
Abstract

This paper describes a phenomenon that emerged in European Adventism in the 1990s, which can be described as need-oriented, life-style, or organic evangelism. This type of evangelism is connected with the church planting movement and mission to reach secular, un-churched people. Although this movement has not became mainstream in European Adventism, it certainly deserves attention because it offers a valid, biblically rooted, and yet culturally relevant alternative mission approach in European territories where the Seventh-day Adventist Church is plateauing or declining.1

It is no secret that Adventist church attendance is dropping in some parts of the world. As one can see in the appendix, this is true of many of the European Seventh-day Adventist Unions; most of these Unions are experiencing a plateau or a decline in church membership, with only a few minor exceptions. Until the last ten years of the previous century, Adventism in many European countries “mainly reached fellow Christians. But the number of converts dwindled, because many were leaving church all together.”2 While some conferences took part in NET ’96, with others joining for NET ’98 or NET ’99, the results were not as anticipated or hoped. Additionally, a lot of effort was placed into translating and “subtitling the tapes, but the effects were minimal.”3

The Missionary Nature of the Church

The innovative mission methods discussed in this paper may be contested by some, but welcomed by others. These reactions, as well as theological perspectives and an emphasis outline, will be discussed in this section. In Matthew 28:18–20,

1 Disclaimer: The author of this article has been personally involved in this type evangelism on a local scale for an extensive period of a time. For that reason, only a description of this evangelism is provided, not a critique. Due to limited space and scope, this article is far from providing exhaustive information related to the topic. The time frame described in this article is limited to the period of personal involvement and observation of the author, as well as the period of provided testimonies of eyewitnesses.

2 Rudy Dingjan, e-mail to author, January 31, 2018.

3 Ibid.
the passage known as the Great Commission, Jesus instructs his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (NIV). These verses serve as a Biblical mandate for mission and outreach.

Yet, one might ask, is mission essential to the Church? And if so, why? Emil Brunner argued that, “the Church exists by mission as a fire does by burning. Mission is not merely the application of theology taught in a classroom. Mission lies at the core of theology, and within the very character and action of God himself.” If mission and outreach comprise the very essence of God’s character, then this is a topic that needs our utmost attention if we claim to be his followers.

This crucial role of mission justifies the development of a holistic mission to lost people, as well as validating the existence of church. Mission is more than evangelism, and is deeper than merely a social responsibility. In view of Jesus’ Great Commission, proclaiming the gospel is an essential part of mission, with the ultimate objective being that of making disciples. Yet “Christian existence is essentially and fundamentally social in nature,” as well. The reality of the church reflects the reality of the triune God. Just as the three divine persons exist in community within the godhead, so the church coexists as a community. The Christian Church is a community “whose inner dynamic reflects God’s inner reality.”

So how does the church reflect the Godhead’s loving teamwork in reaching out to lost people? Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, explains it this way: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’” Christ’s example of living in community with others, as well as bringing them to discipleship, is the strongest example of living out the Great Commission that can be found. Jesus not only sent his disciples on mission, but he lived out that mission in his everyday life.

The Changing Context

In light of the burst of religiosity that followed the fall of communism (as well as other factors) in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, it was clear that religion

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8 Ibid., 31.
European Adventist Ways of Reaching Secular People for Christ

European Adventist Ways of Reaching Secular People for Christ

did not die out as some scholars had anticipated it would. Sociologists such as Peter Berger openly admit that they made a mistake in assuming that secularization would cause the death of religion. Berger confessed, “Our underlying argument was that secularization and modernity go hand in hand. With more modernization comes more secularization. It wasn’t crazy theory. There was some evidence for it. But I think it’s basically wrong. Most of the world today is certainly not secular. It’s very religious.”

With this in mind, and in response to the given situation and to the biblical mandate found in Matthew 28, a new vision for mission outreach following Jesus’ method was needed that included the following key presuppositions: (1) Evangelism is not an event; it is a relational process that includes application in everyday life. (2) The emphasis of the message and methods need to be framed in a plausible manner, in a language that is understandable and relevant to a given context. (3) Evangelism starts with addressing people’s perceived needs and is presented to them in culturally relevant forms.

Applying Jesus’ method brings these assumptions to life. When we apply the qualities that E. G. White attributes to Jesus, we find that “mingling” practically looks like spending extended time with un-churched people in the community. When she refers to “desiring people’s good,” we learn that this requires that the primary motive of our interactions is to make people’s lives better. When she speaks of “showing sympathy,” she is describing treating people with altruistic loving-kindness. The desired fruit of such a Christ-like lifestyle is winning people’s confidence. This is how the soil is prepared. Once this has been done, then the invitation to meet Jesus can logically follow.

The Beginnings of Need-Oriented Evangelism among Europeans in the 1990s

This section is limited to the memories and experiences of the author, as well as the sources that were used for this study. When Peter Roennfeldt became the Trans-European Division (TED) church growth director in 1995, he brought with him previous experience from Australia. Right from the start, he began to promote church planting to reach secular communities. The immediate response, however, was not so positive; some of the excuses – although legitimate – were lack of finances and lack of experienced people for such church planting ventures. Only after taking groups of people to see and taste this approach, which had been implemented in secular Australia, did Adventist leaders in Europe take this approach seriously.

11 Rudy Dingjan, e-mail from author, January 31, 2018.
By 1998, there were young adult teams attempting to plant churches in cities located in Denmark, England, and a few other European countries; their goal was to reach people who did not go to church. Soon after, potential teams from other Unions (the Netherlands and Czecho-Slovakia, for example) were able to see the benefit of these so-called “café churches,” and decided to try something similar.

As the need for mobilizing and equipping increased, the TED, as well as some unions, organized training events. In 2001, a ten-day church planting field school was organized under the leadership of Peter Roennfeldt in Himmerlandsgården, Denmark. Forty-five attendants came from the UK, Germany, Scandinavian countries, and the Netherlands. The experience was spiritually inspiring and motivating for mission. A similar conference was organized in 2002, this time meeting at the Swedish Ekebyholm School; this meeting lasted one week and included about 120 participants. In 2003, almost 300 participants gathered for a church planting training in Turku, Finland, with 70 participants from the Netherland Union alone.12

From that time on, the European Adventist church-planting movement grew. For a number of years, there were division-wide, as well as national, church planting events. Participants from both the TED and the then Euro-African Division (EUD) Unions were involved. In 2003, the SEEDS conference at Friedensau Adventist University, Germany, was organized to train people in new ways of evangelism. Church planters exchanged information and techniques to the benefit of all. In 2005, over 800 attended the Church Planters Exchange at Friedensau – but by 2011 the numbers began to wane, and when another conference took place at Friedensau, including people from across the TED and some from the EUD, it drew only 250 participants.13

While the initiative was growing across Europe, from 2004 to 2012, those in the Czecho-Slovakian Union Conference interested in church planting attended quarterly meetings (called “Planting”); pastors and lay leaders alike were welcome. Teams involved or interested in church planting met in meetings called “Incubator” (later called “Launch-pad”) twice a year between 2004 and 2013. There was also training provided for the administrators and leaders of the CS Union and its local conferences. They participated in training called “Matrix Training & Coaching” in 2005–2007 held mostly in Sweden, which was designed to prepare the leadership for a strategic church planting movement.14 Church members in the Czecho-Slovakian Union were also mobilized through annual weekend seminars (held by invited guests, mostly from TED) to think outside of the box and to fulfill the Great Commission. Evangelism was introduced as a way of life – a way to build “church” (defined as a fellowship of believers) outside the church buildings; the goal was that

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12 Ibid.
13 Roennfeldt had left Europe – but there were more important reasons for the decline, including the attempt to treat East, West and Central Europe as homogenous, the unease of church administrators with a movement beyond their administrative controls, etc.
each church that would bring forth another church. Church members across all age
groups were invited to participate.\textsuperscript{15}

The Netherlands Union Conference has been active in church planting since
the 1990s; they continued to be active in planting churches even when the church
planting movement lacked vibrancy in other countries, including when the initial
planting wave had passed in other countries. In 2008, the Dutch started their Great
Commission festivals on the Union campsite with 300 participants attending, in-
cluding a mix of church planters and mission-minded church members. In 2009,
there was a festival in Slovenia with participants from around the TED and beyond
with about 400 participants. Then in 2010, the Dutch church planting festival was
held during Ascension Holiday with around 400 participants. In 2012, 2015, and
2017, such church-planting gatherings were held in the Netherlands with 200, 250,
and 85 mission-minded participants, respectively. In 2014, another division-wide
training event was held in Hungary with 350 participants.\textsuperscript{16} As you can see, a pas-
sion for mission and church planning was spreading. At each of these events, people
met to worship God, pray together, listen, share testimonies, brainstorm, as well as
gain inspiration and encouragement.

Churches Planted

The Adventist News Network at the Church Headquarters in Washington D.C.
reported on this growing movement in 2003, sharing that “the Café Church in
Copenhagen, Denmark, begun in 1998, grew out of a youth church-planting
movement in the country.”\textsuperscript{17} In this project, people met for worship in a popular
café which presented a relaxed, cozy environment. What started in a small base-
ment room grew until it needed a new space. A new space was then found, and
worship was held in a church auditorium as a second worship service in the after-
noon.

Denmark was not the only country to institute these café churches; another
2003 report on this church-planting movement was from the Netherlands and
focused on the “‘Uni&K’ ([pronounced] unique) café-style church organized with

\textsuperscript{15} Despite the mobilization within the Czecho-Slovakian Union Conference on all levels (incl.
that of administrators), the support of the movement by the Union Conference as well as all
three local Conferences shifted, cooled down and stopped after personnel changes in leader-
ship.

\textsuperscript{16} The movement in Hungary had reached a peak around 2004 with about 2,000 people at-
tending – but fell away quickly when brought under administrative control. Peter
Roennfeldt, e-mail to author, April 23, 2018.

\textsuperscript{17} Wendi Rogers and Ray Dabrowski, “Denmark: Copenhagen’s Café Church Becomes a New
Home for Many,” Adventist News Network, March 31, 2003, accessed April 15,
cafe-church-becomes-a-new-home-for-many.
the young adults of Utrecht.” The Dutch Union leaders expressed their support for different kinds of church growth experiments. During this time, several other café churches were planted throughout Europe, “in response to the changing needs of a ‘post-Christian’ society” across the continent. In 2009, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Paris witnessed the grand opening of House of Hope, a spiritual and cultural center; this church served as another example of a church opened to society at large. These same types of community churches were planted across European countries – in England, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Finland, Spain, and a few others.

As a result of this church-planting initiative and mobilization, a number of churches were planted, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in general grew in its ability to cope with the changing society in a more positive way. Not all participants of the conferences became church-planters, but they understood evangelism and the concept of church in a new way. Hundreds of church members were trained and became aware of mission work among secular people.

However, the report of successful new churches bringing previously unchurched people to Christ would not be honest or complete if failures were omitted. Some of the newly planted churches decided to become traditional churches, discontinuing their involvement with community-based, need-oriented evangelism. Others completely dissolved due to conflict, lack of personnel, sickness, or stress.

23 Between 2001 and 2017, about 10 church plants were organized into local churches; a number of church plants are active across the Netherlands Union of Churches.
25 An example is Seed International Church: http://www.seedinternational.fi.
26 An example is Cero Church, Madrid: http://iglesiacero.es.
27 This list is not exhaustive in listing all of the new churches initiatives aimed at winning secular people for Christ in the period; it merely captures bits and pieces.
number of small groups (made up of potential church planting teams) were formed, but then fell apart for lack of support from their local churches and/or their conferences. Moreover, the financial, as well as moral, support of the Divisions, Unions, and Conferences differed significantly due to a divergence in vision, priorities, budget, and personnel.

Community Based Project Activities (Centers of Influence)

While the previous section focused on church planting, we now turn our attention to the various ways in which European Seventh-day Adventist believers have been involved in need-based mission work with secular people in recent years. This has been done through shops, volunteer centers, cultural engagement, psycho-social help, music/bands, civic campaigns, and other original, unique initiatives. Five projects are listed below as examples. It should be noted that there are many other projects of a similar nature; it is simply beyond the scope of this paper to list all European Adventist mission initiatives.

**Happy Hand, Copenhagen, Danish Union of Churches**

What does a charity shop have to do with evangelism? Actually, quite a lot! In the case of Happy Hand, located in Copenhagen, not only is money earned given to projects that support those in need, but the shop also provides a place where people who would not go to church can sit, relax, and have free coffee or tea in a Christian environment. While in this setting, they can (and do) inquire about Jesus and ask for prayer. Some people come regularly. In the corner of the shop, there is a box with scripture notes and blank notecards; people write down their prayer requests and put them into the box, knowing full well that someone will be praying for them.

Once a month, people are invited to attend a “Spiritual Wellness” meeting. At other times, they are asked to help to feed the homeless in the streets. People working in the shop may not belong to any church, yet they are learning about the love of God. According to one of the project leaders, “Happy Hand is a great way of doing mission in a natural and easy way.”

28 Other projects of this type is ADRA Charity shops in the Czech Republic, [https://www.adra.cz/dobrovolnictvi/frydekmistek/charitativni-obchody/frydek--mistek](https://www.adra.cz/dobrovolnictvi/frydekmistek/charitativni-obchody/frydek--mistek), which are connected with volunteer centers helping seniors, handicapped people, those lonely, ill or socially disadvantaged children; see [https://www.adra.cz/dobrovolnictvi](https://www.adra.cz/dobrovolnictvi). Similar projects can be found in collaboration with ADRA Germany.

29 There are also other similar projects allowing people to come and relax. For example, “Auf Augenhöhe” (for more see [www.auf-augenhoehe-ev.de](http://www.auf-augenhoehe-ev.de)) is a small center led by a volunteer lay person in a rural small town called Neugersdorf in Northern German Union Conference. Weekly Café Cocos meetings happen in the area with higher average age population and yet...
PRESENCE Kulturlounge, Frankfurt, South German Union

PRESENCE Kulturlounge is a recently-established (2014) initiative led by a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. This initiative conducts weekly or bi-weekly activities (sometimes through weekends), which are organized in a rented room; these activities allow people to engage in various topics of interest. The major themes of their activities are: (1) Experiencing culture – for example, observing art, watching movies, discussing cultural topics. (2) Intercultural presentations – different cultures are featured, and presentations include cooking, singing, and dancing. (3) Reflecting on worldviews – people with different worldviews are invited to share their views, whether Buddhists, Muslims or Christians. The goal is to expand people’s perspectives and overcome prejudices. (4) Experiencing spirituality – this includes Bible readings (specifically the books of Job, Psalms, and Isaiah) with corresponding music. The goal is to allow people to experience the text existentially and also in a setting of cultural events.

This initiative is run by several people (both SDA and non-SDA) with a typical attendance of 15–20 people at events; 10% of attendees are considered “regulars.” Relationships and friendships have been formed, leading to the opportunity for deeper reflection. Recently a Bible study group has formed as a result of this mission project.

Lebensschule, Gera, North German Union

In 1998, the pastor of local SDA church started to hold public presentations about emotional health and social issues (i.e. depression, behavioral issues, psychological problems, etc.). A few years later, a “School of Life” was formed. Regular attenders wanted to meet more than once a month and so a kind of “secular church” started. Later, some other interest-based activities were implemented (vegetarian cooking class, fitness center, etc.). Several people became interested in spiritual matters; thus, faith-based studies (Bible courses) were offered. As a result of this, the local church became strongly involved. Later, a conference for mission-minded leaders and lay people was conducted in Gera for people from German-speaking Europe. Through training activities, this “School of Life” has become an avenue for other city churches to be involved in mission. Thus, the concept has been taken to and applied in other settings as well.
**Gospel Generation Choir, Liberec, Czecho-Slovakian Union**

The Gospel Generation Choir is just one among a number of similar choirs that were organized throughout Europe as part of Adventist outreach to secular, non-churched people. This choir started in 2007 with just about seven singers, who thought that singing gospel songs in the style of the movie “Sister Act” was a fun idea, and would help them improve their English-speaking skills. Over the last eleven years, the Gospel Generation Choir has grown into one of the largest Gospel choirs in the Czech Republic. Now, the children of the original members are joining the choir as they enter their adolescent years.

Although most of the choir members claim to be “atheists,” they do not mind embracing the spiritual Gospel songs in English (as a second language). The choir sings in public spaces, including church buildings on various occasions. The singers and countless people around them have experienced God’s presence and have learned more about his providence. The choir forms a circle and prays before each performance, and often also during rehearsals, where they also have a sacred moment of listening to a brief reflection on Scripture.

**National Marriage Week, Europe**

The Family Ministries Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Trans European Division organizes a Christian Home and Marriage week every February. This week coincides with a National Marriage week project, originally initiated by a Christian group in England in 1996 and since 2007 has been

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34 Other projects of similar nature are Croydon SDA Gospel Choir in South London, UK: http://croydonsdagospelchoir.co.uk; Maranatha Gospel Choir in Prague, the Czech Republic: http://www.mgospel.cz/en.


spreading across Europe.\textsuperscript{38} Marriage Week (which is conveniently tied to Valentine’s Day, also in February) draws together various media outlets, businesses, government organizations, faith groups, and anyone else who values and cares about healthy marriages.

Thus, mission-minded local churches, non-profit organizations, and individuals take the opportunity of getting involved in building healthy, strong marriages from within and from outside of local churches. The need for overcoming marriage crises, solving marriage problems, and the like, creates a platform for support groups, connecting and helping each other. It also provides an opportunity for pastors, Christian marriage counselors, and lay people to be present and minister in the community for the rest of the year. This campaign has become particularly fruitful for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Czechoslovakian Union. Thus the Marriage Week is not just in-house mission, but a nationwide public campaign. People are invited to various events to celebrate healthy marriages. The national coordinator of this initiative is a Seventh-day Adventist pastor who helps to organize the national marriage week launching press conference in collaboration with senators and congressmen.\textsuperscript{39}

Characteristics of the European Need Oriented Evangelism and Mission Outreach

Traditionally the Seventh-day Adventist Church conducts evangelism primarily through public evangelism campaigns, which are often preceded by felt-needs seminars. This is typically done over a period of a few months. People who attend the seminars or meetings are visited in their homes, and generally engage in Bible studies as part of their preparation for baptism. These people are normally familiar with Christian faith, as many of them grew up going to church or have previously attended a church of other denomination.

The European need-oriented evangelism described in this paper is different in that it is geared towards the majority of people who have not been raised in church, do not know the Christian God, and are unfamiliar with faith in him. They are, therefore, often biased towards and/or sceptical about the Christian church and would not go to a church on their own. Just as everyone has specific needs and interests, so do these people, and they are open to socializing with those who share the same needs or interests. Need-oriented evangelism is a life-long process that involves socializing, meeting a person’s needs, and building relationships of trust.

\textsuperscript{38} The National Marriage Week campaign (which occurs every year from February 7-14) not only started in Europe, but is currently run in the following European countries: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Switzerland, Ukraine, UK. See Marriage Week International, accessed March 24, 2019, http://www.marriage-weekinternational.com.

\textsuperscript{39} See www.tydenmanzelstvi.cz.
The ultimate goal is to help people experience and get to know the loving triune God – directly or indirectly.

This whole process strongly relies on the Holy Spirit, who grows the desire for God and his truth in people’s hearts. This may take a few months for some, but for others, it may take years. In some cases, people stay halfway involved, never committing to baptism or joining the local church. The primary goal, however, is not to get people into the church as soon as possible, but rather to meet them where they are, walking side by side with them on the journey of life. The soil of their hearts needs to be carefully cultivated as the seeds of the Gospel are sown.

The following are the common characteristics of the Adventist European need-oriented evangelism, which has been developing since the 1990s:

**Lifestyle.** Evangelism, namely mission, becomes an integral part of everyday life. However, it is a lifestyle usually requiring a believer to leave his or her comfort zone.

**Intentional process.** There is a saying, “If two do the same, it is not the same thing.” The difference comes with the mindset, with the motivation of heart, with intention, and patience – and without rushing things.

**Holism.** The difference comes with making God a natural part of the (evangelistic) life-style. Secular and sacred are no longer separated; people can meet God before they even know it. Such a holistic life-style approach makes a good bridge for people to appreciate the holistic Adventist message later.

**Prayer.** When people get into trouble, they pray. Even secular European people will – in most cases – not mind if someone prays for them or even with them.

**Spiritual authority.** Once trust is built, such persons are open to having their “pastor,” someone they look up to, talk with them when they are in difficult times or when they need counsel or prayer.

**Stories.** People are overwhelmed by information every day, and any additional information may be burdensome. However, stories from life and from the Bible – presented in a variety of ways, including media – stir their imagination and feelings.

**Art and music.** Art and music are an important part of worshipping God and experiencing spirituality. Uplifting music and art need to connect with people and bring the gospel truth to them in a way that makes sense to them.

**Interpersonal attachment.** People in general are hungry for relationships, longing for love and harmony. Jesus’ method, then, is tailor-made for secular Europeans.

How does one measure the success of church planting as well as community based projects and activities? As a key leader of the Adventist church planting movement in the Netherlands, Rudy Dingjan, puts it,

> The fruit is a growing network, a mass, around the church planting team. We don’t evaluate church plants by the number of baptisms, but by the number of people that become friends and attend and also lead out in activities.

> We try to encourage the unique preaching of God’s character through the SDA doctrines. God’s character comes out best in the SDA doctrines, making it obvious to long
for Jesus’ coming, as we shall see Him like He is. So also to those who are already committed Christians we have an important message to bring.  

Conclusion

This paper described the “what, why and how” of contemporary European Adventist need-oriented evangelism along with a brief account of its recent history. It also explored two wings of such mission enterprise, i.e. church planting and community involvement. For more receptive and open Europeans, attending a café church may be the answer. Others may need to approach the church at their own pace and the ministries described above may just be the bridges they need. Winning secular European people will not happen by simply making worship more entertaining and fancy. To connect with people is the key. “We need ministries in which we can mingle with them and let them taste Kingdom life.”

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Appendix: Annual Growth Rate of Selected European SDA Unions, 1990–2005

![Graph showing annual growth rate of selected European SDA unions from 1990 to 2005.](image)

40 Rudy Dingjan, e-mail message to author, April 5, 2018.
41 Ibid.