

# Short-Term Missions: A Vital Ingredient of the Divine Blueprint

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By Vernon B. Parmenter

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The face of mission in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has changed dramatically in recent years. It has moved from an emphasis on reaching into unentered areas all over the world to focusing on the 10/40 window of the world. The number of employed missionaries is declining and at the same time the number of volunteer missionaries is increasing.

Due to a downturn in mission offerings, the number of employed long-term missionaries has been reduced. Recognizing this dilemma, driven by the urgency of the times in which we live, and responding to the growing desire of many church

members to be involved in mission, approximately ten years ago the Church established the Adventist Volunteer Center at the Church's headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Volunteer service is not new to the Church. Ever since its inception the Church has relied on volunteers but it was not until about thirty-five years ago that it realized the potential of sending volunteers to serve overseas as missionaries. It was then that the Student Missionary program began in an organized manner with American college and university students going to Japan and South Korea to teach English and win souls. Since that time the program has expanded to numerous other countries.

The Church has always responded to the generosity and enthusiasm of volunteers, excited about the grace of Jesus Christ and His soon coming, and has created opportunities for them to share their faith. But until recent years, when it became easier and cheaper to move all over the world in a short time, mission was largely confined to one's own community, city, village, or country. But now church



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members are taking mission trips for two or three weeks to far away countries, while numerous individuals are spending one to three years overseas in some form of evangelism in a cross-cultural setting.

The Church derives its authority for utilizing church members in ministry from the Holy Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy. The Bible identifies two types of ministry—those who should be supported by the tithes and offerings and those who are invited to donate their time and service on a self-supporting basis as God blesses them.

Mal 3:6-18, in the Old Testament, and 1 Cor 9:11-14, in the New Testament, remind us that “the Lord has commanded that

missionary. There were times when he needed to take time out from his ministry to make tents to support his needs (Acts 18:3).

Ellen G. White suggests:

It is not sufficient to lay money alone upon the altar. God calls for men, volunteers, to carry the truth to other nations and tongues and people. It is not our numbers nor our wealth that will give us a signal victory; but it is devotion to work, moral courage, ardent love for souls, and untiring, unflagging zeal (2002:404).

The Lord calls for volunteers, just as He called the fishermen to leave their nets and follow Him, and just as He called Matthew from the receipt of customs. He calls upon them to unite with Him, the greatest Teacher the world has ever known, and to learn from Him how to work for the

## **Paul was an excellent example of a self-supporting missionary.**

those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14). Adventists have always interpreted these verses to indicate that the tithe of the Lord is for the sacred use of employing the clergy.

But on the other hand, the references are more numerous, both in the New Testament and Old Testament, which describe a labor of love offered by those who work to spread the gospel without thought of financial compensation. Paul was an excellent example of a self-supporting mis-

salvation of souls. “Follow Me,” he says, and many will obey the call. God has His men of opportunity, who will leave all and follow Him. The Lord would not have these men bring into their work the practices they have followed in the past; they are to learn of Christ His methods and plans (1906:21).

For the purpose of this discussion “short-term missions” in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is defined as short-term missionaries who serve on a full time volunteer basis, as opposed to those who are employed as full-time missionaries, and who may serve

for a minimum of a few weeks to two or three years. Seventh-day Adventist volunteers may also receive financial compensation ranging from almost nothing to having all expenses paid. These funds originate from a variety of sources—the volunteer, the sending organization, the calling organization, a church member, one's family, or a combination of these sources.

### **Number of Volunteers**

It is very difficult to determine the size of the volunteer movement in the Adventist Church. If the numbers are limited to those who serve on an interdivision basis the totals are less than 2,000 per year, but if volunteers are included who serve within a division, union, or conference, immediately the numbers move

to a totally different sphere for there are untold thousands of full-time volunteer missionaries. One Union reported recently that they had 8,000 full-time volunteer missionaries serving in their territory for one year.

It is only recently however, that the Church has begun to recognize this untapped resource of potential missionaries. Part-time volunteers have always played a role in disseminating the gospel in their home communities but Adventists have been slow to recognize what other denominations have known and experienced for some time. The Mormon Church is probably the best example of what can be achieved when church members catch the vision and recognize their responsibilities. Among Mormons each family,

*A. N. Onjukka volunteers in Majuro.*



when a child is born, contributes to a fund so that there will be adequate resources for overseas mission service when the child becomes of age. Before each young person commences two years of service he/she is required to submit to a minimum of six months of comprehensive training. This specialized training focuses on the techniques of witnessing, theology, cross-cultural ministry, and language study. Each volunteer goes out into the field equipped for the task, while so many of the Adventist Church's volunteers go with little or no training for the task assigned.

Imagine what impact a similar program would have if the

quinquennium in the number of interdivision volunteers processed through its office. The Center processed 8,199 volunteers during the last five years compared to 6,325 in the previous quinquennium. While it is always encouraging to see the numbers grow the Church needs to see them grow even more significantly in the future. Presently there are no statistics for the programs within divisions, unions, and conferences. However, there is no doubt that the numbers are in the tens of thousands.

### **Types of Work**

The majority of volunteers who serve for a year or more are involved in teaching English as

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Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted a program of planning for service and training. Not only would the number of missionaries multiply but imagine how much more quickly the gospel would spread around the world. It is sad that currently many of the positions advertised on the General Conference Adventist Volunteer web site go unfilled year after year.

The statistics tell a heartwarming story. The Adventist Volunteer Center has seen a 30 percent growth over the previous

a second language. And while in the past this number included numerous student missionaries this is no longer the case because the governments of many countries now limit work permits to those who hold college degrees. The fascinating thing about this is the fact that the degree required by most of these governments is not limited to a particular discipline. As long as the volunteer has a four year degree, which could be in engineering, theology, or whatever, a work permit is usu-

ally granted. Some governments go further and demand that the volunteer must come from a country where English is the mother tongue.

The remaining volunteers, those who are not involved in teaching English as a second language, are engaged in all kinds of ministries—office work, evangelism, youth ministry, physicians, dentists, nurses, and numerous others. In fact the Adventist Volunteer Center prides itself in trying to fill every need that is submitted.

The mission of the General Conference Adventist Volunteer Center is to assist the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the proclamation of the gospel to all peoples through the ministry of Adventist Volunteers, matching talents, gifts, resources and professional expertise with defined needs (<http://www.adventistvolunteers.org/>).

An expanding aspect of volunteerism is the group activity that is developing on a grand scale in many locations. Numerous teams go out to undertake all kinds of mission assignments for a three or four week term. Activities include building and maintenance groups who work on church facilities, medical and dental teams often sponsored by Adventist institutions, and those engaged in all kinds of evangelism. Perhaps the latter group is the most numerous.

### **Impact**

It is almost impossible to measure the impact of short-term

volunteers upon the community and its immediate surroundings. However, Ellen White suggests that it will be through volunteers that the work will be carried to finality.

The Lord calls for volunteers who will be self-denying, who will endure hardness as good soldiers of the cross of Christ. He calls for workers who are willing to be laborers together with Him. We can do much to help the poor and brighten their lives, if we will but realize it. Those who work with unselfish hearts, who share Christ's sympathies, who strive earnestly to fulfill His purpose for humanity, will help to swell the tide of His joy, and will give honor, majesty, and praise to His name (1899:7).

The psalmist assures us that "He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him" (Ps 126:6). There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that if missionary volunteers go out carrying the Word of God (the seed) and weeping with hearts broken on the Rock Jesus Christ, they will have the joy of a harvest.

Reporting does not come easily for many volunteers. If it means sitting down and writing out the story, that is one thing. It is another thing to gather statistics. *Mission Post* is a quarterly magazine produced by the General Conference Adventist Volunteer Center that struggles to find a regular supply of mission stories and reports on what Adventist volunteers are doing.



Nevertheless, every year there are thousands of baptisms as a result of the work and commitment of volunteers. The Adventist Volunteer Center would never assume that the baptisms are due to the efforts of only the volunteers, but also includes the readiness of the Holy Spirit to work through those who are willing to be his vessels.

### **Problems**

The history of the volunteer program in the Adventist Church has created certain expectations. Thirty-five years ago, when the

have been able to do so without the financial support offered by the language schools. In fact the stipend was so good that many volunteers were able to save money for their tuition when they returned to their alma maters.

Unfortunately, this philosophy of support has permeated the thinking of volunteerism today. While the language school program is a most successful form of outreach it has created a climate where volunteers to other projects have expectations of financial support on a similar basis. But there are numerous

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language schools were established in Japan and Korea, they were able to function on a self-supporting basis. In fact, they were so successful financially, that they were able to pay a reasonable stipend to the volunteer, provide free accommodations, and pay for the insurance and airfares of the volunteers if they served for a set period of time.

Most of the volunteers who served as English teachers originated from the North American Division colleges and universities. The volunteers, mostly untrained for the assigned task, would take a year or two in the middle of their study program to serve in Asia but many would not

organizations which desperately need help and do not have the financial resources to match what the language schools offer. These same institutions complain bitterly of the unfair competition that has emerged for qualified individuals, particularly in countries where the governments will only issue work permits to volunteers who are qualified for the advertised positions.

The Adventist Church needs to do all it can to change this philosophy. People need to understand what true volunteerism means, not what it means to be a supported volunteer. The church needs to work hard to change these expectations and it needs

*R. Chung volunteers in Palau.*



to appeal to its members to give of themselves, to be self-supporting in every way possible. There are areas of the world that are crying out for help but are unable to offer prospective volunteers any financial compensation, let alone provide any benefits, such as accommodations or insurance coverage.

Another problem is equity among volunteer missionaries working within the same field. Where financial support is provided by the calling organization, there needs to be equity of compensation for those in the same country doing the same work. There is no policy in most parts of the world to govern this problem. Most organizations endeavor to offer whatever they can as a token enticement to the vol-

unteer and to compete with those who have larger resources.

Another problem is that many organizations encourage volunteers to go to isolated areas for pioneer type assignments. The issue is usually compounded by the fact that the calling organization is very short on funds and relies on the volunteers to raise the money needed to perform their tasks. It takes a special kind of person who is willing to go into a new place where the work has yet to be established, where the infrastructure of the Church is undeveloped, where there is little or no history of church growth, and where the gospel has failed to penetrate in any significant manner. Without proper training and support such pioneer situations can result in

the volunteers facing challenges and difficulties they are not prepared to handle.

### **Challenges**

The Church has recognized for some time that in order for our regularly employed missionaries to have any kind of success in a cross-cultural setting they need special training. Much influence can be destroyed in moments by ignoring a cultural taboo. Communication may even totally break down. And now that short-term volunteers are participating in cross-cultural settings more and more it is just as important for them to be trained

ing add to the total amount the volunteer would need to raise. Do-it-yourself courses, books, and the internet are only partial solutions. It has been proved that short-term volunteers will accomplish more in the field if they are better prepared for cross-cultural ministry.

Most volunteers would also benefit from training for specific roles in evangelism. While it is true that God provides gifts and equips those who are willing to serve, there are many who go out to serve, only to discover that there are many skills they lack, including appropriate resources. There are numerous

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as well as the missionaries who are fully employed. The challenge is to develop a way that this can be accomplished.

There are so few with adequate training who can deliver appropriate training in all of the divisions of the world. And even if there were enough teachers, with volunteers leaving home every week of the year, the challenge would be to run regular training programs throughout the year. And then there is the issue of the missionary taking the extra time from their regular employment to participate in adequate preparation for service. The expenses of travel, food, and accommodations for train-

resources which are available for such training but there is nothing as successful as the opportunity to learn from someone who has wide experience, where individuals can practice their skills in a classroom setting and in the homeland community. Conference and Mission departmental directors could provide an excellent service by offering special classes on a regular basis for those who are preparing for short-term volunteer service. It would be most appropriate if these same departmental directors became experts in training for cross-cultural ministry.

The current emphasis on reaching the peoples of the



10/40 window demands even more specialized cross-cultural as well as specialized evangelistic training. There are so few with any understanding of the beliefs of the people, let alone tried and tested methods of reaching them with the gospel. It is critical that the Adventist Church provide appropriate training for both employed missionaries and short-term volunteers, particularly when it is understood that many volunteers are dealing with life and death issues in some countries. The life of the missionary and the lives of those touched by the missionary may

all volunteer missionaries. Experience suggests that the Church cannot afford to ensure that all missionary volunteers are provided with suitable insurance.

Another challenge comes in the form of lack of vision by the leadership. Ellen G. White tells us over and over again in her writings that the work will not be finished until our church members unite with the ministry in proclaiming the gospel. She also tells us that it is the responsibility of church pastors and leaders to find a task for every church member to perform. Adventist Volunteer Service does just that.

**The returned missionaries are a force for evangelism in local situations as they help others in their churches catch a new vision.**

be at stake if not handled in a sensitive manner.

The volunteer program has not been without its other challenges and problems in recent years. It was affected by 9/11 and the SARS epidemic. People were reluctant to travel overseas and the numbers were reduced significantly on those occasions. Such problems have also affected the insurance the Church provides for its volunteers and rising costs are always a challenge. However, the Church is committed to making sure that there is adequate insurance coverage for

It provides opportunities for church members to become involved in frontline work, to unite with the ministry in proclaiming the gospel, and yet there are very few individuals assigned at the division, union, conference, or mission level to promote and foster this work. Numerous positions remain unfilled each year because there are so few who are engaged in the work of assigning church members to fill the gaps.

The 2006 U.S. Department of Labor Current Population Survey states that “43% of volunteers

C. Chinchuretta volunteers in Pohnpei.



became involved after being asked, most often by someone in the organization (27%) or by a relative, friend, or co-worker (14%). 41% of volunteers became involved on their own initiative” (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>). If only the Adventist Church had more leaders dedicated to asking and challenging its church members to become involved.

Another study, “Keeping Baby Boomers Volunteering” by the Corporation for National and Community Service states that despite their “Me Generation” image, Baby Boomers are volunteering at higher rates than their predecessor generations. Boomers who remain in the workforce or have children are more likely to volunteer than those who do

not, and boomers prefer to give back by sharing their expertise rather than providing general labor. They are most interested in planning, managing, marketing, music and arts, and mentoring and coaching ([http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/role\\_impact/performance\\_research.asp](http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/role_impact/performance_research.asp)). It seems that the situation is ripe for churches to encourage Baby Boomers to lend their intellectual capital, skills, and desire to ministry activities.

### **Benefits of Volunteerism**

#### *Benefits to the Missionary*

When individuals commit to a significant period of service they are tremendously blessed by the experience, even if times are

tough. They learn to rely totally on Jesus Christ for guidance, support, and comfort. Their eyes are opened to miraculous opportunities, to broader perspectives, to communities, and a world that is hungering for answers to numerous questions about life. The missionaries discover hidden talents for service that they never realized they had before and are able to test these gifts. More beneficial is the opportunity to win people to Christ who become lifelong friends. And as volunteers learn what it means to make sacrifices they are filled with true happiness for having served. There is also real color that comes into their lives as they explore new cultures and discover that there are many ways of achieving the important things of life.

### *Benefits to the Calling Organization*

The organizations which are served by the missionaries receive untold blessings as they feel the enthusiasm of their touch, their care, and their interest. As the missionaries share aspects of their own culture and knowledge, the receiving organization is exposed to the world outside. They are blessed by the spiritual ministry of the missionaries and often receive resources and physical aid they would never otherwise know about. The missionaries are usually able to enlarge the family of the organization by winning new souls and thus they bring new life into the body of believers in that place. And if the missionaries are experienced and well trained they are able to disciple

#### *D. Aerni volunteers in Majuro.*



the new believers to become active missionaries also.

### *Benefits to the Sending Organization*

There are also benefits to the organization (church) which sends volunteers out for service. As missionaries report back to their sponsors the sending group is blessed as they hear exciting stories of God's outpouring in far away places. A normal result is for the churches to begin to pray more for their missionaries and give larger offerings than ever before so that their missionaries might have all they need to do their work. Thus, all are blessed by this activity. It is common for

### **Growth**

Short-term missions continues to grow slowly but steadily, particularly the sharing of volunteers between divisions. However, within divisions, the numbers tend to expand depending on the leadership given in a particular field. Where there is little or no leadership, clearly there is little or no activity. On the other hand, where a division has caught the vision and has provided adequate leadership there is measurable involvement of church members, both within and without the various divisions.

The potential for growth is tremendous. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints shows

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local churches to become excited about mission as they see God's blessings, but they also become more active in their local communities. Some churches have large numbers of experienced missionaries who have gone out and served again and again. These returned missionaries are a force for evangelism in local situations as they help others in their churches catch a new vision of what can be done when people become involved in the mission of the church and send missionaries all over the world to spread the gospel.

what can happen if volunteerism is organized, promoted, and possibilities given for service. In spite of the fact that the Adventist Church has Adventist World Radio, the Hope Channel, internet evangelism, and many other modern technological methods of outreach, most of these mediums require a missionary on the ground to encourage those who have heard the gospel and help them make life saving decisions.

### **Future**

What does the future hold? At the Annual Council of the General Conference in 2006, a new

program was launched entitled *HisHands*. The General Conference Secretariat, realizing that there are many parts of the world which could benefit from the service of short-term missionaries but who lack the funds to participate in many typical short-term mission projects has approved a plan that would reflect true volunteerism. *HisHands* proposes a way for missionary volunteers to be sponsored to serve just about anywhere there is a need.

*HisHands* was inspired by statements from Ellen White which say, "We have a great work to do by cooperating with Him as His helping hands" (1982:76). "Why should not the members

- Selecting missionary/s
- Arranging commissioning services for missionary/s
- Organizing training for missionary/s
- Mentoring missionary/s
- Selecting missionary projects to sponsor and host
- Monitoring and guiding host projects
- Promoting the program

4. *HisHands* missionary defined: "A baptized Seventh-day Adventist, at least eighteen years of age, who is willing to devote his/her gifts on a full-time basis, preferably for a period of six months to two years, to serve in some form of witness to spread the gospel."

***HisHands* proposes a way for missionary volunteers to be sponsored to serve just about anywhere there is a need.**

of a church, or of several small churches unite to sustain a missionary in foreign fields?" (White 1915:466).

The general outline for the *HisHands* program is as follows:

1. Every church/institution sponsors a minimum of one missionary annually.
2. Every church/institution hosts a minimum of one missionary annually.
3. Each church/institution needs to appoint a focus group to make this a reality by:
  - Raising funds

5. Sponsorship may include the following expenses: fares, accommodation expenses, stipend, insurance, visas, medical examination fees, evangelistic resources, etc.

6. Sponsorship does include prayer for and regular communication with the sponsored missionary.

7. Missionary project ideas: church planting, door-to-door visitation, public evangelism, Bible studies, teaching, medical and dental care, building construction, office work, etc.

8. Numerous resources have



Volunteers in China.



been created for this program: Administration Handbook, Host/Sponsor Handbook, Missionary Handbook, Training Handbook (resources for preparing to be a missionary), a CD with all of the Handbooks listed as well as power point programs for launching *HisHands* in the community, a DVD, brochures advertising the program, *Passport to Mission*—a cross-cultural training course (<http://hishands.adventist.org>).

Note the reflex influence spoken of by Ellen G. White and what it will mean to a church, institution, or missionary if they become engaged in this kind of program:

The home missionary work will be farther advanced in every way when a more liberal, self-denying, self-sacrificing spirit is manifested for

the prosperity of foreign missions; for the prosperity of the home work depends largely, under God, upon the reflex influence of the evangelical work done in countries afar off (White 2002:27).

If I understand this statement correctly it tells me that when a church becomes involved in evangelism work in distant countries, the work in the home community flourishes and God makes sure that their financial commitments are readily achieved with little effort. I cannot imagine that a pastor or his church members would not want to be in this kind of situation.

Those who take up their appointed work will not only be a blessing to others, but they will themselves be blessed. The consciousness of duty

well done will have a reflex influence upon their own souls (White 1942:148).

There are so many individual church members who have tested this statement and have discovered that their lives have changed forever, having served as a missionary in some distant land. Evidence reveals that many of them go out and serve again and again.

There are approximately 120,000 Seventh-day Adventist churches and companies around the world. Add to this the numerous institutions that could also become involved. If every church and institution sponsored and hosted a volunteer missionary there would be more than a quarter of a million missionaries serv-

ing all over the world where now there are only several thousand. If every family sponsored their own children when they became of age there would be more than a million missionaries working to finish the work of God on earth.

### Negatives

Short-term missions also has its negative side. Many individuals who agree to serve may not be adequately trained for the work assigned to them and this may result in a higher percentage of failures. The Church does not have the same control over a volunteer that it has over an employee. The livelihood of a volunteer does not usually depend upon the job so they can walk away at any time they want. A volunteer may also

*Brenda Rebeca Bravo Fenoy, Aren la Bianca, Glenis-Joy Brown and Paolo Jesus Rivero, volunteer at Tyrifjord Junior High School in Norway.*



need closer supervision than an employee and some may feel it is not worth the effort. Furthermore, it is a myth that volunteers come free of charge, for there are the costs of insurance, stipends, housing, etc.

### Positives

Short-term missions also has its positive side. When large numbers of church members join together and accept the responsibility of spreading the gospel more people also share in the joy of leading souls to Christ. This is in itself a fulfillment of prophecy and an indication that the Church is near the end of time, a time when the laity will join hands with the ministry in spreading the good news of salvation.

When church leaders realize that they are not alone in this work and that there are thousands of men and women all over the world working together to share the good news, that fact becomes a tremendous source of encouragement. Volunteers multiply the effectiveness of the church's outreach, have a huge impact, and accomplish the work of God much more quickly.

If Adventists could only capture the true spirit of volunteerism the Church would not need to be so concerned about finances and would not have to rely on employees to complete the task. And when volunteers get a taste of mission service they want to serve again and again and become more generous in the support of missions as a re-

sult. Often a job is accomplished that otherwise may never have been attempted, simply because of a lack of staff and financial resources. These same volunteer missionaries often provide expertise that may not be available or affordable otherwise.

The positives outweigh the negatives by far.

Short-term missions has come of age. It is the way of the future, but the challenge still remains for some of our leaders to recognize this untapped resource that is just waiting to be commissioned for service. Ellen G. White challenges us, "Many of the barren, un-worked fields must be entered by beginners" (1946:48).

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