

LESSONS I LEARNED IN HUNGARY

Recently, I had the opportunity to conduct a series of evangelistic meetings in Hungary. This was my first time to speak in this formerly communist country. I was in the city of Szombathely (pronounced som-ba-tie). Ten million people live in this secular European country. 4,700 are Seventh-day Adventist. No Seventh-day Adventists live in Szombathely.

Five years ago, Istvánné and Anna Gyürüs (joo-rus), pastors in the Duna Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, decided to move to Szombathely—a city of 80,000 people—and plant a church. Two years ago, they started what they call Bible University. They rented a room and sent out thousands of flyers inviting people to attend classes about the Bible. Sessions are divided into semesters and include lectures, presentations, and quizzes—much like any university. Eighty to a hundred people began gathering every Monday night for the classes.

After two years of classes, the Gyürüs decided it was time to introduce their students to distinctive Adventist beliefs. Thus, I found myself on the fourth floor of the city library in downtown Szombathely. We were

going to embark on a journey that would bring the students face to face with “testing truths” for the first time, and I was nervous.

Questions flooded my mind: *“Were the students ready for this? How would they react? Why did I agree to do this? Why didn’t I just go to Africa where I could record a hundred baptisms?”*

The truth is, I believe I was right where God wanted me, and it was a wonderful experience. Let me tell you some of the lessons I learned in Hungary.

1. Personal visitation is important. About one week into the meetings, I didn’t feel like I was connecting with the people. Everything seemed to be routine. They would come to the meeting, I would preach, they would leave. There was little time to personally interact because we had to be out of the rented room as soon as the meeting was over. I was concerned that we weren’t forming personal relationships. I didn’t want these meetings to be just some random event that would fill their minds with “good” information, yet not reach the heart.

So I suggested that we start visiting. My hosts were a little hesitant. They were concerned that visiting might scare the attendees away. But visiting people in their homes is the most effective way to reach the heart with the transforming power of the Gospel. A five-minute conversation in

the home can be more powerful than a 45-minute sermon from the pulpit.

It's personal. It's one on one.

Let me tell you about one of the visits. Elvira is in her 70s. When we knocked on her door, she was excited to see us and invited us in right away. As we sat in her small apartment, I asked why she had decided to attend the Bible University and the evangelistic meetings. I listened as Anna translated Elvira's life story.

Elvira had been taught that God is a stern, harsh judge. One of the key religious figures in her life constantly told her that God was angry with her. Elvira struggled with feeling distant from God. She knew the theory that Jesus had died for her sins, but she was harassed by this notion that God was angry with her. She lived in fear.

As I listened to her story, my mind raced through verses in the Bible that speak of God's love. There was one in particular for which I could not remember the reference. So I silently prayed, "Lord, please bring this text back to my memory."

Finally, I remembered it! I asked Anna to read Romans 5:8 from the Hungarian Bible. In English it reads, "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." I also asked her to

read John 3:17: “For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

As Anna read these verses of assurance, I could see tears forming in Elvira’s eyes. They were tears of joy—tears of relief. She was comforted to hear from the Bible that God is not angry with her, but rather that He loves her and desires to save her. My own heart melted as I saw the power of God’s Word touch this woman’s soul. The next Sabbath morning, Elvira was worshipping with the Adventist believers. The visit made a difference.

It reminds me of something Ron Halvorsen Sr. told me when he was training me in evangelism. He said, “If you make the visits, people will make decisions.”

Long before Ron Halvorsen, Ellen White counseled, “When a discourse is given, precious seed is sown. But if personal effort is not made to cultivate the soil, the seed does not take root.... A few words spoken in private will often do more good than the whole discourse has done.” (Testimonies, volume 6, page 68).

2. Use decision cards wisely. I decided to use decision cards. Hungarians do not typically utilize them. Even in the States, not everyone is comfortable with them. But it is the only way I know to discover what’s

going on in the people's hearts. It is vitally important to give people the opportunity to respond to the messages and make decisions.

Some speakers shy away from decision cards because they associate them with pressure and manipulation. They picture a speaker making a 30-minute altar call, unwilling to stop until someone finally comes forward out of sheer exasperation.

Decision cards (or even altar calls) should not be used this way. They are simply a tool that allows the congregation to respond to what they have heard.

For example, during the meetings in Hungary, we distributed decision cards at the end of the message when we covered key Biblical subjects, such as salvation, baptism, the Sabbath, and the remnant. The cards enabled us to discover who was seriously considering these decisions and it paved the way for a personal visit and a meaningful conversation.

A decision card on baptism may say something like this:

_____ I understand that baptism is an important step in following Jesus.

_____ I choose to accept Jesus as my Savior

_____ I would like to be baptized one day soon.

_____ I have some questions and would like a personal visit.

The attendee will place a check mark on the statement which applies to him. The way attendees mark this card helps the speaker to know what

the listeners are thinking as well as how to visit with them. Suppose someone marked that they wanted to be baptized soon but they also have some questions. When I visit with them, I ask them what brought them to this decision. I listen to their story and invite them to share their questions with me.

Not everyone will fill out the decision card, and that's OK. Those who do, however, are serious interests, and decision cards identify who they are.

3. Literature is essential. I made the mistake of going to Hungary without handouts of my material. When I covered key topics, I had nothing to give the people.

Fortunately, I was able to obtain some Bible lesson booklets in the Hungarian language. We gave these out at the conclusion of the evening meeting. It was obvious they appreciated it.

The audience can only grasp a limited amount of information from a sermon. Rarely will a person be able to retain everything. Distributing a piece of literature that complements the subject will help to re-inforce the message in the person's mind. Providing a summary of the sermon which includes key Bible verses will enable attendees to conduct a deeper study at home.

In order for people to make lasting decisions, they need to study the Bible for themselves. Literature gives them this opportunity.

4. Ask effective questions. Talking to attendees can be challenging. You are curious about them and they are curious about you. Though a certain amount of small talk is necessary, it is easy to get off track.

It's important to have a set of three or four questions in your mind that will steer the conversation in a spiritual direction. Remember, you are there to touch the spiritual side of a person's life, not just to shoot the breeze with meaningless conversation. Ask open-ended questions that will allow them to tell you their story.

When I visited people in Hungary, I would ask the following questions:

- Why did you decide to come to these meetings?
- Why do you want to learn more about the Bible?
- Did you grow up in a religious home? Tell me about it.
- What questions do you have about what you have heard?

These questions always directed the conversation toward spiritual matters. If the attendee marked something on a decision card, I would ask them why. Don't be afraid to ask these questions.

Let me tell you about Jospheh. Joseph is in his early 40s. He attended our meetings almost every night, sitting in the back of the room by the registration table.

One night Joseph indicated on a decision card that he wanted to be baptized. One evening we knocked on his door. As he recognized us, his face brightened with a broad smile. He immediately invited us in. As we were sitting down he offered us something to drink (Hungarians are very hospitable people), and while we sipped our juice, I asked Joseph those questions. Joseph responded by telling us his story.

Two years earlier he was searching for truth. He had begun to dabble in New Age theories and practices, but one day he saw a crumpled piece of paper on the ground. A voice seemed to tell him to pick it up. As he unwadded the paper, he discovered it was an advertisement to the Bible University classes. The voice seemed to instruct him to attend. This is why he was attending the meetings.

After hearing his story, we encouraged him in his decision to be baptized and had prayer together. We had learned a lot more about Joseph simply by asking effective questions.

5. Don't forget about people who are disabled. After I was finished in Szombathely, I held a three-day set of meetings in Budapest.

While I was there, I spent a half day with the Hungarian Adventist Mission for the Blind. This group meets together twice a month with people who are blind for fellowship and Bible study.

Three blind people from this group came to the meetings one night. Many times people who are disabled are forgotten. They may not have a church to go to. They may not be invited to a Bible study. They may not have anyone to fellowship with. And even if they do attend a church, a blind person can't read the hymnal, or the Bible in the pew, or the words of the songs on the screen. Rarely do churches have large print or Braille hymnals or Bibles.

Do you know there is a way for your church to reach out to this group of people too? There is an organization (for whom I work) that can help you. Christian Record Services for the Blind provides inspirational reading materials in large print, Braille, and in audio formats to people who are blind. When your church conducts evangelistic meetings in a community, Christian Record will send a personal letter of invitation to every person in that community who is blind and is on their mailing list. In addition, Christian Record also provides Bible lesson booklets in large print and Braille that can be distributed to blind people who may attend your church's

evangelistic meeting. You can contact Christian Record at 402-488-0981 or visit the website at www.christianrecord.org.

The lessons I learned in Hungary are simple and concrete. Some of these lessons I knew before, but they were re-inforced by this experience. I believe these lessons contain universal principles that can be applied to your church's evangelistic endeavors.

May the Lord bless you as you minister to others in your mission field. Jesus has said, "The harvest truly is great..." (Matthew 9:37).