

Whose Mission Is It Anyway?

Defining the Future of the Church in IAD
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Lowell C Cooper

Introduction:

As always, it is a privilege to participate with leaders throughout the Inter-American Division. This meeting has been convened in order to engage our minds in collective prayer and consideration of the themes that will inform our journey for the upcoming quinquennium. We all need maps and compasses to orient ourselves—in life, in cities, in wilderness areas.

The purpose of our reflections this evening is not to spur us to do more, work faster, try harder, resolve more deeply, expend more resources, produce greater results, move the machinery of production at a higher speed. Instead, we shall consider how to align our energies with a defining and eternal purpose.

1. Mission and vision statements make a difference in organizations:

No doubt we are aware of the importance of mission and vision statements. These are attempts to capture a sense of defining purpose for an organization's or a person's life.

When we set out on a journey, we generally have a destination in mind. It is this way also in life. If you don't know your purpose in life you risk being irrelevant, a hindrance rather than a help.

A mission statement

- determines a company's direction
- provides a template for decision-making
- forms the basis for team alignment
- shapes strategy
- provide a basis for welcome change

Mission and value statements keep us mindful of the defining purpose of our lives. This is true in corporate life as illustrated in the

following mission and vision statements of very successful organizations.

McDonalds: “To be our customers' favorite place and way to eat.”

Coca Cola: “To refresh the world...To inspire moments of optimism and happiness...To create value and make a difference.”

Microsoft's vision: “A computer on every desk and in every home, running Microsoft software.”

Starbucks: “To inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time.”

Google: “To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.”

Stephen R Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* emphasizes the importance of having a defining purpose in life. He counsels: “Start with the end in mind.”

Now the first question we must ask when we think about the future of the Church the Inter-American Division is this: “Whose mission is it anyway?” Is it the mission of the Church—and, if so, what part of the Church. The General Conference? The Division, unions, local conferences/mission? The local church? The individual members? Who really owns the mission?

2. The mission of God is the source for all Church mission.

When we speak about the mission of the Church we must always do so within the framework of God's mission. It is His mission that we are speaking about. The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful and goal oriented.

Colossians 1:19-20 (NKJV) “For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him **to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven,** having made peace through the blood of His cross.”

God's mission is global. We might even say it is cosmic—embracing the whole universe including the angels in heaven. It is not restricted

to a few privileged people who gradually withdraw from engagement with the world, a picture we often describe about the church.

The creation story and the redemption story portray a God who is engaged in mission. The Old Testament saga of the Exodus, God leading His people out of bondage to the Promised Land, illustrates the scope of God's mission.

In the Exodus God responded to all the dimensions of Israel's need—political, economic, social, moral, environmental, spiritual and physical. God's purpose for His entire creation is one of restoration. It touches every aspect of life on this planet. It is His purpose:

- To restore a right relationship between humans and God.
- To remove the barrier of enmity and alienation among people.
- To repeal the effects of sin and guilt.
- To rout the powers of evil.
- To eradicate death.
- To rebuild the Edenic harmony in His whole creation.

When we come to understand the mission of God, we begin to see the Church in a new dimension—the church is created by God for his own purposes. The church is the representation and demonstration of God in this world. We discover that God does not have a mission for the Church. Instead, He has a Church for His mission. And if we press the point just a bit further, we discover that the God of this universe has called me to be a part of His mission. That is something to be fired up about!

Two things must undergird our appreciation of God's mission:

1. It is entirely His initiative and He is in charge.
2. His redemptive mission addresses everything on this planet that has been spoiled by sin.

God's mission involves the restoration of all that was true about his whole creation, and the eradication of all the evil that has worked its way into this world. Our commitment to mission must demonstrate

the same broad totality of concern for human need that God demonstrated.

It is too easy to think of ourselves as the special people of God, singled out for salvation while the rest of the world struggles to manage on its own. How often do we hear someone say, "I am so anxious for Jesus to come, I am so tired of this world." The not-so-hidden message here is that I want God to rescue me from this broken-down world. I really don't care about the world—I just want to escape it.

3. *The mission of Jesus illustrates God's mission.*

The life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus enlarges our understanding of God's mission. Jesus spoke about His mission being the fulfillment of God's mission:

John 6:38, 40 (NKJV) "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me...this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life..."

The gospels record several statements of Jesus that open our understanding to His sense of mission:

Luke 19:10 (NKJV) "...for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Luke 4:18-21 (NKJV) "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

“Finishing the work” is a favorite among Adventist expressions. One can hear it used worldwide but its use is rarely, if ever, accompanied by an explanation of what it might mean. It is most often, almost exclusively, used in connection with quantitative analyses of where we are and what we have done.

Perhaps we do this somewhat reflexively because of the great commission to go into all the world and make disciples. Although no one ever says it directly, the implication, at least from some of our reports, suggests that the task is well in hand. Still others leave one with the impression that we are done when the last person on earth is baptized.

When is the work really finished? It is a tough question and loaded with assumptions. We can easily ask the question but seem unable to answer it.

It was not so for Jesus. He could confidently declare: “I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.” (John 17:4)

How could this possibly be true? When Jesus made the claim, recorded as part of His prayer in John 17, not all sick people were healed. There were still blind people, poor people, corrupt leaders, faulty religious systems, and all kinds of fallen humanity at every turn. He had barely gone beyond the borders of His own nation, let alone the whole world. There is no evidence of His having visited ancient civilizations elsewhere on the globe. No record of His having been to Mexico or Canada. Yet He declares, “I have finished the work You gave me to do.”

Surely the secret to understanding this bold statement lies in the adjacent declaration, John 17:4 (NKJV) “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.” It is a qualitative claim more than a quantitative one.

Although the work role given to us is different from that given to Jesus, can we not also view our task as bringing glory to God? If so, can we not capture a new sense in which we can be engaged in finishing the work—by focusing on the qualitative aspects of all that we are and do.

4. *The mission of God's people must mirror God's mission.*

The Church's engagement in mission is based on the realization that:

- Our mission is an outgrowth of His mission
- We participate in mission at His invitation
- The accomplishment of our mission is by His power.
- Our mission must involve both quality and quantity.

In order to elaborate on some of these points let us consider the story of God's people in mission. Obviously, the call of Abraham is an important element of the story.

Genesis 12:1-3 (NKJV) Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's calling and election of Abraham was not merely so that he should be saved and become the spiritual father of those who will finally be among the redeemed in the new creation (the elect, in another sense). It was rather, and more explicitly, that he and his people should be the instrument through whom God would gather the multinational multitude that no man or woman can number.

For Abraham, obedience to the covenant was not a condition of election, it was a condition of mission. If Abraham and his descendants would live as God intended, then the nations would notice.

Deuteronomy 26:18-19 (NKJV) "Also today the LORD has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the LORD your God, just as He has spoken."

Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 13 (NKJV) "Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God: ...And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them."

1 Kings 8:60-61 (NKJV) "...that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other. Let your heart therefore be loyal to the LORD our God, to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments, as at this day."

Isaiah 60:1-3 (NKJV) Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the LORD will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.

Paul and Barnabas quote from the prophet Isaiah when speaking to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch:

Acts 13:47 (NKJV) "For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.' "

What can we observe from these few among many Bible texts that describe the mission of God's people in Old Testament times.

1. God never asked the children of Israel to go anywhere. He asked them to be the light. Their covenant relationship with God and their moral and ethical distinctiveness would draw the attention of nations around them so much so that, according to Zechariah:

Zechariah 8:23 (NKJV) "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard *that God is with you.*" ' ' "

2. God assured them of their mission success if they would only learn to love and worship Him. The ethical quality of life for God's people is directly linked to their fulfilment of His mission. This reminds me of a statement from John Piper: "Mission is not the ultimate goal of the Church, worship is."

The mission of God's people is to "Be" and to "Do".
"Being" must precede "Doing".

"Mission is not primarily about going. Nor is mission primarily about doing anything. Mission is about being. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural, multinational community among the nations. It is modeling before a skeptical world what the living God of the Bible is really like."¹

How will the world come to believe in an unseen God who is rich in mercy and committed to redeeming and restoring this broken world unless there is a community (the Church) that is a living example of this very thing?

5. *The mission of the Church needs thoughtful study and expression.*

Now we come to an area of some sensitivity because we address ourselves. We are not just voicing theory. It is time to get practical. So, I wish for us to review the Seventh-day Adventist Church mission statement:

SDA Church mission statement:

Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to call all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to

¹ Peskett & Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission*, The Bible Speaks Today series, InterVarsity Press, p. 123.

proclaim the everlasting gospel embraced by the three angels' messages (Revelation 14:6-12), and to prepare the world for Christ's soon return.

Our denominational Mission Statement is based on the Great Commission and the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14. This Mission Statement has served us well and for many decades. True, it has undergone slight wording changes at various General Conference Sessions. But in essence it has preserved the same thrust for decades.

I hope it will generate no misunderstanding for me to declare to you that something desperately important is missing. In light of what we have reviewed about the mission of God's people can you identify where our Church Mission Statement comes short? I am not suggesting that anything be deleted. But I am appealing for the Church to consider something to be added.

Our Mission Statement is all about doing. It says nothing about being. Remember what we observed earlier: Mission is about 'being a certain kind of person/people/organization before it is about 'going' somewhere and 'doing' something. How can we ever presume to do God's work if we don't act like Jesus and glorify God?

I wish we could add to our Mission Statement an idea somewhat like this:

The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to be a global faith community devoted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the gospel calling all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ in preparation for Christ's soon return.

Do we dare venture further into the examination of our denomination's Mission Statement? We have seen the Mission Statement of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. Is there a Mission Statement for the Inter-American Division, for each Union, for each Conference/Mission, for each local church?

Do we need a mission statement for denominational structure? I firmly believe so. But rarely do we find entities of denominational

structure that have developed their own Mission Statement within the framework of the worldwide Church statement.

May I offer an example?

For a division: In order to advance and support the mission of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church the mission of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Inter-American Division) is:

To nurture the spiritual life and mission of all SDA members and organizations in this division territory.

To develop and share resources for efficient and effective engagement in the worldwide mission of the Church.

To inspire collaboration and community among all the Seventh-day Adventist organizations.

To uphold, practice, and nurture the priorities, beliefs and values of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family.

To stimulate and superintend the development of organization structure necessary for mission advancement.

For a union: In order to advance and support the mission of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church the mission of the _____ Union of Seventh-day Adventists is:

To nurture the spiritual life and mission of all SDA members and organizations in this union territory.

To develop and share resources for efficient and effective engagement in the worldwide mission of the Church.

To inspire collaboration and community among all the Seventh-day Adventist organizations.

To uphold, practice, and nurture the priorities, beliefs and values of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family.

To stimulate and superintend the development of organization structure necessary for mission advancement.

For a local conference/mission: In order to advance and support the mission of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church the mission of the _____ Conference/Mission of Seventh-day Adventists is:

To nurture the spiritual life and mission of all SDA members and organizations in this conference/mission territory.

To develop and share resources for efficient and effective engagement in the worldwide mission of the Church.

To inspire collaboration and community among all the Seventh-day Adventist organizations.

To uphold, practice, and nurture the priorities, beliefs and values of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family.

To stimulate and superintend the development of organization structure necessary for mission advancement.

For a local church: In order to advance and support the mission of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church the mission of the _____ Seventh-day Adventist Church is:

To exalt and honor God through corporate worship, biblically informed relationships, and Christ-like service.

To nurture the spiritual life and mission of all church members.

To uphold, practice, and nurture the priorities, beliefs and values of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family.

To be the local and representative expression of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church family.

To help all persons in our community to experience the lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives.

To develop and share resources for efficient and effective engagement in the worldwide mission of the Church.

6. *Unless I have thought carefully about my mission calling I may be following unconsciously a mission that is only about me.*

A mission statement is not just an instrument for corporations and organizations. Mission statements also guide individual lives. We may not have thought much about expressing our personal mission statement. If not, we can be sure that our lives will be following an unconscious mission statement for, whether we know it or not, we pursue defining priorities in our life.

A personal mission statement: My mission is to live in a way that brings honor and attention to God and His purposes for this world.

Conclusion:

The “take home message” from our gathering this evening is that our lives find their deepest meaning, their highest joy, their best energy, their clearest purpose when we understand God’s work in this world and the calling that He extends to us to be a part of it. It is God’s mission, not my career that ignites the life, that sets on fire the energies, that spreads a new kind of light in the world.

Earlier we stated that God does not have a mission for His Church. Instead He has a Church for His mission. May we know the depth and breadth of that mission—and the honor of being invited to participate with God in making His mission the top priority in our living. Mission First!