

An Evangelism Paradigm Shift

By Terri Saelee

The Great Commission—sharing Jesus with those who do not know Him—has been my passion since my baptism at age seven. My husband and I have planted churches in Thailand and California. But little did we know three years ago, when we accepted the call to reach out to the 75,000 Hmong people in Wisconsin and Minnesota, the exciting spiritual journey—the paradigm shift—the total transformation we would experience in our understanding and methods of evangelism.

Our first church plant together was the Lao congregation in Sacramento, California. We (a whole team of volunteers) spent more than ten years of intense, focused effort on that church plant before launching our next church plant—for the Hmong. Even then, we continued to be involved in the first church plant. We held one service in the morning and the other in the afternoon. So when the Wisconsin and Minnesota Conferences asked us to plant churches, simultaneously, in two states, with our first two concurrent church plants to be five hours apart, spending only two weeks at a time in each state, we wondered how it could possibly be done. But since my husband is one of only two Hmong Adventist pastors in the whole United States to reach out to the 300,000 Hmong people in this country, we decided to accept the call in faith, claiming the promise that “All His biddings are enablings”, and that “Whatever is to be done at His command may be accomplished in His strength.” (COL 333)

We tackled the job trusting God, and He blessed abundantly. Within a few months, through a series of miraculous providences, we had two Hmong congregations worshipping every Sabbath afternoon in local Adventist churches in Madison, Wisconsin, and St. Paul, Minnesota. Soon both congregations began asking how long we would have to go back and forth (spending only two weeks at a time in each place), and when they could have us full time. At the same time, opportunities were opening up to reach out to Hmong people in LaCross, Wausau, Appleton, Green Bay, Sheboygan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It seemed that, going back and forth as we were, we were not adequately meeting the growing needs of even our first two church plants. How could we ever hope to find the time to reach out to the Hmong in other cities who were already expressing interest? Yet, if we didn't, who would? There was only one other Hmong Adventist pastor in the whole United States, and he was needed in the large Hmong population in California. We cried out to God in prayer. “Lord, it's Your work. You must have a way. Please show us!”

Soon after that prayer, in a Worker's Meeting in Wisconsin, the Conference leadership shared some materials compiled by Elder Russell Burrell on the topic of “no settled pastor” from the chapter, *A Rebirth of a Church Planting Movement: Early Adventism* from his book, *Rekindling a Lost Passion*. We discovered some revolutionary concepts from our early Adventist history.

During that time of rapid growth in our church history, someone asked one of our elders, “By what means have you carried forward your work so rapidly?” His reply was, “Well, in the first place, we have no settled pastors. Our churches are taught to take care of themselves, while nearly all of our ministers work as evangelists in new fields.” (Rekindling a Lost Passion p. 53)

Commenting on this arrangement, General Conference President, A. G. Daniells commented, “And I hope that this will never cease to be the order of affairs in this denomination; for when we cease our forward movement work and begin to settle over our churches, to stay by them, and do their thinking and praying and their work that is to be done, then our churches will begin to weaken, and to lose their life and spirit, and become paralyzed and fossilized and our work will be on a retreat.”

That was it! Here was the answer to our dilemma! The members of the new Hmong church plants must be trained to continue the outreach in their cities. Then we would be free to plant new churches, train those new members, and move on to still more unreached areas! Gradually, God's plan for rapid evangelism began to unfold. Quotes from inspired writings that had puzzled us for years began to fit into the picture.¹

The greatest help that can be given our people is to teach them to work for God, and to depend on Him, not on the ministers. (7T 19, ChS 58)

Many would be willing to work if they were taught how to begin. They need to be instructed and encouraged. Every church should be a training school for Christian workers. Its members should be taught how to give Bible readings, how to conduct and teach Sabbath school classes, how best to help the poor and to care for the sick, how to work for the unconverted. (MH 149)

Aggressive Work Called For.--*Our ministers should plan wisely, as faithful stewards. They should feel that it is not their duty to hover over the churches already raised up, but that they should be doing aggressive evangelistic work, preaching the Word and doing house-to-house work in places that have not yet heard the truth. . . . They will find that nothing is so encouraging as doing evangelistic work in new fields. (Letter 169, 1904; Ev 382)*

If the ministers would get out of the way, if they would go forth into new fields, the members would be obliged to bear responsibilities, and their capabilities would increase by use. (Letter 56, 1901; Ev 382)

We began to see God's plan for the everlasting gospel to spread rapidly—among the Hmong people here in North America and, for that matter, to other unreached people groups who have arrived here as refugees in recent years. We began to notice that these two church plants, having to carry on services and outreach on their own two weeks at a time while we were in another state, were becoming stronger faster than the church plants on which we had spent years of intense, focused effort! What a surprise! Then it dawned on us that our current job description was a perfect fit for this new-to-us (yet tried and true) vision of Evangelism.

So it was that, in close consultation with the Wisconsin Conference Hmong Advisory, we began to develop a lay training program to inspire and equip our new Hmong members with the vision and the ability to spread the gospel and grow the Hmong church in their city. At first we called it a "Lay Pastor" training program, but we realized that actually, every member needed to be equipped to work for souls, and that this name made some members feel disqualified to join the training, so we changed the name to "Adventist Hmong Missionary Training" and divided it into two segments. AHM 101 is for every member, and is designed to equip them to successfully win souls for Jesus—from first acquaintance through baptismal studies, and nurture after baptism. AHM 201 is for lay pastors who will be in charge of the church when we go to plant new churches. It includes such topics as charring board meetings, etc.

There are no training materials in the Hmong language except for a Bible, a hymnal, a set of Bible Studies recently developed by former Lutheran pastor, Jay Lo, (another miraculous story) and training outlines that Pastor Ko Saelee develops as he goes. But God is already blessing. The training began in September and nearly every baptized member is attending. The members are very excited and grateful for what they are learning. The members in Madison told Pastor Saelee, "Hurry and train us so you can go and proclaim the gospel in other places!" That reminds me of a quote that I read recently:

Go Work for Souls. --*Instead of keeping the ministers at work for the churches that already know the truth, let the members of the churches say to these laborers: "Go work for souls that are perishing in darkness. We ourselves will carry forward the services of the church. We will keep up the meetings, and, by abiding in Christ, will maintain spiritual life. We will work for souls that are about us, and we will send our prayers and our gifts to sustain the laborers in more needy and destitute fields."* (6T 30, Ev 382)

Truly, all God's biddings are enablings (COL 333) and the "heaven-appointed purpose of giving the gospel to the world in this generation" (Ed 262) is well within His ability to equip us to accomplish, if we prayerfully follow His methods. Praise God for His foresight, power, direction, and grace.

¹ NOTE: For further study on this exciting topic, go to www.whiteestate.org, click on "Search writings of Ellen G. White" and research such phrases as "hover over the churches", "every believer" combined with the word, "missionary" etc. Many more eye-opening quotes and insights are given in Russell Burrell's book, *Rekindling a Lost Passion*, especially in the chapter, *A Rebirth of a Church Planting Movement: Early Adventism*. I firmly believe that if every believer in North America would read and follow the tried and true principles revived in this chapter, we would, in a very short time, see exponential church growth right here in North America.

Hmong Ministry Updates: To receive occasional e-mail updates of God's leading in the Ministry to the Hmong, simply send an e-mail to terriwest.saelee@yahoo.com and type the words, "Hmong Ministry Updates" in the Subject line.

About the Author: Terri Saelee, and her husband, Ko Saelee (Hmong Coordinator for Wisconsin and Minnesota Conferences) and their three children (Jeffrey, 10; Janessa, 8; and Kayla, 5) are church planting among the 75,000 Hmong people in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Who are the Hmong? The Hmong are a people without a country, and without a written history-- a mountain tribe which has preserved its language and culture through its agrarian way of life and oral tradition of story-telling and several forms of traditional Hmong music. There is a striking similarity between many Hmong traditions and God's guidelines for the Israelites. However, through the centuries without a written language, these traditions are now understood in the context of animism and ancestral spirit worship. Nine million (three fourths) of the twelve million Hmongs in the world live in China. The rest are scattered throughout northern Southeast Asia, and, as a result of their support of democracy in Laos during the Vietnam War, thousands were killed in the war, and thousands more fled to the safety of refugee camps in Thailand and have since been granted asylum in the West. God has, in His providence, has brought 300,000 Hmongs right here to the United States to learn the Everlasting Gospel of the Creator, who they call the Owner of the Sky. (See *Evangelism* p. 570.) (Note: U.S. Census reports show that there are Hmong people in every state except Wyoming.)

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