

The End of Church
as We Know It

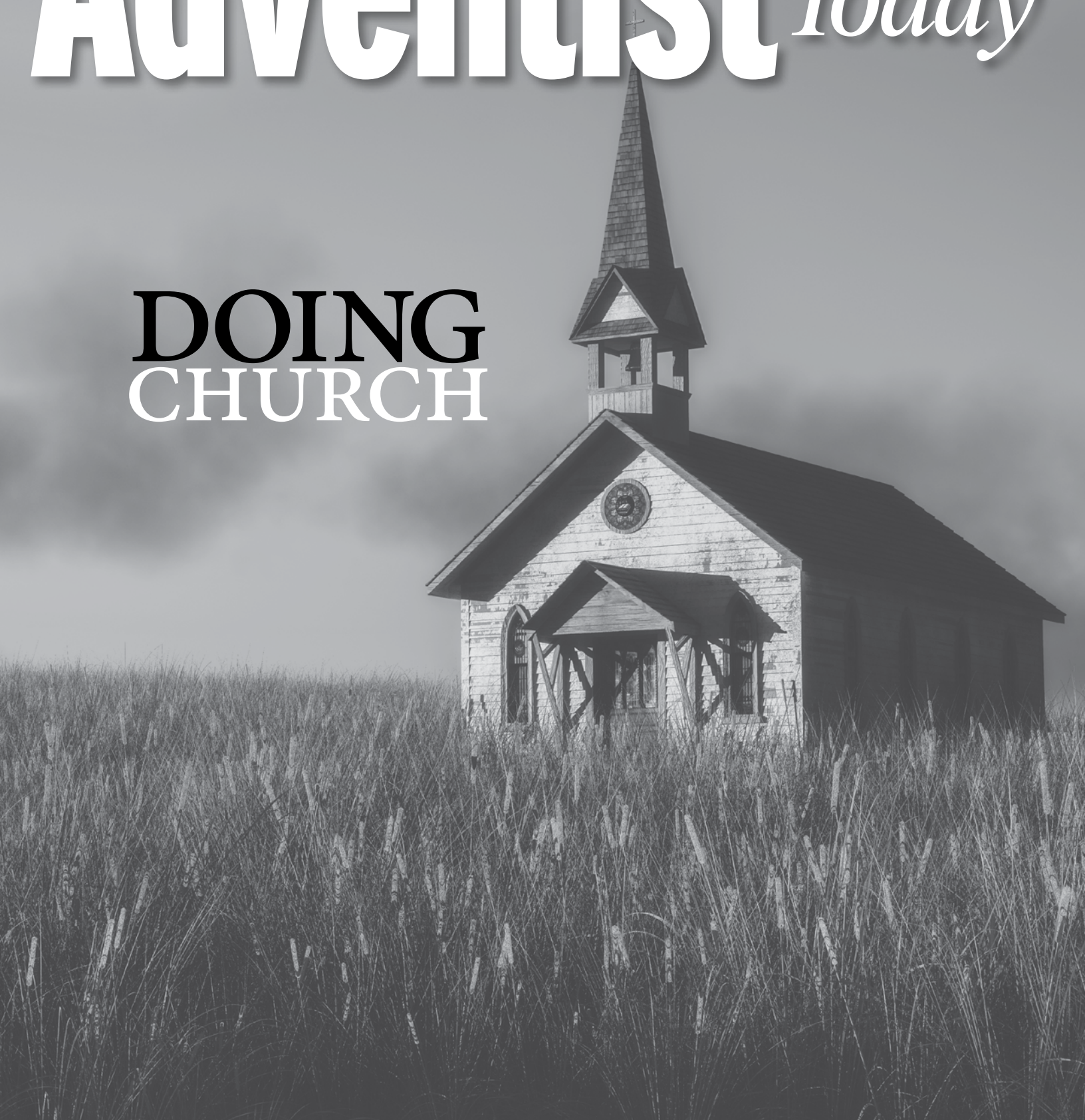
Underwhelmed: Where
Millennials Are Finding Meaning

In Defense of Culturally
Defined Congregations

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Adventist *Today*

DOING CHURCH



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Doing Church

By Monte Sahlin

One of the things that Jesus Christ changed two millennia ago is the basic vehicle for God's presence in human society. Before Christ, God worked largely through family, clan, and nation—in particular, the nation known as Israel, and once that nation ceased to exist, with its people, the Jews. The primary religious organization in the Old Testament is a national theocracy. Jesus turned his back on that institution and created “one new humanity” (Eph. 2:15, NIV), a “holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5, NIV), an open fellowship of “every nation, language, tribe and kind of person” (Rev. 14:6¹), in which there are to be no distinctions based on ethnicity, gender, or social standing (Gal. 3:27-28).

The first Christians were Jews who followed a pattern they were used to: the synagogue. At first this wasn't a purpose-built building, but a small group of at least twelve men who met to study the Scriptures. When Paul began the first mission beyond Judea, he followed a pattern described in Acts 18: he met with a synagogue every Sabbath and shared the gospel (verses 4-5) until he was kicked out, and then he started a similar group in the home of an interested Gentile (verse 7, NLT). His epistles include greetings to “the church in his house” and to “the church in her house” (Philemon 1).

The house church was the original form of the local Christian congregation. Over many generations it evolved into the cathedral, with large crowds and rich pageantry, including some of the classic music of Western civilization. About 500 years ago, the church found a form that is similar to what we are used to today, with hymn-singing and preaching as the central focus.

It is important for modern Christians to realize that what they think of today as church—beginning at 11 a.m. with a sermon, hymns, and passing the

offering plate—is not what the New Testament meant by the word “church.”

Please understand, I am not saying that the gathering described in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* is unbiblical. I am simply saying that if Paul joined us via time machine, he would not recognize what we do there each Sabbath. “Church” has evolved over the 2,000 years since Jesus' ascension.

The only passage in the New Testament that details how to “do church” is descriptive, not prescriptive: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, NIV). Here, the four definitive elements of being the church are: (1) studying the teachings of the apostles, the Scriptures; (2) being part of a fellowship; (3) eating meals together; and (4) praying. The verses that follow elaborate on this simple outline, describing a fellowship so strong that Christian groups had all material wealth in common, selling their possessions and distributing the money to those in need, and spending much time together” (verses 44-46). It describes church growth as the result of “having the goodwill of the whole community,” and because of that, “the Lord added to their number” (verse 47, NRSV). They sensed an active presence of the Holy Spirit, a tangible spirituality that was observable in the way people treated each other and also the surrounding nonbelievers.

One conclusion I have reached as a result of studying the church as it is described in the New Testament is that relationships are more important to Jesus than doctrines. The message that Christ wants to communicate to the world is embodied in our relationships with other believers, as well as with those beyond the circle of faith. The most

What you think of today as church—beginning at 11 a.m. on Sabbath morning with a sermon, hymns, and passing the offering plate—is not what the New Testament meant by the word “church.”



fundamental truth is that God loves humanity and seeks an end to the evil in the world. Unless this truth is clearly shown in both the individual lives and organizational outcomes of believers, all other truths are out of focus and impossible to understand clearly.

Today's Realities

Church is in trouble today—ours along with other Christian denominations. In what is often referred to as “the Western church”—North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand—more and more people have become “nones” or “dones.” They have no affiliation with any religion, or they are done with organized religion because their experience with it has been largely negative. Attendance is down in all denominations. New generations are much less likely to participate. This trend is stronger in the other nations than it is in the United States, but that is largely due to a culturally entrenched church in the American South and Midwest. The data in American cities of the East and West coasts show that the attitude there toward church is not much different from the other regions of the Western church.

And there is a dirty little secret. Most Christian congregations in America spend almost all of the money they receive on themselves: their buildings, their internal activities, and their children. Very little is spent on implementing the compassion of Christ in their surrounding neighborhood or advancing the mission of Jesus in the world. The Adventist denomination is a little better about this because of the way it centralizes giving and expenditures, but even among its ranks, there is growing pressure to spend more of the tithe locally.

In the Southern Hemisphere, particularly in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, Christian denominations are booming, baptizing large numbers of converts and building churches and institutions. The Adventist denomination is in the forefront of this trend in these regions. There is often, in these places, a critical attitude toward the Western church. Believers there accuse those in North America and Europe of being too secular. They believe their experience is more righteous than that of fellow believers in other parts of the world. They demand widespread adherence to traditional practices and beliefs, even those that are not clearly demanded in Scripture and may be barriers to achieving the mission of Christ in Western society.

People who claim to be followers of Jesus seem to find much to fight about when it comes to church. The style of music used in worship, the way people dress when they come to church, which translation of the Bible should be used in preaching or study, ways of interpreting Scripture, and many other issues can cause people to lose all sense of the kind of relationships that

are highlighted in the New Testament. It is like a family fighting over the specifics of wedding plans; something that should be joyful and loving becomes a knotted tangle of hurt feelings, harsh words, and pain. It's no wonder that many young adults are done with church.

Return of the House Church

Barna Research, an Evangelical market research firm that specializes in churches and faith-based organizations, estimates that 23 million American adults have “attended a worship service in someone’s home, known as a house church” within the recent month. When they change the wording of their survey question to include “some other place that is independent of a congregational-form church,” then the number rises to about 52 million American adults.

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More and more Americans, especially younger adults, prefer an informal church experience that does not involve owning real estate, hiring staff, electing a governing board, etc. This sometimes takes the form of three to a dozen couples getting together in someone’s living room with their children to study the Bible, pray, and sing. It almost always includes a meal together, as outlined in Acts 2. It may take the form of a gathering in the back room of a restaurant or in a meeting room at a community center. It is simple and focused on relationships. If an offering is taken, usually all of the money goes to a charity or a missionary.

A growing number of Adventist groups of this type exist. The denomination has developed an online resource center called Simple Church at Home² and a process by which these informal churches can be connected with the Adventist denomination. In a three-month period in the fall of 2016, more than 15,000 people visited this website, which offers training videos by people who have started house churches, study guides to be used in such groups, and other resources. The majority of the site’s visitors were under 35 years of age, and reports from the active groups indicate that half of the people who attend are not affiliated with any established church or denomination. Center director Milton Adams (whose article appears in this issue) estimates that for every group that has joined the network and is officially recognized as an Adventist house church, two more similar but independent house church groups are holding an Adventist identity.

The house church is back, and it may prove to be as important in advancing the Adventist movement in the secular era in the West as it has been in China. Of course, this is scary news for denominational employees and institutions. What happens to professional clergy? What happens to church schools? It is likely that established Adventist colleges, universities, and hospitals could prosper even if informal house churches replace traditional local churches. But conferences might be hard-hit and forced to lay off clergy and close schools.

Conference administrators know they have a problem. They worry when they visit their congregations and see a high percentage of aging members and relatively few younger adults with children. The social and demographic changes in the church may be, for all of us, a test of what is important: are we going to maintain established forms, or will we do what is necessary to adapt the mission of Christ to new generations?

Bottom Line

How do you envision church? How do your children feel about the church? What do you see as the future of the congregation in which you belong? This issue of *Adventist Today* explores the dimensions of the theology that defines church, as well as the perspectives of Adventists from various age groups, ethnicities, and genders. Think carefully as you make application to your own congregation or church organization. 

¹ The Scripture references in this article are the author’s own translations from the original languages. Instances where they match other English translations have been noted.

² See www.simplechurchathome.org

SOLA SCRIPTURA AND THE WAY WE DO THINGS NOW

By Richard W. Coffen

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
—John Donne*

Bernard of Chartres once observed: “We are like dwarfs [standing] on the shoulders of giants.” It’s a reminder that we’d be wise to acknowledge that we haven’t invented our customs—religious or otherwise. We’ve received them from multiple predecessors who preserved them and passed them along. Note the following samples of the rich heritage underlying how we Seventh-day Adventists “do church.”

Sabbath-keeping

Here are some of the things I remember about Sabbath from my New England upbringing:

No business transactions occurred. Driving, other than back and forth to church, was generally frowned upon. Stores were off-limits; shopping was prohibited. From sunset on Friday night to sundown on Saturday, we didn’t listen to the radio or watch television. Mother never cooked or baked food or did laundry during the sacred hours. On Friday during camp meeting, we traded coins and bills for “milk tickets” (another form of currency), which we could then exchange on Sabbath for milk at the Snack Shack.

Sabbath taboos weren’t invented by Seventh-day Adventists. More than a millennium prior, rabbis forbade such activities in a list of the 39 kinds of work to be shunned.¹ Although not explicitly sanctioned with a “Thus saith the LORD,” the 39 forbidden activities,² which they spelled out in much detail,³ constituted an attempt to reach a plain interpretation of the fourth commandment.⁴

Interestingly, one “Thus saith the LORD” command that *does* exist wasn’t mentioned in my youth: During the Sabbath, “stay where you are; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day” (Exodus 16:29, NET). The Hebrew verb (*yashab*) translated “stay” in the New English Translation means to sit down and remain seated. A plain reading of the passage is that God’s people were to keep the Sabbath by staying inside. According to Anchor Bible commentator William C. Propp, “The Sabbath is to be spent at home (*m. ‘Erubin*).”⁵

Many Seventh-day Adventists affirm the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, but it is more accurate to affirm *prima scriptura*. Either way, we are proud to say that we abide by the plain reading of the text. Yet we’ve embraced oral traditions of Judaism pertaining to Sabbath worship, and we don’t follow a blatantly explicit command of Scripture to remain home on Sabbath.

Church Buildings, Worship, and Clergy

The synagogue was originally a room within a house; only later did it refer to a separate building. The oldest synagogue buildings found so far are in Jericho and Egypt, dating between 70 and 50 BCE. Christianity followed a similar pattern: early followers of Jesus held services in homes. Only later did they build separate edifices. The oldest known church buildings are from the third century, in Jordan and Syria.

Sola scriptura says nothing about constructing edifices for use as synagogues and churches.

What about the sacred services, which tend to vary only slightly from one Adventist congregation to another? Early Christians, mostly Jewish, unsurprisingly patterned their services along the lines of those they’d become accustomed to. According to renowned Hebrew scholar Ron Moseley, “The structure of the local synagogues was carried over directly into the structure of the early Church.”⁶ Ernest De Witt Burton observed: “It is hardly too much to say that the synagogue was the cradle of Christianity.”⁷

The order of service in the ancient synagogue, as far as can be reconstructed, consisted of: (1) recitations of benedictions, (2) repeating the *Shema*—“The LORD our God, the LORD is one,”

(3) prayer, (4) multiple eulogies, (5) congregational responses, (6) benediction, (7) reading selections from the *Torah* (law), (8) reading portions from the *Nebi'im* (prophets), (9) exposition, and (10) benediction, during which worshipers cast their eyes downward.⁸ Sound generally familiar?

Officiants at the Sabbath service were laypersons, unpaid, some chosen from the congregation and others who had volunteered to help on a regular basis. James, Jesus' half-brother, was the *nasi* ("ruler") of the infant church in Jerusalem, according to Dr. Ron Moseley.⁹ Ancient inscriptions indicate that women also led out in the synagogue, even serving as *nasi*.¹⁰ The synagogue had positions of lay leadership that correspond to elder, deacon, treasurer, Sabbath school teacher, and others used by Adventists.

New Testament church leaders were generally unpaid. Paul worked as a tentmaker for income. Although Paul defended the practice of supporting pastors and evangelists (1 Cor. 9:14), a church hierarchy of paid professional leaders, such as both we and the Roman Catholics have, is a later development that was not practiced in the New Testament church.

Having salaried pastors in our denomination has generally proven to be a blessing. However, were we to enforce *sola scriptura* and seriously abide by the plain reading of the text, our church structure would look radically different. Judge William T. Hart, after receiving information from then General Conference President Neal C. Wilson, correctly ruled that our church is hierarchical¹¹ and does not follow a New Testament model.

Throughout the years, the Christian order of service has changed somewhat, but it remains an attenuated form of the ancient synagogue service. Similarly, our

hierarchy of paid clergy isn't rooted in *sola scriptura* or any plain reading of the text.

Altars and Pulpits

We've already established that churches (or meeting houses, as our friends the Friends call them) have not evolved from the Temple in Jerusalem, but from synagogues. Thus, unlike the Temple, our churches have no altar. The focal point in our churches is the pulpit, from which God's Word is explained, and the communion table, from which the Lord's Supper is served.

Roman Catholic churches, where priests regularly offer the sacrifice of the mass at the altar, correspond more closely to the Jewish Temple. When the priest exalts the host (bread and wine) and pronounces *hoc es enim Corpus meum* ("This is truly My body"), Roman Catholics believe that the wafer, transubstantiated into the very body of Christ and then housed inside either the "tabernacle" or the "monstrance," provides the "real presence" of the Lord.

Although we use different terminology, Adventists imply something similar when we say things such as: "The church is the house of God" or "We're entering the presence of our Lord" or "Jesus is here."

There's a story of a mother opening her eyes during the pastoral prayer and seeing her 4-year-old crawling under the pew in front of them. She grabbed him by his shirt, hauling him back.

"Ernie, what *are* you doing?" she asked.

"Looking for Jesus," Ernie replied.

The reality is that inside our edifices of worship, deity is not present in any way different from how God is present anywhere else in the world. Like the synagogues, our churches are houses for meeting and are not sacred shrines. The criticism Adventists have heard *ad nauseum*—that we should emulate our reverent Catholic brothers and sisters—has no basis. We may prefer order and quietness, but the services conducted in

our churches are social gatherings; they are not occasions of sacrifice during which we encounter the Numinous.

Also, despite common parlance, we don't have "altar calls" in our church meetings. Why? Simple: there's no altar! Quibbles I heard as a child over whether we should kneel facing the altar during prayer were irrational; there's no altar!

Furthermore, Adventists have no priests. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. Our clergy are, in essence, laypersons set aside for the special function of preaching and teaching. These officers are much more like biblical prophets, who spoke in God's behalf to the people, than they are like the scriptural priests, who approached God with sacrifices on behalf of the people. Thus, any qualifications and/or exclusions for the Jewish priesthood do *not* apply to Adventist pastors; they are not priests!

Some among us have made good biblical arguments that the ritual of ordination has no biblical basis but, instead, comes directly from the practice of the Roman Catholic Church. A plain reading of *sola scriptura* doesn't address the ordination of Adventist pastors. Laying on of hands is biblical. Anything else is not.

Weddings

Although I've read my Bible through several times, I've never found even a hint of a religious service for marriage. We read about multi-day wedding feasts, but Scripture knows nothing of a religious service in which rabbi, priest, or elder "ties the knot." Marriage formalities in Scripture appear to be secular.

How, then, did the church get involved? According to a history of marriage published by the Mennonites: "Beginning in the Middle Ages, churches kept records of who was married to whom. But Luther viewed marriage as a 'worldly matter,'

and so he turned over the recording of marriages to the state. Calvin believed that for a marriage to be valid it needed to be both recorded by the state and officiated by the church. The Catholic Church did not require marriages to be officiated by a priest until 1563, and the Anglican Church did not get around to making this requirement until 1753. So for the past five hundred years there have been, in the European tradition, three kinds of marriage: legal, religious, and social. But social marriage, strictly speaking, is the most biblical.”¹²

What about the white dress (said to symbolize purity) for the bride and the traditional black attire for the groom? Why do several bridesmaids and groomsmen usually participate? Suffice it to say that these details have more to do with custom (possibly rooted in old superstitions) than Scripture. The next time you attend a wedding, you might wipe your eyes not because you're emotionally moved by a lavishly expensive show of love (the average cost of marriage in America is \$26,645!¹³), but because the rituals have no basis in *sola scriptura* or a plain reading of the Word.

The Trinity

Surely the most important aspect of religious ceremony is the Divine Object of worship. By the time of Jesus, belief in the existence of one and only one God (monotheism) was the creed of Judaism and acknowledged twice daily with the repetition of Deuteronomy 6:4: “The LORD our God is one LORD” (KJV). Jesus of Nazareth, a faithful Jew, made this same foundational affirmation (Mark 12:29). Primitive Christians, themselves Jews, were strict monotheists.

Throughout the New Testament, the concept of one God, the Father, prevailed. However, as Christians—especially those from non-monotheistic backgrounds—reflected on the person and work of Jesus, they began, albeit tentatively, to ascribe

deity in one form or another to Jesus.

Paul's letter to the believers in Rome says that “by the resurrection from the dead,” Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God” (Rom. 1:4, KJV). However, we mustn't jump to a conclusion here: “Son of ...” was a Hebrew idiom. For instance, “son of Belial” described someone devilish (not in the playful sense). Throughout Scripture, sons of God were simply godly persons—beginning with Adam (Luke 3:38) and continuing to include all Christians (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14; Phil. 2:15; 1 John 3:1-2). Commonly, Paul differentiated between God, the Father, and Jesus, Lord and/or Messiah—as seen in the salutations and closings of his epistles. (A favorite proof text for the Trinity, 1 John 5:8, must never be cited: it's a scribal addition and not found in the oldest and best manuscripts.)

It wasn't until later that the Roman Catholic Church wrestled with Jesus' ontology. As centuries elapsed, the clerics struggled to maintain monotheism while adopting Trinitarianism. The church councils and the resulting creeds grew increasingly specific as to Jesus' divinity. The Old Roman Creed, date unknown, refers to “God the Father almighty; and ... Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord”—a rather unspecific assertion. The Apostles' Creed says that “Jesus Christ ... [is the Creator God's] only Son.” This wording, of course, echoes John 3:16 and hasn't moved away from that old Hebrew idiom “son of ...”

With the Nicene Creed (325 CE and revised 381 CE), church leaders declared clearly the divinity of Jesus—but only some three centuries *after* Jesus lived. The Nicene Creed referred to “one God ... one Lord Jesus Christ, ... [who is] God of God ... very God of very God. ... Of one substance with the Father.” It is evidence of how troublesome the Trinity was to early Christians that they continued this discussion for hundreds of years, in the Council of Ephesus (“He is One with his Father through the identity of essence”) and in the Chalcedonian Creed (“Both

natures concur in one ‘person’ and in one reality. They are not divided”).

The Athanasian Creed of the fifth or sixth century most clearly shows the clerics' struggle to maintain monotheism while affirming Trinitarianism and not falling into polytheism. It acknowledged “one God in Trinity. ... There is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. ... They are not three Gods, but one God. ... Every Person by Himself to be God. ... So are we forbidden ... to say, There be three Gods.” This is essentially our modern explanation that there's only one God, with simultaneously three “persons” in this “Godhead.”

These avowals, couched in the self-contradictory concept of three persons but one God, haven't been affirmed by all Christians. As early 250-336 CE, Arius, presbyter in Antioch and later Alexandria, refused to accept what was becoming the tradition of Roman Catholicism.

“Many of the earliest Seventh-day Adventists,” says *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, were Arian or Semi-Arian and denied Trinitarianism.¹⁴ They “did not always accept the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity.”¹⁵ Those opposing the doctrine of the Trinity included Joseph Bates, James S. White, Uriah Smith, Roswell F. Cottrell, J. N. Andrews, J. N. Loughborough, Judson S. Washburn, and Charles S. Longacre.¹⁶ James White, as editor of the *Review and Herald*, on numerous occasions aimed his theological fire at the doctrine of the Trinity.

As late as the mid-20th century, the official Seventh-day Adventist *Church Hymnal* changed the wording of certain classic hymns so that they wouldn't reflect Trinitarianism. The hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” originally lauded “God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” However, in the 1941 hymnal these words were replaced with “God over all who rules eternally!” and “Perfect in power, in love and purity.”

The 1985 *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* restored the original Trinitarian words of “Holy, Holy, Holy” and even added an entire section labeled “Trinity” (numbers 70-73). The relatively recent resurgences of Arianism and Semi-Arianism among pockets of Adventists shouldn’t be surprising.

Some attempt to defend Trinitarianism with Old Testament passages that they allege support the concept of a triune deity. It’s difficult enough to find straightforward verses in the New Testament that support Trinitarianism—but from the Old Testament, the scriptures of Judaism, which is arguably the oldest monotheistic religion in the world?¹⁷ Thoughtful Jewish exegetes for thousands of years have not found conclusive evidence for anything other than monotheism throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

Once, during a Sabbath school class, I heard read aloud 22 Old Testament texts allegedly supporting the concept that the Holy Spirit is from God and by logical extension is a member—the third—of the Godhead. (For the Spirit identified as *holy*, see Ps. 51:11 and Isa. 63:10-11.) Ignored, however, were passages about the *evil* spirit from YHWH, who caused King Saul’s mental illness (1 Sam. 16:14-16, 23, NIV; 18:10, NIV; 19:9, NIV) and the *lying* spirit from YHWH, who inspired King Ahab’s 400 prophets to proclaim a falsehood (1 Kings 22:6, 22-23, NKJV; 2 Chron. 18:21-22, NKJV). Inasmuch as these are all affirmed to be spirits of God, it could as easily be misinterpreted to mean that we have in the Hebrew Scriptures a “trinity” consisting of three distinct Spirits from YHWH: a *holy* Spirit, a *malevolent* Spirit, and a *prevaricating* Spirit.

When taking classes in systematic theology at both Atlantic Union College and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, I heard Trinitarianism defended—proficiently, I might add—and described with terminology taken directly from the Catholic creeds! *Sola scriptura*?

Not when it comes to our Adventist Trinitarian beliefs!

I’m not saying that the doctrine of the Trinity, though a relative latecomer among Christians, is theologically invalid. I’m merely pointing out that mainstream modern Adventism inherited its doctrine of the Trinity from its perennial boogeyman: the Roman Catholic Church. And from where did our Arian Adventist pioneers get *their* theology? From Arius, the Roman Catholic presbyter and priest in Alexandria, Egypt.

We Trinitarians should understand that less-than-honest exegesis doesn’t honor the God we love. We can continue to believe in the doctrine of the Trinity while admitting that the biblical evidence may be rather unconvincing and that our best exposition of the dogma comes not from *sola scriptura* or the plain reading of the text, but from the creeds formulated by the early leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Holy Scriptures

Before concluding this discussion, we should ask these two questions: What is the basis of our belief system? And how do we have this ancient documentation at our fingertips today?

The ideal response to the first query is, of course, the Bible. Adventists aver the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone. We’ve already seen how problematic this catchphrase can be for us. We like to say that our dogmatics (28 fundamental beliefs) and our praxis are based on the plain reading of the Judeo-Christian Bible—which I think I’ve proven is not true for every belief and custom that we hold dear.

The second question may be more difficult. Probably every Adventist home contains several versions of the Bible, and we rarely ask how it is that these spiritual treasures are available to us. The fact is that we have no “autographs”—ancient manuscripts written in Jeremiah’s or Baruch’s own hand. There are no extant

papyri scrawled with Paul’s or Matthew’s handwriting. All extant Hebrew and Greek documents are copies of copies of copies that are decades, if not centuries, younger than Isaiah or Peter.

That’s not to say our manuscripts aren’t old. The Dead Sea Scroll identified as 1QIsa (or the Great Isaiah Scroll, the only Old Testament book preserved in its entirety) dates to between 335 BCE and 107 BCE.¹⁸ But this is between 600 and 400 years *after* Isaiah’s ministry.¹⁹ For the New Testament, the oldest and most complete manuscripts are the Codex Vaticanus (300-325 CE), Codex Sinaiticus (325-336 CE), and Codex Alexandrinus (373-400+ CE), all dated long after the ministries of their authors.

How did we get these “late” but nonetheless old manuscripts and others like them? Devout Jews and pious Catholic monks painstakingly hand-copied these precious documents. Yes, there’s that same old “foe”! Not only did they copy them, but to a large extent the books that have been assembled into our modern Bible were selected by Roman Catholic scholars, over a millennium before the Reformation, who accepted some books and rejected others. We Adventists (as are all other Christians) are beholden to Roman Catholics for the Bibles we take to Sabbath school and church each week.

Tradition

Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, sings about “Tradition, tradition!” Tradition can be a marvelous and reassuring thing, but it has its foibles. As a child, I often heard eruptions against traditions—those of the Jews and, worse yet, of the Church Fathers and Catholicism. However, notwithstanding our affirmations of *sola scriptura* and a plain reading of Scripture, there’s much in our beliefs and practices that’s built upon these very traditions.

The traditions aren’t necessarily anti-Scripture. But to act as though everything

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UNDERWHELMED

Why Millennials Are Looking for Meaning Elsewhere

BY REBECCA MURDOCK

AS SOMEONE WHO CONSIDERS THE ADVENTIST CHURCH MY HOME and has actually had a fairly good experience within it, I'm often caught in conversations with friends who have left the church. They tell me their reasons for leaving and then patiently listen as I try to persuade them that changes can be made within our denomination. They usually smile at my naïve optimism and say, "Well, I support you and what you're doing, but I can't wait around until that day comes—if it comes."

What I find interesting is that most of the reasons my friends give for leaving Adventism have nothing to do with better programming or being able to wear jeans to church or having a coffee bar or snacks during Sabbath school. Instead, they express deep-seated convictions about the world that they don't feel are welcome within the church. I can't shake the notion that a philosophical shift is happening right under our noses within the denomination and that it deserves more attention. As my grandmother used to say, where there's smoke, there's fire.

The Flight of the Millennials

The current exodus of Millennials from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, especially after the General Conference Session of July 2015, has caused some denominational leaders to conclude that culture is taking over and that the culture war must therefore be fought with even more fervor. Others assume that those who left

were never securely attached, while still others dismiss the exodus as a generational phase undeserving of much reflection.

However, research shows that the broader trend of quitting church is more than simply a generational phase. In a 2015 study conducted by the Pew Research Center on changes in our American religious landscape, Pew concluded: "Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20 percent in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13 percent in the late 1970s). Young adults today also attend religious services less often than older Americans. And compared with their elders today, fewer young people say that religion is very important in their lives."

For those sick of hearing about Millennials' needs and wants, I'd like to emphasize that I strongly believe this isn't about wooing back a fickle group of kids, but about pivotal philosophical shifts that are reflected within the Millennial generation. While not all people born after 1982 think the same way, surveys reveal common themes regarding what Millennials seem to be missing from current organized religious practices.

What's Missing?

Diversity in Method: Most Millennials are weary of institutions that claim to have a monopoly on the "right" way of doing things.

Examples include: the institution of marriage (as parents tout its benefits while constantly fighting or splitting up), the institution of politics (as—well, no comment needed), and the institution of church (as leaders who claim to speak in the name of God seem to exploit their ecclesiastical authority to manipulate others).

Trust in institutions, especially those with strong propositional claims, has become rare among young adults. The idea that one group of people, in such a globalized era, would have the only truth—that there is one right way to access it, or that I must believe one interpretation of that truth—sounds to a Millennial like a pretty good setup for intellectual manipulation.

Diversity in Leadership and Membership: To Millennials, the idea that one type of person is more fit to engage in spiritual leadership than another is a hard pill to swallow. The YouTube generation is accustomed to encountering amazing talent in all shapes and sizes, so to restrict spiritual talent or capability to one channel—i.e., heterosexual men of a certain age, race, and marital or educational status—imposes a strict limit on a congregation's exposure to truth. A multifaceted understanding of truth requires a multifaceted leadership, presentation, and membership.

Lack of Challenging Dialogue: While many may think that keeping young adults in the church means dumbing down theological discussions, the opposite is probably true. We watch informational documentaries on Netflix for fun, for goodness' sake! Most Millennials are interested in discussions on theology, history, ethics, and how to engage in better spiritual practices, as long as they don't focus exclusively on arguments from the 1860s or on working toward pietism instead of relational spirituality and everyday problem-solving. If the Bible offers ways to confront and understand issues such as racism, poverty, group dynamics, leadership methods, church structure, sexuality, relationships, vocation, or life meaning, let's talk about them.

Involvement in Social Justice: This is a tricky area, as churches search for the line between partisan preaching from the pulpit and social engagement based on biblical values. Churches have been told that Adventists shouldn't engage in social issues or rock the boat. The dictum that "Adventists don't protest" leads movers and shakers to conclude that their vision, passions, and convictions about ideal community living don't belong in the church context. Once God and spirituality are divorced from our everyday political, social, and relational contexts, religion becomes an insipid practice, seemingly without much purpose or relevance.

Working in the Church

In the Adventist Theological Seminary, where I've been studying for a year and a half, I've heard many of my peers express doubts about being pastors—even as they're training in religious

studies. Between dropped conference sponsorships, new jobs as entrepreneurs or social workers, and the option to shift to chaplaincy, the job of parish pastor is becoming less and less attractive to the Millennial generation.

Traditionally the pastor has been expected to be a jack of all trades: an inspired orator, as well as the resident expert on spiritual practices, relationships, counseling, teaching methods, public relations, conflict resolution, marketing, fundraising, school chaplaincy, community organizing, the laws of mandated reporting, and Robert's Rules of Order, to name a few. There's no way one human being can fill that bill, which is often too much even for two or three individuals working together on a pastoral staff. Pastors face a huge risk of being criticized for not fulfilling the congregation's needs, while congregations face the risk of placing an underperforming pastor on a pedestal simply because he has charisma.

All of this is to say that the job of the pastor seems terribly unbalanced, and Millennials have started to steer away from it.

Back to the Basics

I tend to watch where my peers go after they have departed from the church—what they head *toward*. Their destinations fascinate me. They leave to join coffee-shop communities that display their art or handiwork or that foster other talents, such as poetry and music. They leave to give TED Talks, where people of all walks of life get on stage and spend 18 minutes sharing knowledge from their life experiences. They seek experts in different fields or spiritual gurus who teach yoga and mindfulness techniques. They go to bars, where they can have candid conversations about their lives. And many end up working in nonprofit corporations that support their desire to effect tangible, positive change in the world.

These are the people who are leaving our churches. They are looking for ways to piece together "church" from all of these other, different areas of their lives.

My belief is that if the church is truly to be the body of Christ, with all of the gifts used for our common good as a church; if we believe in sacred Scriptures written by many voices that now guide us as one; if we believe that Christ died for all of us in the condition we were in and now accepts us in partnership to bring his kingdom to Earth as it is in heaven; and if we believe that pastors can do better *facilitating* all of the parts of the church body toward blessing those in our culture rather than doing it all themselves, then the church is the perfect place for a Millennial generation hoping to make significant changes in the world.

But until that message can be communicated to the Millennials exiting the Seventh-day Adventist church, I believe that we, within the church, still have a lot of work to do. 🛠️

THE END OF CHURCH AS WE KNOW IT

BY PETER ROENNfeldt

GLOBALLY, RELIGION MIGHT BE ON THE rise.¹ But that's not the experience of most local churches in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

One European union conference has coded all of the churches in its territory according to their health. Healthy and viable is green, at-risk is orange, and red means in danger of being closed and the building sold. Code orange churches can't function unless a visiting preacher is present, and in code red churches, the few aged members can't pay the utility or insurance bills and don't have the personnel to lead a worship service. Only 25 percent of the churches are assessed as healthy, 25 percent are code orange, and 50 percent are code red—meaning that half of the Adventist churches in that union are in danger of being closed and sold.

And they're not alone. The most recent 2016 census of the Australian Union Conference showed that in one local conference, just 33 percent of their

baptized members were in church when the census was taken—a statistic that wouldn't surprise most pastors.

In my ministry I sometimes speak to large regional gatherings, but I also visit local churches. Most are struggling to survive. When I go to our churches, I make it a practice to arrive before Sabbath School starts. Often there are few present—maybe six, but fewer than a dozen—seated in pews meant to hold 120. It is discouraging to them, of course, and I'll often hear Matthew 18:20 quoted apologetically: "Where two or three have come together in my name, I am there among them" (GW). I always explain that there is no need to apologize for small numbers. When Jesus spoke these words, he was not apologizing. For him, the two or three gathered in his name are the church.

Cultural Complexity

Some congregations have welcomed migrant Adventists (and, in a few cases,

asylum seekers), and this is positive. I rejoice to see multicultural churches, though in many cases few are present from the majority population of the community.

Many that claim to be multicultural congregations are not; instead, a single dominant ethnicity expects the others to adapt to their form of worship, and sometimes those "others" drift away. It doesn't mean that those who leave have lost faith in God, but rather that attending church seems irrelevant for them. Those who can't fit in may choose a churchless faith.

Our communities are complex. Holding together a disparate group of members is a challenge, and introducing cultural diversity to the mix exacerbates it. Add to this the brokenness of our communities—unemployment, single-parent families, homelessness, the impact of drug and alcohol abuse (yes, even within Christian families)—and it's no wonder pastors despair.

Members must return tithe for pastors to be paid, but that's not working as well as it used to, either. Once upon a time, 12 to 15 new families meant, for the conference treasurer, the tithe needed to cover the costs of a pastor. However, baptizing more members today rarely addresses the tithe imbalance—and fewer congregations are successful in baptizing people at all. How often does a pastor see a new family (father, mother, with three or four children) join the congregation? And, with the desperate plight of many of the lonely individuals who come to the church door seeking support—when and if they do become members—how many do you need to cover the conference expenses for a pastor? Would it be 40, 50, or 100? Those are numbers that few small churches can imagine.

The "Me" Church

This a traumatic time for Christian

churches. The old ways no longer seem to reach people. Church as it evolved through the centuries no longer relates, and in some cases it no longer represents the message of Jesus. The pitch for relevance in the 1980s and 1990s, to engage the “me” generation coming out of the ’70s, is proving fatal in the longer term. This is true for all churches, whether mega or small—even for our own church, with an end-time message that people need.

Our growth has been predicated on attracting people from a large fishing pool of believers. But that pond has shrunk. There are fewer individuals in other churches for Adventists to proselytize—even if our churches offer more programs, more biblical teaching, more caring members, and more truth.

Because much of our witness has been remote, such as putting leaflets or books in letter boxes or presenting our message on radio or television, we might not be aware that most of our neighbors just don’t care. Few give church or Jesus a second thought. They have moved on.

Even believers tend to think of church as no longer relevant. Many Christians have accepted the radical individualism of this post-Christian season and pursued other interests. “A meaningless routine,” we hear. “It makes no difference to my life.” “I get more out of walking the beach or reading a good book.” “Why not stay home—or meet friends at a café?” The desire for community is strong, but when tempered by the greater desire for individual autonomy, church no longer seems a good option.²

It might be too dramatic to claim that Adventism is disappearing from the West, but it is in danger.

The Disappearing Church

We are seeing “a new mode of disengaged faith,” writes Mark Sayers, author of

Disappearing Church.³ Even where churches appear healthy, they are characterized by “sporadic engagement, passivity, commitment phobia, and a consumerist framework.”⁴

Believers are transitioning away from an active faith, and congregations are declining. When I entered ministry some decades ago, pastors and elders knew that if a person wasn’t in church on Sabbath, there was a hospital visit to make or a funeral to conduct. Those were the days when regular attendance meant weekly attendance. Today, it might mean monthly or even less often.

Some older members prefer watching a sermon on Hope Channel or the Three Angels Broadcasting Network. Staying at home for church means there’s no need to sort out that decades-long conflict with another member, no pressure to engage with tangled relationships, no expectation of involvement. Plus, it’s cheaper: no offering plate or tithe envelope comes around. Simply grab a hot drink, sit in a comfortable chair in front of the big screen, and enjoy Pastor Dwight.

With due respect to my colleague Dwight Nelson, I can’t think of anything more boring than reducing church to sitting in front of a screen. His preaching is much better than many a local elder, and probably even better than the district pastor’s; undoubtedly, the music is superior to the rendition of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” by a third-grade piano student—or no music at all. But is that church?

What is church?

The Missional Church

Church as we do it is not what the early apostles did. A few years ago, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch stirred up the evangelical world when they wrote *The Shaping of Things to Come*.⁵ They faced the realities

of what is happening and looked ahead. What might church look like? What are the alternatives to what we are now doing? Both authors have told me they did not expect the reaction they got. Not only did the book take off in sales, but churches and friends were divided—some aggressively so.

Frost and Hirsch were not looking at church in its political or denominational manifestation, but as the community in which we live and do church week by week. Their model for the future is the missional church. This, by the way, doesn’t refer to a congregation

When I go to our churches, I make it a practice to arrive before Sabbath School starts. Often there are few present—maybe six, but fewer than a dozen—seated in pews meant to hold 120.

supporting overseas missions, though a missional church will often adopt such a ministry. Rather, it refers to a group that is proactive in adapting to the culture of its own community, just as missionaries do when they share the gospel in foreign lands. This means learning the language, understanding the literature and music, experiencing others’ lives and community structures.

Frost and Hirsch identify three foundational principles⁶ for missional church:

1. *Incarnational rather than attractional in ecclesiology*. The focus is not on creating

“sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel.” Rather, the church “disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of a society in order to be Christ to those who don’t yet know him.”

2. *Messianic, not dualistic, in spirituality.* “Instead of seeing the world as divided between the sacred (religious) and profane (irreligious),” missional church “sees the world and God’s place in it as more ... integrated.”

Even believers tend to think of church as no longer relevant. Many Christians have accepted the radical individualism of this post-Christian season and pursued other interests.

3. *Apostolic rather than hierarchical in leadership.* Pyramidal authoritarian hierarchies don’t work in local churches (or, for that matter, in denominations). Missional churches cultivate “biblical, flat-leadership,” which “unleashes the gifts of evangelism, apostleship, and prophecy, as well as the currently popular pastoral and teaching gifts.”

Alternative Church

Within these biblical principles are innumerable ways to imagine and implement community life in Christ. I am in the midst of writing on the life of the early church, using the working title *Resilient Disciples*. I observe that all New Testament churches were:

- *Home-based.* Of course, the issue is not the place but that these were local, relational communities of people walking together on the paths of life.

- *Small and practical.* Beyond 20 to 25 people, the group had to split up because they could no longer fit inside the room. The small size kept all involved.

- *Inclusive and participatory.* The gospel eradicated discrimination on the basis of nationalism, gender, or social status, and there were no spectators.

- *Affirming.* The participation of women was natural. They were gifted and involved in all aspects of church life. Their leadership reflected the dignity Jesus gave them.

- *Sustainable.* No money was contributed to sustain an institutional system. As one body, they gave to help the poor and far-off believers in need. Churches provided some support for gospel workers, but they did not spend money on facilities, parking lots, or promotion, nor were they dependent upon allocations from a conference office.

- *One body.* There was not a Gentile church and a Jewish church. All groups were, together, the body of Christ.

- *Connected.* Through elders or overseers in each city, all fellowships were connected—but not institutionally, as we are today. The gospel and the Spirit bound them.

- *Intimate.* Believers didn’t drive away to attend church. Church met on the paths of daily life, where families and neighbors lived. It was where they shared their homes, meals, and families.

- *Mission hubs.* Church events weren’t planned by the leaders in Jerusalem. Each church took responsibility to share the gospel in their town, city, region, or province.

- *Reproducible.* Multiple faith communities or churches, built on expanding relationships, existed in each town. This simple type of church is easily reproducible.

- *Responsive.* They shaped their communities through conversation, but they also allowed the experiences, hurts, and joys of their communities to shape them.

- *Cruciform.* Believers modeled their fellowship on the principle that others are of greater value than themselves, and they would go to the cross for them.

Traditional Churches Won’t Disappear

Successful traditional congregations will continue to thrive. But this isn’t about traditional versus contemporary or large versus small. Traditional churches and alternative churches can be symbiotic.

Simple missional fellowships can be fostered under the umbrella of existing congregations, affording legal protection. In a church system with employed pastors, missional churches can share in tithe contributions to support the larger work. Small missional fellowships could build the work in cities where property prices are prohibitive, where even large church buildings are lost amidst corporate towers and housing blocks. They’re also a marvelous way to connect with others in environments where people are isolated.

Applying the principles of simple missional fellowships results in variety and diversity. Celebrate this! Learn to expect it! A mix is needed for God’s mission. If you can visit another Adventist church while on vacation and find it just like home, it probably means that one or both churches have not connected with their communities! 🏠

¹ Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief* (Sydney, Australia: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 3; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back* (Penguin, 2009).

² *ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

³ Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016).

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp. 6-12. See also *Mission Shift: Multiplying Disciples in Your Community* (Warburton, Australia: Signs Publishing, 2017) by Adventist author Kayle B. de Waal of Avondale College. In it, de Waal challenges the now-meaningless ruts and routines that church has fallen into.

⁶ See Frost and Hirsch, p. 12, for the quotations in these three points.

THE CASE *for* HOUSE CHURCHES

By W. Milton Adams



EVERY MENTION OF “CHURCH” YOU’LL ENCOUNTER TODAY WILL likely bring to mind a familiar picture. Without having to think much about it, you’ll assume a relatively stable group composed of people who are officially recognized as members and meet at least weekly in a purpose-built building with forward-facing pews, high ceilings, a built-in baptistry, and possibly a steeple. The group includes a pastor and a set of lay leaders, led by a church board, plus a settled core of members to which they hope to add others.

Most parts of this picture aren’t described in the Bible,¹ yet it’s what most of us think of as “church.” For nearly a decade, I’ve been exploring another biblical model for the church whose time may have returned: the house church, or home church. I have come to believe that home churches are missionally effective in their ability to connect with the “nones and dones.”² In addition, they are financially sustainable and easily reproducible.

I am not suggesting that home churches should replace other church-planting models or that they’re for everyone. Dan Jackson, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, recently told me, “We need as many different kinds of church plants as possible.” Yet it’s important that in the process of assessing church planting models, we compare their effectiveness in today’s modern mission field.

#1 – Home churches naturally fit the landscape of today’s Western and urban mission fields.

Homeschooling is on the rise. Home births and home remedies are popular. Home preparedness is being championed by a wide range of people (“preppers”) who are creating both natural and manmade contingencies.

These trends suggest that people are searching for ways of becoming less dependent upon formal systems, whether secular or religious.

Josh Packard, in his book *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE With Church But Not Their Faith*, says: “The two most important macro-level trends are undoubtedly the loss of trust in social institutions in general and religious leaders in particular and the perception that religious institutions are no longer tied into the daily life of individuals as intimately as they once were. In other words, they’re increasingly considered irrelevant.”³

Trust in leaders is at an all-time low.⁴ People are not so much asking “*What* is true?” as “*Who* is true?”—and when they find trustworthy people, they are naturally open to the truths they live. This approach to evangelism is not so much about preaching the truth as it about *living* the truth and, when necessary, using words.

As people become less trusting of secular and religious systems, they turn to more informal and grassroots ways of adding spiritual meaning and value to their lives. Ten years ago Adventist missiologist Jon Dybdahl, Ph.D., articulated three possible future Adventist identities. The second best represents today’s cultural trends: “Adventism as a movement that is more than a denomination.”⁵ As uncomfortable as we might be with the idea of people accepting an end-time message without accepting denominational affiliation, this will likely become the norm. Most of us follow a similar practice in other areas of our lives when it comes to brand loyalty—or rather, the lack thereof.

Home churches are one of the best missional responses to this new normal.

#2 – Home churches bypass consumerism.

“We’ve created a church consumer culture,” says Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College.⁶ When people walk into a public venue—a laundromat, dental office, a store, or football stadium—they expect to be served or entertained in some way. And the same is true of churches.

But when people are invited to a home, it is for friendship. In a home setting, life is shared together. It is real (not performed); messy (not rehearsed); casual (not dressed up); participatory (not scripted). Life becomes a dialogue while journeying together, not (like a formal church service) a monologue that happens in 30 to 60 minutes.

Packard says: “The structures that dominate most churches work very well for the large segment of the congregation that’s not particularly involved, or interested in being involved. But these same structures are not only ineffective for the most active members, they are actually driving them away.”⁷

Home churches are highly relational. They foster low anonymity, high accountability, and high participation—notable strengths from a missional and holistic discipleship perspective, and helpful to distrustful seekers who want to develop faith and find God.

#3 - Home churches are sustainable.

The economic feasibility of the traditional church is a cause for major concern. Says the Barna Group: “It’s likely to get tough in the next 10 years, and we have a God-given responsibility to think and plan for the lean years ahead. . . . There is no time like the present—when things are as good as they are likely to get—to explore the current and future efficacy of funding models for church and church planters.”

What would a more sustainable model of the church look like? Home churches are one possibility, as long as we understand that they cannot be pressed or forced into conventional church models.

As I have shared the concept of home-church planting with hundreds of conference leaders, many have told me that if we are serious about reaching the cities, our current church model will not work. We cannot afford to buy urban real estate, nor can we hire enough pastors, Bible workers, or stipend lay pastors to do the work. This is not unique to our denomination. “According to a 2007 study by the Center for Missional Research of 12 denominations and church planting networks, one-third of church plants do not survive past four years,” says Barna.⁸

In 2001, missionary statistician David Barrett wrote: “The total cost of Christian outreach worldwide averages \$330,000 for each newly baptized person. The cost per baptism in the United States tops \$1.5 million.”⁹

House churches might offer a more cost-effective and sustainable model of church planting.

#4 - Home churches help believers do ministry.

“But pastor! We pay our tithe so that *you* can visit people, give Bible studies, prepare sermons, and grow our church,” says Joe Parishioner. And in a sense, he’s right. Sit in on a pastoral search

committee, and you’ll realize that hiring a pastor gives people an excuse for not doing ministry themselves.

Ellen White forewarned of the consequence of placing settled pastors over congregations, namely that it would create “spiritual weaklings.”¹⁰ In spite of her warning, Seventh-day Adventists embraced this custom after her death in 1915—a practice H.M.S. Richards, Sr., would lament at his first lectureship on preaching in 1957, long after it had become entrenched.¹¹

In a house church, there is no leader to blame: no pastor, no elder, no community services leader, no church board, and no Personal Ministries director. Neither can anyone blame the local conference for not providing a better pastor. Excuses gone! Those who might be tempted to blame someone for a stagnant or declining church are compelled to look in the mirror and then go to their knees. While laywomen are the backbone of most traditional churches, this kind of “do-or-die” front-line action is attractive for men who are looking for true spiritual risk.

#5 - Home churches provide an opportunity to re-establish the biblical role of a pastor.

At the age of 19, my great-great-grandfather wanted to become a pastor. He—and eventually his four brothers—talked with the Iowa Conference president. All were given the same counsel: “Son, you spend two years raising up churches and then come tell us what happened.” This meant no salary, no mileage reimbursement, no per diem, no high-cost-of-living adjustments, no travel budget, and no seminary training. The proof of the calling was in the evidence of new congregations.

You may wonder how we got from that to where we are today. The dissertation of veteran Adventist soul-winner Russell Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church*,¹² is a must-read for those who want to dig deeper into this eye-opening history.

House churches provide a way back to a more biblical role for pastors—one that reflects the early Christian church. In the absence of settled district pastors, itinerant pastors met the need by equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12, NKJV). This made possible the reproducibility that moved a movement. And it still can.

#6 - Home churches provide a new opportunity for people disillusioned with the traditional church.

In *Church Refugees*, Packard says that “the dechurched represent thirty-three percent of the American population” and that “people characterized as dechurched are the fastest growing segment of the population.”¹³

Thirty-three percent translates into over 100 million Americans who have walked away from conventional churches. This is a religious shift of epidemic proportions. Packard writes: “Our interviews indicate that the dechurched are among the most dedicated people in any congregation. They often work themselves into positions of leadership in an attempt to fix the things about the church that dissatisfy them before ultimately deciding their energies could be better spent elsewhere.”¹⁴

In *The Great Controversy*, Ellen White writes: “Notwithstanding the widespread declension of faith and piety, there are true followers of Christ in these [popular] churches. Before the final visitation of God’s judgments upon the earth there will be among the people of the Lord such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times. The Spirit and power of God will be poured out upon His children. *At that time many will separate themselves from those churches in which the love of this world has supplanted love for God and His word.* Many, both of ministers and people, *will gladly accept those great truths* which God has caused to be proclaimed at this time to prepare a people for the Lord’s second coming” (emphasis mine).¹⁵

Did White foresee the group that modern researchers are calling the “dones,” who have quit church but not their faith? What if 100 million Americans—and their cultural counterparts around the world—are now outside of church walls, seeking the Bible truths that Seventh-day Adventists have been given by God in trust? And what if, beyond them, stand unnumbered “nones”?

These, says Packard, might find a home in an alternative church. “The dechurched tend to construct church alternatives through political and civic engagements, small groups or house churches, or informal but spiritually meaningful gatherings.”¹⁶ “They’ve opted for relationship over structure, doing over dogma, and creating *with* rather than creating *for*.”¹⁷

Here to Stay

House churches, small groups, and spiritually meaningful gatherings are here to stay. They may become the alternative of choice¹⁸ for those who are done with traditional church.

Some will insist that we need to fill up existing congregations before actively promoting house churches. Others suggest that home churches are too risky. Some denominational leaders fear losing control if church becomes too local and independent.

Yet in my conversations with church leaders around the world, more and more are taking an honest look at the cultural and urban trends and finding a place in their mission strategy

for house churches. The statistics I have used here have come from North America, but current technology is reproducing the same circumstances around the globe, especially in urban areas, making these conclusions widely applicable to the developing global culture.

Home churches are a very, very old “new” idea,¹⁹ whose time has come again. 🏠

¹ The Roman emperor Constantine is credited with undermining the priesthood of all believers in order to establish a class of priests who were distinguished from commoners by an elite job description (authority to marry, bury, baptize, and dispense the sacraments). In the process, house churches were disbanded to move worshippers into basilicas (the precursors to cathedrals and church buildings). Historians think this was a political move, not the application of a biblical job description.

² “Nones” are individuals who are unaffiliated with any organized religion. “Dones” are those who are passionate about their religion but have quit traditional church due to disillusionment.

³ Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE With Church But Not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015), p. 16.

⁴ Barbara Kellerman, *The END of Leadership* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2012), p. xix.

⁵ Dybdahl’s two-part article, “Doing Theology in Mission,” was published in *Ministry Magazine* in November 2005 and January 2006 and is available online at www.evernote.com/l/AIF-JsZdYaVKUauIMBAHO2XSfGE7oM091U.

⁶ Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” posted December 29, 2015, on ChurchLeaders.com.

⁷ Packard, p. 56.

⁸ George Barna, *Church Startups and Money: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with Thrivent Financial*, 2016, p. 7.

⁹ David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends, A.D. 30-A.D. 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), pp. 520-529.

¹⁰ Dr. Russell Burrill, in his dissertation, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church*, wrote: “Ellen White continually labored against the notion that the local church needed the constant attention of the preacher in order to survive. In fact, she repeatedly counseled that just the opposite would occur if the church became preacher dependent—she felt that the church would become filled with ‘spiritual weaklings.’” pp. 190-191.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 172.

¹² <https://www.simplechurchathome.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RussellBurrillDissertation.compressed.pdf>

¹³ Packard, p. 20.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 464.

¹⁶ Packard, p. 68.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 25, 68.

¹⁸ “As our society approaches a post-institutional era, it’s entirely possible the near monopoly that the church has enjoyed over faithful expressions and religious connections may be coming to an end,” writes Josh Packard in *Church Refugees*, p. 69. “The activities of the dechurched may be ushering in new understanding of what religious activity means. If this trend continues, it will fundamentally reshape the way Americans experience organized religion.”

¹⁹ “Between A.D. 100 and A.D. 300, Christianity grew from 25,000 to 20 million people in the Roman Empire where there were no seminaries, settled pastors, or Christian public places of worship. In fact, much of our New Testament was written to people who met in house churches.” Allan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 19.

IN DEFENSE OF CULTURE

By Christopher C. Thompson

WHEN I WAS A KID, I FANTASIZED ABOUT HAVING A CLUB JUST FOR my friends and me. The quintessence of the dream would have been a treehouse, complete with a door that locked and a secret password.

I was about 8 years old when we convened our own club, on a day when school wasn't in session. We didn't have a clubhouse. The abandoned train track behind our houses was our home base.

There was nothing unique about what we did. We played tag, hide-and-seek, and some game that involved a rock and me screaming and my brother's shirt covered with blood from the gash in my forehead. Thus, the one-day club ended abruptly. I suppose it served its purpose, since we had only a one-day break from school.

It is important to note that the club included only the kids on our street, not those from the neighboring street. For as long as it lasted, our club had significance because meaningful bonds already existed among the members. Lots of kids lived on neighboring streets, but we were close to those on *our* street. We had played together and eaten at one another's homes. I'm sure that other kids would have been welcomed if they had come to our railroad-track clubhouse that day, but what made our little club extra special was that it was *our* club. It was not exclusive, but it was organic.

Non-exclusivity?

We take pains as spiritual leaders to correct any semblance of exclusivity in our churches. God said through the prophet Isaiah, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people" (Isa. 56:7, KJ2000). Paul said that he had "become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22b, NIV).

However, we must make a distinction between Paul's mission and the function of the local church. Paul was an apostle, sent to share the gospel in *diverse* contexts. The local church is the representative for the gospel in a *specific* context. It is dynamic in that it is epistemologically and spiritually bonded to the wider diverse body, but it manifests the ethos of the wider body in its own context and with its own culturally specific mores.

In Isaiah 56:3, God served notice to Israel that previously forgotten and rejected groups would be finally accepted and grafted into the family of God. The significance of Paul's ministry is the fulfillment of the promise in Isaiah. We see God's grace extended to new communities and contexts as a result of the life and ministry of Paul, who rebuked Judaizers for trying to

force these new communities of faith to conform to Jewish cultural norms.¹ Part of what makes the local church work is that believers in a given context are able to interpret and communicate the faith with terms and images that are readily available and most meaningful in their community.

I once talked to the pastor of an Adventist "cowboy church" where the deacons—or "wranglers," as they called them—collected the tithe and offerings in ten-gallon hats and the members were encouraged to wear their boots and blue jeans to Sabbath worship. While I don't think I'd want to move my membership there, the pastor and his wife were so gracious to me that I'm certain they love the Lord and serve him with all their heart. And the folks at that cowboy church understand something important: *We will be more effective trying to reach someone than we will be trying to reach everyone.*

We can't have our local church on every single street; we must pick a single location. The Adventist cowboys found a metaphorical "street" where they started a unique clubhouse. Not exclusive, just organic. They are engaging and evangelizing people who live in that context. If you're a cowboy, you'd probably love it there. If you're not a cowboy, you'll at least be happy to know that you've got some fellow Adventists who happen to be cowboys who love Jesus just as much as you do.

Contextual Churches

Let me be clear about what I am *not* saying. I am not saying that we shouldn't evangelize. I am not saying that we shouldn't be friendly and hospitable or welcome new faces into our fellowship. I *am* saying that there's great value in a church that is embedded in and responsive to a specific context.

One phrase that shows up a number of times in Revelation always arrests my attention: "to every nation, tribe, language and people."² Consider its use in Revelation 14:6, the core of the Adventist commission. A special messenger is bringing a time-sensitive dispatch to everyone. Since the gospel is for people who are scattered throughout the Earth, the angel goes to meet individuals wherever they are and communicates the message in their native language. He goes to all nations, focusing on each tribe in turn, then localizing the presentation to reach every dialect and individual. Because of this pinpointing process, every single village and neighborhood has the opportunity to hear the gospel.

How can the recipients comprehend the important news unless it is delivered in their own language and local dialect? How will people understand the announcement in their local context if the messenger refuses to transpose it to the customs and culture in

ALLY DEFINED CHURCHES

which it is received? It is this narrowing of the message to reach a specific type of person that makes it attractive.

Culture and Community

Culture is the collection of tools that a community uses to address problems in a local environment and, we hope, to thrive in that environment. Christ allowed the gospel to become integrated into the local context in order to create meaning for people where they are. Richard Niebuhr talks about Christ as the transformer of culture, as opposed to the concepts of Christ “of” or “above” or “against” culture, or the “paradox” of culture.³

Jesus did not come to obliterate Jewish culture—or any other culture. He came to save sinners. But he always draws near to a specific group of sinners in a specific place and time. In the first century, he did this while living as a typical Jewish man.

Similarly, each local church must have the space to “work out their own salvation” and receive the gospel as it speaks to specific everyday challenges that are present within the local context.

I may not know who you are, but I love you. It is my duty and joy as a Christian to extend to you the love that Christ has extended to me. I'd like meet you one day, if I haven't already. Add me on Facebook. Follow me on Twitter. Let's talk. Let's build a relationship. Let's be friends. Maybe we could even sit down and talk over tea. If you're ever near my home, we could visit there, too. But please understand that as close as we may become, I love my family more. You may be welcome in my home, but not to stay forever. My family is already a really tightly knit unit, and we've decided that it's important to us to maintain our deep bonds. Not simply exclusive, but definitely organic.

Imagine that you are invited to attend someone else's family reunion. Let's just say that you were invited by a close friend, or maybe even your fiancé. Family reunions are a sacred time for families to fellowship, reflect, reconnect, have some fun, and share affection and the traditions that are valuable to them. You may have been invited, and possibly welcomed, but you're likely to feel at least a bit awkward because of the depth of loving exchange that you can't share. The hosts may feed you and smile, but it's still not the same as being a part of the family. Families are not exclusive in the sense that they want to keep people out, but there is an organic bond that undergirds their communication and celebration, which helps them sort through the unique challenges they face as a family.

And so it is with local congregations. They draw together because of their commitment to Christ, but what helps them maintain their commitment to each other is a shared local

and communal experience. In the worship and discipleship space, community members find answers to problems they face collectively. They are able to celebrate victories and mourn losses collectively. They are able to affirm and reaffirm values and ideas that are important not just to the individuals, but to the entire community. The local church acts as an agent of God's body on location, to help meet the challenges of the local context.

To be all things to all people is the apostle's job; the congregation's job is to be God's family to a specific group of people in a specific place and time.

The African-American Experience

Whenever I'm in my hometown of Beaufort, South Carolina, I make it a point to visit one of the oldest churches in town: the First African Baptist Church. When I was a kid, my entire family attended First African Baptist Church every Sunday. A historical marker tells how First African Baptist Church was organized as a praise house of the predominantly white Baptist Church of Beaufort, located just a few blocks away.

A typical praise house was a clandestine worship space where slaves could “steal away” and share religious practices, such as the ring shout and the singing of (Negro) spirituals, away from the watchful eye and restrictive whip of the slavemaster. Beaufort residents, though situated a considerable distance from rural plantation fields, maintained the praise house practice because, for over a century, African-Americans were not allowed to mingle with the white members of Baptist Church of Beaufort.

Blacks were allowed to sit in the balcony of Beaufort's white church, but its worship experience didn't bear the slightest semblance of cultural relevance for African-Americans. They were permitted to worship there only as long as they did not disturb the sensibilities of white members. I think it's safe to say that worship according to the stringent terms of another cultural group isn't true worship at all.

Some Adventists are dismissive of the rich history that brought churches such as the one of my childhood into being. “It's time we all worshipped together,” they say. These may be the same people that complain about the annual worship service that seeks to celebrate African-American culture at the Walla Walla University Church.⁴ Or those who made fun of the Black Student Association's weekend worship services at Southern Adventist University.⁵

Please understand that for us, this is contextualizing the gospel. Creating culturally distinctive worship communities provides

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Why PEOPLE Go to CHURCH

By Winona Winkler Wendth

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, I HAD A PAIR OF BLACK SUEDE MARY Janes with flowers on them. These were my “Sabbath shoes,” which stayed in tissue paper in a small shoebox six days out of seven. I also had a Sabbath dress, as did my grandmother, the person who took me to church most of the time. My grandmother had a closet full of beautiful clothes, but she wore only one or two simple navy or black ones to church. Her explanation was that church was a different kind of place—not a party place, not a show-off place, not a hangout place. Church was different from everywhere else, and the notion of “sanctuary” hovered over that. A holy place. Unlike my mother’s family, for whom Sabbath preparation included protracted food preparation and floor-waxing, this grandmother spent Friday evenings getting ready to go to church. This sanctity extended to my shoes; when I took them from their box and put them on, I felt as though I were preparing for a role in an archaic ritual.

My grandmother had been a new convert to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and had joined the denomination only 10 years or so before I was born. Her initial reason was that a colporteur had promised that her 12-year-old son could start in church school in the sixth grade, rather than the first, as the public school had insisted because of his lack of English skills.

At that time in New York City, nearly every European community had its own Catholic congregation, and many had their own Adventist church, too: the Swedes, the Germans, the Czechs, the Hungarians. Most of them lived in cultural enclaves along the east side of New York. Their congregations shared a language, and the food that appeared on potluck tables was familiar. Family systems were similar, and everyone knew whose children were studying where or what and whose family would be “coming over” soon.

As the Second World War neared, news changed from who was coming to who could not; care packages were sent, then not—there was no use. The fears that one family faced were felt by everyone in the congregation. German Adventists feared what American policies would do to their livelihoods. Other Europeans wondered how the United States would treat

“foreigners” generally. They came together every Sabbath, celebrating their safety but sharing their fears.

A Natural Fit

My grandmother was happy to adjust a few habits for the Adventist church. She took her earrings out, danced only at family weddings, and rarely took a sip of wine except to be polite. Tithing seemed natural; philanthropy was in her bones. She had come from a community that loved animals, so the traditional Adventist teaching on hunting and environmental stewardship came easily. Many of her neighbors, both in Hungary and New York, kept the Sabbath. She took her habits, hardly changed, into her new religion. Church was a place where the people sitting next to her disliked Hitler, Stalin, and the Pope as much as she did. (The demands of the Pope had never seemed sensible to her.) When she went to church, she felt safe from cultural judgment or punishment.

Like many church members, both within our denomination and without, my grandmother held a firm belief that Jesus loved her and that she was supposed to care for others. What that looked like was the same for her as for her fellow church members. She read the Bible and found in it what she needed, but hermeneutics were off the point. Fundamental Adventist beliefs? She really didn’t know most of them. Religion was what you did, not what you were told to believe.

On Sabbath, the church was a holy place, not a place for yelling, arguing, fancy clothes, or showing off. She toned herself down, and when I got ready for church, it was the same for me. Those Mary Janes stayed in their box until it was time for memory verses.

When I got older, a friend of my mother took me to a Cuban church in the Bronx. It stood not half a dozen blocks from the Puerto Rican congregation. I had friends who attended each church, but none who attended both: I was an outsider in both places. To me, the congregations were the same. Beans and rice are beans and rice. But for members of these groups, the differences were profound. I know now that being Cuban,

especially in 1959, was entirely different from being Puerto Rican. The Cuban Adventists were busy helping their families escape from Castro; the Puerto Ricans had other concerns, having been part of the United States since the Spanish-American War. Sermons and after-church socials reflected these differences.

In these churches, I didn't hear my friends or their parents discuss fundamental beliefs. Nor was their worship that low-key occasion familiar to me; rather, Sabbaths were celebrations and nearly all-day festivals where young women wore fancy clothes. Their conversations were energized, emotional. Solemnity? Nope. But I do remember some of them talking about living in what I know now was exile, and others expressed fears of assimilation. What held these congregations together—and apart—were their anxieties and their hopes.

Sharing Common Goals

When I went to college, I experienced church attendance as a kind of condoned mating ritual. The rules were clear, the services and after-church activities tightly programmed. Earnestness mingled with romance and career-planning. I don't remember much about what non-college people looked like or did then; the predominant culture was a college culture. We went to church for the same reasons we had chosen an Adventist campus: because there was safety in numbers, and church provided a buffer between us and the outside world—a world that was different or, worse, hazardous.

For the rest of my adult life, I've attended "ghetto" churches. But aren't all churches a kind of ghetto? The term has taken an interesting turn from its original meaning, but it's useful because it applies to the way church functions today.

When an Adventist is asked what church she belongs to, the answer is a denominational one—one that refers to a system of beliefs and practices that we often think is global. It's not, of course, as the denomination is finding out in dramatic ways.

Here in the United States, I think I see a trend toward Adventists being more and more like other American Christians, those who answer the church question with the name of a congregation: The Church on the Way, Lakewood, North Point, The Potter's House, Willow Creek. In these congregations, differences in doctrine seem to matter less than a need for cultural belonging.

Increasingly, when you ask a member of these congregations what they believe and why they attend, you will get two answers: the first is a statement of belief "in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for my sins" and the second is some kind of remark about "feeling comfortable there." Language is similar, pew to pew, seldom subject to intercultural challenges; clothing may show economic differences, but not cultural ones; expectations have

more to do with a day's or evening's entertainment and a feeling of belonging than they do with Bible study. Members interpret the Bible according to their cultural norms and social needs. I'd guess that the meals these congregants prepare for dinner do not vary greatly, their expectations for their children are similar, and their concerns with changing social trends, government policies, and the economy nag them in the same ways. In short, they are congregations of people who are concerned about the same issues at the same time.

"I Like It There"

When I worked in the northern part of the Bible Belt, I had colleagues who would occasionally announce a new church affiliation. "Soooo, what's better about this church than your other one?" I would venture to ask. The answer was inevitably something like: "I like the people better" or "I like what they do in church" or "They have great daycare." Even those who attended the Solid Rock Church along Interstate 75 near Dayton, Ohio—a church founded as a for-profit church by a country singer who used the building for concerts and CD sales when he wasn't caring for his horse-trading business—said the same thing. Its pastor encouraged his congregation to vote one way or another in national and local elections, since he could legally do that as part of a for-profit organization; the group more or less agreed with his politics, anyway.

"Why do you toss money in the offering plate," I asked my coworker who worshipped there, "when the pastor is making so much money and can support activities on his own?"

"Because I want to make sure the church keeps going," the coworker said. "I like it there."

After some interesting legal tangles, the congregation turned the corner and filed for a not-for-profit status. Further legal issues arose, but none of that mattered. Attendance grew. People liked it there. Good daycare. A gym.

One wonders to what degree complex theological truths matter to the average Adventist churchgoer. Or how much what most of us consider foundational beliefs matter to the person whose energy goes into choosing what to wear to church and what to take to potluck. One wonders how much the person in the pew cares about what's going on in the General Conference or considers how it might affect his or her day-to-day life.

Adventists go to church to worship in the way they want to worship, to celebrate what they want to celebrate, to wear fancy shoes or plain Sabbath clothes as they choose. They go to church to feel understood and safe among the people they are worshipping with. They always have.

A good share of the denomination's political complications arise because we don't want to believe that. 🙏

IS CHURCH ATTENDANCE THE MEASURE OF INVOLVEMENT?

BY PAUL RICHARDSON

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUMMER SABBATH, and my wife and I were savoring our time with friends who run an Adventist youth camp. Mid-morning we went to the campfire bowl, where we joined the campers and staff in singing, praying, and listening to a presentation about an always-welcoming God.

Over lunch I asked our friends about the adults who were sitting at the back of the outdoor amphitheater. They said that some were parents of campers who came a day early and would be taking their children home the next day. But what piqued our interest the most is that they added: “The majority of the adults sitting at the back were there just to hang out at camp for the weekend. They didn’t have children there; they just wanted to be in that camp setting for the weekend.” When we asked if they lived close by, our friends said: “No, some drive many miles to be with us for the weekend. Many of those folks don’t go to church most of the rest of the year, but they want to come to camp

to experience the joyful life in Jesus that permeates this place.”

Across the North American Division, the average frequency of attendance at each member’s home church hovers around one Sabbath per month. This is somewhat understandable. One Sabbath you might be at a church or school or conference-wide event away from your home church. Another Sabbath you might be at a family getaway at the beach, lake, mountains, desert, or elsewhere. Another Sabbath you might be taking seriously the advice of Jesus to get away by yourself and “rest a while” (Mark 6:31), which is especially necessary for introverted personalities. Or you may be going through a life-altering event—such as the death of a loved one, a separation/divorce, job loss/new job, or chronic illness—that can cause irregular church attendance. Simply put, it is no longer the cultural norm for Adventists to be in the pew every week for the worship service.

So maybe what needs to change is for Adventist churches to engage their members and attenders in a wider array of relevant ministries. For example, after praying for ways to reach the local community, a pastor friend of mine asked her leadership team to read newspapers, listen carefully to television reports, and read blogs. The team took this assignment seriously, paying particular attention to felt needs in the community.


It soon became clear that community gardens were desperately needed in their area. Surrounding the church were planned communities where the houses were as large as the lots on which they were built. The covenants, conditions, and restrictions (CC&Rs) were so limiting that many homeowners could not grow gardens in their own yards. As the church leaders talked about this need, they soon realized that God had already provided on

their church property a potential solution.

Years before, they had purchased property large enough to not only meet their church building and parking needs, but also include room for a school plus land to spare. So they decided to grow community gardens on their church property. They started getting the word out that the land needed to be prepared. Tractors and tillers, shovels and stakes, soil amendments and seeds, watering and weeding were all needed to effectively meet the needs of their community.

Simply put, it is no longer the cultural norm for Adventists to be in the pew every week for the worship service.

Guess who got most actively involved in this ministry? It was the men, who according to data from most denominations (including Adventism) across North America, are more reluctant to come to church than are women. They brought equipment and provided hours of volunteer time. Not only did the people from the community have plenty of space to grow their gardens on church property, but the members grew extra vegetables on church land to be delivered to the homeless shelters in the area.

The pastor said to me: “I learned something in this process: that I needed to count men as active in ministry when they get involved with projects like this. Normally we count them as present or absent based only on involvement in traditional ministries and worship experiences.” 



PAUL'S CHURCH

By Herold Weiss

With the crucifixion of Jesus, his disciples' enthusiasm for the Kingdom was crushed. But reports from witnesses who testified that he was alive forced a new evaluation of what Jesus had been about. Their debates moved to how to understand who Jesus actually was and what his death and resurrection meant. These believers realized that their new experiences were energized by the Spirit of God in their midst. The Jesus movement, which had been preparing a people for the Kingdom, became a movement about Jesus that aimed to order a community "in the Spirit."

Initially these Jewish believers worshipped at the temple of Jerusalem and attended synagogue after the crucifixion, just as Jesus had done. They lived under the law that was the basis of the Abrahamic covenant. So beside the questions about what Jesus' death and resurrection meant, they had also to come to terms with the questions that had troubled them when they were still with Jesus, such as attitudes toward Gentiles, purity laws, the interpretation of the law, the significance of the Spirit, and others.¹

Extremes in the Movement

Serious disagreements plagued the movement. First-century Judaism was characterized by an astonishing diversity: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Covenanters, Nazarites, Zealots, etc. All worshipped at the temple but lived in communities around their particular synagogues, which at the time were not places of worship but houses of study, prayer, and community life. Apparently most of the believers in the Jesus movement thought

an otherworldly affair, Paul said that they caused unbelievers to think that they were mad (1 Cor. 14:23) or that their ungracious conduct showed that they despised the church (1 Cor. 11:22).

The Community as Temple

Paul considered the community of those who believed in the God who raised Christ from the dead as having become the temple of God on Earth (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Temples are representations of the cosmos, which function as channels of communications and energy between the human and the divine worlds. Since the Spirit that moved over the waters at the creation of the material cosmos is also the Spirit that brought about the resurrection of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6), those who are baptized "into Christ" participate in his death and resurrection and live in Christ by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 6:3-4, NKJV). They are a "new creation" (verse 4, NIV), and their coming together constitutes their temple.

In this, Paul gives a new definition of what is holy. In the

A body is more than the sum of its parts; it is an organism with many different parts that function in harmony, which is why the Stoics found the metaphor helpful.

that they would have their own synagogues and continue to worship at the Jerusalem temple, just as these other factions did.

Paul's letters, the earliest New Testament texts, reveal confrontations Paul had with fellow disciples of Jesus, who understood the significance of Easter in a way quite different from his. Rival apostles, who came to the churches that Paul had founded, told the converts that the gospel Paul had preached to them was no gospel at all.

Paul was fighting against two extremes. On the one hand were those who wished to keep the Jesus movement a kind of Judaism—merely another synagogue. On the other, some thought that having been baptized, they had been raised with Christ to live in the Spirit and, therefore, were no longer responsible for the deeds of their bodies. As "spirituals," they were free to live without restrictions of any kind. Their slogan was "all things are lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23, NKJV). Their churches were characterized by speaking in tongues, in the language of the Spirit. As Paul described them, they were eager for the manifestations of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:12), but they abused the freedom they had in Christ.

To the ones who wished to make the church another synagogue, Paul wrote that they made the cross of Christ irrelevant (Gal. 5:2). To those who wished to make the church

Old Testament, only *things* are classified as holy. In the New Testament, only *people* are characterized as holy. Jesus is the Holy One of God, and for Paul, all believers are saints. Together the saints constitute a temple that is representative of the "new creation" within creation. The church is the umbilical cord through which communication and energy are transferred within the cosmos.

As Paul saw it, the church is the result of the eschatological act of creation at the resurrection of Christ. Even though Paul was concerned about individual Christians, his thinking was governed by a larger vision: individuals and communities are manifestations of God's creative activity by the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. The new creation, as an act of God (2 Cor. 5:18), is manifest in the world in the community of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). What marks the church as a community is not circumcision and life under the law, but the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-24).

The Ekklēsia

The word "church" has a distinguished lineage. In Greek, *ekklēsia* is formed of the preposition *ek* (out of) and the verb *kalein* (to call). For example, the Athenian assembly of citizens with voice and vote was made up of those who had been called to participate

in the affairs of the city. The adoption of this word to designate the assembly of those baptized into Christ reflected the understanding that they had been called, too—not to participate in a vote, but to participate in the death and the resurrection of Christ and to live by the power of the Spirit.²

This was a radical understanding of the significance of the Christ Event. As the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) and the Son of God by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 1:3), Christ was the progenitor of a new creation, and those who live “in Christ” are living in the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV).

The church, therefore, could not possibly be just another Jewish synagogue, an institution of the old creation. Instead of using the vocabulary of the Old Testament, which refers to the congregation of true Israelites as “the people of the LORD [YHWH],” Paul introduced a metaphor used by the Stoics, which conceived the cosmos as a body with a soul. He moved from the notion of the church as the temple of God’s eschatological new creation to the church as a *body*, a word and concept that the Hebrew language lacked. A body is more than the sum of its parts; it is an organism with many different parts that function in harmony, which is why the Stoics found the metaphor helpful.

The metaphor served to establish the unity of members who are quite different from one another. Those who have been baptized into Christ live in Christ and are now members of the body of Christ. Moreover, the body gives objectivity to a life that is real in most subjective ways. The body establishes someone’s presence and, like a temple, facilitates communication. This means that the body of Christ is what makes Christ present in the world and makes it possible for us to have relationships with him.

Discerning the Body

For this reason Paul was appalled that at the Lord’s Supper, rather than bringing about the integration of all members into one body, the Corinthians used it to demonstrate distinctions. Paul issued a warning to those who eat and drink at the supper “unworthily.” What is it that renders anyone unworthy of participating in the Lord’s Supper? It is not, as some suppose, a secret sin or the failure to be perfect but, rather, the failure to “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11:22). Believers must be aware that as members of the body of Christ, they live to make possible Christ’s presence in the world. To act without “discerning the body” is not only a denial of their life in Christ, but “to bring judgment upon themselves.”

Please note that Paul did not see the significance of the supper in the bread and the wine. The significance of the supper is that it collapses the past and the future into the present: it announces the death of Christ till he comes. It makes of the participants an

organic unit that lives harmoniously in spite of differences. That was, for Paul, the function of the church and why everything done in church should be done for the “edification” of the body (1 Cor. 14:26).

The End of the Living Church

Paul’s views were not held by the majority of believers at the time. He was at the periphery of the movement and, in the long run, did not carry the day. After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, when all of the different manifestations of Judaism ceased to be and only Rabbinic Pharisaism survived, the Jesus movement ceased to be a living organism energized by the Spirit and became an organization able to stand up against a Judaism that reinvented itself at Jamnia.

Emergent Christianity was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20, NKJV; cf. 1 Cor. 3:11). Christ’s presence in the world was no longer necessary. He already sat enthroned with all things under his feet, so that the *Parousia* lost its imminence (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28; see also Luke 17:20-21). The church took the place of Christ by becoming “the fullness of him” (Eph. 1:20-23, NIV).

In the end, an organism alive by its Christology was displaced by an ecclesiological structure. The leadership of women, fully present in the churches of Paul (Romans 16; 1 Cor. 1:11; 11:5), was systematically suppressed by a new professional male clergy (1 Tim. 2:11-12).³ The clergy became separated from the laity, and the church took away the freedom of the Spirit and encapsulated it in sacraments under its control. By the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch, who was suffering from a severe martyr’s syndrome and writing letters to the churches he would visit or had visited on his way to Rome, boldly established the authority of bishops and described the bread and the blood of the Lord’s Supper as “the medicine of immortality” dispensed by the church. Soon afterward, the church became the arbiter of orthodoxy and then used doctrines as political power tools.

Thus, what had been temples of the new creation that facilitated life in Christ, energized and guided by the Spirit, became fiefdoms of bishops energized by self-control and guided by the clergy—a characteristic that we still see in many churches, including ours, to this day. 🏠

¹ For further exploration of this theme, see Herold Weiss, *Meditations on the Letters of Paul: Exercises in Biblical Theology* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion, 2016).

² In this context, Paul uses the word “church” only to refer to a local congregation that meets at a believer’s home.

³ Cf. the interpolation of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 in 1 Corinthians 14:33-36, which contradicts 1 Corinthians 11:5. See further evidence in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*.



THE BIG CLOSE

Hundreds of small congregations are closing, and no one is talking about it.

BY LOREN SEIBOLD

I AM AN ALUMNUS OF A SMALL CHURCH. WHO I AM TODAY OWES much to a little rural congregation that taught me about Jesus.

In former days, our church was a buzzing place where dozens of families with young children worshiped. Even though we shared a pastor with four other congregations, we had Sabbath School and church each week, with every division from Cradle Roll on up. I have wonderful memories of a lively Pathfinder Club.

I don't think I could ever adequately thank the members of the Cleveland Seventh-day Adventist Church in North Dakota for the opportunities they opened to me.

The Overall Trend

That institution, which was so important to me, is threatened. Small congregations in North America are dying, and within a decade, many hundreds will have closed. It's a major change in our denomination that no one is talking about.

A district pastor in the Midwest told me recently: "Two of my four churches are one death from disappearing. The other two aren't far behind." The result will be no Adventist churches across a massive swath of his conference's territory.

For the last 50 years, we've been headed in the direction of more Adventists in fewer places. The statistics are astonishing: 60 percent of NAD Adventists attend 10 percent of the congregations. Please

don't let that go by without absorbing the size of that differential. To put it another way, 40 percent of us are spread across the smallest 90 percent of the congregations, while the majority of us are concentrated in a handful of big congregations.

Ohio, where I'm a district pastor, illustrates the point. Out of about 90 churches, three within in the orbit of Kettering Medical Center account for a third of the tithe and a third of the Sabbath attendance. Take the largest 10 percent of our churches, and you'll approach 60 percent of the tithe and attendance. This means that the other 80-plus congregations account for less than half of the participation and income among Ohio Adventists. And we're not atypical.

Let me be clear that this is an observation, not a criticism. As a pastor in these forgotten churches, I know how hard it is for dear folks to see that the heads are growing gray, the young people and their children are gone, and the church building is deteriorating. They know they're on borrowed time, and they hope that Jesus will return before they have to lock the doors for the last time.

Sadly, no one knows quite how to reverse this trend.

Reasons

Depopulation: Many of these small churches are in small cities, villages, or rural areas. As I drive along the Ohio River Valley,

where my congregations are located, I see massive steel mills that are rusting and falling down. Hundreds of men with black lunch pails once queued up there as the whistle blew for shift change. Communities such as Steubenville and East Liverpool were blue-collar prosperous. I have church members who broke their bodies working for a mill that declared bankruptcy and left them without the promised pension. These communities now suffer high unemployment and severe opioid abuse.

Aging: The communities are aging, and so are the churches. The median age of North American Seventh-day Adventists is 51¹, and though I can't prove it, I'm certain it's higher in these small congregations, where a few gray-haired people form the core of the church. Most of their children aren't around.

My family and my church were proud of me for getting a college education. But it meant that I didn't go back to my small church in North Dakota, and many of those I grew up with didn't, either. Yet in many places, even those who stayed don't have the same interest in the church that their parents did.

Irrelevance: An elderly member I visit in Middleport, Ohio, remembers the circus tent that was set up at the fairgrounds for evangelistic meetings when she was a little girl, and she tells how "everyone, we and all our neighbors, went" and her family was baptized. The tent is a quaint feature, but so is the response: the last time I sent evangelistic brochures to one of my cities, no one showed up. The prophetic message doesn't draw like it used to, and the claim that we're the only ones who are right and everyone else is wrong is a turnoff.

Resources: Thanks to the conference, small churches have a shared pastor (which few could afford otherwise), but there's not much money left for anything else. It would be hard to overemphasize how aged and maintenance-heavy old church buildings drag down congregations. More money, time, and effort is spent on keeping up the old building than anything else, and yet most still think of their building as their most important resource. It would be unthinkable to abandon the "clubhouse."

Small churches are also starved for lay leadership. Nominating committees face a sad chore. Congregations are heavily dependent upon the shared pastor, who would need the ability to be in several places at once in order to help meet the long list of needs.

An inward focus: A church is supposed to be a place where people love one another, and sometimes it is. But I've seen these tight relationships (both happy and conflicted) shut out new people who aren't quite like the rest. Ever visit a church where everyone seemed to know one another, yet no one talked to you?

Some members, in desperation, try to reverse the slide by hammering into others the old Adventist message as they knew it

during the congregation's salad days. Like Nehemiah rebuilding Jerusalem, they try to rebuild the church by calling people back to the old standards—as they see them. Brought into the present, though, the old standards become a rigid judgmentalism that further depletes attendance.

The result for these small churches is a sort of death spiral. Fewer people means less money and less pastoral attention (because of being districted with other small congregations), then fewer children and young adults as services like Sabbath School, Pathfinders, and church schools disappear—meaning even less money, and fewer and older members. The remaining oldsters revert to a reactionary formulation of our faith, sometimes relying on Three Angels Broadcasting Network (3ABN) for their spiritual sustenance.

Why It's Important

Where are those big churches with 60 percent of the total members? Most of them are near Adventist institutions. We Adventists build congregations best when we hire people to be in them.

Denominational leaders seem to have forgotten about this mass of small, dying congregations. Those beyond the local conference level tend to have other interests; they live and work where institutions produce stronger congregations. When I brought this up, a denominational leader once admitted: "No one wants to look at small churches. They're failing churches. We program for successful churches and new church plants."

So if your small congregation has a sense that it's being ignored, that's because it is. You're tiny, you don't bring in much money, and you're relatively uninteresting compared to the handful of large congregations in your conference. But if the number of people and the amount of giving in these small congregations is so insignificant, why should anyone care? Even if half of them closed, it would hardly touch the bottom line.

Here's one good reason: by concentrating ourselves in a few areas, Adventists are spread out very thinly across the land, which makes it more likely we'll be forgotten.

I remember a conference program that, when I was a child, targeted what they called "dark counties." A map even shaded out every county in North America that was without an Adventist church. Setting aside the arrogance of assuming that God's Spirit was absent from a county without some of us in it, the program was an expression of our sense that Adventism was an essential message that should be represented everywhere.

New congregations will be raised up even as these small-town churches are disappearing. Since I've lived in Ohio, Columbus has had successful plants of a Korean church, a Ghanaian church, a

Pan-African church, a Haitian church, and several Spanish-speaking churches. But they're all in a big city, not in the small cities and rural areas where small congregations are gasping their last.

What to Do

One area where church leaders have been extraordinarily supportive of small churches is pastoral staffing. Given its income, a congregation such as the 1300-member church near Kettering Medical Center could have a staff of 20 rather than a fraction of that. On the other hand, my entire district put together couldn't pay my relatively modest salary and benefits.² Small congregations grumble that they could do great things if only they had their own pastor. (That's probably wishful thinking: I have seen no evidence that hiring a full-time pastor for every little congregation would result in growth.) They don't realize that without sacrifices from larger churches, they wouldn't have a pastor at all.

So what to do? I haven't heard many good ideas.

For many of these congregations, it is already too late. They're on hospice care. There's nothing to do for them but provide a comfortable death. I once heard a church administrator say that we have detailed procedures and policies for starting congregations, but we have none for ending them. It's a form of denial that we can no longer afford.

I see little evidence that our designated denominational resourcers in Silver Spring are interested in small congregations. When I mentioned small congregations to Dr. Paul Brantley, strategic planner for the North American Division (NAD), he pointed out to me a single passing mention of them in the NAD's strategic plan. Given that most of our NAD congregations are small, you might expect more than that. However, most denominational leaders attend the strong churches in the D.C. metro area, so that's what they have in mind when they design programming. They have no idea how numerous and how weak our small congregations are, and that out here we lack the resources for anything that requires complex planning, active and capable laypeople with free time, or money for facilities and advertising.

Evangelistic events still hold promise, but the model we're used to—a crusade that baptizes a bunch of people who often promptly disappear—is bankrupt. Nothing has demoralized small churches like new members whom they can't keep. Measuring evangelistic results by baptisms rather than by long-term church growth is simply dishonest. A car salesman told me that he's penalized if a car he sells is repossessed. Why do we continue to reward evangelism that doesn't grow congregations?


Many small congregations are part of communities with

extraordinary needs. I know one that responded with a well-run community center, so appreciated that it was fêted by the village with an "Adventist Community Services Center Day" complete with a street fair. To their credit, these folks had the wherewithal to recognize that community service is no longer just piles of cast-off clothing but, rather, involves networking agencies of many kinds to provide services of many kinds.

I wonder what might happen if our small, dying churches became more ecumenical? I pastor one church that has become an active participant in a local food bank and feeding program. I'm very proud of them. Though it hasn't resulted in any baptisms, the church is at least known around town. What if we went further: if Sabbath and Sunday congregations shared community centers, even sanctuaries?

Small congregations don't always have preachers, so they turn to 3ABN, which eventually becomes the recipient of tithes and offerings. It's an addiction we'd do well to break. I've often dreamed of digitally connecting congregations *within the conference* so that the conference itself could become a community. Imagine small groups without a keyboardist given the chance to sing hymns from the screen to a rich accompaniment and listen to a grace-filled sermon by the conference's best preachers, even when their local pastor can't be there. When I experimented with this in my congregations, I discovered that cost (it requires an extra-fast Internet connection) and skills (people who can get the video feed working) are inhibiting factors, though these could perhaps be addressed with some outside support.

One counterintuitive idea is to sell decaying old church buildings and pull the congregation back to house churches, which may be better suited to the needs of these little groups, while freeing up money for community ministries. Some feel that the era of house churches is here (see Willis Adams' piece in this issue), though we have yet to demonstrate the concept's effectiveness widely in North America.

Just be assured of this: we are in the midst of a massive shift in what the church looks like in North America. We're not going to be the church of my childhood, nor will we exist in all the places that healthy churches existed back then. I hope we at least make an attempt to address this before we lose them all. 

¹ According to the latest survey (2008) of everyone who attends (including children). The same survey shows that the median age of baptized members is 58. The median age of the American population is 36.

² A pastor's "keep" includes medical and retirement funding, a rather generous package of educational aid for workers' children all the way through college, and a share of our several levels of church administration. In my conference, the guideline is that a church must have \$150,000 in tithe to qualify for a full-time pastor.

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EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the editorial board. One of the purposes of this magazine is to encourage dialogue between those of differing viewpoints within the Adventist Church. Thus, we will publish articles ranging throughout the conservative-liberal continuum.

THE DREAM LIFE OF ELLEN G. WHITE

By Ronald D. Graybill

ELLEN G. WHITE WAS A DREAMER throughout her life. If the definition of a vision were confined to dramatic daytime trances, her dreams can be said to have provided the vast majority of her revelatory experiences. In 1868, when the waking visions accompanied by physical symptoms had virtually ceased, James White estimated that his wife had experienced between 100 and 200 visions. Years later, their grandson Arthur White estimated that Ellen Harmon White had received some 2,000 revelatory experiences in her lifetime. If these figures are at all reliable, they suggest that 90 percent of those experiences were dreams.

Before Ellen Harmon's "first vision," she had two striking dreams. The first ended in discouragement and darkness. In the other dream, she ascended a fragile stairway and met Jesus himself. He told her, "Fear not."¹

What is not usually noted is that she described, within the second dream, the same kind of prostration and ecstatic trance that characterized her early public, daytime visions. "I was too joyful to utter a word," she said, "but, overcome with ineffable happiness, sank prostrate at His feet. While I was lying helpless there, scenes of beauty and glory passed before me, and I seemed to have reached the safety and peace of heaven. At length my strength returned, and I arose."²

Four Types of Revelatory Experiences

Young Ellen Harmon experienced at least four kinds of dissociative experiences, or periods when she was detached from normal consciousness. Her dreams were the most common, but she also experienced what we may call "ecstatic dissociation." During such periods of intense spiritual excitement, she lost consciousness and strength but did not receive information. In her day, and among

her "shouting Methodists" contemporaries, such episodes were common, particularly at camp meeting revivals. The third type of revelatory experience was her waking visions, the daytime visions during which she saw and heard things, sometimes uttering disjointed words describing what she was experiencing. These too were instances of ecstatic dissociation in that they occurred amidst the shouts of fellow worshippers. Finally, Ellen experienced another type of dissociative reverie while she was awake and praying. These were often comforting—even healing—incidents, during which she might receive personal reassurance of heavenly support.

No pathology, injury, or illness is necessary to explain these events; they all fit within the "shouting Methodists" tradition. It is possible, though there is no way to prove it scientifically, that Ellen White was especially susceptible to dissociative experiences thanks to her childhood head injury and her exposure to the mercury vapors of her father's hat-making. Even hormonal changes may have altered the way she experienced dissociative episodes. However, none of these conditions explains the cogency, relevance, or impact of her visions and dreams. After all, her brothers and sisters showed no symptoms of mercury poisoning, and many a child has suffered head injury without subsequent visionary experiences.

Furthermore, the fact that her physical, physiological, and psychological reaction to these episodes took a form similar to her Methodist contemporaries says nothing about whether they were genuine divine visitations and revelations. That is not the question explored here.

The Transition to Dreams

Ellen White's visions can be defined as instances of ecstatic dissociation that

occurred during waking hours, included observable physical phenomena (initial loss of strength, at a minimum), and inspired her to report receiving information or insight through visual or auditory sensations. These visions occurred frequently during the 1850s, then with declining frequency in the 1860s, and had ceased entirely by the end of the 1870s.

W. C. White said that the last of his mother's visions to which he was a witness occurred in January 1875.³ She mentioned receiving a "vision" in 1878⁴—an occasion that George Amadon termed a "vision," as well⁵—but no one witnessed this incident, and it may well have been a dream, by the definitions used here. Mrs. White during the 1870s made about the same number of references to "visions" as she did to "dreams," but in the 1880s she referred much more frequently to dreams than she did to visions. Furthermore, she did not give a date for a single vision during the 1880s and, in fact, used the expression "my last vision" referring to an earlier experience that could have taken place in the late 1870s.⁶ Adventist minister J. N. Loughborough's claim that she experienced a public vision at the Oregon camp meeting in 1884 cannot be credited. Such an occurrence would have been very dramatic at that late date, and a full report of her activities at the meeting, published soon afterward, made no mention of a public vision, nor did Mrs. White mention one in letters from that time.

In the first 12 *Testimony for the Church* pamphlets, issued between 1855 and 1867, White claimed no divinely inspired dreams. Then, later in 1867, the "dream theme" burst forth in full glory with the appearance of *Testimony for the Church*, No. 13. This was the very period when the dramatic daytime visions were becoming rarer. Dreams, Mrs. White wrote for the first time, "are as truly the

fruits of the spirit of prophecy as visions.”⁷ In this pamphlet she reported several of her own dreams as well as dreams of Loughborough and fellow Adventist pioneer John Matteson.

In her extant letters and manuscripts, Mrs. White used the expression “I was taken off in vision” frequently in the 1850s, half a dozen times in the 1860s, once in the 1870s, and only retrospectively thereafter. This declining pattern perfectly matches the waning and disappearance of instances of enthusiastic worship (i.e., “shouting”) services among Seventh-day Adventists during these same decades.

Mrs. White did say, “I had a vision” in June of 1906,⁸ but it was a nocturnal experience; there were no witnesses and no mention of physical phenomena. Nothing in the description of the incident distinguishes it from a dream.

James White described a typical early vision thus: “The power came down more and more, and we all shouted and praised the Lord as much as we were a mind to. In this state of feelings among us Ellen was taken off in vision.”⁹

Visions of the Night

As her public visions declined, references to her dreams increased. The White Estate’s online publication of the polished versions of her letters and manuscripts allows us to date these dreams and the expressions used to describe them. During the 1870s, ’80s, and ’90s, she used expressions such as “I dreamed” or “I had a dream” perhaps two or three times a year. Usually she just said that her revelatory experience occurred “in the night season.” After 1890 she described visitations “in the night season” more than 20 times per year. Also during that period, and especially between 1903 and 1908, she described her dreams as “visions of the night.”

Mrs. White’s sleep was often troubled as she struggled with pain, illness, anxiety, or

depression. Even intense excitement and joy could disrupt her sleep. This meant that she might have alternating periods of sleep and wakefulness during a single night, providing more periods of the REM sleep during which dreaming occurs.

She may even have experienced “lucid dreaming,” in which the dreamer becomes aware that he or she is dreaming yet remains in the dream state. These dreams can be extremely realistic and provide the dreamer with a striking imitation of waking life. After such a dream, Mrs. White wrote that “my heart was full to overflowing. O, what love was burning in my heart.”¹⁰ She also wrote that “my heart and lips were filled with praise and gladness and rejoicing. I am full of hope and joy and peace today.”¹¹

More than once she would waken others—unintentionally—by speaking out during sleep or with audible cries during a vivid dream. Once she “cried it out so loud and shrill Mary awoke me, and lo, it was a dream. It made quite an impression on my mind.”¹² Dreaming of the unprepared state in which her son Henry died, it seemed as if her heart would break: “I awoke myself weeping aloud,” she said.¹³ During a happier dream, she “awoke crying aloud in joy. ... I learned from the members of my family that my praying was aloud in my sleep.”¹⁴ On another occasion, Maggie Hare and Sara McEnterfer heard her praying while she was sleeping. Maggie thought they should wake her, but Sara said, “No, she frequently prays aloud in her sleep.”¹⁵ Such occasions would match the type of lucid dream wherein the dreamer has some degree of control over the dream.

The vividness of her dreams may explain why, on several occasions, she was uncertain whether she was having a dream or a vision. In 1871, she even dreamed she was having a vision “amid cries and prayers.”¹⁶

Insightful Revelations

Her dreams at times offered encouragement for her or others, or rebukes for wayward or slothful church members. In them she might speak to a large assembly, listen in on a council meeting, critique a minister’s style, or converse with a church leader or layperson. On one occasion she was out with others picking wild berries; sometimes saw object lessons in thriving or struggling trees or vines. Once, her “guide” repeated to her the very words she had been reading in one of her library books. A few months after the San Francisco earthquake, she dreamed she was in a strange city when she heard “explosion after explosion” and saw “large balls of fire.” Then a voice reassured her: “Be not afraid. Nothing shall harm you.”¹⁷

Ellen White believed that God granted useful dreams to others, as well. Her husband, James, had a dream that “greatly encouraged him.”¹⁸ Her sister, Sarah, dreamed that she invoked her relationship with Jesus to defeat a menacing apparition.¹⁹ A “Brother Foster,” who had been doubting the validity of Ellen White’s testimonies, had a dream that persuaded him they were authentic divine revelations,²⁰ and she acknowledged dreams by J. N. Loughborough and John Matteson, as mentioned above.

Often in her dreams Mrs. White had a guide—a young man, or “one of authority,” or, more commonly, simply “my guide.”²¹ In Rome, New York, in 1875, she dreamed that “a man of noble appearance came to my side.”²² Many years later, in reference to the same dream, she noticed the youthfulness of this guide and described him as a “young man of noble appearance.”²³ Apparently this same young man was often on hand to lead her and interpret her dreams.

In her letters and manuscripts, Mrs. White refers to her nocturnal “guide”

more than 100 times and nearly as many times to “one of authority” who appeared in her dreams. But the phrase “my guide” only begins to appear in 1875, just as her public visions ceased.

On a few occasions, this same guide is called “a dignified-looking personage, who had been repeatedly presented to me in my dreams.”²⁴ In an 1867 dream, “a person of commanding manners and dignified deportment” accompanied her.²⁵ In her

were more mundane or confused. Even if this sort of dream occurred frequently, she naturally would rarely mention them. In 1886 her son, W. C. White, was still very much alive when she had a dream in which he appeared to have miraculously risen from the dead. Perhaps her mind confused him with his father, James, who had died in 1881. On another occasion, she dreamed that 13-year-old Willie was keeping his hens too closely confined. “They must have sunlight,

hindered the other horses’ efforts. James White gave the out-of-line horses a vicious whipping. In Mrs. White’s dream, these horses could talk, so one turned to James and begged him not to strike so hard. They had already seen the difficulty they had caused and told him they needed only to be checked, not whipped.

James White’s overly directive, controlling, and impatient style was again reproved in a dream that saw a schoolmaster giving detailed instructions to a student on how to form the characters in his copybook.³³ When the result was a total mess, and the teacher threw down the book impatiently.

To some extent we can finally compare Mrs. White’s dreams to our own. Her dreams often related directly to problems or issues she faced or to recent events, concerns, or circumstances.

handwritten diary, she once wrote, “My guide spoke slow and solemn.”²⁶

In her early visionary days, angels served as her guides on most occasions. In describing her visions in the 1850s and 1860s, she was simply instructed by “the angel.” After the visions ceased in the 1870s, angels appeared in specific dreams on only two occasions, the most notable being when the angel gave her the secret Masonic sign she used to convince N. D. Faulkhead of the divine authenticity of her revelatory experiences.²⁷

On some occasions, she encountered Jesus himself in a dream. She had, of course, already seen him in one of her youthful dreams. But now he appeared again: “I was much encouraged by a beautiful dream I had last night. I dreamed I saw Jesus, and He conversed with me.”²⁸ In 1890, once again, “the form of Jesus appeared” to her.²⁹

Orderly or Disjointed?

A few of the dreams Ellen White reported

air and room to exercise in,” she said.³⁰

In the form Mrs. White reported them, her dreams often involved orderly, symbolic scenarios. If her dreams were anything like ours, it seems very possible that she imposed order on these nocturnal experiences as she related them. What she actually saw or heard during the dream may have been more disjointed.

On one occasion, when short of funds, Mrs. White dreamed that a man was holding out a pocketbook to her when another hand snatched it from him, leaving the promising source of funds empty-handed. The clear implication was that the brethren were not allocating funds correctly. “This dream caused me great disappointment, and I groaned aloud. I awoke and could sleep no more.”³¹

A similar lesson—but with a special twist for James White—was conveyed in a dream where several spans of horses were about to try to pull a heavy load.³² Two of the horses sprang out ahead of the rest and not only could not move the load, but

Messages of Peace

A number of comforting and healing dreams relieved Mrs. White of pain, illness, or other forms of distress. She recorded only a few of these but affirmed that she had hundreds of similar experiences. Typically, these visitations involved the room being filled with a soft light and the fragrance of flowers. One example occurred in Salamanca, New York, in 1890. As she knelt to pray, she had one of these dissociative reveries: “I had not uttered a word when the whole room seemed filled with a soft, silvery light, and my pain and disappointment and discouragement were removed. I was filled with comfort and hope and the peace of Christ.”³⁴

While traveling by train in 1901, she was dreading the “carousal” and tobacco fumes of fellow passengers. She fell asleep but soon was awakened by a voice speaking to her. She knew immediately what it meant, “for the room was filled with a sweet fragrance, as of beautiful flowers. ... words were spoken to me, assuring me that the Lord would protect me.”³⁵ She concluded she would not need to make any further complaints about the noise and the smoking.

The most extensive and detailed description of a dissociative reverie occurred in 1908, this time with more color and sound: “About half-past nine ... I became aware that my body was entirely free from pain. ... The room was filled with light, a most beautiful, soft, azure light, and I seemed to be in the arms of heavenly beings. This peculiar light I have experienced in the past in times of special blessing; but this time it was more distinct, more impressive ... I raised myself into a sitting posture, and I saw that I was surrounded by a bright cloud, white as snow, the edges of which were tinged with a deep pink. The softest, sweetest music was filling the air, and I recognized the music as the singing of the angels. Then a voice spoke to me, saying, “Fear not; I am your Saviour. Holy angels are all about you.”³⁶

Answers to Our Questions

For many years, studies of various aspects of Ellen White’s life and career focused on one question: Was she, or was she not, a divinely inspired prophet of God? A whole spectrum of answers emerged, all the way from Colin Standish’s *The Greatest of All the Prophets* to Walter Rea’s *The White Lie*, with the writings of George R. Knight and his many students falling in between, usually affirming her prophetic gift but often in a more objective way or with an array of caveats—some small, some large enough to make traditionalists uncomfortable. That question will continue to be debated, but we also need new categories, new themes, new questions to pursue in the context of studies that seek to understand Mrs. White without exclusive concern for the question of divine influence.

This study of this Adventist pioneer’s dreams demonstrates the invaluable contribution to research created by the online release of the edited, polished

transcripts of most of her letters and manuscripts. (A few remain to be transcribed and edited.) It is now easier to track changes over time in her expressions and experiences because we have dates for each letter, manuscript, and diary entry.

Change over time is illustrated by comparing the first 35 years of Ellen White’s career (1845-1880) to the last 35 years (1880-1915). The first period was not without dreams, but public visions were the most notable dissociative experience. During last 35 years (1880-1915) of her life, however, waking reveries and, more commonly, nighttime dreams provided her revelations.

We could already see, even from earlier published sources, that Mrs. White’s dreams were sometimes metaphoric scenarios symbolizing instructional content but, at other times, provided direct verbal instruction. Now we can virtually enter her household at night. We are able to hear her cry out during her dreams and sometimes pray audibly while sleeping.

To some extent we can finally compare Mrs. White’s dreams to our own. Her dreams often related directly to problems or issues she faced or to recent events, concerns, or circumstances. The same can be said of our own dreams. Being mindful of the older tradition of Ellen White studies, we should also observe that if God were communicating with her through dreams, it would only make sense that he was answering relevant questions. ➦

¹ Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White 1880*, published in *Early Writings* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 80.
² *ibid.*

³ W. C. White *Statements Regarding Mrs. White and Her Work*, Remarks of W. C. White in Takoma Hall, December 17, 1905.

⁴ E. G. White, “Church Difficulties,” Manuscript 1, 1878 (Oct. 9, 1878).

⁵ George Amadon, *Diary*, Oct. 10, 1878.

⁶ E. G. White to D. T. Bourdeau, Letter 4, 1881 (May 14, 1881).

⁷ E. G. White, *Testimony for the Church*, No. 13

(Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1867), p. 2; now in Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), p. 569.

⁸ E. G. White, “God’s Judgments on the Cities,” Manuscript 61a, 1906 (June 3, 1906).

⁹ James White to Brother Hastings, Jan. 10, 1850.

¹⁰ E. G. White to Clement Eldridge, Letter 20a, 1893 (Jan. 9, 1893).

¹¹ E. G. White to W. C. and Mary White, Letter 92, 1890 (May 15, 1890).

¹² E. G. White to James White, Letter 7, 1880 (Feb. 27, 1880).

¹³ E. G. White to J. E., W. C., and Henry White, Letter 21, 1861 (March 25, 1861).

¹⁴ E. G. White, “Diary, December 1903,” Manuscript 177, 1903 (Dec. 2-17, 1903).

¹⁵ E. G. White to G. I. Butler, Letter 13, 1904 (Jan. 12, 1904).

¹⁶ E. G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1915), p. 197.

¹⁷ E. G. White, “Diary, August 1906,” Manuscript 126, 1906 (Aug. 11-27, 1906), entry for Aug. 23.

¹⁸ E. G. White, “Diary, June 1873,” Manuscript 8, 1873 (June 1-20, 1873), entry for June 16.

¹⁹ E. G. White, Sermon: “Tell of God’s Love and Power,” Manuscript 7, 1888 (Oct. 13, 1888).

²⁰ E. G. White to G. I. Butler, Letter 13, 1904 (Jan. 12, 1904).

²¹ E. G. White to Brother and Sister Maxon, Letter 7, 1887 (Apr. 16, 1887); E. G. White to Brother Rice, Letter 30, 1887 (June 11, 1887). These two expressions appear frequently in accounts of dreams.

²² E. G. White to S. N. Haskell, Letter 1, 1875 (Oct. 12, 1875).

²³ E. G. White, “Our Bookmen,” Letter 3, 1913 (Jan. 23, 1913).

²⁴ E. G. White, “Methods of Labor,” Manuscript 1, 1874 (Apr. 1, 1874).

²⁵ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), p. 573.

²⁶ E. G. White, *Handwritten Diary* 16, p. 337, entry for Nov. 25, 1890, transcribed as “Slowly and solemnly my Guide said” in E. G. White, “Diary, November 1890,” Manuscript 29, 1890.

²⁷ E. G. White, “Brother Faulkhead and the Echo Office,” Manuscript 54, 1899 (Apr. 4, 1899).

²⁸ E. G. White to Addie Walling, Letter 91, 1891 (Jan. 1, 1886).

²⁹ E. G. White to W. C. and Mary White, Letter 92, 1890 (May 15, 1890).

³⁰ E. G. White to W. C. White, Letter 4, 1868 (Feb. 17, 1868).

³¹ E. G. White to J. E. and Emma White, Letter 82, 1894 (May 1, 1894).

³² E. G. White, “Two Dreams that Illustrate Unity of Action,” Manuscript 1, 1873 (Jan. 20, 1873).

³³ E. G. White, “Diary, January 1876,” Manuscript 2, 1876 (Jan. 1-12, 1876), entry for Jan. 6.

³⁴ E. G. White, “Diary, October and November 1890,” Oct. 30-Nov. 4, 1890, entry for Nov. 3.

³⁵ E. G. White, Talk: “I Feel an Intense Desire...,” Manuscript 29, 1901 (Mar. 28, 1901).

³⁶ E. G. White, “Circulate the Publications,” Manuscript 23, 1908 (May 4, 1908).



Doing Church, New Testament Style

By Alden Thompson

From the standpoint of “doing church,” one of the more intriguing New Testament passages is Acts 15. The keynote phrase that describes the action of the community is: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (verse 28, NIV).

But this apostolic ideal stands in sharp contrast with the Old Testament way. For example, the “church” declared to Joshua when he assumed the mantle of leadership from Moses: “Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. ... Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey it ... will be put to death” (Joshua 1:17-18, NIV).

As the Psalms testify, you could say all kinds of impolite things to God in the Old Testament. Just don’t try it with Joshua. You could lose your head. In short, the Old Testament way of doing church was to follow a strong leader. Whatever the leader said, you did.

By contrast, in Acts 15 the believers came together on level ground, talked it through, and prayed until their course of action “seemed good” to the Spirit and to the people (verse 28). The kinds of issues they handled can be very instructive for us today. One example, in particular, stands out: inclusion of the Gentiles within a previously all-Jewish community.

The Jew-Gentile Divide

Jesus’ inclusive attitude toward non-Jews could lead us to assume that all was peace and light thereafter. After all, Jesus had told the story of the good Samaritan, a foreigner who had helped a wounded Jew while his fellow-countrymen, a priest and a Levite, hastened by on the other side of the road (Luke 10:30-35). Similarly, Jesus welcomed the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, even asking her for a drink. The Gospel of John records the woman’s astonishment, noting that “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (John 4:9, NIV). In the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus also cured the demon-possessed daughter of a Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28). And Mark 5:1-20 describes how Jesus drove out the evil spirits from the Gerasene demoniac, sending the demons into the pigs but pointing the

restored man toward the Gentile cities of the Decapolis, to tell the people “how much Jesus had done for him” (Mark 5:20, NIV).

All of that might suggest that Jesus had solved the Jew-Gentile tension “at a stroke.” Not so fast. The book of Acts tells quite a different story. Indeed, Acts confirms that of the three great subjugations listed in Galatians 3:28 (Jew-Gentile, slave-free, and male-female), the New Testament deals effectively with only the first, and that at great cost. Slavery would remain for nearly 2,000 years. Indeed, one can craft a good slave-owning argument from the New Testament, as many Southern preachers did to support slavery during the American Civil War. As for male-female subjugation, we confront it as we speak.

Jewish Law at the Cross

Before we return to the Jew-Gentile issue as an illustration of how the New Testament does church, we must address one more popular misconception, namely, that at the cross the Old Testament laws ceased, with only the Ten Commandments and health laws continuing on. I held that misconception in my early years. But it is now clear to me that some laws changed within the Old Testament itself—that is, before the cross—and that after the cross, some Old Testament laws changed quite gradually.

On the Old Testament side of the cross, Deuteronomy 23 lists three laws that changed within the Old Testament itself: first, the prohibition against eunuchs (Deut. 23:1; cf. Isa. 56:3-5); second, the prohibition against illegitimate offspring (Deut. 23:2; cf. Judges 11:1-2, 29 and Heb. 11:32, where the illegitimate Jephthah is even listed as one of the heroes of faith); and third, the prohibition against Moabites and Ammonites (Deut. 23:3-6; cf. the book of Ruth). Note that Ruth the Moabite and Rehoboam’s mother, Naamah the Ammonite (1 Kings 14:31), are both part of Jesus’ royal genealogy.

On the New Testament side of the ledger, a key example of a late change in the law is the dropping of the circumcision mandate, a key dividing line

between Jew and Gentile. That brings us back to the example of how the New Testament does church.

As far as I know, the Old Testament does not mandate the separation of Gentiles and Jews. But in Acts 10:28, Peter declared to Cornelius and his associates that “it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.” Paul revealed how fragile Peter’s new convictions were by writing that “before certain men came from James,” Peter “used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group” (Gal. 2:12, NIV).

Even if there were no biblical mandate against Jews associating with Gentiles, circumcision was indeed a clear dividing line that went back to Abraham. It was a sign of the “everlasting covenant.” Every male, including those who were slaves, was to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (Gen. 17:10-13). That’s why both John the Baptist (Luke 1:59) and Jesus (Luke 2:21) were circumcised on the eighth day. It was a biblical law.

But after the resurrection, what was the new Christian community to do about non-Jews who wanted to join with the followers of Jesus? Must they first become Jews in order to become Christians? That was the issue in Acts 15. It had come to a head as a result of Paul’s visits to the churches in Asia Minor. Loosely connected to these churches were Gentile “God-fearers,” as they were called, who were attracted to Jewish ethics and morals but not to Jewish ritual. Cornelius, the devout Roman centurion, was one of those Gentiles (Acts 10:1-2). And Acts 10 describes how God intervened with two visionary experiences that took place some six to eight years after the cross. The first one urged Cornelius the Gentile to go visit Peter the Jew; the second one commanded Peter to go meet with Cornelius.

And it wasn’t Cornelius the Gentile who resisted change; it was Peter, the die-hard Jew. One can almost hear Peter hyperventilating when he first dared to enter the room full of Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts

10:28-29). He ended up staying for several days, and the six circumcised Jewish witnesses who had come with him were “astonished” when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles (Acts 10:45, NIV).

The Church Decides

Along similar lines, Paul—out of cell-phone range from Jerusalem—made a Spirit-guided decision that these “God-fearers” did not need to become Jews before becoming Christians; they could become Christians straight away. The results were phenomenal, and the report back to Paul’s home church in Antioch was exhilarating—until some of the obedient, highly structured Jews took issue with Paul, telling new converts, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1, NIV).

Paul and Barnabas stood their ground and headed to Jerusalem to press the matter on behalf of the Gentiles. The only report of their negotiations is the cryptic phrase in verse 7: “after much discussion.” We don’t know what they said, but we do know the result. Peter stood up and declared that when God poured out his Spirit on the uncircumcised Gentiles, he was showing that they would be saved in the same way as the circumcised Jews: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (verse 11, NIV).

James, the leader of the assembly, then took over and articulated the decision, a list of four requirements that were included in a letter sent to the churches: “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (verse 29, NIV).

Where is circumcision in that list? Gone—but not yet prohibited! Acts 16:1-3 reveals that circumcision was still an option in select circumstances. Even after the council where circumcision had fallen off the list, Paul circumcised Timothy, because although the young man’s mother was Jewish, his father a Greek. Since Timothy would be working with Jews, he was circumcised.

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In actual practice, “doing church” means constantly redefining two boundaries: the one separating Courtyard and Keep, and the one separating Courtyard and Outer Wall.

The Castle Model

My family’s several visits to Scotland have suggested the model of a castle to help visualize the process. Picture, if you will, three parts of a good Scottish castle: (1) the central fortress, known as the Keep, (2) the Courtyard, and (3) the Outer Wall. Into the Keep go all of those agreed-upon beliefs and practices that are held in common by the whole community. The Courtyard provides space for all of those who seek, with differences in perspective, to interpret and apply what is in the Keep. If one moves beyond the Outer Wall, however, one has left the community.

For Adventism, the Sabbath provides a wonderful illustration of how the Castle model works. Do all Adventists agree that the seventh day is the Sabbath? Indeed. It’s in the Keep. Do all Adventists agree on what to do on the Sabbath? Not at all. Sabbath behavior is in the Courtyard. But when someone denies the seventh-day Sabbath, that person has moved beyond the Outer Wall and is no longer a member of the Seventh-day Adventist community.

A host of examples amplifying the Castle model can be found in May-Ellen Colón’s fascinating book on Sabbath-keeping.¹ Based on a survey of Sabbath-keeping practices in 51 countries, the book led one somewhat playful Adventist reader to summarize its results as follows: “If you add up all the prohibitions from all 51 countries, you can’t do anything on Sabbath. But if you add up all the things that Adventists actually do in good conscience on the Sabbath, there are no restrictions!”

In actual practice, “doing church” means constantly redefining two boundaries: the one separating Courtyard and Keep, and the one separating Courtyard and Outer Wall. Very conservative believers typically want everything in the Keep with almost no Courtyard, while more progressive members are powerfully tempted to dismantle the Wall. Either extreme is dangerous and not in keeping with the evidence from Scripture. If there is no Wall, the castle community disappears. But if the Courtyard isn’t spacious enough to allow for difference of opinions, the community shrinks to a very small remnant indeed.

In spite of long and loud debates, Adventism has stubbornly managed to keep some things in the

Courtyard rather than in the Keep. For example, the nature of Christ—was Jesus like Adam before the Fall or like Adam after the Fall?—has never been in the Keep. All Adventists agree that Christ was without sin; that’s in the Keep. But exactly how he was without sin has been the subject of a long Courtyard debate. In my view, that’s the way it should be.

Sacrificial Food

Here then is a quick summary of the issues facing the New Testament church. Circumcision, as we have already noted, moved quietly into the Courtyard. The decision was not announced with trumpets and fanfare; it just happened quietly. But when the dispute over eating food offered to idols moved into the Keep, that verdict drew more attention. The matter was thrown into bold relief by the insistence of Roman authorities that all citizens sacrifice to the emperor. The question was so vexing that the church put it into the Keep: believers must abstain from food offered to idols (Acts 15). Although not an issue in the Old Testament, this was a culture-driven problem in New Testament times. Similarly, the circumcision question never surfaced in the Old Testament but was mission-driven by the presence of new Gentile converts to Christianity. In both cases, the New Testament believers were “doing church” by carefully and prayerfully monitoring the boundary between Courtyard and Keep.

Remarkably, however, the New Testament reveals that the prohibition against sacrificial food rather quickly moved from Keep to Courtyard. The key biblical passage is 1 Corinthians 8, where Paul bluntly declared that, in one sense, the issue didn’t belong in either Keep or Courtyard, because every believer knows that “an idol is nothing at all in the world” (1 Cor. 8:4, NIV). But Paul hastened to add that it really was an issue, since some new believers previously lived in a world where an idol *was* indeed something! Paul then articulated his “weaker brother/weaker sister” argument, declaring that liberated Christians who “know” that an idol is nothing could actually destroy those who have not yet been liberated. “When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience,” Paul declares, “you sin against Christ” (verse 12, NIV).

In the West, we no longer worry about food offered

to idols. We check labels for fat, sugar, and fiber, not for notes about idols. Yet in some parts of our Adventist world, the issue is still alive. John Brunt, a former colleague of mine, tells of holding meetings in South Africa with both black and white pastors present. When he took a survey, he was startled to discover that all of the black South Africans declared that the prohibition against food offered to idols was permanent, whereas all of the white South Africans said it was temporary. The reason? The black South Africans stood in much closer proximity to their idol-worshipping past.

Another topic with similarly volatile spiritual overtones is music. For those who have been immersed in the rock music culture, contemporary Christian rock places them at great risk. As one devout woman convert told me, the music in the young-adult pavilion at camp meeting triggered an angry response in her soul. Immediately she was back on the dance floor, in the world that she had left behind.

Women in the Castle

Finally, one more urgent illustration from our contemporary world is the question of women in ministry. How does that fit into the Castle model? If we take Jesus as our guide, equality for ministry would be solidly in the Keep. His attitude toward women was as liberated as his attitude toward Gentiles. Even Paul, in spite of his strong statements against women speaking in church (1 Cor. 14:33-35) or having authority over men (1 Tim. 2:9-15), was the one who stated the ideal that strikes down all subjugations: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NIV). To us, the ideal can be very clear. But given the strong attitudes in our world, we must realize that the issue of women in ministry still belongs in the Courtyard. It is not yet in the Keep. What does that mean for us as we “do church” today?

Again, the New Testament can provide us with guidance. Just as Paul was more conservative than the Jerusalem council when he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1-3) and more liberal when he spoke of food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8), so we too must create some distinctions and make some decisions.

If equality for women in ministry is not yet in the Keep, it certainly is in the Courtyard, safely within the confines of the Castle. Remarkably, for us today the issue is both mission-driven and culture-driven. On the one hand, young women are being called to ministry and must be faithful to their conscience. On the other hand, we should be shaken from our lethargy by recognizing that women are more likely to be granted equality outside the church than inside it. On this topic, secular feminists can be a blessing to the church as we seek to move toward the ideal.

I am convinced that there is room in the Courtyard for those with convictions about equality in ministry. There must be more women elders in local churches and more women pastors in local church pulpits. I summon a clarion phrase from the pen of Ellen White: “We must in our work not only strike the iron when it is hot but make the iron hot by striking.”²

At the same time, however, I recognize how difficult it is to reverse this most deeply rooted impulse toward subjugation. Genesis 3:16 describes the sad result of sin: your husband “will rule over you” (NIV). That’s not God’s ideal, but it is human reality. So I must seek to balance Ellen White’s fire-eating call to “make the iron hot by striking” with her equally forceful call to recognize where people are and to know “the pit whence ye are digged” (Isa. 51:1, KJV). In this case the key quote is in the context of health reform. But in my view, regardless of the issue involved, she beautifully describes how God’s people should relate to those wandering sheep who make up God’s family:

“We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are. Some of us have been many years in arriving at our present position in health reform. It is slow work to obtain a reform in diet. We have powerful appetites to meet; for the world is given to gluttony. If we should allow the people as much time as we have required to come up to the present advanced state in reform, we would be very patient with them, and allow them to advance step by step, as we have done, until their feet are firmly established upon the health reform platform. But we should be very cautious not to advance too fast, lest we be

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The Meaning of *Ekklēsia* in MATTHEW 16 AND 18

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

Because the church as we think of it did not exist in Jesus' lifetime, some scholars question Jesus' use of *ekklēsia* in Matthew 16:13-20 and 18:15. In both places he appears to be handing authority over to the *ekklēsia*. Based on these passages, some attribute to Jesus the establishment of the church with its organizational authority and polity. Roman Catholics go so far as to assert that Jesus created the papacy with Peter as the first pope.

How closely does Matthew's *ekklēsia* match church as we know it today?

Ekklēsia was a common Greek word with the generic meaning "assembly."¹ It could refer to any assembly, civic or religious, public or private, Jewish or non-Jewish, depending on context.² Israel was the *ekklēsia* (assembly) of God. The term was synonymous with "synagogue," and in the Greek version of the Old Testament it replaces the Hebrew word *qahal*, which meant "congregation" and "synagogue."

So the use of *ekklēsia* in the New Testament doesn't automatically indicate a sect separate from Judaism. Paul used the term to refer to the Jesus movement while it was still a part of Judaism (Gal. 1:13). The popular rendering of the term "called-out ones" misrepresents its historical use.

In these passages, Matthew *appears* to use *ekklēsia* to define his community as separate from Judaism, an alternative assembly. However, to credit Jesus with the founding of a new religious institution defies historical reality, because an organization separate and apart from Judaism did not emerge until sometime after 70 CE, around the time of Matthew's writing. Jesus was a Jerusalem Jew, a rabbi who taught and ministered in the prophetic tradition (Luke 4:16-21). The assembly that eventually became Christianity began at Pentecost, though even then it did not define itself apart from Judaism. Luke and Paul portray Peter as an "old school" Jew, who would not have gone into the house of the Gentile Cornelius had he not received a vision from God (Acts 10), and who pandered to hard-right Jewish believers (Gal. 2:11-14).

When Paul encountered his contemporary Jesus in resurrected glory on the Damascus road, he did not convert to a new religion, but his understanding of Judaism changed. The Jesus followers called themselves "the Way" (Acts 9:2); Paul disputed the characterization of the Way as a sect (24:14) because they were, he maintained, bona fide Jews. The label

"Christians" meant not that they were of a different religion, but that they believed they had the correct interpretation of Judaism in Jesus, the long-awaited Christ.

Matthew's *Ekklēsia*

Three considerations help us understand the nature and context of the *ekklēsia* as it appears in Matthew, seemingly outside of its historical and theological context.

First, the gospels emerged decades after Jesus, from a church that had by that time separated from its Judaic roots and was experiencing growing conflict with Judaism and the Roman Empire. The earliest of the gospels is Mark, written some 30 years after the actual events (66-68 CE), and Matthew came even later. The gospels were composed as didactic tools to preserve the Jesus tradition, to bolster faith, and to defend and explain the claim that Jesus is the long-awaited Christ of Judaism.

Second, the gospels reflect an intellectual culture different from the one we're familiar with. Ancient stories that now appear in written form began as oral traditions, concerned not with detailed facts, but with lessons. That's why the same story may appear in

different forms in the four canonical gospels: Each writer used the story to teach a lesson based on the particular need of his audience.

For example, Matthew's account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (21:1-10) differs from the account in the other three canonical gospels. In Matthew, Jesus orders the disciples to untie two animals—a donkey and its colt—rather than one animal, as in the other three gospels. They put their cloaks upon *them*, and Jesus rides *them* into Jerusalem. Because

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Matthew's purpose, alone among the gospel writers, was to argue that that Jesus is the fulfillment of the *Judaic* Messianic hope, he uses fulfillment formulas ("this took place to fulfill") to show how every significant event in Jesus' life fulfills a saying from the Hebrew scriptures. Matthew's account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (21:5) refers back to Zechariah 9:9 (KJV): "Behold, thy king cometh unto thee ... riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass." Matthew assumes that Zechariah speaks of

two animals: a donkey and a colt. Although Hebrew parallelism renders the donkey and the colt the same animal, Matthew is telling the story to fit the literal wording of the text, to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew scripture.³

Similarly, your own exegeses of gospel narratives will be more fruitful if they focus on the writer's meaning, rather than trying to prove whether Jesus actually said or did a particular thing. The latter approach may compromise the integrity of the text or even encourage rejection of its validity.

Finally, Matthew's gospel seems to reflect what appears to be a difficult separation of Jesus' followers from synagogue after the First Jewish–Roman War (66-73 CE). After the separation, they no longer identified as Jews so therefore became subject to the mandatory Roman Emperor cult, without the exemption that the Empire had granted to the Jews. That may be why, in chapter 23, Matthew expands Mark 12:38-40 into a lengthy denouncement of the scribes and Pharisees, functionaries of the synagogue: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood ... and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate" (Matt. 23:37-39, NRSV). This and other sayings reflect the bitter aftertaste of the separation.

So Jesus' pronouncement regarding the *ekklēsia* in response to Peter's confession, "You are the Christ" (16:16), is Matthew's affirmation of

Jesus' authority as God's Christ, who in turn hands that authority over to a movement separated from its roots and struggling to find new footing in a hostile Roman Empire (16:19), with the assurance that "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (16:18, NRSV).

Its Ultimate Failure

The movement began as house assemblies (*ekklēsiai*). After the time of Matthew, however, the *ekklēsia* became increasingly public, power-driven, and hierarchical—to the extent that it became Christianity, the official religion of the Roman Empire. Eventually it suppressed other religions, including Judaism. Matthew's humble, Spirit-inspired house church evolved into an imposing power-driven basilica, later spawning Protestant satellites. This is what it still often resembles today in its official organizational forms.

All of which is to say that the Christian church as we now know it is not the *ekklēsia* of Matthew's gospel, but something quite different. 🏠

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), p. 823.

² See www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/ask-a-scholar/ekklēsia.aspx

³ This should not bring into question the inspiration of Matthew's work. The inspiration is in the message, not in the literary method. We do not value that method today, because it is not acceptable in our intellectual culture, in the same way that no Christian today would own a slave, even though Paul sent Onesimus back to his master (Philemon 1-12).

Pastor Pete's Hair

BY MAYLAN SCHURCH

Twenty-two years as head deacon in the same little church, and I thought I'd seen it all. Nope.

I'm always first to arrive on Sabbaths to get the furnace going, and Pastor Pete gets there not long afterward. One morning he showed up with green hair.

"Happy Sabbath, Dave," he said.

"Painting the house?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?"

"Your hair. It's green."

"No, not painting the house."

"Sermon illustration, then?"

Pastor Pete is known for his sermon illustrations. Sometimes the conference office has even been called.

He nodded thoughtfully. "I guess so," he replied. "But it's way more than that."

Other people were arriving, including treasurer Constance Egan, as well as a thin, serious young family I had never seen before—mom, dad,

and two boys. So I zipped the lips and watched as everybody else caught sight of Pete's hair. Connie glared at it, and the young family studied it in fascination and whispered uneasily among themselves. Other members drifted in from the parking lot, some grinning. I knew they were thinking, *Here we go again. Sermon illustration.*

Connie, who minces no words either inside or outside board meeting, got her chin within range of Pete's.

"Why the hair?" she demanded.

"Wait till the sermon," Pete said calmly.

"Aren't you trying too hard with these illustrations of yours?"

"It's more than that."

During the sermon, we found out how much more. The first thing Pete did was to tell us that this Sabbath the message was going to be not a lecture, but a conversation. "Because I know you have questions," he said. "Like the one I've heard a lot this morning: 'Why the hair?'"

"My question," a woman offered, "is how did you get it to look like that?"

"Millie did it for me," Pete said, "over at Snip 'n' Shade. She had to

order some special products, but she did a great job." He pointed at his scalp. "Notice how at the roots, the green is so bright it's almost yellow?"

We nodded. We had noticed.

"And then, further out, how it gradually becomes a darker and more mature green?"

"Maybe," said Connie silkily, "you should choose a different word than 'mature.'"

Pete winked. "Whatever you say, Connie. But look. The main thing you need to know is that this isn't a gag. It's not just a sermon illustration that I will wash off so that I can do something different next week. This," he paused dramatically, "is a metaphor of spiritual growth."

We waited. Since this was supposed to be a conversation, I almost said, "Aww, gimme a break," but I didn't. I was thinking, *Nice work, Pete. The perfect Sabbath to spring this on us—right when a dear little family has joined us for the first time. And their boys can't keep their eyes off your hair.*

"Remember your conversion?"

Pete asked us. "Remember when you decided to be baptized? Your spiritual life was fresh and new. You still had a lot to learn, but everybody around you could see how thrilled you were about your Savior.

"And then," he continued, lifting some of his hair and letting his fingers slide out to the end, "you began to grow. Your Christian experience no longer depended as much on your feelings, but on God's promises. Now you're in it for the long haul. Your faith has grown from bright green to dark green, like a cornstalk in September."

The mother of the serious family timidly raised her hand. "How long does it take to get that green out of your hair?" she asked.

Pete shook his verdant locks. "It's not coming out," he said. "I'm keeping it that way."

"Time is short, Connie," Pete insisted. "If you truly want to prepare our town for the second coming, yes, I'd like you to dye your hair green."

"You mean, you'll just keep re-dyeing it?"

"Millie will," he corrected her. "It's quite a concoction she mixed up for me. It's not cheap, either. But as soon as my original roots start showing, back I'll go to Millie. She's an artist."

I couldn't help speaking out loud, but it was okay because Pete and I go way back. "So from now on, we're going to be known as the church with the green-haired pastor?"

Annoyed sounds of agreement rose around me. Pete shot his hands up and waved them wildly.

"Dave, you're not getting it!" he shouted above the din. "None of you are getting it! From now on, we're going to be the church with the pastor—and hopefully some of the members—who aren't afraid to boldly witness for the gospel!"

Connie Egan's jaw had been sagging, but she hitched it up enough to say, "You want us to dye our hair green?"

"Time is short, Connie," Pete insisted. "If you truly want to prepare our town for the second coming, yes, I'd like you to dye your hair green."

Connie began to swell, and I feared an explosion. Two people in the back, not regular attendees, got up and stalked out. Other people twisted in their seats, trying to decide whether to follow them or watch the rest of the show.

"Hold it, Pete," I said as calmly as I could. "You search that Bible of yours from Genesis to Revelation, and you won't come up with one verse telling us to dye our hair green."

He was ready for me. "Keep flipping through your Bible, Dave, and find for me a verse that says we have to start Sabbath School at 9:30. Or worship service at eleven. Or have a closing song after the sermon. Yet right here in this room, we live and die by those rules and many others, and woe be to anybody who tries to change them. But those technicalities have absolutely nothing to do with bearing public witness to the life-changing message of the gospel."

One of the Sabbath School teachers said, "Pastor, you're serious about this."

"I am," Pete said flatly. "I'm as serious as Ezekiel was in chapter 4,

when he lay on his side for weeks and weeks to make a prophetic point. We know not the hour of the Master's appearing."

"You know what's going to happen, don't you?" said the teacher. "The media are going to show up."

Pete seized a fistful of green hair. "Let them. And right there, with the cameras rolling, they'll hear the gospel!"

Sure enough, next Sabbath the TV station sent out a camera operator and a newbie reporter. For the 22 seconds they allotted the story on the evening news, they cut out Pastor Pete's gospel presentation but left in his plug for Millie's Snip 'n' Shade, plus an expostulation from Connie.

Well, that was that. Eyebrows went up at the conference office, and they sent a high-ranking delegation to take a look at Pete for themselves. But by the time they arrived, Pete was horrified to find that Millie's experimental concoction was causing an allergic reaction on his scalp. He ended up shaving his head (and looked mighty cool, actually), then the next thing we knew, he was off to hospital chaplain training. The young family vanished; it turned out that we were their last stop on the way to survivalist country living.

Last but not least, the kids' division Sabbath School teachers had to remove the green Sharpies and whiteboard markers from their classroom supplies for a long time, until the obsession passed. 📌

Coffen *continued from page 9*

we do and believe were derived solely from our own study of the Bible, without any help from faithful Jews and Christians who came before us, is just being ungrateful. 📌

¹ See www.jewfaq.org/shabbat.htm

² See www.thenazareneway.com/sabbath/39_prohib_sabbath.htm

³ See www.aish.com/sh/1/48971331.html

⁴ See www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/95907/jewish/The-Shabbat-Laws.htm

⁵ William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 598.

⁶ See www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1354742/posts

⁷ Ernest De Witt Burton, "The Ancient Synagogue Service," *The Biblical World*, August 1896, p. 143.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 148.

⁹ See <http://aviel-8.xanga.com/2008/10/15/evidence-of-the-jewish-background-of-the-early-church>

¹⁰ See http://people.brandeis.edu/~brooten/Articles/Female_Leadership_in_the_Ancient_Synagogue.pdf; see also www.jstor.org/stable/3261007?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

¹¹ Judge William T. Hart wrote: "Church documents that prescribe the church's structure and governance confirm that all parts of the church are parts of a single entity. Next to the Roman Catholic church, the Adventist church is the most centralized of all the major Christian denominations in this country. The General Conference, as the world wide governing body of the Adventist denomination, is the church's highest legislative, judicial and ecclesiastical authority." (Legal Decision of the U.S. District Court, North District of Illinois, East Division, Court Transcript of Derrick Proctor vs the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Case #81 C 4938, Findings of Fact, Section B, Church Objective and Structures, p. 22, Oct. 29, 1986.)

¹² See <https://themennonite.org/opinion/marriage-ceremonies-bible>

¹³ See www.costofwedding.com

¹⁴ *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., p. 614.

¹⁵ *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series, Vol. 12, Raoul Dederen, editor, p. 198.

¹⁶ Merlin D. Burt, "The Trinity in Seventh-day Adventist History," *Ministry*, February 2009 (available online at www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2009/02/the-trinity.html).

¹⁷ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monotheism>

¹⁸ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah_scroll

¹⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), p. 426.

C. Thompson *continued from page 19*

an opportunity to revisit one's cultural heritage, engage with local cultural challenges, and reaffirm cultural values and practices freely in terms that are relevant and easily accessible.

We can't start our club on every street, just as we don't speak every known language. We're not being exclusive, just organic.

Maybe we were wrong for not inviting kids from the other streets to join our one-day club. But I'm not sure that would have been the best approach. We didn't know them as we knew one another. And it would have been an awfully large group to manage. But we might have gone to other streets and encouraged them to start their own clubs. Then we could've had a guild of neighborhood clubs—a "general conference" of clubs from each street. That could have been cool.

I am arguing that we don't need our churches to look the same, function the same, or sound the same. We need churches on location, in context, speaking the language and engaging the issues and meeting the needs of people wherever they are. If you ever want to come visit our street, we'd be happy to have you. I hope we can come and visit you, too. And when you head back to your street, we won't be upset or disappointed. We're confident that we're all one big family. 📌

¹ See Gal. 2:14; 6:12, cf. Acts 15:7-11, 17-20.

² See Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 190-229.

⁴ Alex Bryan addressed the complaints in a sermon on Oct. 8, 2016, titled "Racism," which was part of a series of sermons that sought to answer questions students asked. See <https://livestream.com/accounts/7962515/events/5049912/videos/138258224?t=1484255586557>

⁵ See article recounting the racist social media responses to the BSA worship events at <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2016/02/28/racist-social-media-firestorm-erupts-during-southern-adventist-university-vespers>

A. Thompson *continued from page 37*

obliged to retrace our steps. In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people."³

So equality in ministry may not be

in the Keep yet, but there is plenty of room in the Adventist Courtyard where women can serve their Savior, side-by-side with their brothers in Christ. "Doing church" in the New Testament meant coming together before the Lord, talking it through, and praying it through until their course of action seemed "good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28, NIV). We can do the same. 📌

¹ May-Ellen Colón, *From Sundown to Sundown: How to Keep the Sabbath ... and Enjoy It!* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2008).

² Ellen G. White, Letter 13, 1886, to A. C. and Martha Bourdeau, sent from Switzerland, August 22, 1886; quoted in *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), p. 647.

³ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948 [1875]), pp. 20-21.

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Little Debbie Erases Adventist Life Expectancy Advantage

Adventists were dealt a lethal blow by a recent *National Geographic* article that robbed members of one of their proudest talking points.

The magazine published the latest follow-up piece to a succession of reports on world Blue Zones, or areas containing the longest-living people groups on Earth. It revealed that Loma Linda Adventists—one of the groups highlighted in the original pieces—have since let themselves go.

While Okinawans and Sardinians celebrated their continued inclusion in the Blue Zones with their local wine of choice, teetotaling Seventh-day Adventists in Loma Linda have been unable to hold on to the blessed assurance of the Blue Zones membership.

Although factors influencing the lowered life expectancy of Loma Linda Adventists included completely undisciplined potluck consumption and the absorption of obscene amounts of sodium from veggie meat, researchers identified sugar-laden Little Debbie snack cakes as far and away the biggest reason Adventists had exited the Blue Zones.

“Adventists—even the unusually fit Loma Linda variety—seem to think that because Little Debbie is Adventist-owned, the snacks are somehow a health food,” said lead researcher Falsk Vän.

“This is just one example of the Adventist tendency for blind faith in ideas and products promoted by a select few Adventist tastemakers.”

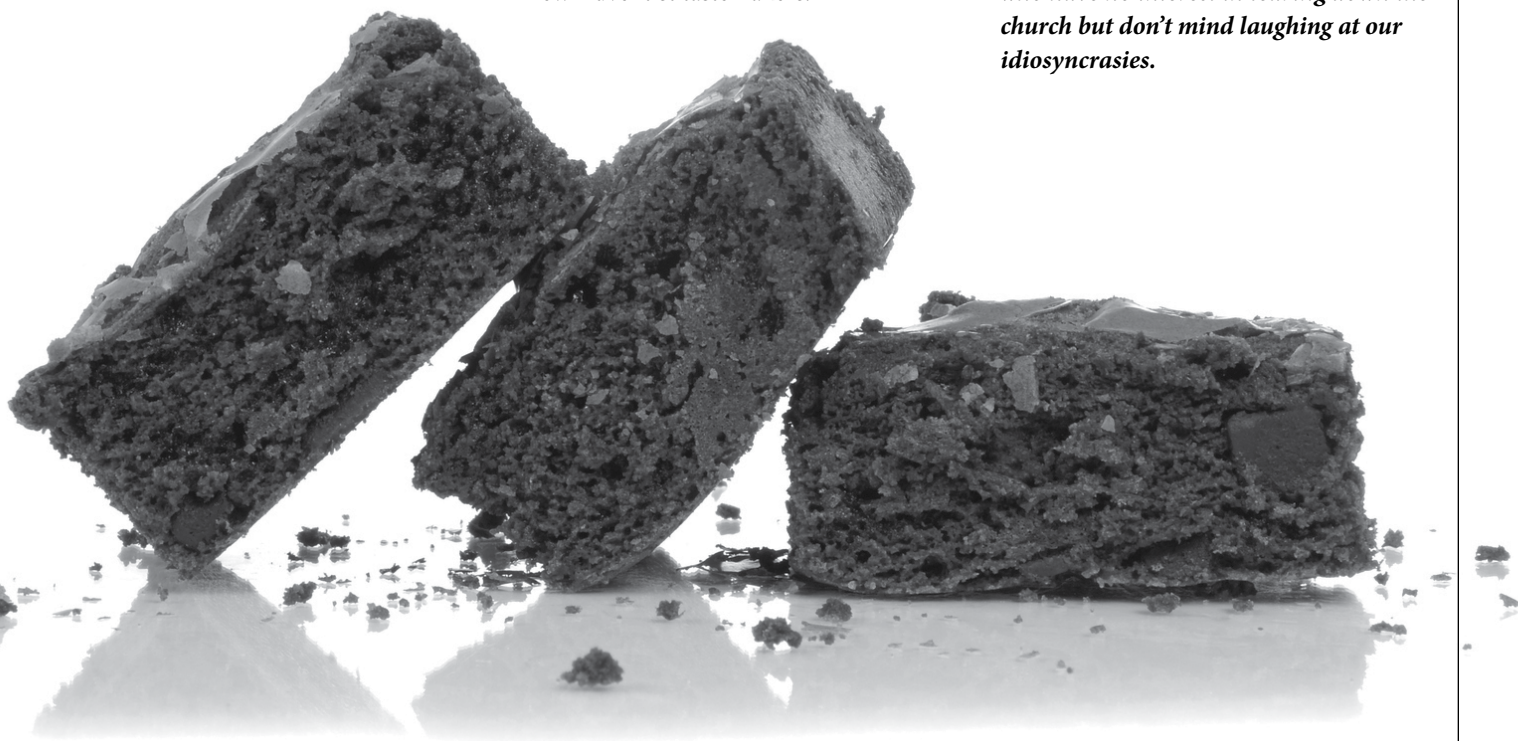
When quizzed as to whether they believed the conclusions of the magazine’s nutritionists, seven in seven Adventists rejected the findings. “How could products that have bankrolled Southern Adventist University and made so many special things happen at the General Conference possibly be bad for us?” asked lifelong Adventist Libros Rojos.

Citing additional examples of mindless Adventist following, Vän pointed to massive tranches of the church clinging to what he called “dogmatic and completely antiquated gender-restricted ordination models perpetrated by graying males hell-bent on being the most peculiar specimens of a peculiar people.”



BarelyAdventist
(barelyadventist.com) is
a satire and humor blog
on Adventist culture
and issues. It is written
by committed Adventists

who have no interest in tearing down the church but don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.



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