
World Church: Pastor the Community, Not Just Members, Adventist Church
Leaders Urge Silver Spring, Maryland, United States [Taashi
Rowe/ANN]

When was the last time your church focused on problems outside its doors? If you can't remember, you are not alone. There are many other Seventh-day Adventists who do little to alleviate the suffering of those in their communities. According to a 2002 world survey of Adventists, only 29 percent of church members were involved in community service.

This number may come as a surprise, since Adventists have founded and today lead a number of humanitarian organizations. Such organizations include Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Adventist Community Services, Adventist AIDS International Ministry and the Dorcas Society.

While these organizations are an important part of the world church's efforts to help those less fortunate, Dr. May-Ellen Colon, assistant director for the world church's Sabbath School/Personal Ministries (SS/PM) department, says the average church member is not often personally involved in community service.

At its 2005 General Conference Session the Adventist world church recast its approach to sharing the gospel message between 2005 and 2010. With the "Tell the World" vision, the church intends to "increase the percentage of church members involved in community service from 29 percent to at least 40 percent."

Colon is responsible for nudging members beyond church doors to make that vision a reality. She also heads training programs for church leaders globally to improve community service.

"Twenty-nine percent is abysmal," Colon says. This might be a result of more traditional outreach that generally holds activities at the church. But Colon says, "instead of making the community come to us we're going to them."

"It's not all about us," she continues. Colon envisions that every Adventist church will engage in a more community-based ministry that creates a church that is an indispensable to the community. "We need a paradigm shift ... Pastors should pastor the community not just the church," she explains.

At that same 2005 meeting Kenneth Flemmer, from ADRA, noted, "The official mission of Seventh-day Adventists calls for a compassionate ministry for the poor, but there is such a focus on evangelism that there is a neglected theology of ministry to people's physical and human needs."

"Lots of people think that it is a traditional part of Adventism not to be involved in community work," agrees Monte Sahlin, a vice president for creative ministries at the Columbia Union Conference in the United States, "but that's a malformed Adventism that came about in the 1920s and 1930s [when the church decided to focus mostly on evangelism]. The

early pioneers of the Adventist church were deeply involved in issues of injustice and social involvement."

Colon, though, stresses that there are many Adventist churches already very involved in their communities. In a recent SS/PM departmental newsletter *Sharing*, Colon lists several such churches. In Virginia, United States, the Summerville Adventist Church sponsors the only childcare center in the county, as well as after-school programs in several public schools. The Central Coast Community Church in Australia, in conjunction with the Red Cross and Sanitarium Health Food Company, feeds breakfast to at-risk children five days a week at the local primary public school. And in Seoul, Korea, the Central Church runs a popular vegetarian restaurant from Monday to Friday in their church. They also provide Sabbath meals, haircuts, and free health diagnoses to aged people in their community.

Colon talks of uniting social ministry with evangelical ministry. She refers to the writings of one of the Adventist church's founders, Ellen G. White, who calls this kind of ministry Jesus Christ's Method--by showing people you care about their physical problems, you open the doors to addressing spiritual problems as well.

In some ways Colon sees this renewed effort at community outreach as a way to enhance and transform traditional witnessing methods.

Sahlin, who has written three books on the subject including *Ministries of Compassion and Understanding Your Community*, says there is no denying "community involvement is absolutely essential to church growth."

She cautions against just arbitrarily deciding what programs may best suit the community. Instead, she suggests working with the communities and their leaders to find out what needs the church can fill. "Why invent new ways of doing what others have done when you can partner with already successful programs?" she asks.

She also notes, "in this age of fast food, fast results and fast baptisms, this kind of ministry may not gain immediate converts to Adventism but we must work in the community as people who desire the good of others--reflecting Jesus' love for humanity."

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