

Lester Merklin

Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Foreign Mission Board Era: 1889-1903

The first decades of the twentieth century are known for their great Adventist mission expansion. Most Adventists have heard of the 1901 General Conference session and the reorganization of the church for mission. This article looks at the events of the decade proceeding those decisions that led the church to such major adjustments. The research for this article consists mostly from General Conference reports, private letters of the period, and the *Missionary Magazine* printed during that time.

The existence of the Foreign Mission Board (FMB) corresponds with the decade proceeding the re-organization, so I have used its period of existence as the time period for this research. Much work was begun during this decade by the FMB and the church, so this article is limited to four main topics of missions during that era to better sense the mission vision and mission understanding that led up to the mission expansion of the twentieth century.

The Organization of a Mission Board

It was in 1874 that the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists finally officially entered the world mission enterprise. Some Adventists had gone on their own before this, and relatives of American believers had received Adventist literature. Thus, there were a few Sabbath keeping Adventists scattered through Europe. As a denomination, however, no work had been done outside of North America. With a growing conviction that the third angel's message must go to others, the General Conference

decided to officially send J. N. Andrews who was in the process of preparing to leave for Europe on his own.

During the next 15 years the work expanded somewhat, but not to the extent that it should have. At the General Conference Session of 1889, a change to the constitution was proposed that would allow the forming of a mission board.

Reports of that Conference do not reveal what motive existed for suggesting this change. Mission boards were a common characteristic of Christianity in those days. Possibly this influenced the Adventists to have their own board. It seems likely, however, that the desire to improve the church's outreach was a definite factor in the proposal to establish a mission board. Some of the same problems of mission were present then as were prevalent in the decade to follow. The Adventist Church seemed to be looking for a plan to better facilitate the challenge of the world mission given to it by their Lord.

The FMB of Seventh-day Adventists as it was legally incorporated consisted of a six-member Foreign Mission Committee and the nine members of the Executive Committee of the General Conference. In practice, however, the committee itself was referred to as the "Board." As formed in 1889, the six-member board was actually only a working committee of the General Conference Committee. It had no executive power. The adopted constitution read: "no plan or suggestion of the Mission Board shall become operative until it has the sanction of the General Conference Committee." Its actual work was administrative in nature, even though plans must be approved. "The Mission Board shall take the general oversight of all foreign work and suggest ways and means for the expeditious propagation of that work" (Daily Bulletin of the General Conference (DBGC) 1889:5:45).

Nothing changed at the next General Conference Session in 1891. O. A. Olsen, President of the General Conference, commented in his report that the board is doing its duty to find the best workers for each field (DBGC 1891:1:6). Apparently, that is what it should be doing; and the session saw no reason to dictate differently.

The Board was given added responsibility at the 1893 General Conference Session. That session was more mission directed than the past ones had been. There were many talks on missions, but little planning for the future. Agreeing with Olsen again that the FMB was faithfully doing its work, the session voted that the "Foreign Mission Board be authorized to audit all the accounts of laborers in their employ, instead of this work being done by the regular General Conference Auditing Committee" (DBGC 1893:16:375). This seems to be a significant step in that it shows that the session members are beginning to see that the men best understanding

the situation should do the administration. This resolution was passed because the FMB is “better acquainted with the circumstances” involved.

It was at the 1897 General Conference Session that one finds the FMB significantly changed. As was also the case in the 1901 General Conference Session, the change that came to the FMB was a result of wider changes in the total organization of the Church. After many years of testimonies that too much of the work was concentrated in too few people in Battle Creek, this session endeavored to rectify the problem (see General Conference Daily Bulletin (GCDB) 1897:13:212). It was proposed that the work of the General Conference be completely divided into three areas of “responsibility” and “territory”—North America, Australia, and Europe. Each of these areas would have its own executive duties, each being equal in authority. The FMB was responsible for all other territories for the propagation of the gospel.

The FMB was reconfigured with nine members with its own president. Since the old organization plan had the General Conference President responsible for the total work, this was a great step forward in the work of missions. Now the board members could *all* devote their energies to the mission work alone and the world field could be treated more fairly, since the men used the opportunity to know the field and its needs better.

According to the General Conference discussion, the FMB was to move to some Atlantic state. There was some discussion as to whether the Board should separate itself that much from the work in Battle Creek, while other delegates proposed other locations. However, in the end, it was allowed that the FMB and the General Conference Committee could decide where it should be located to be most efficient. As it turned out, the Board moved to Philadelphia. The Board explained that the value of this location was that this city was a port city, yet without the high rent necessary in places like New York (Edwards 1898). However, why it stayed there only two years was never publicly stated.

The Foreign Mission Board retained this organizational structure until the church re-organization at the turn of the century. In 1901, it retained its independent structure, although the “chairman of the General Conference Committee” was its president. The Board’s headquarters moved back to Battle Creek, then at the 1903 General Conference Session the Executive Committee of the General Conference became the Mission Board of the Church. Although the FMB remained a legal entity until 1919, in reality the Board’s existence ended as of that 1903 session. The details and the reasons for this action will be discussed in connection with the re-organization and its relation to the mission work of the Church.

During the 13 years the FMB existed, what was its primary work? When it was first proposed in 1889, it was asked “to appoint, instruct, and direct

the foreign missionaries of the denomination" (DBGC 1891:4:49). When the FMB was made a separate board in 1897, the General Conference action specifically stated that it was to "take charge of all mission funds of the denomination, and all mission fields" (GCDB 1897:13:212-213). It is easy to see that the Board would need the support of a mission conscious church in order to do its job well.

The Mission Spirit among Adventists in the 1890s

The success or failure of the FMB would be determined largely by the Adventist Church's understanding of its mission. It would take total church involvement to make a world-wide work possible. That the church fell short in this area becomes very apparent because of the dearth of workers, the shortage of funds, and the lack of zeal for the growing mission work that were prevalent during this decade. There were voices crying for a change, but real mission consciousness came slowly. At the 1899 General Conference the need for more mission fervor was so desperately needed that most of the time during the meetings was spent dealing with mission related affairs. It took the re-organization of the Church in the following General Conference sessions to really transform the Adventist Church into a worldwide denomination. It is interesting to look at a few glimpses of the mission understanding of the Church before those sessions at the turn of the century.

Ever since the Gentile churches in Asia Minor sent money to help their Jewish Christian brothers in Jerusalem the willingness to give financial means to aid the work of the church has been a measure of a mission vision of God's people. The church of the 1890s did not fare very well in this regard. Yes, much money was being spent to build up Adventist centers in the United States, but very little was given for mission work. During this time, 95% of the finances of the Church were being used in North America (*Mission Magazine* 1899:4:148).

The FMB was constantly appealing for more funds so they could do their work. As late as 1898 the *Missionary Magazine* asked, "Are we offering to the Lord as He has prospered us, when today we are not contributing one penny a week per capita for the work of carrying the gospel to the one thousand million heathen in the world?" (159). The years prior to this period had also been a time with widespread financial problems among the various mission boards of other Christian churches. The world financial situation had been hard on all mission work. This could account for some lack of funds for the FMB. In spite of this challenge the FMB did better than other boards and was able to expand some Adventist work (GCDB 1897:11:172). Yet a lot more could have been done if the people

had given more than just a penny per week. "Much has been done; much more remains to be done," was the appraisal of the work at that time by the secretary of the Board (GCDB 1897:12:179).

Different plans were tried to ensure a constant flow of funds. During that time, the denomination had not yet developed a systematic way of funding the operations of the church. The offerings that were collected at the weekly church services usually went for local work, while the tithe went to the conferences to pay for local workers. A notice in the *Missionary Magazine* reveals this lack of a systematic or definite mission funding approach. "All who wish to donate from time to time to the Foreign Mission Board can send their offering to the treasurer direct or through the secretary of their State Tract Society" (1898:3:112).

One plan for financing mission work was the "annual offering." The first issue of the *Missionary Magazine* as the organ of the FMB explained why such an offering was conceived. "Our annual offering is to provide funds for carrying the Gospel to the regions beyond. We might dispense with this offering if we were faithful in remembering to contribute continually as the Lord hath prospered us, so that His treasury might be supplied; but this we have failed to do (1898:1: 2).

The annual offering was the major source of income for the FMB during this period, and unfortunately, the church was not yet giving to missions on a week-to-week basis. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Board never really received the funds it needed.

One positive factor in the financial support of mission was the Sabbath School mission offerings. The Sabbath School was a separate association at this time, but beginning in 1885 many Sabbath schools began giving their offerings for mission work. It was also during this period (1890) that the mission ship *Pitcairn* was funded by Sabbath School offerings and a "new era in Sabbath School missions' offerings began" (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* 1996:1125). It was also during this time that Adventist members were given the goal of 1¢ per member each week to support work in the mission fields. Later the goal was raised to 5¢ per week; however, the official Sabbath School mission offering did not come into being until after the establishment of the Sabbath School Department in the early 1900s.

There were other plans, since some churches followed what they called the "first-day offering" plan that was based on Paul's council in 1 Cor 16:2 to set aside weekly funds. The members were encouraged to set aside some loose change during the week and turn it in on Sabbath separate from their regular church offering as a special offering for missions.

Before the official action at the 1899 General Conference Session establishing the Sabbath School mission offering there were some places that were already using special envelopes for this type of weekly offering. The

FMB recommended this plan to all Adventist members in 1898, and the General Conference Committee passed an action stating “that we endorse the envelope plan for collecting foreign mission offerings, as suggested by the Foreign Mission Board” (*Missionary Magazine* 1897:5:159).

Although these methods raised some mission funds, the fact remained that not much was given. In the early days of the church, the pioneers had sacrificed all to the cause they believed in. The 40¢ per member per year given for mission in 1897 reveals that the members still did not have much of a vision for a worldwide work. More than plans encouraging giving was needed; the church needed a revival of missionary spirit that would motivate people to gladly give.

The lack of people to enter mission work was another hindrance during this decade. At the very session when the FMB was formed to aid in the mission of the church (1889), the committee tasked with finding workers for foreign field was unsuccessful and made this final report: “Your committee finds itself quite unable to secure laborers for the greater number and the most important of these positions without taking men from their places whose loss would seem to be irreparable injury to the work in which they are now . . . engaged.” Instead, they recommended that the Board select people “at as early a date as possible” and send them “as rapidly as the amount of the funds in the treasury will warrant” (DBGC 1889:16:154).

Lack of funds was the biggest challenge facing the FMB from the very beginning. In the letters that O. A. Olsen wrote to Ellen White and W. C. White in Australia, one can see the problem the FMB and Olsen as President of the General Conference faced in trying to supply workers for the growing mission field. After several letters referring to attempts to find the right men they needed to run the new school in Australia, Olsen finally found two men; and the Mission Board “acquiesced” and agreed to send them (May 1892). Neither of them went. One requested to stay for another year of schooling and the other did not want to go alone. Olsen remarked, “They pled the matter so urgently that I yielded” (June 1892). When a replacement was found the man’s district refused to let him go for at least a year (July 1892).

During this time the Seventh-day Adventist Church was preaching “the gospel to all the world” as a concept, but in reality, the vision was not strong enough to cause action of any significant dimension. One paragraph from the Foreign Mission Board reveals the significance of the matters that mentioned above.

Think! Forty cents was all that the average church member in the United States could spare last year out of his abundance to send the Gospel to the uttermost part of the earth! It took 7,862 church members to support one ordained foreign missionary. We have only given one sixty-fourth of our ordained ministers to carry the good tidings of great joy to the half that have never been told of Jesus' love! (*Missionary Magazine* 1897:11:427)

This is not to say, however, that there was not some missionary zeal in the church. There definitely was. The fact that the FMB had been organized reveals some desire to improve Adventist mission work. There were dedicated leaders committed to seeing the work progress.

O. A. Olsen, as head of the FMB for most of this period, revealed a strong interest in seeing the overseas work flourish. In his letters to Ellen White, he seems to be honest in his work to find the best men for the needs of the overseas fields. "I never was so determined," he said, "as I have been of late to do all I can for the work in foreign fields. Indeed, I am almost desperate" (July 12, 1892). Because of the urgent needs, he decided that missions must be put first, "even to the detriment of the work at home" (July 13, 1892). Although he gave positive reports at the General Conferences sessions of how the work has seen success and how the Board had "sent out many additional laborers" (GCDB 1887:107), he also emphasized the other side by saying that "compared with what we ought to do, it is very little indeed" (DBGC 1893:11:290).

Others recognized the need, and some of them did their best to convict others. At the 1893 General Conference Session, S. N. Haskell gave a series of sermons on "the Missionary Work," beginning during the Institute preceding the actual start of the session. A strong mission spirit is promoted and he suggested that anyone who has no interest in the gospel going to the whole world will "lose the kingdom of God just as surely as you remain in that condition" (DBGC 1893:10: 248). He believed that the time had come in a "special sense" to take the message to all the world (235).

Believing that "we have hardly struck the missionary spirit as God would have us" (275), he made this strong appeal to the church. "The thing of the greatest importance in the world is to carry the gospel to the world. How can we? If God says, Go, go we must, and go we will, if we have to walk on water. When we get the "go" in us, we will see the way open fast enough" (248).

The church during this decade tried various ways to get that "go" in the hearts of its members. There were new plans and exhortations that came out of the General Conference session to motivate the church. The 1891 session voted to send Mrs. White to help the work in Australia

(DBGC 1891:18:256), which is an action that moved beyond the talk about what needed done in the foreign fields. Every session during this period included reports of missionaries working in different areas of the world and their successes and failures. The reports emphasized the hand of God in the fulfilling of the Great Commission keeping the needs of the world field before the people.

Part of the work of the FMB was to instill a mission vision with the people of the Church. One method used was the Sabbath Mission Reading supplied to the churches for each Sabbath. This was the forerunner of the *Mission Quarterly*. The readings were supplied because “not a Sabbath should pass without the attention of the people being called to the need of the world and opportunity given to make offerings for the work” (*Missionary Magazine* 1899:11:516).

In 1898, the *Missionary Magazine* became the official publication of the FMB and its primary medium calling the Church to a deeper mission consciousness. When it first came out it was recommended to the Church by the *Signs of the Times* as a magazine that was “filled with live missionary matters of interest to all who love to see the gospel of the kingdom going to all nations” (*Missionary Magazine* 1898:2:71). Every issue gave reports of missionaries just as was heard at General Conference Sessions. Mission interest grew as Adventists heard the stories of God’s work in various fields and through the appeals for active involvement in mission work. As one missionary stated when writing for the magazine, “may the Lord speed the day when what His servant says *should be; shall be*” (Andre 1889).

The *Missionary Magazine* included letters from the field, pictures of the work and the workers in foreign fields, and notices of departures to various parts of the world. The *Missionary Magazine* also printed the mission readings for each Sabbath of the month and the various actions of the Board. In these ways, Adventists were educated on the importance of mission work and the needs around the world.

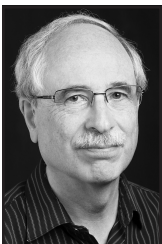
It would seem with these missionary endeavors and mission fervor as seen in the leaders of the church would have resulted in a much more mission-minded church. What was the problem? One obvious conclusion is that some church leaders tried, but they were not able to do it on their own because the majority of the members slept. Ellen White wrote, “for years the appeal has been made, but the Lord’s professed people have been sleeping over their allotted work” (DBGC 1893:19:420).

The problem was not just with local church members for there were also problems among Adventist leaders and poor organization for the facilitation of the needs. Some of the leaders were not all that they should be and their decisions were an offence to God “Who, I ask, . . . in your Foreign Mission Board is Christian in heart and soul?” (White 1896).

This lack of vision and poor decision-making was partially responsible for the Adventist Church not doing all it could have done during the 1890s. In 1893, White had written from Australia that she “felt deeply over the little burden many carry for the missionary work” (1893). Would the special attention paid to the mission of the church at the 1899 General Conference Session improve the situation? Would Adventists take up the challenge to reach out to the whole world? Would the Church operate more efficiently in the mission work it was involved in? These questions will be answered in part II of this article that will appear in the next issue of JAMS.

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Lester Merklin is Professor Emeritus of World Mission at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and Coordinator of the tentmaker-mission initiative for the Office of Adventist Mission of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Lester has served cross-culturally in Belize, Pakistan, and the Philippines; and served as mission trainer in the Institute of World Mission and the Global Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations.