

OPENING ADDRESS

Annual Council 2002

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A year ago there were just a few of us here at an abbreviated Annual Council. Our minds contained then both anxieties and hopes. Since then we have been through a year that has been difficult whether one looks at international security, stability, political leadership, or finances. We have learned how quickly events can pass, and we have learned how fragile the world and our situation are. We have had no exaggerated expectations of what our political leaders could deliver. Therefore, they have not disappointed us. Whether one looks to Africa, the Middle East, or, indeed, to the recently concluded Earth Summit, it is clear that resolutions driven by politics and politics driven by money are an unreliable formula for resolving any of our national or international dilemmas. And, so, our expectations have been and remain very tempered.

However, I think it is important that we do not throw up our arms in despair and assume that all dilemmas are inevitable. We would fail as a church if we become indifferent to the suffering of this world, or become so wholly “other-worldly” in our thinking that we are insensitive to the suffering of humanity and cannot be bothered. For this is the world in which also we live. And Christ’s death for humanity describes its value to him. This world and its people and the conditions we encounter on our journey through it must be a concern to us as God’s people, for this is where we conduct our mission. Even as God’s people in an unstable and confused world we ourselves are not sheltered from the instability and everyday pain that comes to us all.

As a community of faith we observe things as they happen, we reflect on their meaning, and we read the Bible and the writings of Ellen G White and

they define how we are to understand things, and how we should act. From these writings we discover what our God-given agenda looks like, and what our priorities should be. As a community of faith we have discovered that we do best when we think “mission”, i.e. we think in terms of the good we can bring to others; and when we do so with a specific awareness of the times in which we live. The question which God’s people must ask of themselves today -- and return to every new day -- is: “How can we be most useful to God?”

Yes, in some places it is very difficult to do mission -- for both political and cultural reasons -- and in those places we move gingerly and cautiously. Also we are as aware as anyone of the precipitous situations which prevail in tension spots such as the Middle East and Southern Asia, both parts of the 10/40 Window and central to the mission-thinking of the church. But as a church we have deliberately avoided being drawn into the political resolution arena, or in offering public opinions on them even when politicians clearly fail to calm our uneasiness. We have held and we hold that our mission agenda has to be accomplished in fragile and risky times as well as in stable situations. That is our role. We cannot step out of it.

So, the question we are constantly returning to is one of Mission: What must we do and how must we act to bring Christ to people who do not know him; and how can we effectively and attractively communicate hope to those who have none? This is our mission! Important as reformation and revival are, and we will attend to that also as a priority, it must all ultimately find expression in our commitment to mission. For it is in mission that spirituality finds its meaning. Without a mission, personal spirituality, however well attended to, is like “being all dressed up but nowhere to go”. And, so, I am again making my point about being useful to God. Election finds its meaning in mission. I believe the Remnant people are God’s elect at the end of time, and God intends to finish his work through them. Surely this calls us as a people to focus on mission.

This is how it must be.

And in that context we must also remember that as the church family around the world grows in size (in numbers), so do our responsibilities to the nations and communities in which we are placed. It is right that as a church we should care about the secular community -- care about those with health problems, whether AIDS or other ailments. It is right that we should be a

delivery system for an education which is placed in very particular life-style values which are not generally available elsewhere. It is right that when nature bursts out of control and spreads disaster or when people inflict disaster on each other, it is right that we should move quickly to help, for Christ is pained when humanity suffers. But it is also right that the church -- whether in Africa, in Asia, in the islands of the Pacific, yes, even much closer to where most of us live -- it is right that as a community of faith we should also be a mouth-piece for the poor whose number is ever increasing, for the refugees who come to us in waves asking for nothing more than one more chance to build a life for their children. And it is right that we should be a mouth-piece for other disenfranchised minorities. Is not this also mission? I think it is!

One or two of you have asked me whether I am suggesting a changed mission agenda for the church to one that "looks and smells" like social gospel -- one which is no longer focused on the straight preaching of the Word. Far from it! So, let not your hearts be troubled. We are not changing our mission agenda which we have been true to for this many years. We just need to make sure that it is large enough and inclusive enough to reflect the breadth and depth of Christ's care for suffering and lost humanity. For Christ is constantly touched by the suffering of humanity. We must remember that he is first and foremost a healer. He heals and restores what he can here and now, and the rest he promises to take care of in the future in which the "old things will be no more, for behold I make all things new." Christ's commitment is to set all things right.

And that is how broad and comprehensive our mission must be.

The Adventist family around the world exceeds 20 million. And the pattern is clear: That numbers will increase. We will see greater things in the future. In this connection I have two concerns which we must attend to:

1. A growing church is not primarily identified by the increase in numbers. Growth must also be in depth of understanding -- both of the Bible and what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist and what it means to live in times such as these; it must also be in depth of commitment -- both to the Lord, to the truth, and to the church; as well as in increased capacity to unite and bond as a family of believers. Lack of attention to this will produce Adventist mutations, which would be an unacceptable development.

When I hear that 80,000 names have to be deleted from the records of our church in one country simply because they came in *en masse*, they cannot be traced, they do not come to church, they may not even exist. That troubles me greatly. And when I learn that after one of these mega-campaigns with an imported team they don't even bother to write down the names of those who are baptized, something is wrong. Evangelism in these circumstances becomes a carnival. This is not growth. I believe in evangelistic campaigns, and they can be wonderful celebration which crown the labor done in small groups and multiple villages and is then brought together in a grand harvest - a festival, a cause for celebration. This is effective because the new members have been taught and nurtured over many months, they know who they are and what they believe, and they have a network of friends in the church. When this does not happen "growth" is just a play on numbers and does not reflect the reality we want to see.

The very word "growth" means to become bigger, stronger, healthier, and more capable of functioning effectively. Growth lies imbedded in the three values we have chosen: Growth in size, growth in unity, and growth in the qualities which define our life as Seventh-day Adventists. Growth has to do with becoming what God wants us to be, both on a personal level and in our church as a community. Neither we individually nor our congregations are anywhere near finished products!

2. But I have a second concern. There are places particularly in the developed world where things seem to have stopped for us as a church. Yes, we are not the only ones for whom it has happened, but it is little comfort to know that so has it for many other churches. My mother sent me the other day a clipping from a local newspaper. It read: "The Seventh-day Adventist church is being sold." And you say to yourself: "What led to this"? This is not an isolated case. There are in fact so many parts of the industrialized and developed world on almost every continent that we as a church with a mission seem to be having little effect. Why? It is not for lack of commitment nor because leadership has lost the vision and the church is in apostasy and is off course. No, nor is it because the Spirit is gone. So, what is it? If the answer were easy or singular it would have found and we would be busy setting it right.

Maybe, just maybe, I say to myself, looking to parts of the world where there is such a contagious enthusiasm, involvement, and joy in the life of the church, maybe, I say to myself, just maybe, things have gone stale on a

personal level for many of us in the Western World. You look around yourself and you say: “Nothing is happening -- and as for me I am looking for early retirement”! Maybe we have forgotten that all of the things we value as believers can be kept only when we share them. Maybe that’s our problem: We are not busy sharing the things we believe in! Maybe as leaders we have not been able to project this concept strongly enough. For it is an undeniable fact of life for believers that personal spirituality and mission go hand-in-hand. One cannot happen without the other. Maybe we should help our church members not to fight “the formula” but, instead, become personally increasingly involved. Without involvement in mission, somehow and somewhere, our lives become stale, and spirituality loses its shine! This is not just a Peruvian reality, or an African, or a Mexican reality; it is an undeniable reality of Christian living!

It is from this perspective that I would invite you to view an initiative in mission to be introduced at this council which is of a magnitude and size that may lead some of you to think that it is too big for us. Well, it is not. Our people need to know that as leaders our objective is to finish the work. -- We will come back to it.

Reorganizing our work in Africa, in harmony with an action taken by this body, was and is a self-evident development-need for our growing work in Africa. The time had come when it was right to do so. However, implementing this plan comes at a time when we are being negatively impacted financially both by what is happening in the secular market place as well as by the adjustments being made in the tithe sharing formula that we have agreed on. While the management of our resources from this house is sound and solid, we are and we need to remain very prudent for the remainder of this quinquennium. We had a meeting a few days ago of the whole leadership-team serving from this house, and we are together in awareness of and commitment to serve within the resource boundaries we have defined. We think we can do that without weakening the qualities of what we bring. It lies in our nature, and in the nature of what we do, that we wish that we had more and could do more, but we are going to have to be restrained.

Just a few weeks ago we held the first of a series of conversations on how our stated position as a church on Creation meets the challenges which the world of science places before us. That is a conversation which is never going to be easy because the world of faith and that of science define their

boundaries differently. And their criteria for acceptance of reality differ. Although the conversation is not easy, it is very necessary. For we have scientists in this church who are wonderfully committed to the Lord and to His church. We have scientists who are men and women of faith. But these are servants who in their daily work and professional disciplines are exposed to the processes and findings of empirical sciences from which most of us are sheltered. The challenge of holding together faith and discoveries is something we need to learn to talk about. We may not be able to reconcile them now, but we need to be able to have a meaningful conversation about these issues in an atmosphere which is not personally hostile. The need for this conversation has been there for the past several decades. At this point it is a conversation, and recommendations are not being entertained.

What happens next is that this conversation should spread in 2003 to the various divisions -- regions of the world field, in harmony with the plan voted by this body. You may say: "But the issues of Creation and Evolution are not a problem to us in my division". To which I say: Fine. Don't make it a problem. And don't import problems from other parts of the world. But make these conversations occasions of celebration when some of your own scientists, theologians, and administrators can come together and affirm the wonder of God's creation, and focus on how the strength and wonder of that belief can be an important part of your witness to the public.

Then in 2004 there will be another central conference -- similar to the one we concluded a few weeks ago, but probably with even larger participation from the world field -- when we will ask ourselves: What have we as a community of faith learned from these conversations? What is to be distilled from it all? What are the strings that we should draw together? -- I expect that as a church we will be better, healthier, and stronger for having engaged ourselves in a conversation which at times may have been tense and difficult. I expect that our in-faith position on creation will be clearer as a result of these conversations. And I know that the Lord through the Spirit will guide his church also in this experience.

As we engage in the business of mission -- and that keeps us very occupied - - I cannot help but note what observers of cultures and Christianity in general tell us about a growing gulf between what they call "Southern Christianity" and "Northern Christianity". By "Southern Christianity" is meant primarily Christianity in Africa and Latin America; and "Northern" refers primarily to North America and Europe. "Southern Christianity" is

described as buoyant, conservative, Bible-literalistic with an apocalyptic focus on Scripture and having a strong moral tone. And belief in the supernatural poses no problem at all. “Northern Christianity”, on the other hand, is stagnant, scientific, rational, highly technologically orientated. And it struggles with that which is supernatural. Observers tell us that the gulf is widening.

I note this for I see some of these elements in our own church.

It may be tempting to stand in one camp and observe, diagnose, and be prescriptive of the other. But it does not help. If anything it just reinforces the gulf. The Spirit calls us to take a caring interest in each other -- a call which is rooted in one of the values we have chosen, namely UNITY. We are one body in Christ. Wherever we come from we are meant to give life to each other. That is something which lies at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist family around the globe. That is God’s design for us; that is who and how we are. So, let us not be imprisoned by socio-cultural definitions. Let us break loose and be different!

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body --
whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free --
and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

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God has combined the members of the body
And has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it,
So that there should be no division in the body,
But that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

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Now you are the body of Christ. . . .”

(1 Corinthians 12: 13,24,25,27)