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# The Call of Ministry:



## Excitement vs. Faithfulness

CHURCH PLANTS: SEEDS OR WEEDS : 08    INTELLECTUAL ADVENTISM — PART III : 16



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Editorial | John McLarty

# Excitement Versus Faithfulness

» Most young ministers dream of making a difference. And the easiest way to change things without getting crucified is to plant a new church. There, everything is new. Every new person who walks through the door is another affirmation of one's call to the ministry.

The most exciting thing I did during my years at seminary was to start a church for students. Most of these students had previously not been attending anywhere. Now they were in church. We were making a difference. It was *one of the most* exciting ventures in my ministerial career. To this day when I talk with others who were involved back then, they point to it as a high point in their church experience.

A few years later, I was invited to develop an English congregation in the old German church on the upper east side of Manhattan. With the help of the elderly German members, we developed a new congregation that was 75 percent young adult. We changed the name of the church, the worship service, Sabbath school, the carpet. It was *the most* exciting venture in my ministerial career.

Most young ministers dream of making a difference. And the easiest way to change things without getting crucified is to plant a new church. There, everything is new. Every new person who walks through the door is another affirmation of one's call to the ministry. Every time the core group members meet, it feels like they are making a difference for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Church planting can be exhausting. Systems we take for granted in an established church have to be created. The unsung service provided by

retirees in many established churches has to be done by someone else. New churches are less stable than older churches. If the pastor is also unstable, problems can easily become crises. But at least there is excitement.

## Faithfulness

I have been at my present church for almost eight years. "Children" are now entering high school, lifting weights, driving cars, competing in swim meets. "Kids" are now off to college, getting married, or moving to New York where they are attending my former church! We parents are just eight years older.

I serve a wonderful congregation of generous, good people, but I struggle with the sameness. It's like watching a tree grow. There have been some dramatic life changes in our congregation, but I look out at largely the same people every week. Tithe is up, but we haven't had many baptisms. There are a few new people in the congregation, but our attendance is a bit less than it was eight years ago. I seek to remain faithful, but I dream of excitement.

One reason for church planting is to give energetic, visionary young pastors sufficient scope to test their dreams and abilities. Established churches are stable, mature, reliable and — for a bright, young visionary — confining, restraining, domesticating. Placing a visionary in an established church usually means taming the visionary or wrecking the church. Young pastors need a sense of making a difference, of being agents of change. In an established church, being an agent of change is like painting a target on your back. But take that same restless energy, turn it loose in a new church, and it becomes a resource for growth and development.

The denomination will always argue over the assignment of resources. There is not a surplus of superlative pastors. We cannot assign the best and brightest of our new ministerial graduates to plant churches *and* to pastor established churches. But if we take a long view, then giving young, energetic, visionary pastors the opportunity to create new churches makes far more sense than taming them in established congregations.

Their work will create excitement, not just for the young pastors and their new congregations, but for the denomination as a whole. Our support of them in their struggles and triumphs can add excitement to our own ministries of steady faithfulness.



# Contents

Vol. 14,  
issue 5

## EDITORIAL STAFF

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**05** | Letters | AT Readers

### News

**06** | A One-note Concerto | *Ron Gladden*

**14** | The Good News Tour 2006: A Review | *Brad Cole*

### Features

**08** | Church Plants: SEEDS or Weeds? | *Robert T. Johnston*

**12** | Response to Johnston | *Russell Burrill*

**16** | Sabbath: Sacrament and Treasure  
— Intellectual Adventism — Part 3 | *John McLarty*

**18** | The Year of Astonishment | *Alden Thompson*

**20** | My Journey to Ordination | *Halcyon Westphal Wilson*

**24** | Reaching Adventism's Future | *Edwin A. Schwisow*

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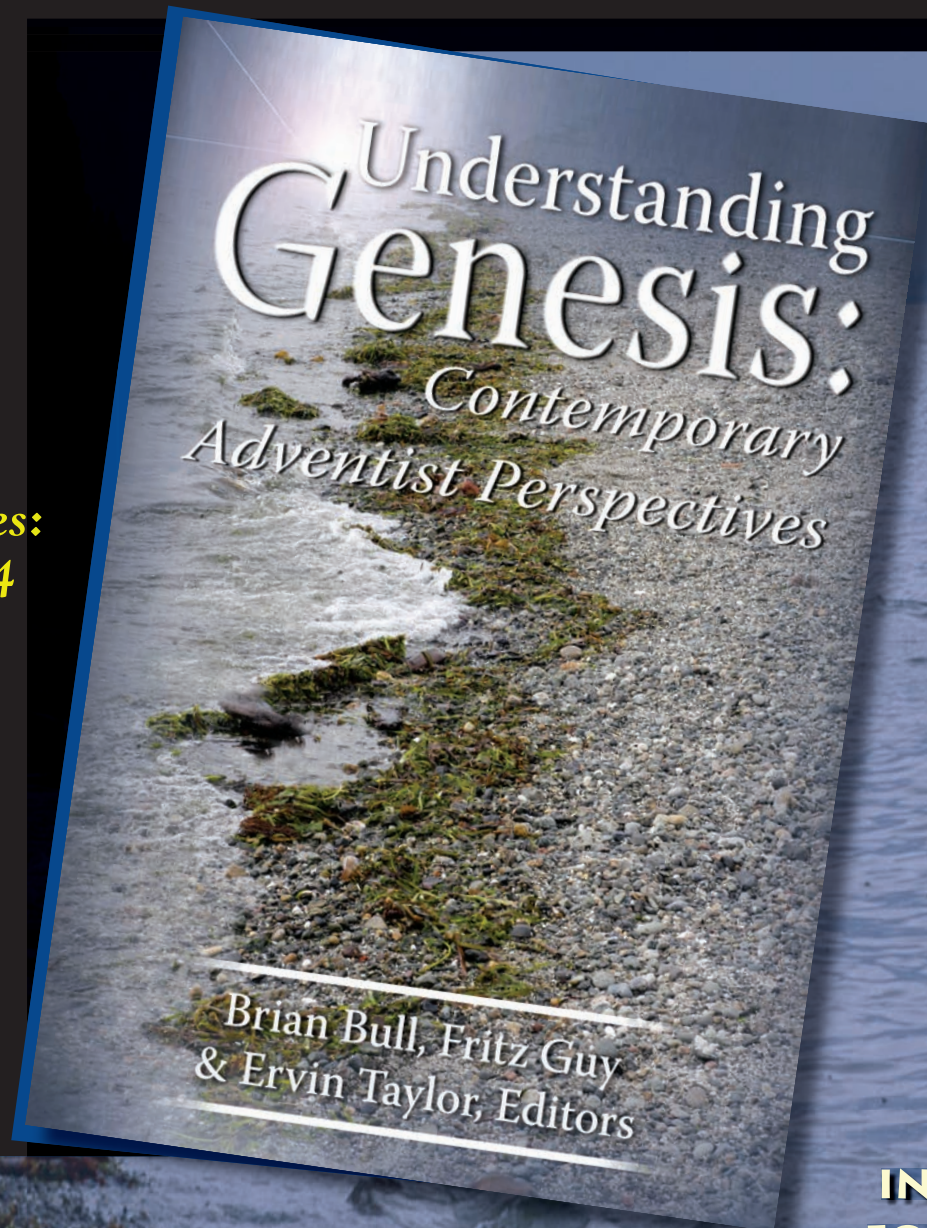
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# letters

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## AT NEWSBREAK LESSON COMMENTS

Thank you for printing comments on this quarter's lessons. I have to teach the lesson this summer, and I will greatly appreciate having your balanced comments.

Catherine Lang Titus  
Via the Internet

## A DEVOUT HYPOTHESIS

The “sanctuary service” as taught by Adventism has both repulsed me organically (the gore, the blood, the death of animals) and enthralled me metaphorically (Christ’s redemptive journey in microcosm).

On balance, however, I would say that its emphasis has been a “gravitational pull” *toward* the church rather than a repulsive force *away* from it. And for various reasons, I believe that an attitudinal survey of Adventists would identify this emphasis as a “fascinating” and “attractive” force. I cannot say the same, however, for the “1844 Message.”

The emphasis on the study of the Sinai sanctuary has produced within Adventism an occasionally problematic, but often richly engaging “Kabbalistic” subculture that draws on nuances of the sanctuary service to express tremendously invigorating insights regarding the Plan of Salvation. It has also encouraged a vibrant “Messianic” movement

within the church. On the whole, discussion of the sanctuary service is, and for decades has been, a powerful part of the Adventist experience that, to its credit, focuses on Christ as its object.

This said, however, we do have a problem — specifically the identification of October 22, 1844, and the Investigative Judgment as hard-and-fast doctrines of Adventism, rather than the “devout hypotheses” they historically are. It has been explained to me by at least one mainline Adventist theologian, however, that any official recasting of these doctrines would have a tendency to place Ellen White’s ministry in question — for she did, after all, teach that Christ indeed entered the Holy of Holies on October 22, 1844, and that an Investigative Judgment began at that time.

But there is, I believe, an alternative. Appropriately recasting these doctrines as hypotheses would by no means need to affect White’s credibility. For did she not entirely fail to predict the Great Disappointment (though she was already having visions by that date)? This prophetic failure on her part, however, has never seriously affected her credibility in the church — she simply said that somehow God shielded the actual truth about the Second Coming from His people, for their greater good. And with that explanation,

*Continued on page 23*

# A One-note Concerto

**I**t's all about mission. Like a one-note piano concerto, Mission Catalyst (MC) strikes a single key. Sometimes with allegro, other times with moderato or andante. Fortissimo follows pianissimo and swells back to thunderous, but the note remains the same: Mission. Get the message out. Keep the focus on helping people find their way back to God.

If you close your eyes in front of a map of North America and point at it, any Adventist church in a town near your fingertip will probably have a membership no larger than it had 20 years ago; it may have even fewer members. Mission Catalyst emerged in August 2004 with a passion to take the church off "pause," to push the "play" button, or maybe even "fast forward."

Here's what we believe:

1. God is using the Adventist denomination, but it is falling short of its redemptive potential (especially in first-world countries).

2. Local churches are God's design for reaching individuals and communities. Institutions exist only to assist the local church in carrying out the mission.

3. In every city Adventist churches should be growing consistently. Each church should be reaching hundreds, even thousands, of people who need Christ.

4. The message is sacred; the mission is our sole reason to exist, but where church structures interfere they are supposed to change.

5. Systems produce predictable results, and the Adventist system, created in 1901, produces the smallest-sized congregations of any denomination. Inadvertently, local congregations lose interest in saving lost souls.

6. God is honored as churches spring up that preach the message, while their members live out the priorities of Christ, regardless of their structural affiliation.

Mission Catalyst is doing something new. In the past, groups of Adventists who decided to operate outside the official system usually did so because they had a bone to pick with the theology. Sometimes they had concluded that the church was bad, and therefore ripe for attack.

Mission Catalyst, however, embraces the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We link to the doctrines page of [www.adventist.org](http://www.adventist.org) from our Web site. We have summarized the 28 Adventist official beliefs into 11 points, even as the Adventist baptismal certificate reduces them to 13. We require each of our member churches to affirm their acceptance of the teachings every year. We have even embedded the doctrinal summary into our bylaws — a legal document — to protect us from doctrinal drift. If any of our staff should question even one of the teachings, we will pray for him or her and dismiss them.

Is Mission Catalyst attacking the denomination? Not a chance! It's easy for us to remain positive toward the church and its leaders, because we are honestly convinced that God is using the denomination in many ways.

*Continued on page 7*

It's all about mission. Our piano needs only one note. The only reason we took the risk is that we believe that more people should fall in love with Jesus, as our church members live out the message in the context of healthy, outward-focused faith communities.

**Adventist Today (AT):** How is Mission Catalyst doing?

**Gladden:** We're growing. We have churches in nine cities in the United States and Canada, as well as an undetermined number overseas.

**AT:** Have you had any failures?

**Gladden:** Oh, yes! Failure is part of the learning process. Some of the new Adventist churches have had to give up, and so have a few of ours.

**AT:** What are you doing to minimize failure?

**Gladden:** A couple of things. One is Founding Pastor Evaluation (FPE). We correspond with persons who think God is calling them to lead a new church and invite them to attend a four-day program that highlights the competencies necessary to do church planting. You don't have to attend FPE to plant with Mission Catalyst, but if you do and you're recommended by the process, you receive launch funds to help you get started. Second, we have a coaching system that takes a founding pastor from Day One through the first 11 months of the project. It's called "LaunchTicket," and we are extremely proud of it.

**AT:** Do you have to be a trained pastor to start a church?

**Gladden:** No. We look for three "Cs": Character, Call, and Competence.

**AT:** Are you happy with the pace of growth?

**Gladden:** We had no idea what to expect when we started this a year and a half ago. We're proud to have nine churches in North America and more on the way. One of our BGAGs (big, God-sized, audacious goals) is to have 318 churches in the U.S. within 10 years. We're praying for steady progress toward that goal.

**AT:** Why 318?

**Gladden:** There are 318 metropolitan areas in the United States. We'd love to have a church in every one of them — and in all the cities of Canada as well.

**AT:** How are your churches doing?

**Gladden:** All of them (but one) are in what we call the pre-launch phase. They are very active and they're meeting every Sabbath, but they are working toward their grand opening. It takes time to build the core, establish the teams, and create momentum. But we're seeing tremendous progress.

» What Mission Catalyst is doing is something new. In the past, groups of Adventists who decided to operate outside the official system usually did so because they had a bone to pick with the theology. Sometimes they had concluded that the church was bad, and therefore ripe for attack.

**AT:** Why do you think more people haven't jumped on the bandwagon and started Mission Catalyst churches?

**Gladden:** Three factors. First is disapproval. We have strong support from hundreds of pastors and denominational employees, but some of the administrators have been pretty harsh. Their paradigm won't allow anyone else to come into town, meet on Sabbath, and share the same message without their permission. Some people who see the need and feel the call aren't sure they can live with being criticized and attacked. Second, Adventist pastors are accustomed to receiving a paycheck irrespective of the growth of their church. They may feel a call to plant a Mission Catalyst church, but they're not used to having their income (for the first year or so) tied to the success and growth of their church.

**AT:** How are the Mission Catalyst pastors doing financially?

**Gladden:** Fine. Some are starting out bivocationally, but, in spite of dire predictions, none have lost their house or car or missed any meals. We've seen some unexplainable miracles in this area. Every one of the pastors has entered the "God zone", where they walk by faith, and they love doing it.

**AT:** And what about the third reason some are waiting to join Mission Catalyst?

**Gladden:** They want to make sure Mission Catalyst is in this thing for the long haul. It would be a bummer to burn their bridges, so to say, only to watch MC fade away.

**AT:** Are you in it for the long haul?

**Gladden:** Absolutely. Until the Second Coming of Christ.

*Continued on page 22*



# Church Plants: SEEDS or Weeds?

**I**n a recent article,<sup>1</sup> Russell Burrill, director of the NAD Evangelism Institute, argued that a new church planting movement is yielding more rapid church growth in

North America. This movement “is based on the principles of non-pastor dependency, lay empowerment, and mission centeredness.” Burrill concluded that it is “obvious” that church planting is working in North America, though we still have a long way to go in our use of “the most effective tool” for reaching the “unreaped harvest.”

I am a church-planting skeptic.

For 25 years I have attended a small Texas church (40-80 members), where a procession of pastors has passed through. The greatest growth throughout this period occurred when we had a full-time intern or pastor (usually we shared a pastor with one or two other churches). From my perspective in an “established” but small church, I see significant growth potential if we simply serve the many people who already contact our church, offering effective ministries and compelling worship experiences. For this reason, I’ve become convinced that in my church, at least, an effective pastor/leader is an essential component of growth.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there are not enough highly competent pastors in the Adventist church to go around. Hence my

first complaint against church planting — it draws entrepreneurial pastors from an already depleted pool, thereby hurting existing churches.

My second complaint about church planting is that it takes financial resources away from existing churches. The “lay empowerment” that Burrill mentions is stifled by the loss of financial resources and the decision-making, mission-enabling power that goes with that.

A third concern is the transfer of active members from existing churches to the new plants. If a conference provides disproportionate financial resources to staff new churches with charismatic, full-time pastors, it should not be surprising that Adventists in the area might start attending the new church instead of their previous one.

## Is Church Planting Effective in North America?

Burrill used historical, statistical, and anecdotal lines of argument in his case for the SEEDS church-planting movement.

The historical argument was that the period of greatest growth for the Adventist church in North America occurred during its early years, because of the transient pastor-evangelist/church planting model that existed up until 1900, when it began to be displaced by a stationary pastor-nurture model. Burrill argued that restoration of the precise forms of the earlier model was not possible, but “building a church on those spiritual roots was essential,” and this vision ignited the SEEDS movement.



*Continued on page 9*



The statistical argument cited church planting trends since the founding of SEEDS (in 1996): 25-30 new groups per year in the early 1990s versus 160 in 2004. In the North American Division (NAD), 1,374 new churches have been started in the last 10 years, of which 75 percent are still in existence. Church planting in the Texas Conference (80 in the last 10 years, 70 in the last three years alone) was offered as further evidence of the success of the church planting movement, with the argument that Texas Conference studies “indicate a direct correlation between the new church plants and the number of baptisms and the amount of tithe increase.”

The anecdotal argument recited church-spawning successes in the North Dallas area near Richardson, a similar experience in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, and a lay-led church planting experience in Tulsa, Okla. (in which, ironically, the lay leader became a full-time pastor).

### Examining the Historical Argument

Using data in the General Conference Annual Statistical Reports,<sup>3</sup> I calculated compound annual growth rates (CAGR) for North American churches and membership during 6 historical periods as shown in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> The table shows that both membership and church growth rates were highest before 1900. The two growth rates are moderately correlated, with Membership Growth Rate =  $0.76 \times \text{Church Growth Rate} + 1.83$  ( $r^2 = 0.83$ ). At first glance, this supports Burrill’s historical argument. This correlation does not address cause and effect, however. Is the higher membership growth rate before 1900 correlated with higher church planting rates, due to the church planting/transient pastoral assignment model followed by the church then, as Burrill argues? Or, is new church formation a natural outcome of membership growth? To put it another way, does membership follow formation of churches, or do churches follow membership growth? Or is it some combination of both?

**Table 1. Compound Annual Growth Rates During Six Periods of SDA History 1864-2004**

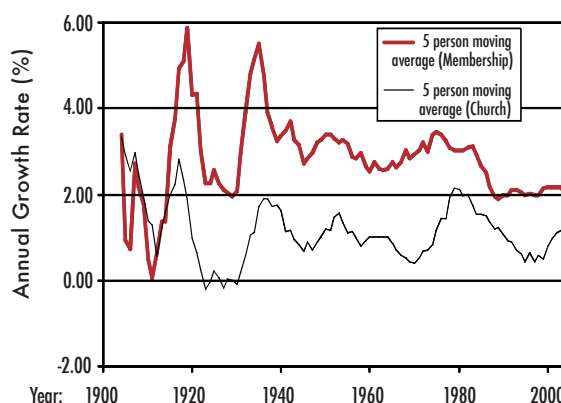
Period	Church CAGR	Membership CAGR
1864-1873	6.70	5.32
1874-1899	7.24	8.84
1900-1929	1.43	2.68
1930-1959	1.15	3.45
1960-1989	1.18	2.79
1990-2004	0.78	2.04

It isn’t possible to directly answer this question from the limited statistical data in the GC reports. However, there are some suggestive anomalies. During the WWI years of 1915-1918, membership growth spurted to a CAGR of 6.3 percent while church growth was a more modest 2.3 percent.<sup>5</sup>

During the peak years of the Great Depression<sup>6</sup> (1931-1934), membership CAGR was 5.8 percent while church growth was 1.6 percent. Both these periods had membership growth rates higher than those experienced in 1864-73 despite only 1/4 to 1/3 of the church growth rate of that period. This suggests that high rates of church planting are not necessary for high rates of membership growth.

Figure 1 shows that changes in church and membership growth rates from 1900-2004 were approximately coincident. This suggests that membership and church growth rates are related, though it doesn’t establish cause and effect. Recent data deviate from this pattern. The surge in church growth rate since the late 1990’s is the first since 1900 not to be accompanied by a surge in membership growth rate. The SEEDS church planting movement is not producing a surge in membership. Membership CAGR for 2000-2004 was only 1.94 percent, lower than any period in Table I, despite a church CAGR of 1.28 percent. In 2004, a year that Burrill said produced 160 new churches, the membership growth rate was a paltry 1.44 percent — the lowest North American membership growth rate since 1928! If church planting was ever the cause of membership growth, it doesn’t seem to be producing that effect yet in the current church growth cycle.

**Figure 1. Church and membership growth rates from 1900-2004, smoothed using a five point moving average.**



Possibly the high church planting rates of the early years of the Adventist church followed naturally from the fact that the church was then in its infancy. Many cities and towns had no Adventist church. Once churches were planted in these areas, growth could continue with a reduced church planting rate by expanding the membership of the existing churches.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps there is a natural linkage between church and membership growth that was broken when church planting began to be done with the intentionality of the current church planting movement.

If in fact smaller churches are the source of membership growth, then should the church give up its institutions to focus on growth? Can the church do this in 21st century North America and retain any impact on an increasingly educated and skeptical world?

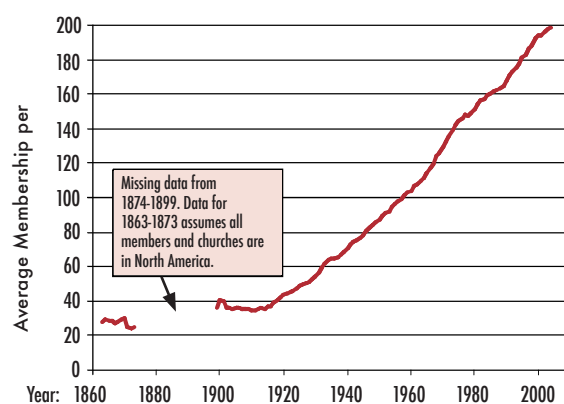
*Continued on page 10*

There were many instances during the last 100 years when one could find selected churches where a favorable combination of timing, pastor, lay leadership, financial means, spiritual members, conference cooperation, or other factors resulted in rapid church growth. Often, however, these examples are not replicable. Furthermore, they are often not sustainable over time.

## Church Plants: SEEDS or Weeds? *Continued from page 9*

It is interesting to note that before 1910, church and membership growth rates were similar. After approximately 1910, the growth rate of membership consistently exceeded the growth rate of churches. The offset is approximated by the 1.83 percent intercept from the previously cited correlation equation. This growth rate differential produced an increase in members per church. That is shown more clearly in Figure 2, which also includes data for 1863-1873. Interestingly, the early church average size was only about 25-30 members, and that only increased to 40 by 1920. After 1920, the average membership per church increased almost linearly until today it is approximately 200, or 7 times the average size of the early congregations.

**Figure 2. North American SDA membership divided by the number of churches, from 1863-2004.**



Several observations can be made about this graph. First, the period from 1900-1914 had a relatively high rate of church growth (2.3 percent CAGR) but low rate of membership growth (2.0 percent), while the period 1915-1929 had a relatively low church growth rate (0.4 percent) and higher membership growth rate (3.3 percent). Thus, the membership growth that began in 1915 predominantly resulted in expansion in average church size. These trends not only show the weak link between church growth and membership growth, but they suggest that there are other effective modes of church growth besides church planting.

Second, one could speculate that instead of itinerant pastor-evangelists, the success factor for growth in the early days of the denomination was small-sized congregations. Perhaps the secular decline in membership growth rates during most of the past century was partly caused by increases in church size. If true, this would suggest that all churches larger than approximately 50 members should be divided.<sup>8</sup> Yet, how many NAD Adventists would be willing to give up the multi-faceted ministries and institutions supported by large churches and instead attend a 25-30 member church?

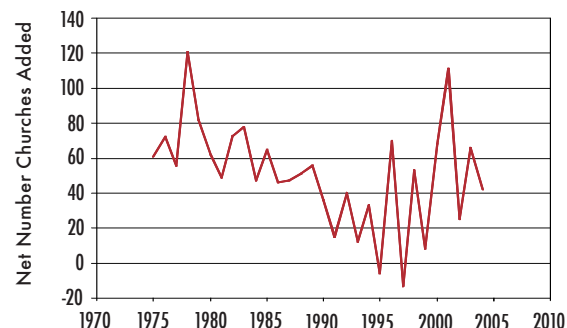
If, in fact, smaller churches are the source of membership growth, then should the church give up its institutions to focus on growth? Can the church do this in 21st century North America and retain any impact on an increasingly educated and skeptical world? Increased church planting since 2000 hasn't reversed the trend of increasing members/church; is that why membership growth rates haven't increased? These are questions that ought to be considered before concluding that church planting is the best tool to reverse declines in membership growth rates.

### Examining the Statistical Argument

Increased numbers of church plants in the 2000s doesn't translate into increased membership, as shown previously. It also doesn't translate into high net increases in number of churches. Figure 3 shows that the early 1990s used by Burrill as a baseline for comparison was the lowest point in the past 30 years. Even so, there was only a net increase of about 40 churches per year over that baseline during the 2000s, despite the significantly higher number of church plants started during this time. In 2004, the 160 new church plants yielded a net increase of only 42 churches. This is less than the increases prevailing through the 1980s, even though there were fewer churches then. Against a record of 1,374 new plants said to have been established in the last 10 years in NAD, the net increase was only 424. Since 75 percent of the new plants were said to remain active, 606 existing churches must have disappeared. Did the large number of church plants in the 2000's stem the tide of what would otherwise have been a disastrous period of church decline, or did they merely displace existing churches?

Such high turnover rates mirror the high turnover rates in Adventist membership. The Adventist "retention problem" appears to be as much an issue with churches as it is with members. Are the church plants and closures related? Might high turnover rates indicate a need for more nurture of existing churches, not less?

**Figure 3. Net increase in number of churches in NAD since 1975.**



*Continued on page 11*



The evidence cited for Texas is no more encouraging. Despite the “more than 80” new church plants in the last ten years, with “more than 70 in the last three years alone,” there wasn’t a correspondingly large net increase in churches. According to NAD records,<sup>9</sup> at the end of 1994 there were 193 Texas Conference churches. Ten years later, at the end of 2004, there were 206, or just 13 more. At year-end 2001, there were 198, indicating a net increase of only 8 churches in the last 3 years despite claims of planting 70. What about membership growth during this period? The first 5 years of the decade averaged a net increase of 1,281 members per year, while the last 5 years (in the last 3 of which 70 new churches were planted) averaged only 1,072 members per year, or 16 percent fewer.

What’s going on deep in the heart of Texas? Many of the Texas church plants are companies with only a small probability of reaching church status. Furthermore, Burrill totally ignored demographic factors in his argument. Texas has high baptismal and church growth rates primarily because of a burgeoning and actively proselytizing Hispanic population. Church planting has been a natural part of growth among Hispanics. Several of the new Texas church plants are ethnic splinter groups from larger, integrated churches. There is no evidence in the NAD data to suggest that the recent Texas Conference church planting program has produced a larger net increase in the number of churches or membership than occurred before its new church planting program was started.

### Examining the Anecdotal Argument

Although the examples cited by Burrill suggest that church planting can have a beneficial impact on church growth, it is risky to rely on selected examples as evidence to support systemic changes. In any argument, anecdotal evidence is of limited value primarily because it is subject to selection bias. One can select two or three examples that favorably illustrate one’s argument but ignore examples that do not. There were many instances during the last 100 years when one could find selected churches where a favorable combination of timing, pastor, lay leadership, financial means, spiritual members, conference cooperation, or other factors resulted in rapid church growth. Often, however, these examples are not replicable. Furthermore, they are often not sustainable over time. I can point to once large and growing church plants in Texas that are now in decline or non-existent because the founding pastor moved on, a treasurer embezzled funds, or members had a falling out with each other and the church split. These are all circumstances that suggest effective pastoral leadership is critical — quite the opposite of the itinerant preacher — planting model argued from early Adventist history.

### Conclusion

I opened this article with a personal anecdotal argument for why I believe a full-time pastor is helpful to membership growth. However, this argument is no more credible than Burrill’s anecdotal argument. What is needed is a careful study of the growth rates of churches that have an effective pastor-nurturer versus those that don’t have one or who share one with other churches. Such a study would need to take into account demographic and social factors.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Burrill, “Adventism: A Church Planting Movement,” *Adventist Today*, 13 (6), Nov/Dec., 2005,

<sup>2</sup> Some might argue that this is why the principle of non-pastor dependency is so important. I argue that we live in a professional society where inconsistent lay-led services have limited appeal. My experience suggests that no pastor may be better than a bad pastor, but a good pastor is much better than none. The pastor could be a highly competent lay person, but he/she is still a pastor and provides needed leadership.

<sup>3</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Annual Statistical Report for (various years), downloaded 1-15-2006 from <http://www.adventistarchives.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Statistical data in the archives was limited for the early years. NAD data exist only back to 1913. From 1899 to 1912, I used the sum of reported data for the unions in the United States and Canada. For years previous to that, the only data in the online GC archive statistical reports are global totals (see, for instance, Table 2 in the 1905 report), from which it wasn’t possible to determine the North American component. Since mission offerings and overseas mission work didn’t begin until 1874, I used the global data from 1863-1873 as an estimate of North American values (the statistical report says data from 1863-1866 are estimates anyway). I felt less comfortable substituting global data for North American data after 1873 so the CAGR for years 1874-1898 were calculated from the differences between 1873 and 1899 data.

<sup>5</sup> The growth in membership during WWI is an interesting phenomenon in its own right. Did the first truly global war suggest a fulfillment of the prophecies being expounded by Adventist preachers? Did the end of the world seem close at hand? If so, the novelty of this idea must have worn off because there was no such spike in growth rates during the WWII years.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth recalling that in 1932-1933, unemployment peaked above 25 percent, and despair was rampant. See L. Achuthan and A. Banerji, “Beating the Business Cycle”, (New York, Doubleday, 2004), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> This is analogous to the process of crystallization in nature, where nucleation and rapid initial crystallization forms a skeletal template that is then filled in by slower crystallization processes.

<sup>8</sup> Some have advocated use of small groups as a way to achieve the dynamics of small congregations in large churches, thereby obtaining the benefits of both.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view\\_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=239130](http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=239130), downloaded 1-15-06.



# Response to Johnston

Johnston's third concern is over existing members leaving existing churches for new church plants. Again, the evidence is not in his favor. Before 1995 that was probably true, when most church plants happened because of a church split or because of overcrowding. However, the church planting being emphasized today is for the sake of reaching lost people.

In the article, "Church Plants: SEEDS or Weeds?" Robert Johnston makes some interesting points. It shows he is a careful student and one who looks at the evidence thoroughly. I commend him for entering into dialogue on the issue of church planting.

Church growth is a complicated discipline. There is never a single answer to all church growth. If this were the case, churches would be flourishing. I certainly never intended to convey that church planting is the only way for a church to grow. All our studies of Adventist church growth reveal that there are multiple factors that cause churches to grow, one of them being church planting. Likewise, the SEEDS church planting conference has taken a broad approach. Over the past 10 years we have used whole SEEDS events to emphasize church health, church renewal, as well as church planting.

In my article, "Adventism: A Church Planting Movement," (*Adventist Today*, Nov/Dec, 2005), I was emphasizing one aspect of successful church growth: church planting. I have also written articles and books on church renewal. Johnston's observation is right — we also desperately need to renew our existing churches. If we don't renew them, our

denomination will be in serious trouble in the future. It is sadly true that as churches age they become less effective in reaching people. For example, one interdenominational study revealed that in churches under 10 years of age it took 10 members to baptize one convert, but in churches over 50 years of age it required 100 members to baptize one convert.<sup>1</sup> This is why church planting is so vital for a denomination.

Lyle Schaller, well respected evangelical church growth researcher, declares:

Every denomination reporting an increase in membership reports an increase in the number of congregations. Every denomination reporting an increase in the total number of congregations reports an increase in members. Every denomination reporting a decrease in membership reports a decrease in congregations. Every denomination reporting a decrease in congregations reports a decrease in members... The first step in developing a denominational strategy for church growth should be to organize new congregations.<sup>2</sup>

When I first read Schaller's comments, I wondered if it held true for Adventism. I did a 30-year study of every conference in North America, tracking their membership gain and their church gain. Then I compared them over a 10-year period. I separated

*Continued on page 13*



out by percentage the 10 fastest-growing conferences and compared them to the least-growing conferences in North America. Here are the amazing results of this study:

Since yearly growth rates can vary so widely, church growth scholars use a 10-year span to measure growth. It is referred to as Decadal Growth Rate (DGR). The first span that I looked at was from 1968-1977. The 10 fastest-growing conferences averaged a 73 percent DGR in membership and a 29.2 percent DGR in number of churches. In contrast, the 10 least-growing conferences averaged a 19.2 percent DGR in membership and a 1.7 percent DGR in churches.

In the second decade, from 1977-1986, the 10 fastest-growing conferences averaged a 64.5 percent DGR in membership and a 41.8 percent DGR in churches, while the 10 least-growing conferences averaged a -1 percent DGR (decrease) in membership and a 1.2 percent DGR in churches.

The third decade studied, from 1987-1996, revealed a 40.7 percent DGR in membership and a 26.1 percent DGR in churches for the fastest-growing conferences, while the least-growing conferences averaged decreases of -7.3 percent DGR in membership and -3.7 DGR in churches.

While it may be true that this does not prove a cause-and-effect relationship, the statistical information overwhelmingly reveals that growing conferences are planting churches and declining conferences are not. Whether church planting follows membership growth or growth accompanies church planting is really immaterial. Any church-growth strategy that would ignore the important role church planting plays in growth would be inconsistent with the facts.

In addition, Skip Bell and Rod Davis conducted a scientific study of the relation between church planting and growth in the New York Conference.<sup>3</sup> Their research revealed a clear statistical connection between the amount of conference involvement in church planting and a reversal in its growth rate.

### **They conclude:**

Does a relationship exist between planting new churches and evangelistic growth in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America? The discussion should continue, and further research is needed. This single project does suggest a relationship to the objective observer, and provides to the more subjective observer evidence that indeed church planting is an effective evangelistic strategy for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.<sup>4</sup>

Johnston refers to the Texas Conference, declaring that church growth is not occurring as a result of church planting. However, the Texas Conference has conducted detailed studies on the impact of their church-planting strategy. These studies, although not formally published, were

» Johnston's observation is right — we also desperately need to renew our existing churches. If we don't renew them, our denomination will be in serious trouble in the future. It is sadly true that as churches age they become less effective in reaching people.

presented to the Conference Executive Committee and have clearly revealed that the growth they are experiencing is directly attributable to their church-planting strategy. Furthermore, they have discovered a secondary result: tithe increase also directly attributable to their church planting efforts. That \$700,000 tithe increase has made it possible for them to hire more pastors for existing churches. So the opposite of Johnston's concerns is happening in Texas: pastors for existing churches are increasing as a result of their church-planting strategy.

Johnston has based his article primarily upon his own observations, which obviously are limited. He suggested that my article was also based on anecdotal evidence. While I did share several exciting examples of successful church planting, hopefully this response is revealing that my observations are based on clear statistical studies. The research has plainly substantiated the anecdotal evidence.

Another issue that Johnston raised needs to be clarified: the number of church plants. We now have the figures for 2005, so our total church plants from 1995-2005 total 1,547. There are three stages in the evolution of a church. Stage one is a group status, stage two is company status and stage three is church status. Stage one is not reported in the statistical report of the General Conference. One can get it by calling each conference every year and getting the name of every new church. That is the 1,547 figure. Stage two has been reported in the statistical report only since 1997, while stage three has always been reported.

To be fair with the statistical data, you cannot compare stage one and stage three data, as Johnston has done in his article. That is not comparing apples with apples. It usually takes several years for a church to move from stage one to stage three. Johnston declares, "Against a record of 1,374 new plants said to have been established in the last 10 years in NAD, the net increase was only 424." That is a very deceptive use of statistical data. There were 1,374 groups started, but all groups did not yet make it to church status; some are still in company status or group status. He did not even include the companies.

*Continued on page 15*

# The Good News Tour 2006: A Review

»» “The most powerful conference I have ever attended. From Genesis to Revelation the issue is...do you trust God...and that, of course, depends upon His character. The Good News Tour team gave a stellar defense.”

**T**he Good News Tour held its first convention June 16 and 17, 2006, on the campus of the University of Redlands, California. The focus was entirely on our understanding of

God, and all of the discussions pointed to the central question, “What kind of person is God?”

These included lectures by Ty Gibson, Manuel Silva, Alden Thompson, Marco Belmonte, and Tim Jennings, each presenting a different aspect of the character of God. The evening sessions concluded with a panel discussion featuring questions from the audience.

The lectures were planned so that the subject matter would progress chronologically. Beginning with the war in heaven, the real issue was over the character of God and the principles of his kingdom. Created beings with a false picture of God’s character began to fear and distrust him and eventually to rebel. Further discussions reflected on the God of the Old Testament and the many ways he had sought to win his children back to trusting him. In New Testament times God’s victory was achieved through the life and death of Jesus, in whom we see the greatest revelation of God’s selfless love. Jesus also exposed the lies Satan had been spreading about God. Jesus had emphasized, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:8, CEV.). And he added, “I have been speaking to you in parables — but the time is coming to give up parables and tell you plainly about the Father. When that time comes,

you will make your requests to him in my own name, for I need make no promise to plead to the Father for you, for the Father himself loves you.” (John 16:25, 26, JB Phillips version.)

The meeting concluded with talks about spiritual healing and restoration for individuals and communities of God’s friends and the centrality of Jesus’ life and death in making this possible.

Quotes from those who attended the conference included these: “The most powerful conference I have ever attended. From Genesis to Revelation the issue is...do you trust God...and that, of course, depends upon His character. The Good News Tour team gave a stellar defense” (Charles Beck).

“This was not a conference to find fault with church leadership or deal with differing personalities or their unique persuasions, nor on outward performance or behavior. This was a conference that focused on Jesus Christ and His regenerative love. The pangs of physical hunger or the fatigue of long hours of sitting were minimal to the desire of the attendees to hear the message. The call to go out from this conference with that life-shaping message was clear and brought responses seldom seen elsewhere” (Gerald Reynolds).

“Following the emphasis in a masterful overview on Friday morning, speakers and hearers focused their thoughts and hearts on God — the kind of God he is and his passion to know us and for us to know him as the closest of forever friends. It was a blessed Friday and Sabbath — well planned and well spent” (Louis Venden).

*Continued on page 22*



# Response to Johnston *Continued from page 13*

One also has to remember that many old churches are dying, and that is reflected in diminishing the net increases. Our data is measuring church starts, not their development into full-fledged churches, voted into the sisterhood of churches at a constituency meeting — a process that takes five or six years.

A better way to compare the net increases would be to look at the increases in churches and companies. It still does not include those who are still in group status. In 1997 in the NAD there were 5,076 churches and companies,<sup>5</sup> while in 2004 there were 5,679, an increase of 603 churches and companies. During those same years there were 1,077 church starts. We believe around 25 percent of the groups fail. That would mean 269 groups failed. That leaves 205 churches still active in group status.

When I rechecked with Tom Evans, church planting director for the Texas Conference, he emphatically denied Johnston's assertion that most of their church plants have a small probability of reaching church status. He declared that Texas is regularly organizing groups into companies and companies into churches. Most church plants, he declared, are well on their way to church status. In fact, Texas has deliberately raised the standard higher for a company to become a church. In the past there were only two requirements to reach church status; now there are 10. This makes the process slower, but the churches reaching it are much stronger. I would suggest that Johnston check with his conference for the actual information rather than rely on observations, which are often inaccurate.

There are other issues addressed by Johnston that I will respond to briefly. He charges that entrepreneurial pastors are being drawn to church planting rather than to existing churches. That is true, but what he fails to realize is that these kinds of pastors were not being drawn into ministry in times past. The church-planting movement has drawn many of them into the seminary and has enabled the church to use the excellent talents of these entrepreneurial pastors. If church planting were not here, neither would these pastors be around.

His second complaint has also been addressed. The increased tithe that has occurred because of church planting is actually helping existing churches. The real tragedy is that more money is not being placed into church planting, so that even more tithe can be generated. Most church planters are being hired on stipends and ultimately move to full salary as the tithe of their church increases. Also, hundreds of church plants have been lay church plants, with no pastor involved. Their tithe is all increase to the conference. Church planting is not consuming tithe from existing churches. It is providing even more tithe for existing churches. The truth is the opposite of Johnston's conjecture.

Johnston's third concern is over existing members leaving existing churches for new church plants. Again, the evidence is not in his favor. Before 1995 that was probably true, when most church plants happened because of a church split or because of overcrowding. However, the church planting being emphasized today is for the sake of reaching lost people. Therefore, we do not recommend that there be too many Adventists in the church plant. We want it focused on reaching new people. So most church plants start small and grow out of the harvest. These groups are focusing on kingdom growth rather than transfer growth. I do not deny that some grow by transfer, but that is not the SEEDS emphasis. We are not about the redistribution of the saints, but the growth of the kingdom of God.

In conclusion, church growth is a very complicated process, with many factors contributing to its success. Clearly, one of these is church planting. The statistical data overwhelmingly indicates that there is a relationship between church growth and church planting. Church plants are not weeds, as Johnston suggests; they are the vital energy that is helping the Adventist church in North America to continue to grow. Most Christian churches in America have ceased to grow or experienced declines, and if we neglect church planting we will quickly join them in this regard. Church planting continues to be a vital ingredient in the church-growth mix of the Adventist denomination. As church growth guru Peter Wagner stated, "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."<sup>6</sup> Adventists must not be left out.

<sup>1</sup> Phillip Barron Jones, "An Examination of the Statistical Growth of the Southern Baptist Convention," in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, ed. Dean Hoge and David Roozen (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 171.

<sup>2</sup> Schaller, Lyle, Commentary: "What are the Alternatives?" *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, ed. Dean Hoge and David Roozen (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 351-352.

<sup>3</sup> Bell, Skip, Davis Rod. "Church planting as growth strategy: Is it effective?" *Ministry Magazine*, April 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 26

<sup>5</sup> This is the first year the number of companies was reported.

<sup>6</sup> Wagner, Peter C. *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

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Feature | John McLarty

# Sabbath: Sacrament and Treasure

(Part 3 of Intellectual Adventism)

» When you ask middle-aged Intellectual Adventists why they keep Sabbath, they are more likely to respond by talking about the benefits of these practices than they are to cite the fourth commandment.

**S**abbath-keeping is the most universal religious practice among Intellectual Adventists. It is the primary social and spiritual tie linking Adventist intellectuals with Adventist fundamentalists, evangelicals, Maxwellians, centrists, liberals, and right wingers.

## Sabbath Practices

For intellectuals, Sabbath-keeping is first a set of practices: refraining from regular employment and housework, special meals for Friday evening supper and Saturday lunch, participation in Sabbath school and church, and taking a Sabbath-afternoon hike. When you ask middle-aged Intellectual Adventists why they keep Sabbath, they are more likely to respond by talking about the benefits of these practices than they are to cite the fourth commandment.

Intellectuals know the classic arguments against regarding the Sabbath commandment as a continuing moral standard. But they are not impressed. The arguments against Sabbath are usually couched as protests against an oppressive legalism. However, for those who have enjoyed Sabbath for decades, the idea that Sabbath is somehow part of a spiritual tyranny is laughable.

## Sabbath Theology

Though Sabbath practices loom large in the experience of Intellectual Adventists, they have also developed a theology of Sabbath. In the Genesis story, the first full day of Adam and Eve's life is the Sabbath. Theologians have pointed to this as the first evidence that God's relation to humanity was grounded in grace. Sabbath establishes the fundamental paradigm for God-human interaction.

Adam and Eve did not work "toward" the Sabbath, but "out of the Sabbath."

In Genesis, there is no command for Adam and Eve to rest. There is simply the declaration that God rested. Sabbath critics gleefully note this lack of command and argue this proves God did not intend for the primeval humans to keep Sabbath. But this, of course, misses the point of the story. God rests as a declaration of his satisfaction with the people he had created. God's Sabbath was *for* Adam and Eve. And since they were created in God's image as God's children, God's pattern of rest would set the ideal for their lives and the lives of their descendants.

The Sabbath rhythm promotes optimal health. On Sabbath we bask in God's declaration of favor. We are accepted, here and now, as we are. Then we launch into the week, working to serve, create, build, make, preserve, correct, improve, conquer, accomplish, achieve. Then on Friday evening, we stop. Again. Not because we have reached our goal, but because our ultimate place in the universe depends more on the accomplishment of God than it does on our own achievements. Blessed inactivity, then energetic action. Rest, then purposeful struggle. Then rest again. The best life is not stasis, but movement back and forth between quietness and action.

This also applies in spiritual life. God expects humans to pursue moral and spiritual excellence. But he wants us to enjoy his favor and acceptance here and now, even in our brokenness and inadequacy. On Sabbath we not only lay aside our pursuit of academic, creative, and business achievement; we also let go of our striving for moral and spiritual advancement. On Sabbath we rest in the favor that comes to us simply as the outflow of God's love, without regard to our accomplishments. On Sabbath we bask in God's smile as members of a creation that he declared was very good, as citizens of the world for whom he sent his Son to die.

This approach to Sabbath theology is a departure from historic Adventism, which saw Sabbath primarily as the end-time Seal of God that protected a person from receiving the Mark of the Beast. In historic Adventism, Sabbath was primarily an act of human obedience. In intellectual Adventism,

*Continued on page 17*

Sabbath is viewed primarily as a divine gift. In historic Adventism, Sabbath-keeping was a test. In Intellectual Adventism, Sabbath-keeping is a sacrament.

### Sabbath as Sacrament

Historically, a person affirmed their place in the Christian community by reciting statements:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. . .

But the creeds were not the only way for Christians to “voice” their faith. A person entered the church through baptism and was sustained by receiving the Lord’s Supper. The church quickly came to see these acts not just as statements of the people toward God, but also as “sacraments.” That is, they were earthly vehicles conveying the favor and presence of God into the lives of individuals and the community.

Adventism follows in this tradition. We have emphasized the affirmation of a detailed statement of belief. Our present creed has 28 discrete statements. Beyond that our church espouses an extensive body of prophetic interpretation and a highly detailed theology. Traditionally, the Adventist understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper has emphasized the human faith involved in participation. But over time, Sabbath has come to play a major sacramental role. That is, through Sabbath-keeping a person is able to receive something of the grace and presence of God, quite apart from any explicit affirmation of particular beliefs.

Sacramental, wordless participation in spiritual life is especially important for intellectuals. Intellectuals in all communities frequently struggle with the details of their church’s creed, whether that is “the 28” of the Adventist Church or “the 39” of the Anglican Church or “the 9” of the Apostles’ Creed.

Fundamentalists tend to shrink the gateway to salvation by developing an ever more precise theology. Building on Paul’s severe language about those who disagreed with him, they insist that salvation is found only through correctly voicing (and thinking) a fairly precise understanding of how God saves people. For some people, this Pauline gospel is wonderfully liberating. But for many others it is merely a new form of the old Pharisaical impediments to salvation; only in place of the Pharisees’ demand for perfect behavior, these Paulinists demand perfect thinking — something many intellectuals find dauntingly difficult.

Sabbath offers intellectuals with unruly minds a way to step into God’s presence and enjoy his favor without first getting their minds “all right.” Sabbath-keeping offers a nonverbal, kinesthetic participation in spiritual life as an adjunct or even an alternative to the creedal certainty of historic Christianity and

Adventism. One does not have to believe everything to participate in Sabbath practices, but participation fosters faith.

### Whole-day Sabbath (Protecting the Park in Time)

I have heard mainline Protestants theologians bemoan the loss of Sabbath richness from their own lives and the lives of their congregations (referring to Sunday in these laments). Their proposed remedy is to instruct their congregations that “at least they must go to church. This will give them something of a Sabbath.” This would be like surrendering Yellowstone Park to an energy consortium and then trying to console the citizens by building a set of bleachers around Old Faithful. The park can function only as a whole ecosystem, a union of geysers, rivers, lakes, forests, bison, wolves, elk, meadows, and peaks. And Sabbath can serve its function only as a whole day, as an entire system of life.

Intellectual Adventists tenaciously hold on to the biblical picture of the Sabbath as a whole day. Churchgoing is part of that day, but only a part. Time in nature can be as rich as churchgoing, especially when shared with others who see nature as God’s creation. When Intellectual Adventists refuse to shop on Sabbath and refrain from regular work on Friday night, it is not because they are afraid God will punish them. They are fierce in their protection of Sabbath sacredness because they know that without such protection, the “open space” of Sabbath will eventually be filled with the same stuff that fills the rest of our lives. It may be good stuff, but it will suffocate the particular glory of Sabbath. Sabbath is a park in time, a special space. It will remain special only if its friends are vigilant and active in its preservation.

Intellectual Adventists embrace the notion of the “Sabbath commandment” because they know that only something as forceful as a divine command could hope to interrupt our drive to achieve, accomplish, succeed. And it is not only our desires to advance ourselves that push us. We are driven as well by the need of the world. There are always more patients and clients to be served, more students who need help, more customers who desire attention, more causes to be promoted. All this urgency is interrupted by the divine command: The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you are to do no work.

Intellectual Adventists ignore the quibbles of critics and give thanks; they are glad God spoke so clearly.

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Sabbath is a park in time, a special space. It will remain special only if its friends are vigilant and active in its preservation.







Feature | Alden Thompson

# The Year of Astonishment

Indeed, I want to argue with passion that recognizing the contrasts in Scripture are essential to a proper understanding of God, ourselves, and our mission as Christians. But because critics have been so quick to shout “contradiction” as an accusation against the Bible, we are often allergic to even the slightest whiff of tension.

Taking a page from the Chinese, I’m giving my year a name. They go through a list of 12 animals and then start over — this is the year of the dog; next year it’s the pig. In my list, last year was the year of “violence”; this year it’s “astonishment.”

Why the change? Let’s start with a good friend who regularly chides me for overworking the word “violence” but has taken a modest step toward repentance. The psalm-a-day plan for worship had brought their family to Psalm 137. That’s the one that closes with the special benediction on the neighbors: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (NRSV). A key family member exclaimed: “We can’t stop there! Let’s read one more.”

They did. Fortunately, Psalm 138 closes with better news: “Your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.”

“Maybe there’s at least a little bit of violence in the Old Testament,” said my friend. Later he said quietly, “My parents don’t even want to read the Old Testament anymore.” His parents are deeply committed Adventists, active in the life of the church. So let’s console ourselves with some good news from the “better” Testament: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28, NRSV).

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, NRSV).

Those verses point to a marvelous ideal. But is what I have just done really good news? Though the contrast is a valid one, I believe, you could point out some notable omissions, especially from the New Testament side of the ledger. Consider “wrath of the lamb” in Revelation 6, for example, and Jesus’ words: “It would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6).

Those notable omissions deserve full-length treatment but will have to wait for another time. What I want to focus on here is the “astonishing” difficulty we experience in even seeing the tensions. To contrast Jesus’ life and teachings with the words of Jesus’ Bible — our Old Testament — immediately triggers the word “contradiction,” a word trumpeted by critics in their attacks against the Bible. Thus, even though my intention is to build faith, when I call attention to the contrasts in the Bible, it already “feels” like I am destroying faith.

Indeed, I want to argue with passion that recognizing the contrasts in Scripture is essential to a proper understanding of God, ourselves, and our mission as Christians. But because critics have been so quick to shout “contradiction” as an accusation against the Bible, we are often allergic to even the slightest whiff of tension. It’s like the drowning man who desperately grips his deliverer because it “feels” like the way to safety, when in reality it’s the best way to be lost. In short, trying to help believers see what they need to see can actually make it more difficult for them to see it. But you do have to see the tension if you want to benefit from it. Discovering how difficult it is to see that tension, even for mature Christians, has been one of the most vivid astonishments for me this year. Let me illustrate further.

In sharing the story of his own spiritual pilgrimage, for example, one of my fellow believers told of memorizing Psalm 139 when he was a boy. I was startled to hear that a young Christian would memorize the whole psalm. The first part, up through verse 18, is beautiful stuff; but in 19-24, the psalmist turns strident. Indeed, verses 21-22 are the verses I regularly use to illustrate one of the contrasts Jesus was so bold as to include in the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

“Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred. I count them my enemies.” (Psalm 139:21-22).

Now if we really get serious about Bible study — and aren’t unnerved by the prospect of “contradictions” — other fascinating discoveries lurk nearby. First, of the six contrasts that Jesus cites in Matthew 5, the statement in 5:43 is the only one that cannot be traced directly to the Old Testament text. We have the texts on murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, and revenge. But I know of no passage in the Old Testament where any of God’s messengers actually say, “You shall hate your enemy.” There are, however, plenty of illustrations of hatred; I use the one in Psalm 139 because I think it is one of the most vivid.

In another way Psalm 139 also heightens the sense of contrast between the Old Testament and Matthew 5, for the Greek translator of Psalm 139 uses exactly the same word for “perfect” in the phrase

*Continued on page 19*

“perfect hatred” as the Greek text has in Matthew 5: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Father’s perfection would be illustrated by all that has gone before it, including the command: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44).

The observant reader will also notice the differences between the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and the parallel Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6: The whole sermon is much shorter in Luke; the beatitudes in Luke focus on physical realities (“blessed are the poor”) rather than on spiritual truths (“blessed are the poor in spirit”); Luke includes none of the six notable contrasts found in Matthew 5; the Lord’s Prayer is not found in the Sermon on the Plain, but appears elsewhere in Luke (chapter 11 instead of Luke 6); in modern translations, the passage in Matthew admonishing us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) drops from a quartet to a duet: “do good to those who hate you” and “bless those who curse you” are only found in Luke 6, not Matthew 5. Small wonder that some believers want to stick with the KJV.

But now let’s return to my fellow believer who memorized all of Psalm 139 as a boy, including the violent parts. “What did you do with 21-22, ‘Do I not hate those who hate you....?’” I asked him. “It didn’t hit me until I was in graduate school,” he said with a chuckle. And then he added with another chuckle: “I had never ‘heard’ the last verse of Psalm 137 either until I began rubbing shoulders with the School of Theology faculty at Walla Walla College!”

Undoubtedly a host of factors determine whether or not we actually “hear” a given passage and how we “hear” it when we do. Just a change in translation can fling open the windows, and not everything that flies in is a welcome guest. A colleague told me what had happened in their family when they shifted from reading the KJV to the NIV in family worship. What had been perfectly safe reading in the KJV suddenly turned deadly when they began reading Leviticus in the NIV. In a fresh translation, the implications of bloody animal sacrifices struck home, and reading the book of Leviticus had to be postponed to a more convenient season.

Most of us don’t comment about these “surprises” in public. Perhaps we are too embarrassed to admit that we have just discovered something we thought we should have known. After all, most of us grew up with frequent admonitions to read the Bible through every year. But I have been astonished to discover how widespread these surprises actually are. And if you haven’t made it through your Bible recently (or ever), I suspect that you too would be astonished to discover how much good company you have among thoughtful adult members of the Adventist Church.

If the surprises come late for some, for others they come very early. And this is the challenge I face as a college teacher. Here are three quotes from students in my classes in this year of “astonishment”:

**1. On discovering differences in the Gospels.** From a devout young woman in my “Inspiration” class:

“I know the sickening feeling that strikes many people when they begin to see that there are ‘inconsistencies’ in the Bible. I remember the first time I realized the Gospels weren’t all the same. It was some time in grade school when I noticed it. I remember lying on the floor of my room, totally shaken, wondering if everything I had been taught was about to be snatched out from under me. What, then, could I base beliefs on? What was my bottom line or solid rock that I could anchor to if the Bible couldn’t be trusted?”

**2. On learning about Esther’s pragmatic approach to sexual relations.** From a devout young man in my “Old Testament History” class.

“I’ll never forget my complete shock and outrage when my dad first brought it to my attention that Esther may have engaged in some questionable behavior to become queen. Growing up I always held the notion that the king held some type of beauty pageant, but in reality there was more involved.”

**3. On the value of confronting the violent and the shocking in a class setting:** An anonymous comment on an end-of-term evaluation form in my Old Testament History class.

“I think it is important to go over ‘shocking’ aspects in a structured environment such as this. Here it is easier to ask questions and explore new ideas. It is a little less scary to go over these things in class than alone. As some problems were described I could feel myself begin to panic a little bit.... But then it would be explained. If I’d discovered these things on my own, I don’t know what would have happened. Coming into OT history I thought it would be just that — history (boring). I love that we looked at deeper issues and took time to actually think about why, not just what.”

In closing, a brief comment on why the same God can be so violent with some and at the same time so very patient with those who can’t believe their God could be as violent as parts of the Bible make him out to be. That’s a longer story, indeed it is many stories. But the short answer is simply Jesus. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

If violence is the only language you can understand, Jesus will speak your language to set you on the path to gentleness. And if you are so gentle that any hint of violence horrifies you, he will be very gentle in opening your eyes; he may not even open them at all. For only God can see the world in all its horror — and still love even the most violent of his children.

*Alden Thompson, Ph.D., teaches religion at Walla Walla College, College Place, Washington.*



# My Journey to Ordination



**T**en years ago, on December 2, 1995, I was ordained to the gospel ministry. I am a woman minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and believe I have been called by God to be a pastor. I am controversial, yet I avoid controversy where possible. This is my account of a very painful journey.

» When I first became a pastor, I had not dreamed about or desired ordination. However, I soon realized I could not perform the marriage ceremonies for the couples I counseled in premarital sessions. I could not baptize those with whom I studied. I could not visit inmates in prison, and I was considered by many to be not a “real pastor.”

I had been serving as a pastor in the La Sierra University church for 15 years, having been hired in 1980 to be the first woman pastor in the Southeastern California Conference. Years earlier I had taken university theological studies at La Sierra and Loma Linda, and owed a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Madelynn Haldeman for helping me understand the controversial texts about women and guiding me through many events and speeches.

It was an interesting and unusual experience to be the first woman pastor in a man's domain. What a challenge! I had no idea it would be so difficult.

In our church at that time, only men were elders. Very few women had preached from the pulpit. Usually only men sat on the platform. I heard comments such as *Are you allowed to preach from the pulpit? Are you allowed to wear makeup? Does your husband work? Does your husband mind your being up in front? Who takes care of your children? Who is boss in your house?* And so on ....

Lynn Mallery, my senior pastor, wisely waited until the congregation was used to seeing me up in front and was familiar with me and my work before he assigned me the pulpit one Sabbath. The evening before my first sermon was to be given, I had to preach it to him alone sitting on the front pew. He had been a faculty member of the LSU School of Religion and my homiletics teacher. That was worse than doing it the next day in front of 1,200 people and live on the radio.

I learned to smile and not answer insulting questions. I don't believe most were meant to be insulting; they just felt like that to me. It was a new era, and new thoughts and questions were arising.

Besides my senior pastor, I had a committed and helpful staff who became my friends: Arthur Lesko, Steve Blue, Steve Daily, Jim Hoggan, and Robert Wheatley. With their help, and the help of secretaries, friends, family, and husband, I ran the counseling center for 16 years. I led divorce-recovery groups, grief groups, and seminars for singles and blended families. I planned and presented family life seminars. I finished my BA in Religion and my MA in Family Life Education. I learned to preach and organize and lead groups and children's Sabbath school divisions, and learned to give pastoral counseling and listen to people's problems with empathy and prayer. I also learned to speak up at committees and even to chair committees. When I retired from full-time ministry in 1996, I became a part-time pastor and part-time assistant to the conference president, who was then Lynn Mallery. That put me on more committees.

Soon other women were hired as pastors, and today we have 22 women who are on the conference payroll as pastors. One of them is Sandy Roberts, one of our conference's three administrators. We also have about 15 more who are religion teachers, or paid by local churches. Hallelujah!

However, our conference membership is about 64,000 adults, plus the children who also need pastors. More than 70 percent of the membership is women. Why are we not equally represented in the community of pastors? We have a long journey ahead of us!

*Continued on page 21*



## The Struggle for Women's Ordination

When I first became a pastor, I had not dreamed about or desired ordination. However, I soon realized I could not perform the marriage ceremonies for the couples I counseled in premarital sessions. I could not baptize those with whom I studied. I could not visit inmates in prison, and I was considered by many to be not a "real pastor."

I also started attending and taking part in ordinations of young male pastors who had the same education and years of service that I did. I could sit on the platform at their ordination, could give the challenge, and could be on the committees that approved their ordinations, but I could not put my hands on them during the ordination prayer.

I did not want to be angry, so I avoided being a part of the Gender Inclusiveness Task Force, which our conference sponsored, or any other movements pushing for women's ordination. Pain turned into anger too easily.

Eventually I learned to just feel the pain and control my anger. It helped to join the Inclusiveness Task Force and be a part of the women's movement for equality. I had to admit to myself that I wanted to be ordained, but I did not want to be any part of strident or aggressive behavior. It helped to set my own boundaries. I knew then, and I know now, that God called me to do exactly that which I was honored to be doing. I was called by a great, inclusive God to love others as Jesus has loved me. It was Christ's work, not mine. I am only the clay vessel and I've needed a lot of molding!

In 1985 our conference constituency proposed a motion to allow unordained pastors in our conference to baptize and perform marriages. It was a long 13-hour discussion on the floor, but it did pass.

The first wedding I performed was for a beloved niece. My first baptism was a family of five. It was a sacred and holy time for all of us. My church family stood and applauded.

In 1995 our Conference Executive Committee, of which I was a member, struggled for weeks and months over the issue of women's ordination in our conference. It ended in a tie vote. I left the room and wept alone.

I was a delegate to the General Conference in Utrecht, where the motion for women's ordination was proposed. Ugly and demeaning speeches were made. At one time we women pastors were compared to the evil Babylonian priestesses! The value of women was questioned and argued, and the final vote was against the motion. I never want to be a part of that kind of meeting again.

After that, at my church there were committees, board meetings, and more discussions and studies. It culminated in a board meeting where the vote was taken to ordain me, and ultimately the date was set for December 2, 1995.

Today, both men and women in ministry in

the Southeastern California Conference receive the same ceremony and credential, which reads *Ordained-Commissioned*. The men in our conference voluntarily gave up their credentials to receive it. When any one of us moves from our local conference to another, the men remain ordained. The women are commissioned — **if** the other conference acknowledges it. When the names go from our Conference Executive Committee to the Union Committee for approval, the men are **voted** to be ordained and the women are **acknowledged** to be commissioned. Not even a vote! Women and men have the same education, the same experience, the same responsibilities, and the same call from God.

I wish someone would explain to me the **real** reason why the demeaning inequality exists.

Ten years ago, on December 2, 1995, I was ordained to the gospel ministry. How I wish my minister father could have put his hands on me in blessing! I was ordained by my senior pastor, Dan Smith, and my church family, not by the conference or union administrators. It was by my colleagues, families, children, people I had counseled, baptized, married and dedicated, those who sat with me in church, who had supported and helped me learn how to do ministry.

Dan Smith had tears in his voice at the ordination service. He had led the church family in the discussions, sermons, and committees. He had received intense pressure from both sides of the issue. He did it in spite of threats and demeaning challenges. He did it with the support of the church staff and university faculty, because he believed it was God's plan and was the fair and correct thing to do.

At that service I knelt before God and my church family, with my husband by my side, and felt the pressure of a thousand hands on me — hands that belonged to women and men, old and young, all colors, my teachers and pastors from our conference and others. I was blessed and affirmed for that which I had been for the past 15 years. It was a glorious and humbling time. God's divine presence was in the sanctuary that day — in the music, the flowers, and the banners; in the words both written and spoken, in the air and in our hearts. It was truly a divine worship service.

I wrote in my journal that night, "How can anything be so painful and yet so beautiful and divine?"

*Halcyon Westphal Wilson is an active retired pastor in the La Sierra University Church and is currently part of the administrative team of the Southeastern California Conference. She resides with her husband, Leland, in Riverside, California.*

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*Continued from page 7*

## A One-note Concerto

**AT:** Is it true that Mission Catalyst accepts tithe?

**Gladden:** Yes. Two points on that topic. First, it's common among Adventist supporting ministries to accept tithe; they just don't advertise it. Nor do we; however, when asked, we're up front about it. Second, we are using the tithe exactly as early Adventists intended: to start churches that preach the Adventist message.

**AT:** What is your biggest challenge? Money? The attitude of some administrators? PR?

**Gladden:** None of the above. Our biggest challenge is finding founding pastors. We've had calls from people all over asking for someone to move to their city and help them start an MC church. We're praying for God to raise up more audacious people with the character, call, and competency.

**AT:** Your slogan is "Same cart. New wheels." Why did you choose that?

**Gladden:** That was our first slogan. We wanted to emphasize that we're not giving up the message, we're just presenting it in a different way. We still use it on some of our brochures, but we also use "Moving at the Speed of God." We have no idea what that means or how to do it, but it reminds us that what we're doing is far too important to let structure slow us down.

**AT:** You have a Web site, right?

**Gladden:** Actually, we have three Web sites. The first is [www.samecartnewwheels.org](http://www.samecartnewwheels.org). It's designed for

people with an Adventist background. We've had a lot of interest from people outside of Adventism, so [www.missioncatalyst.org](http://www.missioncatalyst.org) is for them. Our third Web site is [www.launchticket.org](http://www.launchticket.org) and explains our pastors' coaching system.

**AT:** If someone wants to help, what can they do?

**Gladden:** They can be creative. We've had people donate office space, furniture, a Web conferencing service, and money. Someone sent money for a new laptop and a video projector to one of our church plants. A number of people are advising us on finance, marketing, and in other areas. If people want to help, they can get on the phone and tell some friends about Mission Catalyst. They can help us find some outrageously devoted leaders who may be called to lead a new church. We're glad to send brochures to share, and we'd be glad to get on the phone and talk about other ways to help push the kingdom ball down the field. And we really need prayer!

**AT:** Any advice for someone who cares about the lost but is frustrated?

**Gladden:** Do something. Don't just check out spiritually and emotionally. You can make a difference, so pray about how to proceed and go for it.

*Ron Gladden is Directional Leader for Mission Catalyst. He can be reached at 360-624-7271 or [rglad@missioncatalyst.org](mailto:rglad@missioncatalyst.org).*

*Continued from page 14*

## The Good News Tour 2006: A Review

"It was a wonderful experience! I am so glad this sanctuary tour came about and that it offered a fresh perspective. I brought my friend with me and she loved it, too. We were both so blessed. What a wonderful way to spend the Sabbath" (Jam Salon).

### Lasting Impression

A very large banner of Lars Justinen's painting of Jesus washing the feet of world leaders provided the stage backdrop. Many people commented that they frequently looked away from the speaker to contemplate the face of Jesus. Alden Thompson made the insightful observation that it was remarkable to witness a group of Adventists begging

for more talk about God, even though the Sabbath hours had long since passed.

### Audio CD and DVD Recordings

Audio CD and a DVD recordings will be available within a few weeks on [HeavenlySanctuary.com](http://HeavenlySanctuary.com). In addition, a free Webcast and MP3 download of the event will be available. Recordings may be ordered by e-mailing [office@heavenlysanctuary.com](mailto:office@heavenlysanctuary.com) or by calling 1-888-250-4612.

*Brad Cole is a neurologist and teaches the neuroscience course for the medical students at Loma Linda University.*

## Letters *Continued from page 5*

the movement marches on. Cannot the same be said of the Investigative Judgment and the 1844 hypothesis — that they served their purposes in their day, but that God has since revealed greater truth?

Such a reasonable explanation would leave the Three Angels' Messages' emphasis intact, belief in the mission of Ellen White unsullied, and present the original cornfield vision as a devout hypothesis that while "allowed by God", represents but the beginning of a continuously expanding understanding of how the judgment relates to the Old Testament sanctuary service.

The "1844 Message" has served well as a *catalyst* — a hypothesis that has led to deeper study of the Old Testament sanctuary service, and through it to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament gospels. But let us now acknowledge that it was only a step — and perhaps a stumbling one at that — toward a better, more nuanced truth.

Ronald Spencer  
Portland, Oregon

### 1844 MESSAGE A FLAT DISGRACE

I am a quasi-member of the Sunnyvale SDA church in California, and simply want to add my two cents worth to the topic at hand, if possible.

While I take offense at many of the "truths" the church had raised me to believe were dictated from the hand of God, the 1844 message is a flat-out disgrace to the sacrament of honest religious thinking, and in my opinion should be removed from the books in as rapid a fashion as possible. Not only is this teaching destined to alienate any deep searching person from the church (as this and others have done to me), it continues to show the world how little the SDA church has to do with open, investigative truth....

David Hartje  
Sunnyvale, California

### THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IN ADVENTISM

How dare you contradict the pioneers of this faith, this movement, and its prophet? Your problem is you do not wish to believe, you only seek contention. Quite frankly, you are a part of the biggest problem in Adventism. You foster a sense of disbelief in the prophet, E.G. White, which in essence is the equivalent of the children that mocked Elisha with the chant, "Go up, thou bald head..."

P.J. Thompson  
Cookeville Tennessee

» The "1844 Message" has served well as a *catalyst* — a hypothesis that has led to deeper study of the Old Testament sanctuary service, and through it to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament gospels. But let us now acknowledge that it was only a step — and perhaps a stumbling one at that — toward a better, more nuanced truth.

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By Edwin A. Schwisow

# Reaching Adventism's Future

The buildings in Salt Lake City's Temple Square are built to last — I noticed this immediately as I left the taxi and strode to the denomination's central library within the bowels of Mormonism's 15-story inner sanctum. This was *not* a faith that expected imminent destruction of the temporal realm....

I had come on a mission on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Confidently, respectfully, I announced to the librarian at the front desk that I was a student of media and had come to research the origins of the highly successful LDS media program. Where could I find historical records dating back at least to the late 1960s?

The librarian evaluated me cheerfully for a moment, noting my blue woolen suit, and directed me to a Microfiche viewer. There I quickly identified factual articles related to my research, among which the most incisive, revealing, and best documented came from a clearly Mormon-oriented, but decidedly non-denominational, press.

"Aha, this is great!" I thought. "I've found their *Mormonism Today*\* microfilm!" And for the next 90 minutes I speed-read about 20 different articles on Mormon media — analytical articles with vital accounts of conflicts within the Mormon intelligentsia not shared elsewhere.

Interestingly enough, when later in the day I spoke by appointment with Mormon media leaders themselves, I alluded to some of the information I'd gleaned. And what was my surprise when what had been a warm reception at the door suddenly turned cold as a north wind across the desert salt — "Who've you been talking to? Who told you that?"

Clearly I'd found information these men had no desire for me to know — in fact, probably had not read themselves. They were dedicated to the "amazing story" of how "divine inspiration" alone had prompted Mormonism's brilliant foray into media. But what their "free press" had documented was a protracted inner struggle, leading to several false starts, before they eventually stumbled down a pathway to success as a "church of family values."

I wondered then, as I wonder now: Is Adventist intelligentsia as woefully unknowledgeable (or at least unheeding) of the content of *Adventist Today* as these Mormons were of their own professional, independent publications — publications that tended to strip public relations myths down to their mannequin skin and portray the church's struggles and triumphs as the rational (and occasionally irrational) flesh-and-blood contests they really were?

## A Lot of Study

When I joined *Adventist Today*, I shared my conviction with my new colleagues that we could not allow this to happen in Adventism. The magazine's subscription

base could — and should — rise to a minimum of 5,000 and an ideal of 10,000, we determined together.

But above and beyond this concern, we discussed the need to reach the "future" of Adventism. And to that end we have set as our highest priority this year to expand and maintain

a Web site capable of attracting and maintaining the interest of Adventist young people throughout the world (we foresee the day when we can market electronic versions of the magazine, not only in English, but in Spanish and other prominent languages, as funds permit). The vision is alive and well; we will implement it as those who share our vision joint-venture with us financially.

*Adventist Today* at 14 is still a very young magazine, ripe for an adolescent growth spurt. We look to help move the magazine into this rapid-growth phase. Our quest is for the financial ability to underwrite more investigative journalism and reach more, and increasingly younger, Adventists.

Our church and many of its independent missionary outreaches, like those of the Mormons, have developed a marvelous ability to extract candy-coated myths from the very jaws of reality. Unless an independent voice offers a factual alternative, the perceptive young of the church will continue their quiet exodus, sure that the church has passed, for them, the credible point of no return.

But most will give Adventism that wistful second and desperate third chance, sometime in life, and *Adventist Today* wants to be there prominently for them.

We want to be there for them now — before they leave. But we must also be standing by prominently on the Web for those already outside, offering refreshing draughts of reality and truth that can set them free to re-graft into the very best in Adventist culture and experience.

*Edwin A. Schwisow serves as development director of Adventist Today.*

\* Actually titled "Dialogue"

