

to think about . . .

Are we providing answers to questions that people in the secular society do not ask?

the World Inside and Outside of the Church

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In the Acts 17 story of Paul's encounter with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at Athens, it is clear that Paul was accustomed to taking notice of the context in which he was attempting to share the good news of Jesus Christ. For instance, Paul carefully observed the Athenian's objects of worship (vs. 23). Then, in his speech on the Areopagus, Paul noted the religious fervour of the city, quoted Aratus (a Stoic poet), and concluded with an appeal for repentance based on the fact that the "unknown God" had spoken to the world in Jesus Christ (vss. 22-31).

A similar sensitivity is necessary for us if we are to share the gospel effectively with our world. We can no longer just "tell them" and expect them to "trust and obey. What are the challenges and opportunities?

The world is secular . . .

Many Christians have a strong feeling of unease in regard to the world. Most people do not take God or the sacred into account in everyday life. Think of the difference between the world of the Bible and that of contemporary society. Back then, God (or Satan) was behind everything that occurred. God caused earthquakes, floods, bountiful harvests, and beautiful romances. Now we have secular, scientific, and biological explanations of the world.

. . . but spiritual

So, secular people have almost entirely bracketed God out of their everyday lives. Yet, at the same time, in Australia (one of the most secularised countries in the world) the majority of people believe in the existence of a "higher being." It is easier than ever before to have "spiritual" conversations with people. However, instead of expressing their spiritual journey in terms of a search for God, they are on a search for meaning. One can hear this "tune" often in popular music and contemporary movies. Hence, the Christians often unspoken witness to an authentic life lived with God remains enormously powerful. People are not looking for Christians to be perfect, just real and "together."

The world is multi-cultural . . .

Present-day society in Australia and New Zealand is multi-cultural. What does this mean for the church? Basically, it means variety. People are not only being stirred into the Australian or Aotearoan "melting pot," but groups of people are proudly maintaining their cultural traditions and heritage. This brings the church into contact with a wide diversity of highly valued worldviews, family patterns, communication styles, and religious heritages. On the other hand, it may also mean that Australians can adopt spiritual rituals and patterns that are Buddhist in orientation, without experiencing any dissonance at all.

So, where does this leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church which has been used to sending out missionaries to carry the gospel to the "islands across the seas" instead of to the countries represented on my street?

. . . but local

The fact that the basic building block of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has always been its local incarnation, may be the answer. That is where "church" really happens. It is where people are in touch with people. The challenge and opportunity for us is to foster churches that cater for difference rather than uniformity. This may mean nurturing the growth of ethnic churches, generation-X churches, etc., and then putting in place strategies for keeping the whole body together. The challenges are such that we may have to dispense with the "luxury" of attacking anything that appears new or innovative. The unity of a truly multi-cultural church may just be the most powerful witness possible in the multi-cultural, but fractured, Australian and New Zealand context.

> Our theology is not just good theory, but it is also intensely practical

The world is postmodern . . .

The world in which the church is situated has not changed merely because of the influx of other cultures into Australia and New Zealand. It has also undergone a paradigm shift that some sociologists label postmodernism. In the past few decades, popular trust in the power of human reason and optimism associated with scientific advances has

crumbled. There is a pervasive agnosticism in regard to the possibility of arriving at absolute truth, be it religious, historical, or scientific.

While not demeaning the value of community and relationships, postmodernity's view of truth is highly personal, relativistic, and non-institutional. Postmoderns are characterised by a strong suspicion in regard to the value of the "big stories" (or metanarratives) and a great reticence to accept the value of institutions.

. . . but pragmatic

Postmodernism presents enormous challenges to Christianity. However, while rejecting metanarratives and absolute truth, it accepts that truth is what works. I believe that Seventh-day Adventists have an opportunity here. Our theology is not just good theory, but it is also intensely practical. The Sabbath is not just the right day to worship; it has a real impact in our frenetic lives. The doctrine of the state of the dead doesn't just tell us that when "you're dead, you're dead"; it is also a reminder of the wholistic value of the human being (not just the soul). And, the second coming provides encouragement to those who grieve (1Thess 4:13-18). Even Christology—over which more theological battles have been waged in Adventism than over any other doctrine—could be construed in practical terms (see Phil 2:1-11).

Perhaps the time has come for the church to use doctrine to relate to humankind's needs, rather than seeing it as an occasion for debate and disagreement. And, this is not even to mention the opportunities for increased involvement in the humanitarian needs of the world in corporate and individual modes. Nor, the opportunity to restructure the institutional church so that it might appear attractive, relevant, and practical to postmodern people.

The World is Post-Feminist . . .

The idea that the world out there is post-feminist might sound like good news to recalcitrant male chauvinists. However, post-feminism does not mean that the feminist movement has run its course, but that feminist presuppositions are now generally accepted in society.

Young women, especially, do not question whether they are equal with men, or that they have the right to take any role in society with equal pay and respect. It is accepted that women also have the right to consideration from spouses/partners and employers in regard to their traditional roles relating to motherhood. Still, at the same time, many "old men" are struggling to come to terms with the "new women."[1]

. . . but . . .

What are the possibilities here? They are enormous, but will it happen? Dream with me for a moment. I see a time when the gifts of Adventist women are being fully utilised in the church. Where the insights of women are valued in the fields of human resources and theology. When women will be encouraged and acknowledged in church ministry and leadership. The opportunities presented by our world are such that we dare not restrict the role of women in the church unless we are absolutely certain that restrictions are warranted by Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ!

In recent times I've talked to several young women who are inclined to think that the Adventist Church cannot be the "true church" because it does not treat its female members as equal to males. This just highlights the importance of the post-feminist opportunities.

The world is post-church . . .

For decades, Australian society has not functioned with the church at its centre. Instead, the church is often marginalised, and its pastors and priests are no longer given the respect they once enjoyed. While it is true that the church is still often called on at the key points of human life—birth, marriage, death—unless churches and Christians are deeply involved in helping in the community, they are not considered relevant.

For increasing numbers, as well, the worship services, doctrines, and language of the church are incomprehensible. What do secular people know about "righteousness" (by faith or anything else)? Or "sanctification"? Or "spiritual gifts"? Does the name, "Seventh-day Adventist" have any meaning to most members of the community? What do they think when they see a sign advertising a "Revelation Seminar"?

. . . but redeemable

The fact that we live in a post-church society should challenge us toward the possibility of renewal. Let me illustrate this in my own particular area of interest, doctrinal theology. Jesus and his apostles "grabbed" word-pictures from their own context in order to convey the good news of "salvation. They spoke of "redemption" and "justification." But, notice that some of these great "Christian" words are no longer commonly in use. How will we convey the grand themes of salvation to non-churched people? A challenge, yes! But, it comes with great possibilities for renewal of the church in language, worship, outreach, and structure.

Challenges or Opportunities?

The world surrounding the church has changed. The church now has the challenge of reaching secular, multi-cultural, postmodern, post-feminist, and post-church people. As well, many of the people inside the church have some (or all) of those characteristics as well. We must prayerfully devise strategies to make the most of the new opportunities. "Business as usual" won't be enough! ■

1 This is Hugh Mackay's expression in *Reinventing Australia: The Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s* (Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1993), 24-54.

For reflection . . .

- How did Paul the Apostle take account of the context in which he was sharing the gospel?
- Do you agree that unless churches and Christians are deeply involved in helping the community, they are not relevant? How might we get deeply involved?