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Overcoming Barriers to Effective Missions

The greatest responsibility and the highest privilege that God has given to his people, the church, is that of partnering with him in mission. Mission is an attribute of our sending God and is the essence of his loving nature. *Missio Dei*, a broad missiological concept, presents missions at the heart and nature of the Trinity (Bosch 1991:390, 391)—God the Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ to seek and save humanity, God the Son sent the Holy Spirit, to establish, empower, and equip the church, God the Spirit selected and sent out, and continues sending out disciples to all the nations of the earth (Van Rheenen 2014:70, 71). Similarly, each church institution should regard mission as its highest priority and greatest obligation and thereby continue to send out disciples to make other disciples for the Master from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people.

Much today is known regarding the Great Commission of Christ to the church before his ascension for which every member is called to actively engage in missions until Christ's Second Coming. The Greek word *ethne*, translated in English as "nation" is better understood as people groups (Matt 28:19). The challenge and responsibility of the Adventist Church, therefore, is to reach the diverse and numerous people groups proximal and distant, by employing all possible means and methods that God has provided for this task. The assignment undoubtedly may appear daunting, however, it still is "mission possible."

For this goal to be achieved the church, especially its leadership, needs to overcome certain barriers inhibiting effective mission. This paper seeks to highlight a few of those barriers; however, it is not exhaustive in scope due to certain understandable limitations. Its objective is to enlighten and arouse mission leadership concerning obstacles to be overcome in order for more effective mission to be conducted in all respective territories. It seeks to create awareness of the reality of the mission situation, the

acknowledgment that there might be barriers occurring within our territories, and engender action plans to rectify the present scenario.

Other literature may provide several different perspectives on this subject; however, from the present Adventist standpoint the focus is on five issues I consider crucial at this point in time. The five barriers to effective missions discussed in this paper include knowledge, timidity, identity, spiritual, and logistic barriers.

Knowledge Barrier

One of the primary duties of mission leaders is to determine the nature and extent of the mission task within their regions. In other words, how many unreached people groups exist within a given territory? The Joshua Project provides a global figure of 7,033 unentered people groups worldwide out of a total of 16,954 people groups. The site also supplies continental and country specific data. Its table indicates that only about 41.5% of the world's people groups have been witnessed to (The Joshua Project 2018).

Other categories by which people groups may be viewed in addition to continental, regional, and country sub-divisions include affinity blocs, people clusters, religion, language, etc. It is essential that mission leaders map out their territories clearly, displaying the regions entered and unentered, after which they may discover their mandate and mission.

Some time ago, while serving as a conference secretary when my president and I examined an old map of our territory, we discovered to our dismay that the oldest and largest churches of our conference were all located in territories not featured in the old map of the state we had. This was very revealing to us.

If mission efforts are to be successful it would be helpful that the needs of the masses are known. This is especially vital because some in leadership may only be using familiar evangelism models, and rejecting any other form. As a result, the church may be employing in some places methods older than the leaders to reach communities that have demographics that have long changed.

> Too often evangelism is conducted by people who have a solution and are looking for a problem to which to apply it! They have worked under the assumption that there is one evangelistic method and message that is appropriate for all cultures and classes. As a result only certain homogeneous units worldwide have become church members, because only certain people responded to the message and method. The church must be prepared to design unique methods geared to different cultures to reach particular kinds of people. (Schantz 1989)

Regarding the need for new methods in evangelization Ellen White suggests, "Let every worker in the Master's vineyard, study, plan, devise methods, to reach the people where they are. We must do something out of the common course of things. We must arrest the attention. We must be deadly in earnest. We are on the very verge of times of trouble and perplexities that are scarcely dreamed of" (1946:122).

Timidity Barrier

Besides not having sufficient knowledge of the mission task entrusted to the church by the Lord, another critical factor impeding effective mission is a certain sense of timidity in which sometimes mission strategies seem to be executed. Strategy is the natural sequel to good comprehension of the mission task in any context. Take for instance, Coca Cola, the multinational beverage drink producer. Several years ago it had as its vision, "a can of coke in the hands of every person on the planet." Presently, there are very few countries in the world where one cannot find a drink of coke—no matter how remote the region may be; whether accessible by road or not. God's people need to also have such great dreams—plans bigger than their own power can accomplish—or that their limited budgets can realize. After all our Sponsor, Source, and Sender has no lack. That seems to be the principal lesson in the story of the man in Jesus' parable who received an unexpected guest (Luke 11:8). The rationale of this story seems to teach the principle of "shameless audacity," (in Greek, "*anedia*," Luke 11:8 NIV). The rare combination of these two concepts of "shamelessness," and "audaciousness" implies that God expects his people to do the same by asking beyond the usual, or normal. After all, the times are also unusual. Commenting on the need for greater effort in mission work, Ellen White states:

> With the great truth we have been privileged to receive, we should, and under the Holy Spirit's power we could, become living channels of light. We could then approach the mercy seat; and seeing the bow of promise, kneel with contrite hearts, and seek the kingdom of heaven with a spiritual violence that would bring its own reward. We would take it by force, as did Jacob. Then our message would be the power of God unto salvation. Our supplications would be full of earnestness, full of a sense of our great need; and we would not be denied. The truth would be expressed by life and character, and by lips touched with the living coal from off God's altar. When this experience is ours, we shall be lifted out of our poor, cheap selves, that we have cherished so tenderly. We shall empty our hearts of the corroding power of selfishness, and shall be filled with praise and gratitude to God. We shall

magnify the Lord, the God of all grace, who has magnified Christ.
And He will reveal His power through us, making us as sharp sickles
in the harvest field. (1899)

Identity Barrier

Perhaps the most significant and pernicious obstacle to effective mis-
sion is the identity barrier, which manifests itself in ethnocentrism, preju-
dice, and various forms of bias. Human nature leads people to identify
with those who have similar backgrounds, upbringing, nature, and ex-
perience such as theirs. Negative reactions to others who are dissimilar
is what results in stereotyping, prejudice, and ethnocentrism. Ethnocen-
trism is a great detriment to mission effectiveness. Instead of developing
mission programs for the salvation of people groups who need to be evan-
gelized, because such people have dissimilar characteristics they are often
forgotten, ignored, or avoided. In some cases, institutions that could have
missional benefits to bless unreached or less reached people groups are
never established in these needy areas due to ethnocentric factors. It is
not strange therefore to find that some Adventist institutions are clustered
around certain regions favored by the majority group in leadership.
Resource allocation for programs and initiatives to groups in the margins
is another aspect where ethnocentrism impacts mission negatively. If mis-
sion is indeed the *raison d'etre* for the existence of the church, then funds
should be budgeted for advancing the cause of God's kingdom despite
personal biases or prejudices.

Mission history amply demonstrates that greater progress is made in
the advancement of the gospel whenever indigenous leadership is pro-
duced (Walls 1996:86-89). Unfortunately, ethnocentrism hinders the emer-
gence or employment of persons who have different identities from the
majority in mission leadership. In cases where indigenous leaders are
eventually employed they sometimes suffer from non-acceptance or non-
recognition among their peers due to ethnocentrism.

Bible history also attests to the serious challenge that ethnocentrism
causes to the mission of God. For the gospel commission to be fulfilled
the disciples needed to step out of their comfort zones, overcome ethno-
centrism, in order to make disciples of every people group. When God
sought to open the eyes of Peter to the fact that the church he sought to
establish would have boundaries far wider than Judea the apostle's reac-
tion was, "Surely not, Lord!" (Acts 10:14). Peter's experience is represen-
tative of many Christians, no matter their positions in the church, educa-
tion, spirituality, or even cross-cultural experience. And if leaders act this
way it is easy to see how church members can also fall into this default

mode. Sometimes even experienced missionaries, trained in the Institute of World Missions, look down or speak condescendingly towards some group and do nothing to bring them to Christ or belong to their inner circle of leaders.

The identity issue also reflects in church politics. This is evident when persons unfit for certain tasks are put in offices they are not qualified to fill or are sent for training for which they lack basic competencies. This results in hindering mission progress and is a misuse of funds and resources.

Spiritual Barrier

Another major impediment to effective mission is the spiritual barrier. Spiritual barriers have spiritual origins. As the apostle Paul acknowledges, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). In other words, there are persons and places where the devil has established strongholds which prevent the impartation and penetration of the gospel. These strongholds of the enemy are largely ideological or philosophical in nature and stand in opposition to the truth of God's word (2 Cor 10:4). Their nature may vary from one person to another and from one country or region to the next. In some contexts they take the form of animistic fears and beliefs, in others it may be in the form of atheism, communism, capitalism, secularism, radical religious beliefs, or occult beliefs and practices. Symptoms of such spiritual blockage include: spiritual apathy, spiritual insensitivity, worldliness, and indifference to all things spiritual (Rogers 2013).

Many of the countries and people groups in the 10/40 window dwell in regions where the spiritual barriers are ancient and seemingly impenetrable. In such territories and terrains each battle is hard fought and the stakes are high. Persecution and death are very real outcomes in the course of proclaiming the gospel. It needs to be understood that in such contexts conventional, human strategies will be of little help.

Mission leaders should however remember that the promise of victory is assured (1 John 4:4; 2 Cor 10:3-5), and God's eternal presence and power is available (Deut 31:6; Matt 28:20). Spiritual warfare is the only viable strategy in such situations entailing earnest prayer and fasting imploring the Lord to bring down these strongholds so that his kingdom may be established (Mark 9:29). This is exactly what happened during apostolic times in cities such as Ephesus and Colossae, which were former bastions of magic and the occult. This is exactly what can occur again today. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian Church is a reminder of this reality and a call to arms: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against

principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:12).

Logistic Barrier

There may be other times when there is understanding and willingness on the part of mission leadership to empower and deploy indigenous workers so they can establish church plants among their own people. Often, however, the main complaint is, "Where are the workers?" The logistic challenge of finding adequate, committed, local workers to engage in mission is real. Nevertheless, caution is needed lest mission leaders find themselves in God's way blocking the channels the Holy Spirit seeks to use in doing his work. Although the task of mission may always need cross-cultural missionaries to plant the seed and establish a beach-head, caution is needed to guard against a Messiah complex and a sense of indispensability to the cause of God. Such a condition may be similar to the affliction of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:10-14).

It needs to be noted that such a notion that there are certain places where no indigenous leaders exist to carry forward the work of mission may be fallacious. It could in reality be unbiblical. The biblical doctrine of spiritual gifts indicates that the body of Christ is complete—gifted to perform every function in the church (Rom 12:4-8). Perhaps, the problem may be that of myopia, or reluctance to seek for those persons of peace that the Sending-God has providentially positioned ahead of us to fulfill his mission (Luke 10:2-7). The logistic barrier can be resolved only when true disciples are found, trained, and deployed. However, the real issue is only genuine disciples can make true disciples. If the right disciples are not being found perhaps the problem may be staring at us in the mirror.

Recommendations

In light of the issues discussed, if the church seeks to be successful in overcoming these barriers blocking effective missions it seems it will be necessary to take certain vital steps. A few recommendations are offered to attain this objective:

1. Each church institution should establish or update its database of unreached or the least reached territories in its area of responsibility as a prelude to witnessing.

2. Unreached people groups, such as immigrants, the homeless, and other socio-economic blocs within each field should be identified for the purpose of establishing church plants among them.

3. Because stereotypes, prejudice and ethnocentrism are learned early

and are reinforced in the course of life, regular diversity training and related programs are needed to help overcome these tendencies.

4. Beyond mere representation in the leadership and functions of the church, structures need to be established to provide a platform for minorities to speak and be heard without fear of retribution.

5. The goal of discipleship is to make believers who transcend their cultures and ethnicities; however, the sad reality is this very often is not the case. It would therefore be vital that a worldview transformational paradigm be developed for the church regarding this often ignored dimension of discipleship

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