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Serving your community: *Filling in the cracks*

A person casually scanning Norwegian newspaper headlines recently could be forgiven for thinking that this secular European country is in the midst of a Christian awakening. For a start, the surprise best-selling book of 2012—selling more than 160,000 copies and outselling every secular title—was a newly released Norwegian translation of the Bible. The Norwegian Bible Society had mounted an impressive advertising campaign for its updated, easy-to-read version of Scripture, but even this does not wholly explain its unprecedented market popularity in Norway.

And then in 2013 came a six-hour play called *Bibelen*, Norwegian for “the Bible,” staged in one of Oslo’s well-known theaters. The play’s six-month run drew more than 16,000 people and generated a stir in the media as critics and commentators alike speculated on what could be fueling interest in such a topic in a society where only 3 percent of the population regularly attends church.

Is Norway poised on the edge of Christian revival? It is unlikely, for there is more going on here than meets the eye. The relationship between Norwegians and Christianity is complex, shaped by historical and contemporary forces that are difficult for non-Scandinavians to fully appreciate. Some of this complexity was captured in an offhand comment by Erik Ulfsby,

artistic director at Det Norske Teatret, which staged the *Bibelen* play. Far from expressing surprise at the popularity of his play, Ulfsby told a reporter that even if Norwegians do not go to church, they still see the Bible as “an important part of their literary heritage.”²

Neutralized Christianity

And here, in these few words, lies a clue to one of the most pressing mission challenges facing all of us who minister in countries of the secular West: How can we effectively witness to the power of the living God in a society that has largely consigned Christianity to the realm of history, literature, or to the very naïve? How can we speak compellingly of the Christ of Scripture when the language of Christian faith has such a quaint, anachronistic sound to the secular ear? How do we reach men and women whose interest in Christianity, if they have any at all, more likely stems from abstract curiosity rather than spiritual seeking? In short, how can we make the gospel alive and real for those who see Christianity as unreal and irrelevant?

My wife, Kari, has an uncle in east Norway whom we sometimes visit, and he likes to talk to me about faith. Our conversations are amicable and wide ranging. He is unapologetic about his atheism, yet is not hostile to my views. Rather, his attitude is one of indulgent amusement, which is touched

perhaps with pity that I should live my life beholden to a belief system that, to his mind, is little removed from the realm of fairy tales.

This type of response confronts so many of us who pastor within postmodern and secular communities. It is not usually outright hostility that creates barriers to our witness, nor is it that interest in Christianity has been completely extinguished. It is simply that the notion of a faith that actively shapes life seems alien to the postmodern mind. The idea that there is an ultimate truth—a truth that makes demands on our thinking and behavior—seems absurd to someone steeped in a culture of relativism, which regards absolutes of morality or spirituality with deep suspicion.

Much of Seventh-day Adventist evangelism has specialized in persuasive and effective presentations of biblically based, propositional truth. But what are we to do when the people we want to reach are ambivalent about the very concept of truth? When they do not accept the Bible as authoritative in any sense? What should our mission outreach look like? How can we authentically communicate Christ’s salvation to the deeply skeptical, humanistic mind?

Retelling the old, old story

For some of us to accept that in many secular contexts traditional

evangelism is simply a nonstarter may be difficult. We yearn for the “good old days” of evangelism where, through judicious advertising, we could draw a crowd of people to hear someone give a clear and compelling presentation of truth. But a nostalgia-driven approach to outreach may often be an exercise in futility and self-indulgence. I believe we can be true to our historic mission without necessarily embracing every method of yesterday for every context today.

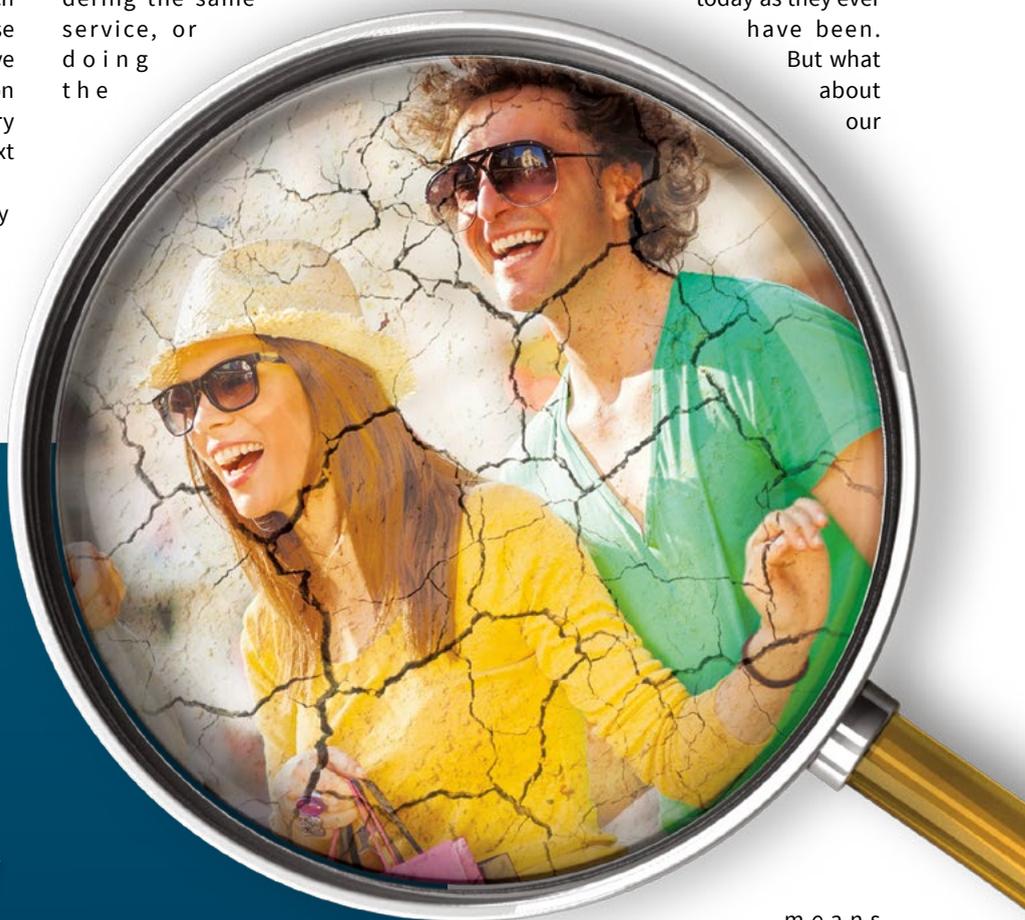
Ellen White often urged early Adventist workers not to be “one-idea men” in their presentation of the gospel.³ On one occasion she advised, “Whatever may have been your former practice, it is

not become frozen within a particular approach but should be adapted to best allow it to be understood and believed.

She wrote, “We cannot be accepted or honored of God in rendering the same service, or doing the

in our day. We must walk in the light which shines upon us, otherwise that light will become darkness.”⁵

Our mission responsibility remains unchanged. The truth and hope we offer remain the same today as they ever have been. But what about our



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not necessary to repeat it again and again in the same way. God would have new and untried methods followed. Break in upon the people—surprise them.”⁴ In her writings and ministry she made it clear that our outreach should

same works, that our fathers did. In order to be accepted and blessed of God as they were, we must imitate their faithfulness and zeal,—improve our light as they improved theirs,—and do as they would have done had they lived

means of communication? Our method of sharing Christ’s salvation? We must “walk in the light which shines upon us” today, or else our inflexibility and blindness to reality will render us ineffective as God’s instruments of mission.

Opening church doors

By 2010, when I retired as General Conference president, my wife and I had spent more than five decades living and serving away from Norway—in Africa, Britain, and America. But in recent years, we have had the chance to spend more time in the country of our birth and the opportunity to experience firsthand the challenges of

faithful mission in an environment that is profoundly secular and postmodern.

A few months ago, Kari attended a special health expo held at the Mjøndalen Seventh-day Adventist Church, approximately 50 kilometers from Oslo, which has become our home congregation when we are in Norway. This event brought some 250 people from the community through the doors of the church for a vegetarian

Yet over the past five years, the Mjøndalen congregation has pursued a model of outreach that, today, is regularly engaging with members of the community. Increasingly, the church is positioning itself as a community hub. Its distinctive building, erected in 2012, centrally located on a traffic circle, has become a community landmark. Attached to the church is the highly regarded Rosendal church school, which consistently attracts more applications than there are student places available. The church

It is unusual in Norway—indeed, in Western Europe—for a Seventh-day Adventist Church to be viewed as an open-door community institution rather than as a private religious enclave. And yet this reputation for openness is what the church members at Mjøndalen are deliberately and carefully fostering. The operative word here is *deliberate*; their plan is well thought out and long term, and it is making some impact. Throughout the health expo, people from the community—men and women who would otherwise never think of entering a church building—mingled with our members. A few



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meal and a series of seminars on weight management and nutrition. For us, this was an astounding sight. In Norway, where the Lutheran Church has long been intertwined, financially and administratively, with the state, church buildings are most often viewed as either historic relics or places to visit for christenings, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and little else. And non-Lutheran Christian churches—such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church—have the aura of foreignness and are often treated with an extra layer of caution.

has also launched a regular twice monthly Wednesday evening “Café,” which offers vegetarian meals for 75 Norwegian kroner (about US\$12.50). Church members have extended their Wednesday evening efforts to include a variety of seminars that are designed to meet particular needs in their local neighborhood. They offer different courses on personal finances, religious freedom, psychological health, tracing family trees, and photography as well as studies on biblical topics.

weeks later, the church again attracted a crowd to hear a well-known local trio in a concert marking the start of the Advent season. The concert was followed with a vegetarian “Christmas Table”—a Norwegian smorgasbord traditionally offered by companies and institutions as a seasonal gesture of generosity.

Standing in the cracks

Since the Mjøndalen health expo, I have reflected on why their approach is

helping them swim against the tide of community irrelevance. Why have they not, like too many other congregations, succumbed to an outpost mentality, allowing a sense of isolation or futility to undermine their passion for outreach?

Mission outreach in Norway—as in any western country—can be a daunting proposition. A recent government census places members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Norway at about 0.1 percent of the population. However, our lack of numbers or institutional strength is not really our biggest barrier to faithful mission. Our larger challenge is encompassed in the pervasive feeling among many Norwegians that they have everything they could possibly need. In general, they are educated, financially comfortable, and well supplied with life's necessities. It is difficult to argue with the conclusions of a recent article published by the online magazine *Alternet* naming Norway as one of the eight best countries in which to be an atheist.⁶ The writer pointed out the apparent strong correlation between the happiest countries in the world and the least religious countries in the world—with Norway topping many lists in both categories.

But every secular paradise has the occasional crack in its utopian facade. There are cracks that inevitably appear in one's personal life—family discord or sickness comes at some point to each of us. In the western world, there can also be a sense of isolation—a longing for authentic community in a world where technology and affluence are transforming the way people interact with one another.

Some cracks in the broader Norwegian society can be traced to a recent rise in immigration, some 260,000 men, women, and children just in the past six years alone, many from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. This is no small thing in a country that has historically been very static in its ethnic and cultural makeup. Immigration has brought various social and political stressors, but more than this, many

Norwegians have been personally confronted with prejudices and biases they did not know they possessed.

This is the society in which the Mjøndalen congregation ministers, and these dedicated believers have deliberately placed themselves within the cracks of society. They have looked around carefully and asked, Who exactly are these people who live in this community? What drives them? What are their needs—even those needs they are not yet aware of themselves? How can we serve them?

Four questions

What does it take for a congregation in a western secular community to adopt a mission mind-set that connects with people who may instinctively reject more traditional methods of evangelism?

I know of no comprehensive blueprint for mission in a secular community. Obviously, the subject is broader than what can be covered in this short article, and every pastor will find himself or herself facing unique local challenges. But what follows are a few questions that could perhaps be used to start a conversation within your congregation about adapting your outreach approach to secular, postmodern realities—to “walk in the light that shines upon us” today.

1. *Do we have an extroverted or introverted mind-set?* In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.”⁷ This is the grand paradox of Christian community—its true reason for being is to serve those who *are not* members. Take a look at your regular programs and monthly budget, and then ask, Do we exist to serve our community, or are we primarily serving ourselves?

This distinction between an extroverted and introverted mind-set also shapes *how* we go about serving others. An introverted mentality prioritizes the comfort of church members and expects others to adapt to our culture and to learn our language of faith before they can extract something of value. An extroverted mind-set asks, How can we

adapt our approach and language so that our church will be a place where nonmembers can feel at home?

An introverted mind-set tends to view mission as a sortie into enemy territory. An extroverted mind-set says, as one of the organizers of the recent Mjøndalen health expo said, “We want to meet the people of our community on *their* terms and with *their* needs.”

Those with an extroverted mission mind-set will also be unafraid to seek out community partners who share similar goals. For instance, the Mjøndalen health expo was held in the local church facility but the congregation also partnered with the Norwegian government's Department of Health and with a well-known national weight management organization. Three of the four main speakers were non-Adventist experts.

Where does this extroverted mission mind-set come from? It comes from the Master Missionary Himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for His disciples: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15–18, NIV). This was a prayer of engagement, not of retreat or separation but a call for Christ's followers in every age to reject an isolationist attitude and to emulate His radical engagement with the world.

2. *Are we offering something of value?* We may quickly answer, “Well, of course the truth of Scripture has immeasurable value!” And yet whatever we offer must have *perceived* value in the eye of the receiver before it will be appreciated. Too often, we give people what *we* know they need and wonder why their response is less than enthusiastic. Why do we do this? Maybe because it is easier to just offer someone a tract or an invitation to an evangelistic meeting. Or perhaps the real reason is that we have not done the homework necessary to truly know our community.

In all He did, Christ showed Himself to be intimately and compassionately

engaged with the day-to-day struggles that defined life in first-century Palestine. He shaped His language, His stories, His miracles in ways that spoke directly to the men and women He encountered. He understood their needs. The Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 42:1–9 reminds us of the sheer breadth of Jesus' holistic mission to humanity.

Does our outreach speak to the lonely, the stressed, the overweight, the drug-dependent? Is it tuned-in to political and social realities? Is it focused on meeting people where they are, rather than where we wish they were? Are we prepared to stand in the cracks of society and offer something that corresponds to felt needs?

I was interested to note that many programs offered by the Mjøndalen congregation, including the Christmas concert and the health expo, have a moderate attendance fee attached. The church has considered local interests and needs, and they are signaling their confidence that what they offer has value. It seems that many in the community agree.

3. *Is it powered for the long term?* As president of the Adventist world church, I learned quickly that without local church ownership of mission initiatives, such ventures are doomed to a short life. Mission plans that flow from the top down—whether from a General Conference committee or the mind of a church pastor—will not find long-term sustainability unless there is widespread buy-in among lay members of a congregation and the plan corresponds with their talents and enthusiasms.

This question of long-term sustainability is especially important within a secular context because mission to postmoderns is not generally a speedy process. It encompasses not just the length of a Revelation Seminar or a course of Bible studies but years of relationship-building. Our mission approach therefore must be carefully planned—deliberate and

consistent—and not made up of stand-alone events that come about in bursts of inspiration or enthusiasm.

One of the distinctive features of the Mjøndalen approach is that this concept has largely bubbled up from the passions of lay members and draws on the specific skill sets and resources that already exist within the congregation. There are a number of health professionals who are eager to use their professional skills for outreach. Since 2005, they have regularly offered health tests in local shopping centers, nutrition lectures, vegetarian buffets, and more. The church members believe that only consistent engagement with the community over a period of years will eventually break down prejudices and build genuine trust and relationships.

4. *Is it authentic?* A secular, post-modern man or woman can smell a sales pitch coming from miles away. Thus, when it comes to outreach in the secular world, it is absolutely essential that we first seek to build genuine relationships with people. Trust is difficult to create and easy to destroy, as one leader of the Mjøndalen church's mission program told me. She was expressing her concern that the model they have developed could be misused by some as a means to simply begin talking about spiritual values without first creating bonds of friendship and trust. "If this happened, it could eventually destroy our ability to use this method," she told me, "because in our part of the world, credibility and our good name as Adventists is everything."

What does authentic, people-focused mission look like? In some ways it reverses our traditional approach, where we convince people of the rightness of our message, conform their behavior to acceptable standards, and then, finally, embrace them into our community.

We do not cheapen our core values or beliefs when we freely enroll people into the warmth of our fellowship, regardless of where they are

in their spiritual journey. Rather, we are reflecting Christ's overwhelming concern and compassion for *people* over everything else. For it is *people* He came to save—not statements or doctrines or denominations. These exist to serve Christ's mission, not the other way around.

Yes, of course, all mission outreach must seek to lead men and women inexorably toward a meeting with their Savior, and when this happens, it will inevitably produce radical changes in their behavior. Yet, I believe effective mission in a secular world requires us to welcome people where they are and to foster a sense of belonging as a basic first step.

Conclusion

Prosperity and secularism do indeed create a formidable barrier, deflecting so many of our "tried and true" methods of sharing the gospel. And it is not easy for us, as a church or as individuals, to change our approach—to reorient our thinking and use of resources to meet the mission realities of today.

Yet it is imperative that we try to read the unique pulse of our community, to really understand the specific fears, hopes, and needs that drive the men and women around us. I pray that we may look at the crowds, as Jesus did, with compassion (Matt. 9:36) and then ask, "How can we serve you?" 

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- 1 Kari Paulsen, wife of Jan Paulsen, is a notable contributor to this article.
 - 2 Quoted in many news sources, including "Bible in Norway Is Bestseller: 'The Scriptures' Surprisingly Strong in Largely Secular Country," *Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/06/bibles-strong-comeback-su_n_3394982.html.
 - 3 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915), 383.
 - 4 White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 125.
 - 5 White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1855), 262.
 - 6 Amanda Marcotte, "8 Countries Where Atheism Is Accepted, Even Celebrated, Instead of Demonized" *AlterNet*, www.alternet.org/8-countries-where-atheism-accepted-even-celebrated-instead-demonized?page=0%2C0.
 - 7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark International, 2010), 36.

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