful to the theology of Scripture.

Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek Community Church

Bill Hybels, senior pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, Illinois, has also attempted to make the gospel message relevant and understandable to secular people. Believing that the arts need to be recaptured in the

¹John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 43.

²*Ibid.*, 95, 96.

³*Ibid.*, 86.

presentation of biblical truth, Hybels and some friends used drama, multi-media, and contemporary Christian music in their weekend services. They have had extraordinary success, growing from weekend attendance of 125 in 1975 to over 15,000 in 1996!

Some Evangelical Christians question Willow Creek's evangelistic methodology, expressing concern that their "worldly" methods lead to compromise.¹ The basic line of reasoning seems to be that if we use methods that look and sound like "the world" then in our teachings and character development we will become more "worldly" and less committed to the gospel of Christ.

Others believe that Willow Creek has maintained solid evangelical theology and developed mature Christian disciples.² Whether or not we agree with the critics of Bill Hybels and the philosophy of ministry of the Willow Creek Community Church, we can still learn something from his experience in reaching the unchurched with the gospel. Hybels has some ideas on how to speak to the secular mind that are worth considering.³

First, he says, before we step into the pulpit we need to understand the way they think. This is not done just by reading a book on the unchurched, although that may

¹One example is the book by John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993).

² Having attended eight Church Leadership Conferences at Willow Creek, and listened to nearly 100 sermons by Bill Hybels and other pastors at Willow Creek, I have not sensed that they have compromised the basic gospel message. Nor have I detected a neglect of Christian discipleship and character development. While they do not hold to all of the same doctrines and practices that Seventh-day Adventists do, I have found them to be evangelical in their theology, and they challenge their members to a very high standard of Christian living.

³Bill Hybels, "Speaking to the Secular Mind," *Leadership*, Summer 1988, 28-34.

be helpful. But we have to go out and get acquainted with secular unchurched people, and become their friends, in order to really understand how they think.

The second prerequisite to effective preaching to secular people is that we like them as people. Hybels points out that if we listen closely to messages on the radio and television we will hear remarks about "those worldly secular people." We unintentionally distance ourselves from them when we view them as the enemy.

Once we get to know them and come to appreciate them, Hybels says we will see that they have many genuine needs. Once we figure out their needs we will be better able to present the gospel to them. Hybels gives a gospel presentation at the end of each series of messages. His series are very practical and relevant, like "Turning Houses into Homes," "Fanning the Flames of Marriage," and "Telling the Truth to Each Other." He also gets into theological subjects with messages like "Alternatives to Christianity."

With the unchurched we cannot assume the Bible holds a great deal of authority. Hybels says,

They look at it as a useful collection of helpful suggestions, something like the Farmer's Almanac. They tend to think, "The Bible has some neat things to say once in a while, but we all know it's not the kind of thing I'm going to change my life radically to obey."

If we simply quote the Bible and say, "That settles it. Now obey that," they're going to say, "What? I'm supposed to rebuild my life on some book that's thousands of years old? I don't do that for any other respected literary work of antiquity." It just doesn't make sense to them.¹

Building up the reliability of Scripture and increasing the respect his audience has for it are his goals. Hybels believes this is done by "explaining the wisdom of God

¹Ibid., 31, 32.

behind it. When you show them how reasonable God is, that captivates the secular mind."¹ Eventually those who attend will come to accept the Bible as the Word of God and give it the full authority it deserves.

When speaking to the unchurched it is also critical to be informed about what is going on in the world. Hybels encourages those who wish to speak to secular people to read newspapers, magazines, and to listen to news programs. Instead of using Spurgeon stories, he says to use stories and examples from current events as illustrations. Most unchurched people think that Christians, and especially pastors, are woefully out of touch with reality. It is important to let them know you live in the real world.

When we are winding up a message, Hybels believes it is important to give people freedom of choice. At the end of an evangelistic message he says something like:

You've got a choice to make. I'm not going to make it for you. I'm not going to tell you that you have to make it in the next thirty seconds. But eventually you've got to make some decisions about the things we've talked about. As for me and my house, it's been decided, and we're glad we've made the decision. But you need to make that decision as God leads you.²

Bill Hybels's theology is different from Seventh-day Adventists in some areas, but he is an evangelical Christian from whom we can learn a great deal about ministry to the unchurched.

¹Ibid., 32.

²Ibid., 33.

Adventist Attempts to Reach the Unchurched

In recent years there have been several attempts to bridge the gap between Adventism and the secular unchurched citizens of our nation. One of them is the ministry of Faith for Today.

Faith for Today

In 1950, at the request of the Atlantic Union Conference, the General Conference authorized the production of a television program to be broadcast in New York City. Church leaders recognized that the emerging television technology had great potential to reach the masses. This decision, however, was not without detractors. Controversy among church leaders had waxed “hot and heavy” over whether or not it was appropriate to use television for evangelistic purposes.¹ Some “saw in television an unmitigatedly gross evil, an unredeemable menace to the nation as well as to the church.”² To them “television was mutually exclusive from anything that had to do with the church. It was, in short, casting one’s pearls before swine.”³

Many of those who pushed for the use of television had opposed the use of radio several decades earlier. Church leaders now recognized that the same arguments some had used against the radio ministry of the Voice of Prophecy were being used

¹Roger W. Coon, “The Public Speaking of Dr. William A. Fagal of ‘Faith for Today’: America’s First National Television Pastor” (Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University, 1969), 151.

²Ibid., 152.

³Ibid.

against this new technology. Radio proved to be a powerful evangelistic tool, and the church felt strongly that television broadcasts could be effective as well.¹

After much discussion church leaders decided to give the air waves another try, and the Faith for Today television ministry was launched. Elder William Fagal, a pastor in New York City, was chosen as the director.

After much study the “parable approach”² format was adopted. It opened with a dramatic presentation of an everyday problem, followed by a five-minute sermonette by Pastor Fagal and several songs from a male quartet. The program concluded with an invitation by Pastor and Mrs. Fagal for viewers to enroll in a Bible correspondence course.³

Many were extremely hesitant to endorse Faith for Today’s television ministry. But when people began calling and requesting the free literature and Bible correspondence course offered by the Fagals, their concerns melted away. Resistance turned to rejoicing as viewers became church members.

Years later when asked about the objectives of the telecast, Fagal gave four primary goals:

First, we want to give a good image of Seventh-day Adventists--to show the public we comb our hair straight. We want to get our people and our message accepted by the public--show that we’re normal people. Deep prejudice exists presently against us; the public thinks we’re strange. We want to change all that.

Secondly, we want to destroy the current inaccurate stereotyped impression the public has of Christian missionaries overseas--the “Mother Hubbard” dress, a people who are seen as prudish, out of touch with reality. We want to change that

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 162.

³Ibid.

image, and show that we're normal human beings, trying to help humanity. And our interviews with missionaries help a lot in reaching this goal.

Thirdly, of course, we are after membership accessions for the sponsoring church. Our fiscal survival depends upon it--the church would not continue pouring millions of dollars into this venture if we were not demonstrably "winning souls" to it. However, no mention of the denominational name is made in the program itself--only a credit line at the end. We want to avoid the appearance of tooting our own horn.

Finally, we want to interest people in the Bible, in its relevancy for their lives. Therefore, *the program is aimed basically at the unchurched*. In the early days we appeared at the hour in which the customary churchgoer was in his own house of worship on Sunday morning. Our primary aim is to get people to study the Bible; for, if they will study it, then we feel that they will see and accept the message of Seventh-day Adventism.¹

The fact that the telecast was targeted at the unchurched impacted the type of programming they used. Fagal said the dramatic format was adopted because

church people generally think of a sermon when thinking of broadcasting religion, not drama. But the world accepts drama; and we also find that our interviews, travelogues, and musical programs are more acceptable to the unchurched than mere sermons would be.²

Pastor Fagal above all wanted to make the program "relevant to daily Christian living." Summarizing his goal he said,

We attempt to make our films practical in the Christian experience of those who view. We want Faith for Today to help them in meeting daily problems and in overcoming obstacles that might deter them in their onward progress toward God's kingdom.³

Today, under the leadership of Elder Dan Matthews, the ministry of Faith for Today is still focused on the unchurched. The format has changed to a Christian talk show that explores a variety of topics of interest to the public. During and after the

¹Ibid., 173-174.

²Ibid., 174, emphasis mine.

³Ibid.

discussion a Christian perspective is highlighted, and literature and Bible studies are made available to the program viewers.

Literature

Adventist editors and leaders have tried to reach the unchurched through the printed page. Magazines such as *Vibrant Life*, *Signs of the Times*, and *Message* are designed with the unchurched in mind. Pamphlets and books come out from time to time targeted at the unchurched. The quality of much of these materials is very high.

The major problem seems to be one of distribution. We have not experienced significant success in getting our literature in the homes of the masses. No doubt much thought has gone into that problem, but no obvious solution is apparent.

General Conference Committee on Secularism

As a result of Elder Neal Wilson's call for an ongoing study of how to reach the secular-minded of our world in 1985, a committee was formed to research this topic. One of the results of this group is the book *Meeting the Secular Mind*.¹ It contains a number of excellent ideas on how to translate theology into messages the secular world can understand and appreciate.

One author warned,

If one speaks of antiquated issues and outdated concerns, they will turn away in a hurry. If we do not talk the language of the contemporary person, or about his primary concerns, we will fail to reach him.²

¹Humberto M. Rasi and Fritz Guy, eds., *Meeting the Secular Mind* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985).

²Ibid.; Robert M. Zamora, "The Gospel of the Abundant Life," 129.

The major concerns of the unchurched are the big existential questions of life. They want answers to everyday living. Zamora writes, "The Bible must be presented as a book that deals with the ultimate questions of life, and that reveals the principles and laws of successful living."¹

We often think becoming an Adventist means mentally assenting to our beliefs. But there is much more! People are looking for answers to issues that relate to life, and Adventism offers a wonderful way of living. Many of our doctrines offer answers to the existential questions people have, like Who am I? and Where am I going? While it would be possible to push too far into existentialism, we would be remiss if we ignored it. Zamora comments, "When we realize that Adventism is a perspective on existence and a way of life, then we will make better progress in reaching the secular mind."²

Summary

Many attempts at reaching the unchurched have been made in recent years. Some have not only adapted their methods to reach people, but they have changed the essence of the gospel message. Others have been more successful at remaining faithful to the gospel while trying new ways of sharing it.

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., 132.

PART IV: ACTION

CHAPTER 8

SYNTHESIS AND SUMMARY

Synthesis of the Analysis

Secularism has eroded the influence of the church in society. More and more people are viewing and pursuing life without relationship to God. Most do not hate God or disbelieve His existence--they do not consider Him necessary or relevant to their daily lives.

The unchurched are almost untouched by the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. One of our greatest problems may simply be lack of education. They know very little about us, and most of us probably do not know much about them either.

In order to reach the unchurched we must understand them. Generally speaking they believe in God, but not in the church. Most have only a little biblical knowledge. Their perception of the church tends to be negative, associating it with guilt, boredom, and irrelevance.

Theological Conclusions

The Bible is clear about God's passion and plan to reach the lost. He cares deeply about their lack of spiritual direction and would like very much for Christians to

reach out to them. One of the foundational principles of God's plan to reach the unsaved is incarnational ministry. In order to reach us, God, through Christ, became one of us, entering into our world and culture, and spoke to us in the language of humanity. We, in turn, must enter into the culture of those we wish to reach, and present the gospel in ways that they will understand and appreciate, without compromising Christian principle.

The apostle Paul wrote the best summary of this missiological philosophy when he wrote:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor 9:19-23).

Ellen White's comment on this passage is instructive:

Thus the apostle varied his manner of labor, shaping his message to the circumstances under which he was placed. . . . The laborer for God is to study carefully the best methods, that he may not arouse prejudice or combativeness. This is where some have failed. By following their natural inclinations, they have closed doors through which they might, by a different method of labor, have found access to hearts, and through them to other hearts.

God's workmen must be many-sided men; that is, they must have breadth of character. They are not to be one-idea men, stereotyped in their manner of working, unable to see that their advocacy of truth must vary with the class of people among whom they work and circumstances they have to meet.¹

Having reviewed church history, what have we learned?

¹White, *Gospel Workers*, 118-119, emphasis mine.

What We Learn from History

Hegel quipped, “What experience and history teach is this—that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.”¹ While that statement may be an exaggeration, it is true in many instances.

As we scan missiological history, we find people trying to reach non-Christians, who followed the principle of contextualization and the incarnational model of ministry. The list includes Martin Luther, Hudson Taylor, William Fagal, Bill Hybels, and many others. They frequently received criticism at first. But later, in some cases, this tended to decrease when they experienced significant success in winning people to Christianity.

Adventist attempts to reach the unchurched through ministries such as the Faith for Today telecast and magazines like *Vibrant Life*, *Message*, and *Signs of the Times* have not received the significant attention and support they deserve. The quality of the products produced has usually been high, but the link between the product and the target audience, the unchurched, seems weak.

¹Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 6, quoted in Miller, 139.

CHAPTER 9

SUGGESTED ACTION PLANS

Implications for the Hamilton Community Church

The incarnational ministry principle of contextualization upon which the ministry Hamilton Community Church ministry is based seems to be in harmony with the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, and has parallels in history. This suggests that while improvements can certainly be made in the way these principles are lived out, the church should continue in the general direction it is going.

Hamilton has taken seriously the research about the unchurched by authors such as Lee Strobel, George Barna, Doug Murren, and others. For example, the wide variety of adult Sabbath School classes offered each week reflects the fact that the unchurched have unique needs that the traditional lesson quarterly may not address. Authors of the quarterlies assume that readers are Seventh-day Adventists familiar with a certain body of information. By providing classes on topics such as marriage, parenting, money management, and the twelve steps, we are giving people who may not be ready for advanced biblical studies a place where their current needs can be addressed.

This approach has also been successfully carried over into the worship services. A seeker who attends the Hamilton Community Sabbath morning worship service will

not hear a lot of Adventist jargon and technical theological terminology. Each service is planned with unchurched guests in mind. To capture the attention of the entertained eyes of the average person, services usually include drama, multi-media, and other forms of visual communication. Most of the music used at Hamilton is contemporary and easily comprehended by seekers who appreciate our attempt to communicate in a culturally relevant manner. Each worship service is different, keeping in mind that the unchurched like variety and creativity, according to current research.

Literature on unchurched boomers indicates that they want quality moral training for their children. As a result, children's ministries have received significant attention at Hamilton. Efforts have been made to make the Sabbath School classes interesting and understandable to children who do not have a strong biblical background. For example, we have replaced some of the tradition Sabbath School programming with Vacation Bible School materials, which are designed with community children in mind. A children's church is also offered each week during the worship service for children ages four through eight. This enables their parents to be able to focus better on their worship service, and it provides another opportunity to minister to children.

One of our primary goals has been to provide a place where members would feel comfortable inviting their non-churched friends. An informal survey conducted one Sabbath morning indicated that two thirds of our members present that day at some time had invited a seeker friend to church at Hamilton. Research would have to be conducted to determine how this compares with other Adventist churches, but it seems likely that this is higher than in the average traditional Adventist congregation.

The research of Dudley and Gruesbeck indicated that newly planted churches would be able to reach inactive members of other Seventh-day Adventist churches. We found this to be very true. We have experienced our greatest success in reaching this segment of the unchurched population.

Some progress toward reaching unchurched individuals has been made, but there are many areas that need attention and improvement.

We must guard against taking a "business-as-usual" attitude toward our ministry. Our programming needs to be even more aggressively targeted at the unchurched. At times we have catered to the interests and needs of our members and neglected our seekers.

The fact that there has been internal conflict over our programming, such as drama and contemporary music, is evidence that the mission of the church and its philosophy of ministry are not clearly understood by some of the rank and file membership. This has been addressed in a recent sermon series, but needs continued attention. Casting the vision of our unique mission must be done more regularly and aggressively through communication mechanisms such as the membership class, church newsletter, and occasional sermon series.

Our success in reaching unchurched Seventh-day Adventists should be encouraging. However, we need to give attention to the fact that we have not experienced significant success in reaching unchurched individuals without an Adventist background. Some have been reached, but not nearly as many as I would think possible if we were more faithful to our mission.

During my research for this dissertation I noted George Barna's findings, which indicate that of all church activities unchurched people would be most likely to attend a concert or a seminar on a felt need. Most people are reluctant to attend worship services on Sunday, and even more so on Saturday at first. Add to that the fact that many consider the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be a cult, and it would seem that we would need to work extra hard at building rapport with people before inviting them to our Saturday morning, seeker-sensitive worship services. Concerts, seminars, and other relationship-building activities should receive higher priority than they have in the past at Hamilton.

Our vision is to offer community classes on a regular basis. A new team is being formed to accomplish this. We recently started a weight control class, and we have an Internet training class on the drawing board. These and other classes are designed to give us opportunities to serve people in the community and build relationships with them.

A key factor in reaching the unchurched is building relationships of integrity with them. Programming and technology are important tools, but ultimately people become Christians as the result of meaningful relationships. Relationship building must be modeled by the pastors before our membership will really follow suit. A few of our nonchurched friends have attended Hamilton Community, but I have not done an adequate job of clearly modeling this activity on a regular basis for our church family.

Another area of need is in teaching our people how to share their faith. Many desire to do so, but do not understand how to do it naturally in the course of their daily

lives. I attended a seminar called *How to Be a Contagious Christian* in which we learned that each person has a unique style of witnessing. Just as it is important for each member to discover, develop, and deploy their spiritual gift, the same can be said for learning about our unique style of witnessing.

Another area that needs attention is follow-up and assimilation. When unchurched people have begun attending Hamilton we have not consistently reached out and intentionally built a network of relationships that will hold them. Some have received adequate attention, but many have not. The holes in our nets are much too large. We need to give relationship building as much effort as we have programming.

To help assimilate our seekers we need to build a strong small-groups ministry. These offer the best hope for integrating people relationally into the church. Several months ago we launched our small groups ministry and nearly ten groups are functioning now. We have much work to do, but we have started and I believe these groups will help us integrate our attending seekers.

In addition to small groups, social activities can provide opportunities for relationship building, something we have not done enough in the past couple of years. Recently our social activities team began planning a series of events, which included things such as a Saturday night social, two golf tournaments, a motorcycle ride, a bicycle trip, a campout, and more. These have gone well thus far, and we are confident that these events will help us build relationships and a spirit of community.

A third area that needs development is in ministries that meet needs. For example, an unchurched couple who began attending our church nearly four years ago is

now going through a divorce. We had a ministry for the divorced several years ago, but the leaders got married and have moved on. We need a way to help those who are divorcing through this turbulent time in their lives. This is just one example of many that could be implemented.

One of our challenges has been that we have access to our building only one day a week. We recently purchased twenty acres of property and it has a house we have been able to use for fellowship dinners, socials, small groups, and team meetings. This has been a big help the past six months. Once we have our own building it will be much easier to have ministries that will operate during the week. Our building campaign motto is "Building the kingdom seven days a week." This is our vision, and while we should not wait until we have our own space, it will significantly increase our ability to serve our members and others in the community.

In summary, as a result of this study, I plan to take the following action steps:

1. I will set aside four hours each week to develop relationships with seekers who attend our church and others in the community who are still unchurched.
2. At an upcoming leadership team meeting, I will share a synopsis of this study. On the agenda I will include time to discuss our mission, vision, and core values to make sure that as a team we are clear on those issues. We will take time to visualize what our core values will look like when they are lived out in real life situations. We will discuss ways we can keep our vision and core values before our members. On September 7, our fifth anniversary, I will preach a sermon in which I will highlight our core values and cast the vision for the future of the Hamilton Community Church. In a

sermon each quarter, I will try to creatively highlight a core value and talk about our vision for ministry.

3. At another leadership team meeting we will discuss possible new ministries that could be launched in the fall. Women's ministries, divorce recovery, and a cars ministry are examples of some we have discussed in the past. These might be launched on September 7 at a ministries fair.

4. In order to help our members reach out to unchurched people, at an upcoming staff meeting I will set a time for a "How to Become a Contagious Christian" seminar. Once the date is determined I will make sure it is well publicized for the entire church, and I will personally extend invitations to our key leaders. Once the seminar is developed we will offer it approximately twice a year.

5. At a worship team meeting in July I will discuss plans for our 11:15 a.m. seeker services in the fall with a view to making them more aggressively targeted toward seekers. I will discuss plans for the fall 9:00 a.m. believers service with our elders and worship team leaders to make certain they are meeting the needs of our members.

6. As soon as it can be arranged, I will meet with the gentleman I asked to lead our seeker events team, to determine if he is going to be able to carry this responsibility. If he is, I will work on developing a team to plan concerts and seminars on felt needs. If he is not, I will look for a new leader and get this team going by September of this year.

7. To ensure that our seekers and new members are assimilated into our church, I will meet as soon as possible with our small groups coordinators to work out a strategy for making sure all the seekers who are attending our church and all new

members are invited to participate in a small group. I will ask our elders to periodically visit those who choose not to join a small group to develop relationships with them, and to see if there are any needs to met or questions to be answered. We will also have a small groups emphasis at our ministries fair on September 7 giving opportunity for anyone to join a small group.

8. At an upcoming building team meeting I will remind our members of our mission and core values, asking them to keep them in mind as they plan our building. July 9-11 all our ministry and team leaders will brainstorm about their ministries and express their needs in our new building with our architects. September 7 we will unveil our building site masterplan for all the church to see.

9. I will regularly involve our staff and leadership team in conversational prayer. I will also restart a weekly Prayer Partners newsletter I used to write. Prayer must permeate all aspects of the Hamilton Community Church.

These action plans are challenging, but by the grace of God, very doable. Many of them are things we have talked about doing in the past. Now is the time to move forward and get these things going.

Suggestions for Pastors and Local Church Leaders

Pastors and other church leaders who become aware of the unique needs of the unchurched should work to make other members in their congregations cognizant of their special needs. Members need to be informed on how to reach out to the unchurched. In some cases churches may be able to implement changes in their worship services that will make the service more meaningful to the unchurched. Following are

some suggestions for those thinking about making a transition in their current traditional worship service.

First, people will not change unless they are dissatisfied with what already exists. If a church is growing and the members are generally satisfied with the way things are, it will be very difficult to make significant changes in the outreach patterns.

Second, pastors and church leaders should work on changing the values and mind-set of church members before changing the programming at worship services. Changing programming without changing values usually leads to conflict.

In Adventist churches it would be important to explain incarnational ministry and contextualization from the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, and to show how this has played out in church history.

Third, pastors and church leaders will need to accept the fact that implementing change takes a long time. In most cases it will take several years to make significant alterations in Sabbath morning worship services. While there are undoubtedly some exceptions to this, most would be wise to exercise great restraint in the change process.

Attempting to transition churches with a traditional style of worship to a seeker-oriented contemporary format may cause so much conflict that it is not wise to move in that direction. In many cases it might be more prudent to add a new service designed specifically for the unchurched. Some churches have added a seeker service before Sabbath School, on Saturday night, or on another night of the week such as Tuesday or Friday.

From my personal experience as a pastor and my observation of other churches I have concluded that church planting is one of the best ways to reach out to the unchurched. Most established traditional churches will not be able to transition to a contemporary format. The conflict is frequently so great that it is best not to move forward in transitioning a church to this kind of ministry. Therefore more pastors and church leaders should give serious consideration to planting new churches specifically designed to reach the unchurched.

When a church is planted there are fewer barriers because the traditions of the church have not been set. People are generally more open to doing things differently when they start a newly planted church with the unchurched as their chosen target group. A certain amount of transitioning still has to take place because even those who help start the church bring with them a certain amount “baggage” from their previous experiences with church life. But the amount is much less than churches already established.

It would be helpful if pastors and local church leaders would work at being supportive of other churches who are attempting to reach the unchurched using non-traditional methods. Even if they are not involved directly, giving the others the moral support they need is very helpful and important.

When a new church is being planted, nearby pastors and local church leaders often feel threatened by the new group and try to protect their “turf.” They are afraid they will lose members to the new group resulting in a weakening of their ministry. While this is understandable, it should not be accepted as the norm. A church may be

close by geographically, but programatically very different. Each will appeal to two different kinds of people. Cooperation, not competition, should be the watchword.

We would be wise to use the Sabbath as a day for evangelism as Paul did. For many years church leaders promoted the idea of having a yearly community guest day, a Sabbath worship service when everything was planned with community guests in mind. What would happen if we applied that idea to an entire month, or even a whole quarter? Our members would be much more inclined to invite their seeker friends on days they know are planned for their friends.

While I am grateful that we did some things right at Hamilton, as I reflect on our experience, there is one thing I would definitely do differently: I would work to develop and establish the core values that would drive our ministry before we started our public worship services, and talk specifically as possible about what these core values would look like when we lived them out in actual ministry situations. We experienced some very serious and painful conflict as a result of not having worked on these together at the beginning. Following are two examples of where we ran into trouble.¹

First, our worship team was severely criticized many times by several of our core group members for some of the programming (drama, music, multi-media etc.) we used in our seeker sensitive worship services. One of our core values stated that we would use culturally relevant methods of communication, but we would remain doctrinally faithful to our fundamental beliefs. These members did not understand what

¹After having compared notes with several colleagues who are involved in ministries similar to ours, I have found that they too have experienced serious problems in these same areas.

“culturally relevant” would look like. If we had spelled it out clearly and talked about specifics at the beginning it would have prevented a great deal of misunderstanding. Some of those with us at the start might have chosen not to be a part of the Hamilton church, but it would have been better to get that settled at the outset rather than later.

Another core value stated that we would unconditionally love and accept people just as they are. As we lived out this core value we attracted many who had felt unwelcome at other churches. But we ran into trouble when some of our key leaders and public performers misinterpreted this value. They did not understand that we will unconditionally love and accept all who come into our *fellowship*, but there are character and lifestyle requirements for *membership* and *leadership*. When serious moral problems arose a few reacted very angrily when we asked them to step down for a time while we worked out the problems.

In addition to developing and discussing core values, I would encourage those planting new churches to establish clear character expectations and lifestyle standards for key ministry leaders and public performers before they begin public worship services. It might shrink the workforce a little at first, but in the long run the church will be more unified and established on a stronger foundation.

Recommendations for Denominational Leaders

Contextualization as a missiological principle has been applied to mission work outside North America for many years. It would seem that we should give thought as to how it might apply to North America. The pace of cultural change has been so rapid in

the past few decades that the culture of those in the church is foreign to those outside the church and vice versa.

In order for the church to effectively reach the unchurched in the various subcultures it seems that it would be wise to support those who are attempting to reach out in non-traditional ways to these new groups and to start unique ministries designed to win them for Christ's kingdom. If the music stirs up some controversy it is possible it is also stirring the souls of some unchurched folk.

Not only can new congregations be more effective in reaching specific people groups outside the walls of our churches, they can also add life to those on the inside. Some members are present "in body but not in spirit" in their local churches. This is particularly true for many of our youth and young adults. For a variety of reasons their spiritual needs are not being met in the churches they are attending, and they would welcome a new church with a different approach to ministry. This has certainly proved true for us at Hamilton. We have many young adults involved in our ministry who just did not seem to fit in the other area churches.

God was strategic and intentional about when and where He "planted" the nation of Israel at the crossroads of civilization. Much of the church planting that has taken place in the past has been done spontaneously and spasmodically, resulting in large population areas with few churches, and some small churches in remote areas with little potential for growth. We need a comprehensive strategic plan for church planting, giving special attention to metropolitan areas. This enterprise needs and deserves our

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