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A **Passion** for **Revival**

An interview with
Lee Venden



A passion for revival:

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Derek J. Morris (DM): *After many years as an effective church pastor, you have accepted an invitation to serve as a full-time revivalist. What events and convictions motivated you to make this transition?*

Lee Venden (LV): About fifteen years ago, I began to feel a passion for revival among God's people. That passion continued to grow. I read my Bible trying to learn what would facilitate revival and also began reading about great revivals. After I waited many years, a church administrator asked me, "Lee, have you ever considered being a full-time revivalist?" I was stunned. Just a few weeks earlier, I was wondering how God would make this passion a reality. The administrator continued, "God has put a burden on my heart that revival should be our first focus." Within a year, I was serving as a full-time revivalist.

DM: *You mentioned developing a growing passion for revival. What fueled that passion?*

LV: Surveys that I have conducted indicate that less than twenty-five percent of Adventist church-attending members spend any personal time each day seeking to become better acquainted with God through His Word and prayer.

This is especially sobering when we consider that, according to 1 John 5:11–13, salvation comes only to those who develop and maintain a personal relationship with Christ.

I was also startled by the following statistics shared by Paul Richardson, coordinator for the North American Division Reconnecting Ministries:

1. At the present time, up to two million inactively attending and/or former Seventh-day Adventists live in North America.
2. Of the nearly 1.2 million North American Adventists currently on the church books, less than five hundred thousand attend church even once a month.
3. Based on the above statistics, for every North American Adventist who regularly attends church, five have either left the church or no longer attend.

Jim Gilley, president of the Three Angels Broadcasting Network, shared with me that if the church in North America had retained eighty percent of its own youth (since its inception), and had only experienced biological growth, there would presently be more than eight million Adventists in North America alone. Numbers like these motivate me to try and do what I can to help solve this problem.

DM: *Have your studies revealed any sort of fundamental problem that may be contributing to such a condition?*

LV: It seems to me that, in North America, most Seventh-day Adventists join the church because they see our doctrines as biblically sound or because their parents were Adventists. Somehow, though, they don't see Jesus as the core of each doctrine. I'm concerned that too many church members search the Scriptures thinking that in them they have eternal life but they don't see how these are they that testify of Jesus. Too many people come to church but don't come to Jesus that they might have life. Consequently, like the seed that fell on rocky soil, they spring up quickly but wither away almost as quickly.

DM: *As you visit churches in various parts of North America and around the world, what are you learning about the need for revival?*

LV: We have discovered that Adventists everywhere are hungering for Jesus and long to know how to have a personal friendship with Him that is tangible and life changing. Most of those we meet are thirsting for clear, practical instruction on how to experience a meaningful

relationship with Christ. It is the lack of this understanding that leads members to backsliding.

In the last three and a half years, we have crisscrossed the continent several times and have been to more than sixty churches. At every church we conclude our series with a short, anonymous survey and the findings have been startling! The first question asks, Which best describes your spiritual life before attending the revival meetings?

- A. Basically drifting from God and the church.
- B. Attend church but lack a meaningful daily relationship with Jesus.
- C. Maintaining a vibrant relationship with Jesus and eager to share it.

Of those attending the meetings, seventy to eighty percent described their spiritual life prior to the revival series as "attend church but lack a meaningful daily relationship with Jesus."

DM: *That is a startling statistic. Logic would suggest that the more spiritually alive people would be attending your revival meetings. And of that number, seventy to eighty percent confess that they lack a meaningful daily relationship with Jesus. That tells me that many really need revival. How have you developed a revival series to address that need?*

LV: God led us to a thirteen-part package presented over a period of nine days, with each presentation building on the preceding one. We start on Friday night, meet three times on Saturday, then every night of the week and three times the following Saturday. Here is a brief summary of the meetings:

- "Can We Be Friends?" God Himself wants to have a meaningful friendship with us. In fact, He is

more interested in us than we are in Him.

- "It's Who You Know!" Christianity is not about what you do, but who you know—and who you know will change what you do.
- "Born Twice." All need to be born of the Spirit. It is His job to bring us to conversion, but if we lift Jesus up, the Holy Spirit will draw us more quickly into the second birth.



Lee and Marji Venden

- "Blessed Assurance!" The majority of Seventh-day Adventists lack assurance of salvation. Our assurance is based on relationship, not behavior. Jesus promises to save and cleanse if we abide in Him.
- "Recipe for Bread." Jesus (in His Word) is the Bread of Life. The devotional life is how we "eat" that Bread.
- "The Answer Is Prayer!" Prayer is foremost for communion with God, and it is both ways, if we are still enough to listen.
- "Gotta Tell Somebody!" God shares with us the privilege of serving and telling others

about Him for our own good and happiness.

- "Dealing With Failure." Victory and overcoming are gifts the Spirit gives to those who, by beholding Jesus, are changed into His likeness.
- "This Is War!" The enemy will do everything possible to prevent or hinder us from daily seeking Jesus. There are three weapons that are especially useful.
 - "Comforter and Friend." Our Friend, the Holy Spirit, is deeply committed to our spiritual growth and usefulness.
 - "Surviving a Revival Seminar." Suggestions for individuals and churches wishing to insure that the flame of revival grows brighter instead of fading away.
 - "Homecoming!" It is good to be reminded of why we are Adventists. What will it be like to finally go home?
 - "Is Jesus Enough?" A conclusive demonstration that making and keeping Jesus central will satisfy every personal and corporate need!

DM: *How do you invite your listeners to respond?*

LV: We urge attendees to take the tools that we hand them and use them to develop a daily relationship with God. The focus of this entire series is to encourage people to spend time, morning by morning, with God in Bible study and prayer and then share that with others. Without all three legs of this "relationship stool," our spiritual experience will stagnate and eventually go sour.

The first leg of the relationship stool is Bible study for the purpose of becoming acquainted with God. The focus here is on relationship rather than information. We're not trying to *prove a point* but rather

become acquainted with a Person. The second leg of the stool is prayer for the purpose of communion with God, rather than simply making requests to God. The third leg of the stool is sharing with others what they are discovering within the first two legs. We encourage attendees to daily invite God to open their eyes to opportunities to make a difference for His kingdom in the lives of others. People regularly tell us, "We experimented with that challenge, and it is amazing to see the opportunities He gives!"

on the part of our members in learning to have a more meaningful relationship with God.

DM: *What changes do those attending the revival meetings observe in their spiritual condition by the end of the thirteen meetings?*

LV: There is a clear change, at least in the short term. When asked at the end of the seminar to describe their spiritual condition by choosing one of the same three options mentioned earlier in our survey, ninety to

need to make sure they know how to use the tools for experiencing a personal relationship with God.

DM: *For years, our denomination has invested heavily in public evangelism, often hiring evangelists who specialize in public meetings. Could you envision a similar niche for denominationally supported revivalists who travel from church to church?*

LV: In the health care industry, specialists stem from the reality that no

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT ABOUT WHAT YOU DO, BUT WHO YOU KNOW—AND WHO YOU KNOW WILL CHANGE WHAT YOU DO.

DM: *How do you see revival ministries complementing the church's mission to evangelize?*

LV: A revivalist assists local shepherds in growing healthier sheep, with the belief that healthy sheep will reproduce for the glory of God. Revived members, who are experiencing a personal relationship with Jesus, are spontaneously evangelistic and contribute to exponential kingdom growth.

DM: *How well attended are your revival seminars?*

LV: We have found that approximately seventy to eighty percent of a church's typical Sabbath attendance will attend nearly all of the meetings and that attendance grows with each meeting. That seems to indicate a genuine interest

ninety-five percent check that they are "maintaining a vibrant relationship with Jesus and are eager to share." Something significant has happened. They have taken the tools that were provided and use them to develop a daily friendship with Jesus.

DM: *Do those startling results suggest that many Christians are just longing for some practical instruction in regards to experiencing a more meaningful spiritual life?*

LV: Yes. I'm concerned that we have assumed for far too long that nearly everyone has a daily personal experience with God. That is a false assumption. The vast majority of our church members openly admit that they don't have a daily walk with Christ, but we must do more than just tell people *what* they need. We

doctor has time or energy to delve deeply into every particular field. For this reason, neurologists, cardiologists, gynecologists, radiologists, pediatricians, etc., work closely with general practitioners (GPs) to provide specialized assistance. The GP is indispensable and the first point of contact. It is the GP who refers a patient to a specialist. In many ways, a revivalist can provide similar support to a local pastor. Evangelists provide a specialized and focused form of ministry that many pastors appreciate. I believe the same would be said about revivalists and that there would be pastoral support for such a ministry.

In Luke 15, Jesus described a sheep that knows it's lost but doesn't know the way back; a coin that was lost in the house and didn't even know it was lost; and a prodigal who chose to be lost, then wondered if

he could be reaccepted. A revivalist specializes in helping find the lost, especially the “lost coins.”

DM: *I understand that your wife, Marji, also participates in this revival ministry.*

LV: That’s right. The truth is, I wouldn’t be doing this if she weren’t working with me. Though she receives no salary, Marji works as hard as I do. A certified teacher, she left the classroom in order to join me in this ministry. Her most visible support is the special children’s feature she does as a lead-in for each of our presentations.

Marji believes what Ellen White wrote, “It is still true that children are the most susceptible to the teachings of the gospel; their hearts are open to divine influences, and strong to retain the lessons received. The little children may be Christians, having an experience in accordance with their years.”*

Marji loves to help children understand how they, too, can have a meaningful, daily relationship with Jesus that grows and


matures as they become older. At each location, many of the “young-at-heart” express their appreciation for her simple illustrations that make righteousness by faith more understandable for everyone.

DM: *God is using you and Marji to impact communities around the world, but you are just one team. Are those thirteen presentations available for pastors who would like to preach that revival series in their churches?*

LV: Yes. Each presentation is available as an audio file on our Web site www.allaboutJesusseminars.org. In addition, we have developed a resource package containing sermon outlines, PowerPoint slides, participant guides for adults and children, and brochures for inviting others to attend the series, that can all be used by local presenters. We also have our presentations available in DVD format for churches or individuals wishing to host a seminar using prerecorded material.

DM: *Those are wonderful resources for pastors. What important lessons*

have you learned as a revivalist that pastors might make use of as they engage in revival preaching?

LV: Three important lessons: First, you can never preach too many messages about Jesus. Every sermon should present the matchless charms of Jesus. Second, Jesus is the Bread of Life, and you have to be at the table before you can pass the Bread. I’ve learned in my own experience, and by talking with my peers, that Satan works hard to keep pastors away from daily, intimate communion with God. Time alone with God must be our top priority. We need to fellowship with Him daily in order to help others find Him daily too. Third, as we provide fresh tastes of the Bread of Life, people will want the “recipe.” Every sermon should include fresh reminders of how important (non-negotiable) spending meaningful time with Jesus is, and encouragement to daily go to the “table” for communion and fellowship with Him. 

* Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 515.