Bounded and Centered Sets: Possible Applications for Adventist Mission

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Adventism was birthed in a largely Christian environment and has had its greatest successes among people who were already Christian. In working among Christians it was only natural that Adventist apologetics and evangelistic strategies would stress Adventist doctrines that were different from other Christian groups. It was assumed that people already knew the basics of Christianity and had a living, growing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, Global Mission with its emphasis on sharing the distinctive Adventist message with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and secular postmoderns has faced new challenges and obstacles. The approaches that work well among Christians often do not work as well among people who belong to one of the other world religions.

Bounded and Centered Sets

In 1978 Dr. Paul Hiebert published “Conversion, Culture, and Cognitive Categories” (24-29) in which he laid out the basic premises for what has become known as bounded and centered sets. He has republished and added to that material in “Sets and Structures: A Study of Church Patterns” (1979:217-227) and in “The Category ‘Christian’ in the Mission Task” (1983:421-427), material that is included in a 1994 publication (Hiebert 1994:107-136). Hiebert suggests that there are two very different approaches one can take in viewing the essentials of Christianity, the church, and its mission. While recognizing that there are substantial differences in how an evangelical like Hiebert views these important points, Hiebert’s concepts can assist the Adventist Church as it attempts to reach out to those in other religious systems.

Characteristics of Bounded Sets

Hiebert suggests five characteristics of bounded sets:
1. A category is created by listing the essential characteristics that are needed in order to belong to the set.
2. The category is then defined by a clear boundary indicating whether an object is outside or inside the boundary.
3. Objects inside the boundary share essential characteristics and are considered a homogeneous group.
4. Bounded sets are static in the sense that the primary concern is whether or not an object is inside or outside the boundary.
5. Bounded sets are ontological in nature and emphasize the unchanging nature of abstract categories that lead to an abstract analytical approach to logic (Hiebert 1994:112-113).

A bounded set approach emphasizes order with boundaries, and much like sidewalks if dirt gets on the sidewalk effort is put into removing it in order to maintain the boundary. However, if the dirt is just off the sidewalk, it is just dirt and can be left alone. The edge of the sidewalk defines the boundary. Fundamental to bounded sets is that they have well-formed boundaries.
Applying this concern for boundaries to the present discussion, Adventists, in their effort to define the boundaries or the essentials of Adventism have too often viewed those of other Christian denominations or from other religious backgrounds (those outside the Adventist boundary of faith) from a certain perspective. Outsiders can be left alone as long as they do not threaten the boundary. But if those outside the boundary are perceived as a threat to the established boundaries they are often attached, vilified, and treated as enemies.

Adventists have seen this happen. As the Adventist Church became interested in developing new approaches to Muslim evangelism suddenly voices were raised (voices that had never written or expressed concern about the lostness of Muslims) that demonized Islam and pointed out the false nature of the Muslim prophet and Islamic holy writings. Boundary maintenance was of greater importance than was a missiological concern to share the good news of salvation with one-fifth of the world’s population.

Boundary maintenance is essential for people who operate from a bounded set perspective, for people with this approach are afraid that if the boundaries are not maintained the category will break down.

A bounded set approach sees all members of a set as essentially the same. There are identifying marks or behaviors that identify things or people as belonging to a bounded set; there are things that set them apart from those who are not a part of the set, and which indicate whether the object is inside the boundary or outside. The most important change to this type of set is movement from outside to inside or from inside to outside.

**Bounded Sets**

- Smoker
- Non-smoker
- Evolutionist
- Tithe payer
- Alcoholic
- Sabbath keeper

**Christians As Bounded Sets**
Hiebert is helpful in showing how Christians are viewed from a bounded set perspective by suggesting practices that are often present when the category “Christian” is viewed in this way.

1. Christians are defined by what they are: orthodoxy—what they believe, or orthopraxy—what they practice. When people believe as the group believes, they are inside the boundary of the bounded set. When their practice agrees with what the group practices they are in. But when they deviate from belief or practice they are out. Those who smoke, drink, or who do not believe exactly as the “in group” does are viewed as outsiders.

2. There is also a sharp distinction between Christians and non-Christians. The boundary between those who are truly Christian and those who are not is important; it is also very important to decide who is inside or outside the circle of faith. The focus is on the boundary. One is either in or out.

3. There is a tendency to see all Christians as basically the same. Growth is NOT an intrinsic part of the makeup of a bounded set. Growth in spiritual matters is secondary. Being in or out is the important thing. Once a person is a Christian they are considered a Christian. A person would not be thought of as 80 percent or 50 percent Christian, for one is either a Christian or one is not.

4. Conversion and evangelism are emphasized because the focus is to get people inside the boundary of faith. There is an emphasis on the evangelism or conversion event that helps people cross the boundary rather than seeing evangelism or conversion as an ongoing process.

5. Christians are viewed from an ontological perspective—as people who have been declared righteous before the law (Hiebert 1994:115-116).

Those who view Christians from a bounded set perspective place great importance on uniformity. There is a great desire for people to believe and practice their faith in the same way. Methodology is sometimes confused with theology, with the group being so concerned about everyone doing everything in the same way that cultural differences and different logic systems are not dealt with in the quest for uniformity. The dominant cultural expression (American forms for the Adventist Church) is viewed as the norm. There is a danger that people with a bounded set approach may worship their groupness or put undo emphasis on the marks of the true church in their desire to stress their corporate self.

There are advantages to a bounded set approach to making Christians because “it is simple, precise, and portable; clear, concise, and communicable. The unconverted know what they have to do to be saved, and the converted know what they have to do to save others. And when everyone has done what they know has to be done everyone can be sure they are saved” (Andrews 2005:7 of 34).

But a bounded set perspective also has disadvantages for it “draws lines of demarcation through the human race, clean from unclean, believers from unbelievers, the enlightened from the unenlightened. People who live within separate barriers cannot effectively communicate. What is orthodoxy to one group is blasphemy to other” (Andrews 2005:7 of 34). A bounded set definition of a Christian is “straightforward, but it is also superficial and reduces relationship to Christ to a formula. It is also exclusive. It excludes anyone who cannot affirm the formula.(7 of 34). But normally a bounded set perspective rips the heart out of Christianity by “replacing the warm, kind-hearted compassion of Christ with cold, hard-headed propositions about Christ” (Andrews 2005:7 of 34).

The problem with judging people from a bounded set perspective to determine whether or not they are Christians is that the question just is not broad enough to embrace all that God is
doing in the world to draw all people to himself. The Bible mentions many things that are to be considered when deciding who is or who is not the people of God. Denominational and institutional boundaries circumscribe some of God’s activities in the world, but by no mean the totality of his work (Hjalmarson 2005:1 of 6).

Ellen White has helped Adventist’s understand this concept with statements such as, “Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. . . . Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, yet they will not perish” (White 1940:638). “Today in every land there are those who are honest in heart, and upon these the light of heaven is shining. If they continue faithful in following that which they understand to be duty, they will be given increased light, until, like Naaman of old, they will be constrained to acknowledge that ‘there is no God in all the earth,’ save the living God, the Creator” (White 1943:253).

Those who tend towards a bounded set approach sometimes tend to have a territorial concept of God’s kingdom believing that the kingdom of God is enclosed within the boundary of their denomination (Collins 2003-2004:1 of 2). Those who share belief and faith in the same way are viewed as part of God’s kingdom, but those who do not are not in the kingdom. Such thinking has perhaps forgotten that God has other sheep (John 10:16). A territorial concept can lead to a sense of ownership of God’s kingdom and a feeling of superiority and triumphantism. Not only could believers with a bounded set perspective have a territorial concept of God’s kingdom, but great importance is placed on being enclosed within a boundary. Membership comes through crossing the boundary in an act of conversion. Once inside the kingdom territory, care must be taken not to cross the boundary again (Collins 2005:23 of 34).

Church As a Bounded Set

Notice how Hiebert suggests bounded set thinking affects one’s perspective of the church and one’s belief in how the church should be organized.

1. The church is seen as a gathering of Christians who believe the same doctrines, share common behaviors, are homogeneous in nature, and have a unity based on uniformity. Bounded set churches are like clubs with membership limited to those who share common interests. Theology is viewed as the expression of ultimate, universal, and unchanging truth that is expressed in propositional statements. This emphasis causes the members to question whether other denominations who have different doctrinal views are truly Christian or not, leading to walls of separatism between churches and denominations. Doctrinal differences define the boundaries and are the ultimate expression of reality.

2. Boundary maintenance is important so membership roles are strictly kept, participation in church business meetings is limited, and non-Christians are largely excluded from the activities of the church.

3. The church is organized around democratic principles with each member having an equal vote, but the operation of the church is mechanical with clearly defined roles, rules, policies, and set ways of conducting most aspects of church life.

4. The major task of the church is to win converts through evangelism, to get people inside the boundary, but once inside the boundary there is little concern for discipleship or spiritual formation. Levels of spiritual maturity are not noted or of much importance. A Christian is a Christian.
5. Building the institutional church is seen almost as an end in itself. There is a constant emphasis on maintaining the identity of the church and its organization to the point that there can be worship of the structure (Hiebert 1994:116-117).

**Mission and Bounded Sets**

Bounded set thinking and approaches also impact how the church approaches its mission. Hiebert again lists several characteristics:

1. While the church seeks to win the lost it is very careful not to baptize anyone until they know and practice all the teachings of the church. Baptism often takes place years after a person first believed in Christ.

2. People with a bounded set perspective emphasize boundaries and differences and view other religions and faiths as being radically different. Beliefs, practices, and even traditions in Christianity would all be viewed as true, while everything in other religions would be viewed as pagan and false. Fear of syncretism would result in radically removing all elements of the pagan religion with the result that the comfortable forms and practices of the foreign church would be substituted for local religious forms (see Bauer 2005:18-33).

3. Christianity would be defined in terms of the practices and traditions of the introducing church. New churches would be forced to accept the Christian practices of the West (for Adventists the American religious forms would become the standard).

4. The theological statements and doctrines worked out in the West over the past several hundred years would be viewed as normative. Therefore, the training of local leaders in newly entered parts of the world would be a long drawn out process to ascertain that they had assimilated the views of the Western church (Hiebert 1994:117-118).

Mission practiced from a bounded set perspective views all those who are outside the boundary of faith as outsiders and when it comes to those practicing other religions they are seen as totally pagan with few if any of their religious practices that could possibly carry biblical truth. Such simple things as postures in prayer that are locally accepted and viewed as the normative way to pray have often been rejected and replaced with the foreign forms of the introducing missionary.

People coming to faith from other cultures would be forced to adopt the cultural expressions of those introducing Christianity for those practices follow “biblical principles.” For example, if Christian preachers in Holland wear black suit coats when preaching, then the elders and preachers who have been converted by Dutch missionaries in Indonesia must also wear black suit coats when in the pulpit. If the missionary uses hymn tunes from a north Atlantic hymnology, then the converts in Asia must also use the same hymn tunes.

Church leaders with a bounded set mentality believe that they are the teachers. They define the gospel, they interpret it for each culture; they are the final arbitrators in deciding what is acceptable and what is not. There is not much buy-in to the concept of the priesthood of all believers or that the Holy Spirit can guide new believers into truth as they study the Word. God is thought to only work inside the boundary of faith as defined by those inside.

**Characteristics of Centered Sets**

There is another way of viewing what separates Christians from those who do not believe. Distinction is based on extrinsic rather than intrinsic characteristics. In such a scheme of
things the items group themselves according to their relationship to some common object, and not on the basis of what they are. Notice Heibert’s description of centered sets.

1. Centered sets are defined by a center or by the relationship of the set’s members to the center. Those related to the center belong to the set while those with no relationship to the center do not belong. Another way to describe objects that belong to a centered set is in terms of movement—those moving towards the center belong while those moving away from the center do not.

2. A centered set approach does not emphasize boundaries, but there are sharp distinct boundaries that separate those within the set and those outside the set, for those related to the center are included but those who are not related to the center are not. There is a boundary, but more emphasis is placed on the center or the relationship to the center for there is no longer the great need for boundary maintenance since objects automatically are part of the set because of their relationship to the center.

3. Two intrinsic variables define centered sets—membership and distance from the center. Objects become members of the set by relating to the center. There are no second class members of the set, but the concern and focus is to encourage movement towards the center, even while it is recognized that some members are far from the center while others are quite near. Even objects close to the center, if they are moving away from the center, would no longer be considered part of the set.

4. There are two kinds or types of change—in and out of the set, but also movement towards the center or away from the center. We could liken the initial turning towards the center as justification (moving from outside to inside) and continued movement towards the center as sanctification. The variations that we see within the centered set are the result of different levels of growth and maturity (Hiebert 1994:122-124).

Centered Sets
Christians As Centered Sets

Hiebert defines the characteristics of Christians as centered sets in four general areas:

1. Christians are defined in terms of their relationship to the center. The Lordship of Christ is stressed. As people move closer and closer to the center their commitment and desire to be totally committed followers of the biblical Jesus also grows. Mere knowledge about Jesus would not be enough to place one inside the set, for one must know Jesus personally in the biblical sense (John 17:3).

2. There is still a clear distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian. The emphasis is placed on encouraging people to become followers and disciples of Jesus Christ instead of excluding those who do not believe exactly like the rest of the set. Salvation is available to all regardless of who they are or what they know as long as they become followers of Jesus Christ.

3. Variations among Christians are acknowledged since some are closer to Christ in their spiritual maturity, while others need to grow in both knowledge and maturity. But all are recognized as Christians and all need to continue to grow to be spiritually alive.

4. A centered set perspective sees two important types of change: conversion and spiritual growth. People from various cultures and backgrounds come to know Christ in a variety of ways, but coming to know Christ includes turning away from the old ways (moving into the set) and then continued spiritual growth as the individual moves towards the center. Some come to know Christ as the protector from evil spirits, others come to know him because of his healing power, while still others would initially know him as the Great God. Regardless of how people initially come to know Christ they would all have to grow in their understanding throughout the rest of their lives and even throughout eternity.

A second important change involves movement towards the center. Christian growth does not end with conversion, but is an ongoing process, continuing for the rest of one’s life. This centered set emphasis on continued growth avoids the charge of cheap grace by those with a bounded set view of salvation, while at the same time avoiding a salvation by works approach by constantly emphasizing the need for a relationship with the center (Hiebert 1994:125-127).

A centered set approach to what it means to be Christian can lead to a much more radical type of Christianity since one can only be considered a Christian as long as one is willing to relate to the center and move closer in relationship to that center. It also places an emphasis on Christ as the center and focus of life, on worship of that center, obedience, and a deepening commitment to Jesus Christ. People are attracted to this type of religious system by the godly lifestyle and deep religious experience of the people involved.

Belonging to the faith community does not depend on giving mental assent to a list of essential beliefs, but belonging is instead based on a life of living and being because of commitment to a common center. The focus is on the center and continued movement towards the center is more important than definitions or propositional statements of belief (Hjalmarson 2001:6 of 7).

Christian growth is recognized as existing at different levels of Christian maturity since people within the set are at different distances from the center and have differences in spiritual gifts. However, unity is still found in one Lord.
“People belong by seeking the Kingdom, and journeying closer to Jesus (the centre). Distance from Christ does not matter as much as direction. People who were close but are now moving away don’t belong (but may still be members) (Knock 1999:30 of 34).

A danger with centered sets is that this approach could result in idolatry if there is a wrong center, or if Christ as the center would be replaced with a worship of the church as an organization.

**Church As a Centered Set**

A centered set perspective also influences how the church and its ministry are viewed. Again, Hiebert suggests several fundamental characteristics of a centered set approach.

1. The church is defined by its center, the biblical Jesus. Church would be peopled by those who have turned towards Christ and begun a spiritual journey that includes worship, obedience, and living for Christ. Because this spiritual group focuses on Jesus as the center of their faith, their worship community is characterized by righteousness, fellowship, and peace.

   “Because membership in the church would be based on relationship to Christ, not on knowledge or behavior, we would see the church first as a place of worship—a place where we corporately declare our allegiance to Christ through praise and service. Communion with Christ would be the central focus in the life of the church. Instruction in doctrine and behavior would follow” (Hiebert 1994:127).

2. A clear distinction would be made between Christians and non-Christians, and while the priesthood of all believers would be a prominent tenet, differences would be acknowledged because of the degrees of spiritual maturity manifested by those of varying distances from the center. Therefore, even in a centered set there is need for a carefully defined spiritual and theological center that is Christ centered and deals with the corporate theological and behavioral aspects of life in Christ, and that would be necessary for mature believers to adhere to and immature believers to learn.

   More would be expected of those closer to the center with more tolerance granted to young believers who are just beginning their journey towards that center. Those far from the center but moving towards Christ do not have a fully developed biblically shaped worldview, but that does not mean they are not believers. They have turned towards the center, have believed in Christ, and are growing in their understanding of what the Word expects of people in Christ.

3. Stress is placed on evangelism that calls people to commit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, but equally important is discipleship and the nurture of all believers. Importance is placed on continued movement towards the center by all in the community of faith.

4. Spirituality and upholding a Christ-centered lifestyle would be paramount so that others would be drawn to Christ by what they observe in the people of Christ. The kingdom of God needs to be seen and experienced in the lives of God’s people.

5. Idolatry is always a danger for a centered set approach to the church. Anything that displaces Christ as the center leads to idolatry. The West, with its current emphasis on strong pastoral leadership, could place the energetic, charismatic pastor at the center and marginalize God. The institution or the denomination could also become a false center for some (Hiebert 1994:127-130).

**Mission and Centered Sets**
Hiebert describes mission from a centered set perspective under four broad characteristics:

1. There is a sharp distinction between Christianity and other world religions for Christ is the only Lord and Savior. The primary focus of mission from a centered set perspective is to invite people to taste and see that the Lord is good and to encourage people to begin a walk with Jesus rather than to point out the falsehoods in other religions. Labeling prophets and holy books as false is a non-starter for communication with those who have a high resistance towards Christianity. Stress would be placed on what Christ has done in our lives rather than on emphasizing the superiority of Christianity.

2. People would be baptized when they made a faith commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior instead of waiting long periods for them to demonstrate Christian maturity and perfection.

3. Evangelism includes both a conversion decision for Christ but also a continued process of growth. This is also true for newly planted churches in difficult cultural contexts. The new believers and their leaders would be encouraged to do their own theologizing based on a deep commitment to the Word of God, while at the same time those introducing the group to Jesus Christ would help the young church learn how the church through the ages has understood Scripture and developed theology.

4. Leadership in new churches would be turned over to local spiritual leaders from the beginning. Leaders would be chosen from those who have a demonstrated walk with Jesus Christ, and from that group, theologians and overseers would be trained for guiding the development of the new believers (Hiebert 1994:130-131).

Possible Applications for Adventist Mission

Both the bounded and centered set models have strengths and weaknesses, but the two models can help Adventists look at how they approach secular people and those in one of the world religions to see if there are attitudes or different approaches that would enhance Adventist methodologies.

Matt 28:18-20 and Rev 14:6-12 suggest that the scope of world evangelization includes all peoples, all languages, and those from every type of background and religious system. The goal is to go, make disciples. The purpose of the three angels in Rev 14 is to share a worldwide message that prepares people for Christ’s return. But something is terribly wrong in that few from the Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish world and only some from the lowest castes in Hinduism have come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. “If we keep doing what we’ve been doing we will keep getting what we’ve been getting” (Stone 2006:1).

What is our objective in evangelism? Is it only to teach truth to those who are already Christian, or is it also to help all people move closer to Jesus and become active in his kingdom? It would seem that Adventist evangelism aimed at the people in the world religions and also those classified as secular postmodern would be better served by an evangelistic approach that initially stresses much more of a centered set approach than a bounded set approach. Much more emphasis should be placed on a relationship with the center, of tasting to see that the Lord is good. When presenting topics to Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and secular people, they need to hear a lot more about the basics of biblical Christianity before they are ready for typical Adventist evangelistic topics.
Evangelism that seeks to draw those in the world religions to Jesus needs a strong emphasis of God’s perspective of not wanting any to perish (2 Pet 3:9) rather than taking a more confrontational approach of pointing out errors and falsehoods (Kevin 2006:2 of 30). Within Adventism there are many types of evangelists, but all who preach to audiences from those in a world religion or from a secular background need to spend a lot of time making sure people know and understand salvation as it is found in Jesus. Research needs to be done as to why so many who are being baptized in the typical three or four-week series are leaving the church within a few months of their baptism. Is it because they were taught a series of propositional truths but never came to know Jesus in a personal way? With the growing trend of sending out evangelistic teams from the West is there sufficient emphasis in the typical three-week series on helping people begin a journey that moves them ever closer to Jesus?

There should be no barriers or obstacles in movement toward Jesus, yet bounded set outreach and evangelism that places a heavy stress on doctrinal truths sometimes give the impression that people entering God’s Kingdom can only go through a narrow doorway that is often limited to a definition of certain truths. However, many in the world religions are so far from Jesus in their worldview and understanding that they are totally unable to respond to some of the doctrinal presentations. A better approach would be to have a model that is more like a funnel—far from the spout there is width, but as people move toward the spout there is a narrowing and movement towards the center, or even movement towards a bounded set in the center of the centered set (see page 12).

One of the dangers of approaching mission to those in the world religions from a bounded set perspective is that such an approach can encourage a hostile attitude towards outsiders. What is our attitude? How do we treat people? Do we attack or vilify those outside? Do we have a confrontational approach in our evangelism? In the centered set model the goal is to treat all people the same whether they are inside or out because all people need to be drawn closer to Jesus.

Our attitudes toward Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and secular postmoderns impacts how we build personal relationships with them, and relationships with those in the world religions then become bridges allowing us to share Jesus Christ. If we look down on their religion and faith, if we demonize their prophet, call their holy writings satanic, ridicule their devotion to their false gods, and have an abrasive attitude, we will never be able to communicate the biblical Jesus to them (Stone 2005:2).

I am sure that one of the fears lurking in the background of any discussion on how to approach those in other religions is a fear of syncretism. First of all, syncretism is present every time a person begins the conversion process and turns toward Christ. Conversion is never just a point in time, but is always a process in which the Holy Spirit shapes and changes thoughts, values, and premises that are the building blocks of faith (Paulien 2005:236). Which is better—no syncretism and no progress toward Christianity, or some syncretism and movement towards biblical faith? (Stone 2005:4). Two elements that are of vital importance in growing out of the syncretism that is inherent during the conversion process are a faith that has Jesus Christ as the center and a faith that is deeply committed to the Word of God. Both of these elements are present in Faith Development In Context (FDIC) ministries among Muslims and in the Global Mission initiatives to those in the other world religions. Problematic in such settings is that conversion often takes several years instead of the few days or weeks that Adventists are accustomed to in usual evangelistic settings.
During my work with young university students in Japan it was common for people to take six to eight years from the time they first started studying the Bible until they were baptized. I left Japan in 1984. My daughter returned to Japan in 1994 and held an evangelistic series that resulted in several people being baptized—two of whom I had studied with twenty years before. In areas of the world where it takes years to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ a much stronger emphasis on a centered approach that encourages growing and developing spirituality centered in Jesus Christ is often the only thing that keeps people connected and in an environment where the Holy Spirit can draw them to Christ.

Some have been outspoken in their insistence that the only way to approach Muslims or others in their world religion is to confront them in their falsehoods, to point out their errors, and to call sin by its right name. I believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is at a crossroad when it comes to how Adventists will witness to those in other religious systems. Which approach will we choose? Will we operate more from a bounded set perspective which from the very beginning has clear propositional statements of Adventism, which has as a primary goal the defense of the boundaries, and which often expresses negative and derogatory attitudes often associated with a bounded set perspective? Or, will Adventism approach Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jewish communities from a more spiritual approach that emphasizes spiritual growth, deepening commitment to God, a growing understanding of Jesus as Messiah and then as atoning sacrifice, a growing appreciation for the Word of God that leads to deeper insights, and continued growth and movement toward Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

In the Australia outback ranches are so huge that there are no fences to keep the cattle and sheep within the boundary of the ranch, instead, farmers dig wells and provide water that attracts the livestock to the water sources (Frost and Hirsch 2003:47). Following this analogy, the basics of Christian faith need to be presented to Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and secular people in such an attractive and spiritual way that committed and sincere seekers in these contexts would be drawn to that water of life—Christ.

Instead of following the usual doctrinal approach that emphasizes many essential propositional doctrines, outreach could initially focus on the winsomeness of a relationship with Jesus Christ. The power of Jesus Christ to set people free from the fear of evil spirits, the power of Jesus to heal physical, emotional and spiritual sickness, and the power of God to set people free from addictions should be stressed. Some may be saying, yes, that is great for the initial approach, but what will the final result look like? One has to know what the goal is and what the final outcome will be.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest that centered sets are soft at the edges and hard at the center, while bounded sets are hard at the edges and soft in the center (2003). Perhaps we need a new model that combines the strengths of both approaches by beginning with a centered set approach for those who are not Christians, but as people move closer to the center they would then be introduced to a bounded set of core beliefs and practices (Hjalmarson 2005:2 of 6). Darrell Guder suggests that at the center of a missional community is a bounded set (1998:208). This bounded set resides within the centered set, and whereas the centered set defines the larger community of faith, (those moving into closer relationship with Jesus) leaders move within both the larger centered set community but also lead in the inner bounded set. This modified model incorporates the vital importance of spirituality and continued movement toward the center while at the same time realizing that the direction for those growing in faith is towards the bounded set that has greater and greater definition as people mature in their faith in Christ and have their worldview impacted by the Word of God (Hjalmarson 2005:3 of 6).
Murray has some good suggestions in this area:

Churches with healthy centres are secure enough to welcome those who are exploring faith and searching for authenticity. They are relaxed, non-judgemental communities where questions, doubts, dissent and fears can be expressed, and where ethical issues do not preclude acceptance. They are inclusive without compromising, communities with deep convictions that are nevertheless open to fresh insights, churches that allow and encourage critical engagement with beliefs and behaviour but test everything by its congruence with their founding story.

Is this model a legitimate way of describing the community that traveled with Jesus? He invited people to follow him, to become disciples and commit themselves to the vision and values of God’s kingdom, but to remain open to others and to fresh insights rather than thinking they had arrived. Is it the model operating in Acts 11 as Peter and the Jerusalem church assess his experience in light of their core convictions and the life and teaching of Jesus? This principled flexibility allows them to weigh up Peter’s report, welcome Cornelius and debate what counter-cultural discipleship might mean for Gentiles (Murray 2004:30, 31).

With this as a background, I recommend a modified centered set with a clearly defined boundary in its center. In this model, the initial approaches to those in the world religions would take the perspective of a centered set, but would not stop where many of our evangelical friends stop—for Adventists believe that there is a very important core set of beliefs that also contribute to a deeper understanding of the character of God and God’s plan for this end-time period. Such a model would also leave intact the Adventist tradition of baptizing people only after they had been taught the basic doctrines of the denomination. But by having an initial approach that stresses a relationship with the center, Adventist evangelism would be encouraged to spend more time and emphasis on helping people develop their relationship with Christ instead of just giving assent to a group of doctrinal propositional statements.
“It is not that bounded sets are always bad and centered sets are always good. Boundaries do exist. Salvation is a bounded set. One is either in Christ, or not in Christ. Discipleship is a centered set. To be a disciple is to be constantly moving toward the center, which is Christ” (Hjalmarsen 2001:6 of 7).

The story in Luke 18:10-14 of the Pharisee and the publican in the temple illustrates some of the problems if a church is a bounded set organization. The Pharisee was very close to Christ in practice, but hardness of heart had set in and he had turned his face away from following God. He tithed, looked for the Messiah, strictly followed the laws and diet restrictions. The publican was viewed as an outcast, as one who had sold out to the Romans, as one who cheated his countrymen in collecting more than required. If we had been asked to vote either of the two into church membership we most likely would have voted for the Pharisee and not the publican. Why? We feel comfortable with those who are inside the boundary of behavior and do not look too closely for evidence of direction in the life. This parable illustrates how our worldview impacts on how we look at the church, and how we view people as either in or out. The Pharisee was close to Jesus in what he did, but his life was moving away from God. The publican did not have his act together yet, but he was moving towards God.

Perhaps where Christianity is widespread in a society a bounded set perspective is more important and more acceptable. However, in environments where there is outright hostility to Christianity and where leaving one’s community (such as Islam) and joining another community (such as Christianity) is almost unheard of, a centered set approach may be much more appropriate, at least in the initial stages. Drawing Muslims closer to Jesus without having as our initial focus of getting them inside a Christian boundary may be much more appropriate. As Muslims move towards Jesus, syncretism most likely would exist in the transitioning from a Qur’anic belief in Jesus to a biblical belief in Jesus. I believe that Muslims who believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus and are moving towards him are people moving in the right direction. People on such a journey have moved a long way from those Muslims who only believe that Jesus was one of many prophets.

The same approach is needed when approaching the high caste Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and secular people. It takes time to begin to even know and understand the biblical Jesus. We have been in too much of a hurry to baptize people and since we do not baptize anyone until they have received an introduction to many important Adventist doctrines we hurry them through a process beyond their capacity to absorb. In hurrying them through the doctrinal instruction we often neglect the time and effort needed to disciple them and ground them in a saving relationship with Jesus.

If you would push me to define what is essential for initial work in the Muslim context but also among Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and secular peoples I would press for just two things: a deep commitment to the Word of God as the absolute guide to life and religious practice and a worshipful focus on Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice for sin. If FDIC groups would be judged on the basis of these two principles we should see continued growth and movement towards a group of beliefs that look very similar to the beliefs that are important to those of us within the boundaries of Adventism. If outreach to Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and secular postmodern people would also give more stress to these two basics I believe that there would be a much lower percentage of people leaving the church soon after their baptisms.
Perhaps one of the problems is that it is easier for an evangelist to know that he has given a full doctrinal series than it is to know if a person is on a journey towards Christ. There are many practical things that could be done to remedy this situation. The Adventist Church could begin by not only continuing to track baptisms, but also to closely monitor Sabbath School and church attendance. We should be just as concerned about how many of the newly baptized continue to fellowship week after week as we are about how many at a point in time made a public confession.

What if an equal amount of money was spent on the discipleship process in our church? Who is taking the time to teach new converts how to pray, how to read the Word, and when they cannot read to make daily devotional material on tapes available for them? What if the organizations that send teams around the world for short series of meetings would also support a team of people for each group for at least one year to nurture and disciple them in their movement toward Christ?

The bounded set within a centered set model offers the strengths of both models while eliminating at least some of the weaknesses of each model. Perhaps the model will also remind Adventist evangelists from the West that secular people and those in the world religions are far from Christ, that they do not have the basic building blocks of understanding to make a commitment to Jesus, and that movement towards the center is just as important as learning new beliefs that would place one within the Adventist boundary of faith.

Reference List


Kevin. 2006. Bounded Set, Centered Set. [http://sakamuyo.net/node/18](http://sakamuyo.net/node/18) [16 August 2006].


