

From the G.C. President

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O DATELINE MEXICO: Fifteen thousand to be baptized on one weekend! It seemed too good to be true. But last August when Inter-American Division President Israel Leito invited me to attend last weekend's celebration in the South Mexican Union Conference I couldn't resist. Yet their projections were too low. Over 17,000 were baptized! Let me share a few distinguishing features of the church in South Mexico.

! Size: With 335,000 members, 4,400 congregations cared for by 280 pastors (average 16 congregations per pastor), the South Mexican Union is one of the largest in the world.

! Progressive, young leaders: Reflecting trends of most of Inter-America, the presidents of South Mexico's six conferences and three missions (one 35,000-member mission will reach conference status in January of '98) average 35 years of age. Union president, David Xavier Pérez, is 48 and has served as conference or union president for 11 years.

! Lay "Mission" ownership: The 17,000 baptized were won to Christ by 4,800 lay-evangelistics series, using materials (US\$25 per trained member) provided by the church, as well as the reaping evangelistics series conducted by **all** 280 pastors (district or office-based). As part of the program, in the last four months they established more than 600 new congregations in unentered areas!

! Accountability to God: Every pastor, congregation and Sabbath School class sets a baptismal goal. Each new member is trained in soul-winning to transmit a vision of mission, to affirm their faith and reduce apostasy. Pastors previously were recognized on baptizing 100 persons but that recently changed. Now pastors are recognized when the laymen in their district conduct more than 100 evangelistic series.

! Difficulties: Some mistakenly think soul-winning is "easy" in South Mexico. Last Sabbath afternoon I met with two pastors and 11 members from the embattled mountains of Southwestern Chiapas. I listened to stories of torture, homes burned, farmers driven from their land, rape and murder. The persecution continues. One week ago a 34-year-old mother of seven was shot and killed as she walked home one evening and several who attempted to retrieve her body for burial were shot, and two more killed. Both pastors told me their lives have been threatened and know they could be killed any day. Yet during this persecution baptisms have increased!

O PASTOR ARRESTED IN LAOS: Last October K. Houmphanh, pastor of a small Adventist congregation in Vientiane, capital city of Laos, was arrested while bringing Bibles into the country for his members. Smuggling religious literature into the country is considered a serious criminal offense. It seems likely that, unless God intervenes, he will be sentenced to a lengthy prison term. Though his case has not yet come to trial nor, as far as we know, has he been officially charged, all efforts to secure his release have so far proved fruitless. I invite you to please join me and his wife and three children, praying earnestly on his behalf.

O OPPORTUNITY IN THE UKRAINE: Recently church leaders asked local authorities in the Dnepropetrovsk region of the Ukraine (population 125,000) for permission to hold an evangelistic meeting. According to division president, Lee Huff, their response was most unusual. About one year ago community authorities searched but could not find a church willing to hold religious meetings in all 24 towns in their

region. Eager for their communities to learn more about God they offered us, a heated auditorium and an apartment for an evangelist in every town, free of charge. Church leaders accepted their invitation. Last night, January 26, 24 Ukrainian pastors who left their regular assignments began their meetings.

Off the Back Burner

Segment # 52: I find it troubling when some so misapply Ellen White's writings that she is portrayed as an extremist. These overlook the remarkable common sense she used to interpret and apply truth. We need only study, she said, the "time, place, and circumstance" to understand her writings. (ISM:57)

For example, in 1904 the St. Helena, California church school constituency had a problem. Some schooling should not be provided for children under the age of ten because years earlier Ellen White counseled that "parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age" (3T:317). Others argued members' children would be better off in school than roaming town while their parents worked and could not supervise them. The question was: What shall we do with Ellen White's counsel regarding when to start children in school?

Ellen White attended the school board meeting in her Elmshaven home in order to resolve the impasse. She reviewed her counsel regarding parental responsibilities and discipline in the home. She said she also had observed parental neglect, with some children running loose, "wandering about with nothing to do ... getting into mischief" —a poor recommendation of Adventist decorum!

Under the circumstances, she said, "the very best thing that can be done is to have a school ... for those who [should] have the restraining influence upon them which a schoolteacher should exert."

She then explained her earlier statements about holding children out of school until age 10—teachings some were faithfully trying to implement. She spoke clearly: "I wanted to tell you that there was not a Sabbath keeping school when the light was given to me that the children should not attend school until they were old enough to be instructed. They should be taught at home to know what proper manners were when they went to school, and not be led astray. The wickedness carried on in the common schools is almost beyond conception." Then she highlighted her concern about those who unreasonably applied her writings: "My mind has been greatly stirred in regard to the idea, 'Why, Sister White has said so and so, ... and therefore we are going right up to it.' God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things" (*Biography*, vol. 5, pp. 312-315). I encourage you to read Ellen White's writings, consider the "time, place, and circumstance" and, search for and apply the principles you find there.