

In Memoriam



Gottfried Oosterwal

Gottfried Oosterwal was born on Feb 8, 1930 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He was the third child to Hillebrand and Margarethe Oosterwal. His older siblings were Hilda and Siegfried. At a very young age he lost his older brother, Siegfried and became the big brother to his subsequent siblings, Siegfried and Elfriede.

Gottfried often shared his memories of desperately wanting a new bicycle for his 8th birthday, but instead got a little brother (Siegfried). Not only did he get a baby brother instead of the bicycle he wanted, but he also had to share his bed with this new addition to the family in a tiny walk up flat on the Westerbeekstraat in Rotterdam. Gottfried and Siegfried's bond as brothers grew tight through the years and to his death their affection for each other was very strong.

He enjoyed music very much and was quick to join in song, always singing at the top of his lungs. In particular he liked to play the piano and started giving lessons to other children in the neighborhood as a teenager.

Gottfried enjoyed a mean game of stickball at the intersection of the city streets in front of his home. Home base was the entrance to the corner store. As a youth, he was recognized by the curls of bright red hair, sparkling blue eyes, and an infectious laugh. As he aged his bright red hair faded, but the sparkle in his blue eyes and his sense of humor were a constant to the end. Even with slurred speech from his stroke last Thursday he was joking with the doctor and teasing his nurse.

Gottfried was a proud Dutchman. He was 10 years old when the Nazi's invaded his homeland. He would beam with pride when he told stories how the Dutch marines defended the main bridge in Rotterdam for five days from the German paratroopers. Relinquishing the bridge only when the tanks rolled in and every one of them was shot.

The war was difficult on Gottfried. He had scars on the back of his legs sustained when a train he was riding in with his father was bombed and they narrowly escaped the attack. As he and his father ran from the attack, shrapnel from the explosion lodged in the back of Gottfried's legs. He was scarred emotionally from his father being taken away from the family and interned in a German labor camp.

As the food ran out in Rotterdam, his mother arranged for him to be sent away to live on a farm in the German countryside. Knowing Gottfried, you can imagine he quickly realized he did not have an affinity for manual labor.

Gottfried studied at Cambridge and obtained his PhD at the University of Utrecht. In 1957 he married Emilie Tilstra who was his wife for 41 years. In 1960 Gottfried and Emilie were blessed with a beautiful baby girl they named Waronne. In 1961, he and Emilie along with their 6 month old baby travelled months on a freighter to begin their missionary work in Papua New Guinea. In 1962 they welcomed their first baby boy to the jungles of New Guinea and named him Dantar for one of the native guides who accompanied Gottfried into the New Guinea bush. For 5 years, Gottfried

travelled into the interiors of the island jungles, sharing the word of God and studying the customs of the tribes for the Dutch government. Tom Davis later wrote a book, *The Island of Forgotten Men*, which recounted many stories of nearly being eaten by cannibals, being stranded in a crocodile infested river when his dugout canoe capsized, and many other adventures. Gottfried retained many wonderful memories of his time there and wrote his doctoral thesis, “People of the Tor” in which he recounted his work there. He told his children that Oosterwal, or some version thereof, became a popular name in New Guinea in the mid-60s.

In 1963, Gottfried and Millie were transferred to Philippine Union College in Calooga City where he taught and served as the Dean of Students for 5 years. During that time, Millie took the children to Holland where Gottfried later joined them and little Erik was born in 1965.

In 1968 the family moved to Berrien Springs where Gottfried began teaching missions at the Seventh day Adventist Seminary and where he grew and developed the Institute of World Mission.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Gottfried travelled the world visiting locations where it was impossible to contact home for weeks at a time. Traveling on his Dutch passport, he was often behind the Iron Curtain, or in regions of the world inaccessible with US travels documents. Whenever there was strife in the world, Gottfried seemed nearby, prompting his children to imagine that their father was a spy. Gottfried loved to read—spy novels were his favorite.

His family always looked forward to the scent of stale airplane cigarette smoke, which hung on his coat and luggage because it meant that their Papa was home. Whenever he came home, there was at least one suitcase containing gifts—Gottfried never showed up to anyone’s home without a gift.

When on furlough, Gottfried would return to Holland with his family where he showed them the brick streets where he grew up, and they visited the important spiritual locations, the Wartburg castle, the churches, the cathedrals, and many more churches and cathedrals exposing his children to cultures and sights most would never experience.

It was also during this time that he completed his book *Mission: Possible*, which is still an inspiration to many. Although Gottfried and Emilie always intended to return to their roots in Europe, Berrien Springs and Andrews University became their home. The longer they stayed, the more deeply they became entrenched in the community. As his children grew, Gottfried’s proudest moments were when he baptized each of them each in Pioneer Memorial Church.

Gottfried always wore a coat and tie. Even if it was a quick run for some fast food, he would cinch up his tie and ask, “Do I need a coat”, but we always knew he would wear a coat regardless of our input. At home when he was casual, he would wear a cardigan sweater.

Gottfried collected many mementos in his life and many of them came

from his vast travels around the world. His sense of humor was evident as he displayed many penis gourds on the shelves of his office. He would recount with a laugh how at times people unfamiliar with New Guinea would mistake them for flutes.

Gottfried loved soccer, and in his mission to New Guinea he not only spread the Word of God, but also shared his love for soccer. He shared his experience of bringing the love of soccer to the natives in New Guinea. He taught them the rules of the game, and he had a wonderful time with them. They were very gifted athletes and they quickly picked up the finer points of the game. The New Guinea game of soccer took a very strange twist from what he intended the first time an errant ball struck and broke one of the players penis gourds. As the embarrassed player shirked off into the bushes covering himself the best he could while the other players laughed. Getting the ball into the opposing goal was no longer the primary purpose for their game of soccer. It became far more exciting to knock off someone's gourd.

Gottfried was a spiritual man. He prayed with his children every night teaching them to pray. His children's friends fondly recall the families Sabbath rituals. Sabbath was celebrated together as a family and was ushered in on Friday night with prayers, salutations in Dutch, Indonesian, and English, and family hugs and kisses. Friends were always welcome to join. Before leaving the house on Saturday night, Sabbath was closed with the same ritual before anyone left the house.

Gottfried loved people—all people. Gottfried was a great orator, a prolific linguist, and able to speak many languages. He sometimes sprinkled his conversations with Latin quotations. He was completely blind to people's socio-economic status, their race, their religion, the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, or any other aspect of a person that might serve to prejudice or divide. He was equally comfortable sharing a meal on the floor of a grass hut in the jungle as he was presenting seminars to executives on the importance of intercultural relations.

Gottfried's passion was missions and cultural anthropology—the study of people, cultures, and how environments affect the way people behave and what they believe. Gottfried transitioned this passion later in life as he took on the education of industry on how to conduct business across foreign cultures. He founded The Center for Intercultural Relations where he continued his passion for bringing people together and raising awareness to cultural diversity. Most recently he focused specifically on medical care and the need to treat the whole person recognizing that cultures have different expectations and needs for healing.

He was the author of many books and articles. Most recently he had his book, *The Lord's Prayer As Seen through Primitive Eyes* published. He was in the process of writing a manuscript for his next book. He had much to share and felt an obligation to share his knowledge with anyone who had an interest to listen.

In the last years of his life, Gottfried spend a lot of time with Wendy and her daughters Cindy and Tracy. He felt very welcomed by the Zambian community and loved his times there. They were a great strength to him in his last years.

Gottfried was a brilliant, loving, and diverse man. His wit and wisdom will be greatly missed.

**Gottfried Oosterwal--Inspirational Missiologist
February 8, 1930 to November 9, 2015**

This is my personal memorial tribute to Gottfried Oosterwal's missiological influence in the light of subsequent developments in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In the early 1950s with a steady, but relatively slow growth of the Adventist Church in the third world, the conviction grew among church leaders that more focused attention should be given to the training of local church leaders. I was studying at the Seminary in Washington, DC at the time and received a letter calling me to Solusi College in Zimbabwe stating, "This is a new Africa and we need more adequately trained church leaders." This opened the way to ten rewarding years preparing pastors for service in the Trans-African Division.

Officers in the General Conference Department of Education were involved in leading to this decision. Among them was Richard Hammill, Associate Director of the Department who had travelled widely and recognized that in order to fulfill this mission the church required many more well prepared missionaries. Accordingly in 1956 the Annual Council voted that newly appointed missionaries, and those on furlough, should attend an intensive six week training course. However an appropriate program was not immediately developed.

In 1963 Hammill was appointed president of Andrews University. In order to assist him, and facilitate this missions program, he called Myrl Manley, who had been president of three overseas colleges, to serve at Andrews. Manley attended a missionary training session at Wheaton College in preparation for developing the Adventist training program.

Upon returning to Andrews he invited Gottfried Oosterwal, who was then taking a few courses at the Seminary, to assist him. Oosterwal had been a pioneer missionary in Papua New Guinea and had impressed Manley with his missionary experience and enthusiasm. In 1966 they conducted the initial four week Institute of World Mission session together and Manley later requested him to join him permanently. Oosterwal accepted, but returned to the Philippines for two years. He returned in 1968 and the Institute of World Mission was then firmly established. Regular intensive four week sessions were conducted each summer. In 1971 Manley was appointed vice-president for student affairs and Oosterwal began to search for an assistant.

I was studying in New Jersey at the time, and Oosterwal who was attending the Annual Council at the General Conference, phoned me and arranged a visit. We spent a very interesting day together. He told me of his experience in entering into the life and thought world of the Boro Boro peoples of New Guinea and then he wanted to know about my experience. He left me wondering where all of this was leading. A few days later I received a phone call from Richard Hammill, requesting me to come to Andrews to join Oosterwal in the Institute of World Mission. My primary responsibility would be the preparation and subsequent support of missionaries. I was also to do a little teaching at the Seminary.

We came to Andrews in 1971 and I assisted Oosterwal in conducting the Institute that summer. It was a rewarding experience. About 35 candidates were preparing for a wide range of missionary services—educational, medical, and primary face to face evangelism. He taught a wide range of classes: anthropological and social understandings of primary people's religious experience, Adventist Church operation and structure, and current missionary purposes, etc. All were enriched by inspiring accounts of his personal experience. In addition we spent considerable time in personal conversation with candidates and in group social activities. This was the beginning of a close cooperative relationships with Oosterwal for almost 20 years.

The number of recruited missionary candidates increased rapidly. Starting in 1972 two six week Institutes were conducted annually, one in the summer and one in the winter, with about 50 to 60 candidates in each. In 1975 a third institute was conducted at Loma Linda for medical missionaries and about this time the Institute was also invited to conduct sessions in the Northern European Division, Australia, and subsequently in several other world divisions. Oosterwal travelled widely guiding and inspiring many missionaries during these years. In the late 1980s, because of the growing number of missionaries from other countries and the internationalization and extension of its services, the Institute of World Mission was reorganized and placed under more direct control of the General Conference Secretariat.

The significance of these missionary endeavors is best seen in the con-

text of the expansion and growth of the Adventist world church. In 1970, when the Institute was getting under way, world membership was 2.05 million. By 1980 it had grown to almost 3.5 million, in 1990 to 6.7 million, and in 2000, about 30 years after the establishment of the Institute, to 11.7 million. The number of new missionaries sent out each year also increased. In 1960 there were 260; in 1970 there were 470; in 1980 there were 356; and in 1990, 369 (spouses are included in the above numbers). The Institute of World Mission was doubtless a major factor in this increase in the missionary working force.

This expansion and growth of the Adventist World Church was a surprise to the larger Evangelical Christian world when they read the 1982 publication of the thousand page *World Christian Encyclopedia* edited by David Barrett and published by the Oxford University Press. It included all denominations and Christian groups in every nation and was the most extensive and detailed study of World Christianity ever published. The status of Adventism in country after country was included, and also the statistics of its progressive world membership growth. When I attended the American Society of Missiology meeting that year I could hardly move through the hallway to the assembly hall. Missiologists were staggered by the extensivity, size, and rapid growth of the Adventist Church.

I met David Barrett at an annual meeting of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) group in Nairobi in 1965. He had been an engineer in the British Aircraft establishment but decided to enroll as an Anglican missionary and enrich the lives of others. He soon began to realize that although most missionaries were deeply committed most were not adequately analytic regarding the efficiency and results of their work. He began to attend the annual TEF sessions organized by the World Council of Churches and organized several small groups to collect data and study the results of specific missionary enterprises. I was a member of one of these groups for two years, and then left to study in the United States. As a consequence of this initial series of studies he extended his research and in due course published the 1982 *Encyclopedia*.

Some twenty years later the group he had organized produced a revised and enlarged version of this *Encyclopedia*. I had a conversation with him soon after this extended version was published. He had travelled extensively and visited many missionary institutions. He told me he had been favorably impressed by the educational and medical institutions operated by the Adventist Church and by the missionaries from many nations that served in those institutions. He also mentioned that he had sensed a strong feeling of corporate unity and commitment.

Perhaps influenced by Barrett, and subsequently also by the 2009, Johnson and Ross *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910 – 2010*, which includes Adventists, with a listed membership of 23.6 million in the table of “Largest Protestant Traditions: 2010” (p.90), Phillip Jenkins, the leading scholar of contemporary world religions wrote:

“A church that was once regarded as a purely U.S. phenomenon has become one of the world’s fastest growing and most diverse....By the late 1950’s the church celebrated the fact that it had surpassed the milestone of a million adherents the vast majority of whom were in the United States.... Sixty years later the Adventists constitute a global church that plausibly claims 18 million members, only 7 percent of whom live in the United States....The church has developed its rich network of educational institutions and media outlets around the world.... When I meet an Adventist I sometimes ask in a semi-joking question as to how many relatives he or she has working in the medical professions....Adventists show believers how to improve their lives in physical terms as well as spiritual and that practice carries enormous weight.” (*The Christian Century*, Sept. 30, 2015. p. 45).

Many factors are involved in this rapid growth of the Adventist Church; and it is not only the numbers that are encouraging and important. The new life-purpose, and manner of life that have given shape to large Adventist communities, are a significant part of the whole picture. The Institute of World Mission has played an important role in both preparing the messengers, and giving shape to the message they proclaim. However there are also major facilitating organizational factors that have promoted this growth. In all of this we owe a great debt to Oosterwal for both the commitment he inspired and for equipping candidates with appropriate methodological approaches.

Having covered the broad spectrum and growth of Adventist missions I come back to the fact that this is a memorial service convened to pay tribute to Oosterwal for his deeply committed and dedicated service to our Lord and to pray for continued blessings for his family. Oosterwal’s life was shaped by the gospel and he committed his life to sharing the blessings of our Lord with others. He was a man of many talents and his influence on others was deep and broad. Many have told me that attending an Institute was a life changing experience. Not only did it give their lives a more focused direction, it also equipped them for more effective service. He published several books some of which were used in Institute classes. We mostly used *Mission Possible*, published in 1972 in dealing with current opportunities and challenges. In subsequent travels in Africa I found that several colleges were still using it. His influence was not confined to the Institute. In the meetings and presentations at sessions he conducted in his many travels, both in the USA and abroad, he inspired many to commit their lives to the service of our gracious Lord. We thank God for his life and witness.

Memorial Service at Pioneer Memorial Church
November 15, 2015
Russell Staples, Professor Emeritus of World Mission