The Seventh-day Episcopal Church

A Church With Elbow Room

There's No Perfect Church Structure

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Adventist Today

WHO ARE WE, AND WHO DO WE WANT TO BE?

features

4 Church Governance in Times of Conflict
By Denis Fortin

8 The Big-Tent Church?
By Lisa Clark Diller

14 A Dream of Doctrinal Revival
By Smuts van Rooyen

17 Why We Need an Educated Pastorate
By Jiří Moskala

20 In Search of the Perfect Structure
By Damien Rice

22 The Exegete
Romans 14:17
By Olive Hemmings

24 Mythos
Crisis in the Library
By Maylan Schurch

26 Alden Thompson
The Church of My Dreams

29 Story
A Church With Elbow Room
By David Neff

30 Contributors

31 Barely Adventist
News Briefs

DEPARTMENTS

3 Editorial
Who Are We, and Who Do We Want to Be?
By Loren Seibold

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Who Are We, and Who Do We Want to Be?

By Loren Seibold

I have a friend, a pastor and teacher, who says with stubborn insistence that no one gets to tell him whether or not he's a real Seventh-day Adventist—that his belonging in this denomination is according to his definition and no one else's. Since he's older, smarter, and better-educated than I am, I want to believe him. But ever since he told me that (40 years ago), I've questioned it.

My friend is, like me, a product of the church; he was in Sabbath School since he was in his mother's arms. He's certainly a social and cultural Seventh-day Adventist, and as far as I know he lives an exemplary Seventh-day Adventist life. But he would admit that he couldn't sign off on the 28 fundamental beliefs without extensive explanatory footnotes.

Can you be part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church if you object to much of what it says about itself? If you've moved away from it, or it from you? Some of my friends say "no" and have left. Others, like the aforementioned gentleman, say that their belonging is anchored in multiple and diverse points and that it can't be defined merely by assent to a set of beliefs. As for their relationship to the fundamentals of the faith, they'd say that passively *being* a Seventh-day Adventist isn't the goal anyway. They'd argue that the church is a dynamic, evolving organism, upon which and within which dedicated members act. My friend's contribution is not intellectual assent, but spiritual exploration, as unappreciated as that sometimes is.

Whose Church Is It?

Some ask whether the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as many of its members and its leaders now define it, really can be a home to progressives.

Two points would argue in favor of it. First, we come from a denomination that was founded by bold thinkers and rule-breakers. Our pioneers feared being anchored to decaying creeds, wanting instead a "present truth" that evolved through the guidance of the Spirit. (One of the big lies told by conservatives is that the church hasn't changed—that their version of it is precisely what Seventh-day Adventism was at the very beginning. History says otherwise.) Second, in the United States some of our most thriving church communities are built around universities and hospitals, which many would argue (critically or approvingly) are hotbeds of progressivism.

But as *Adventist Today* readers are aware, the progressive identity isn't something that is well and thoroughly appreciated across the church. Who believes in the prophecies? Who does the evangelism? What kind of leaders are most readily elected? It's not those who want the church to be more open-minded, but those who prefer it to be more certain, more reactive, more propositional. Followers of Amazing Facts and Three Angels Broadcasting Network (3ABN) and members of ASI (Adventist Laymen's Services and Industries) are arguably the most energized and vocal part of the North American church—and are treated as such by our leaders. (Our General Conference president seems sometimes to actively resent our centers of higher learning.) The developing world, too, wins people not by being progressive, but by offering a simple, defined, and performable religion.

That is to say, Seventh-day Adventism still seems to generate the most enthusiasm and loyalty in its fundamentalist forms. Those who call themselves liberal or progressive in North America may have figured out how to make hospitals profitable and university students matriculate, but here the conservatives have a valid criticism of them: they've not figured out how to make our congregations grow, apart from hiring lots of church members, nor how to make new people value our theology and attend our churches.

Seventh-day Adventism still seems to generate the most enthusiasm and loyalty in its fundamentalist forms.

Who Do We Want to Be?

So in spite of some amazing successes in other lands, here in North America the old ways aren't working, and neither are the new. What could get us out of this spiral?

Two observations. First, don't just wait for the church leadership to do it. Unless the church is

Continued on page 30

CHURCH GOVERNANCE

BY DENIS FORTIN

That the Seventh-day Adventist Church is currently facing a governance crisis is an understatement. Recent conversations over women's ordination have highlighted major differences of understanding of the role of various levels of organization in the decision-making process of the church.

Since the beginning, the Christian Church has used various models of church governance. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have long held to an episcopal polity. Since the Reformation, Protestant churches have followed three main types of church governance: (1) the episcopal model (Anglican/Episcopal, Lutheran, United Methodist); (2) the presbyterian model (Presbyterian, Reformed); and (3) the congregational model (Baptist, Pentecostal, United Church of Christ, Mennonite).[1]

Our Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief No. 12 says in part that "The church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour."[2] Although the statement describes the church as a community and lists some of its activities, it omits any reference to governance structure. The *Church Manual* is more explicit in describing the Adventist governance system, but it doesn't say which of the traditional models it most resembles.[3]

Some say that the dominant model in Seventh-day Adventist church governance is presbyterian, though in reality it uses elements and characteristics of all three systems.[4] In my opinion, the episcopal model is the dominant one in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and one cause of our current crisis is that we have not clearly recognized this.

The Episcopal Model

The episcopal polity has been the prevailing form of church governance for most of Christian history. This model says that Christ entrusted authority and the government of the church directly to the apostles, who in turn entrusted it to their successors. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans have said that bishops are the legitimate successors of the apostles. The role of the bishop is therefore to exercise the power of God, which has been vested in him (or her, in some Protestant churches).

The bishop governs and cares for a group of churches, rather than one local congregation, and has authority over pastoral placement. This regional overseer preserves the true faith and church order within a particular area. The episcopal model offers a clear organizational structure and system of authority and delegation of authority.[5] The dominant understanding of unity in this system is visible unity, which is manifested when lower organizations belong to a higher organization and follow the regulations of the higher organization.

The New Testament function of overseer (Greek, *episkopos*) is described in the pastoral letters of Paul (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 3:1-2). But it is Ignatius of Antioch who, in the early part of the second century, first gave shape to the role of the bishop.[6] In his letters, Ignatius advocates a typology of heavenly hierarchy in each local community: the bishop represents God the Father, the council of presbyters (or elders) represents the council of apostles, and deacons represent Jesus in their servant ministry (see Matt. 20:25-27). Since without a bishop the local church cannot function or even exist, the bishop is constitutive of the whole congregation, and perfect unity is manifested in obedience to this leader.

One other important feature of the episcopal model is its three levels of ordination. The deacon, presbyter (priest or elder), and bishop each have a distinct ordination service for different functions and hierarchical authority. The bishop is superior to the presbyter, who is superior to the deacon. For some episcopal churches, ordination imparts a qualitative change to the human nature of the bishop and the priest, placing him in the category of clergy and giving him spiritual gifts to perform the sacraments of the church. The sacraments are valid only if performed by a priest/pastor with the presence or consent of a bishop. In this system, the headship of Christ is manifested at the highest level, through the leaders of the church when they make decisions.

The Presbyterian Model

The presbyterian system of governance places primary authority in the office of elder and upon representative councils, which exercise that authority. The primary church leader is the elder, either lay (ruling elder) or employed by the church (teaching elder, or pastor). In this model the terms elder (*presbyteros*) and bishop (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably and describe the same function of pastor or overseer (Titus 1:5, 7; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). Elders are representatives of the people and are not ontologically (by nature) different from lay persons. Their ordination does not give them any special qualitative or spiritual characteristics that place them above the rest of God's people. Their role is functional: to serve the people and the church.

The concepts undergirding the presbyterian model are collegiality, collaboration, interdependence, and goodwill. Local churches are administered by a council of elders, and each congregation belongs to a larger body, such as a presbytery or synod, which is administered by a council of elders and lay

persons. All of the presbyteries (synods, conferences) meet regularly in a general assembly. Its pattern for church governance is the Jerusalem council of Acts 15.

It is in these councils and assemblies that the will of God is expressed and the Lordship of Jesus is found. Authority in the presbyterian model flows both from the top down, as higher councils exercise limited but important authority over individual congregations within a presbytery (for example, only the presbytery can ordain ministers, appoint pastors, and start or close a congregation) and from the bottom up (for example, the moderator and officers are not appointed from above but, rather, are elected by the representatives of congregations in the presbytery).[7] The moderator, or leader of the presbytery, is usually elected for only one term. She or he serves as chair of the council meetings and has no real authoritative function outside of these meetings.

Congregationalism

Congregationalism is characteristic of denominations within the "free" church tradition, such as Baptist, Pentecostal, and nondenominational churches, as well as most megachurches. This model stresses the autonomy of the local congregation and the role of the individual Christian in its operations. Because the local church is the ultimate seat of authority over doctrinal beliefs, discipline, and operations, this system stresses democratic participation. Local congregations can belong to a larger body of churches (such as the Southern Baptist Convention, for some congregational Baptist churches), but such ties are mostly an association or fellowship. Congregational churches usually have only two levels of ministry: the deacon and the elder, with the pastor functioning as an elder. The local parishioners make decisions regarding organizational structure, membership, and leadership.

Each model has its strengths. According to Southern Baptist seminar professor Gregg Allison, the episcopal model offers a clear and well-structured system of authority, a leadership that is dedicated to the care of pastors, a national or even worldwide communion that offers a visible sign of unity, and an office (the bishop) that defends doctrinal orthodoxy and church orthopraxis. The presbyterian model offers local churches accountability to the larger church with a system of checks and balances, and it values cooperation and interdependence between churches.[8] The congregational model values the participation of each member in the mission of the church (priesthood of all believers), the freedom to do its own local mission activities, and the direct headship of Christ over the local church.

The Adventist Hybrid

Seventh-day Adventist church organization is a mix of all three traditional models. It follows the congregational model in giving local Adventist congregations responsibility for church membership and baptism, ecclesiastical discipline, and local mission activities. In addition, Adventist liturgy and worship is similar to many congregational churches with nonliturgical and nonsacramental traditions.

The presbyterian attributes are reflected in the honorific title Adventists use for church leaders ("elder") as well as the conference system that governs through committees and policies. The local churches belong to a conference, which provides oversight to the congregations. The conference owns church properties and also appoints and ordains pastors.

Yet the episcopal model of the United Methodist Church in the United States comes closer to the traditional Adventist governance structure, with its organization and hierarchical authority structure. The Adventist conference resembles the diocese of episcopal churches, and the conference president, although not called or ordained as a bishop, exercises many of the functions of an episcopal bishop. The fact that presidents of the various hierarchical bodies within the Adventist structure (conference, union, division, and General Conference) can serve an unlimited number of terms is a mark of episcopalism, as are our three levels of ordination (deacon, elder, pastor).

Another mark of episcopalism is the adoption of fundamental beliefs by the highest organizational level (for Adventists, this happens during a session of the General Conference—often described as "the voice of God" or "the highest authority of God on earth"). Church policies are adopted at higher levels and require compliance at the lower levels. The system of checks and balances between various levels is highly efficient and well designed, and compliance with policies and regulations is fundamental to visible unity.

In distinction from the Roman Catholic or Anglican systems, Seventh-day Adventists have no concept of bishops in apostolic succession, nor do we give our presidents sole constitutive authority to make the church or to create visible unity through the sacraments. Methodist and Adventist systems function with representative assemblies made up of pastors and lay people, and they are less focused on the role and function of one person—a mark of the Protestant "priesthood of all believers" characteristic of the presbyterian system.

Yet the roles of Adventist church leaders are strangely akin to those of the episcopal bishops. According to our *Church Manual*, the conference president is responsible for the oversight of all pastors and all churches within the conference. "He

stands at the head of the gospel ministry in the conference and is the chief elder, or overseer, of all the churches. He works for their spiritual welfare and counsels them regarding their activities and plans."[9] He has access to all local congregations' meetings, record books, and reports.[10] He should be present at the organization or dissolving of congregations.[11] In the absence of a pastor, the conference president gives permission for a lay elder to baptize new members, preside over the Lord's Supper, or perform marriage ceremonies.[12] When a person seeks to join the Seventh-day Adventist church by profession of faith rather than by baptism, the conference president should be consulted ahead of time.[13] The president also authorizes non-Adventist speakers in local churches.[14]

Ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist church also displays some episcopal characteristics. Historically, Adventists have utilized three hierarchical levels of ordination. The local church is responsible for the first two levels (deacon and elder), while the conference is responsible for the third level (pastor). Since ordination for pastoral ministry is also understood as qualification for worldwide ministry, the General Conference determines policies and qualifications for ordination.

Adventist ordination resembles apostolic succession in that only other ordained ministers can perform the ceremony; unordained laity are not typically invited to be part of the ordination prayer. Additionally, only an ordained minister can take the function of a conference president (a point of contention among us), and since thus far our church policy allows only for men to be ordained, our denomination resembles other episcopal churches with male-only leadership. No wonder, then, that Adventists might understand ordination to give a qualitative mark of authority and ministry on those ordained.

Furthermore, since a pastor is ordained for life, regardless of his function within the church, the tendency toward upward authority has been a key feature of Adventist culture, which is encouraged also by its upward remuneration scale and privileges. In a traditional episcopal ethos, leaders at a given level of church governance are usually selected from the ordained leaders in the lower levels, and these leadership positions do not have term limits. The role of the Adventist conference president is analogous to an episcopal bishop appointed for life, rather than the typical presbyterian moderator who serves usually only one term and then returns to pastoral ministry.

So while the Seventh-day Adventist governance structure reflects presbyterian characteristics with its councils and committees, interdependence, checks and balances, as well as the involvement of lay people in its governance, the roles and functions of its leaders, along with its understanding and practice of a hierarchical ordination, reflect an episcopal polity.

This dissonance is significant: Adventist lay members think they are involved in a presbyterian governance structure, while the leaders function within an episcopal structure.

In my opinion, the episcopal model is the dominant one in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and one cause of our current crisis is that we have not clearly recognized this.

Strains in Church Governance

The current tensions in Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology over the ordination of women to pastoral ministry (or, for some, to discontinue ordination altogether)[15] are a result of conflict between these three models of church governance.

At odds with the dominant episcopal governance structure, which considers the role of its ministers and leaders as crucial to its survival and authority structures, is Adventism's original presbyterian impulse that sees the role of the ordained minister as functional rather than sacramental, as in the New Testament's priesthood of all believers. The Adventist minister does not dispense the saving grace of God through sacraments, since Adventists practice ordinances. This is also evident when one considers that most of the functions of an Adventist ordained minister can be performed by a commissioned minister or even a lay elder.[16]

Even more obvious is the recent impulse toward decentralization in some union conferences. They reason that since lower organizations decide who is to be ordained, they are also responsible to interpret or apply denominational policies as they see best within their own contexts.

The tension between centralized and decentralized authority is nothing new. At the General Conference Sessions of 1901 and 1903, the centralization of authority in the General Conference was implemented when various semi-independent ministries of the church became departments of the General Conference and local conferences. The same executive committee would provide leadership and management oversight for all of these ministries within a given region. Yet, at the same time, this centralized authority was counterbalanced with the creation of union conferences with their own semi-independent boards and constituencies. And all of the unions together would form the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Over time, the General Conference Executive Committee has reclaimed much of the authority that the creation of union conferences was intended to diffuse,[17] such as by the creation of the divisions of the

General Conference. Our church structures have evolved from a congregationalist system (before the organization of local conferences and the General Conference in the early 1860s) to a hybrid presbyterian/episcopal system in the last decades of the 19th century, and finally to a more hierarchical and episcopal system by mid-20th century.

What Next?

Is all of this leading us to an inevitable schism? Not if we take advantage of the best features of our ecclesiology. One of the assets of our hybrid episcopal system—our common belief in a single mission—is a strong antidote to schism. But preventing a schism, or even a large exodus of members, will require action from our dominant centralized episcopal structure: to re-embrace the important presbyterian and congregationalist aspects in our history.

Here are five suggestions.

First, some church entities might benefit from less rigid ties with the General Conference structure—and I don't think we need to be afraid of that. Adventism can remain within one worldwide structure as long as we understand that true unity is first a spiritual unity of common mission and belief, not just a visible unity within an organizational structure. Trying to impose the latter by means of policies has always been counterproductive. Loosening these ties will require wisdom, trust, and generosity, but I believe that in the end it would actually strengthen our mission and ministry.

Second, we can remain within one worldwide structure if we decentralize ecclesial authority enough so that all church policies are subject to cultural and local accommodation. In contrast to fundamental beliefs, which are held by all church members, church policies are the practical applications of rules and standards that vary from country to country, from culture to culture, and over time. The organizational model of the General Conference is best seen as a federation of semi-independent union conferences that are best equipped to apply the rules, policies, and standards of the church within their cultures or local traditions. If Adventists see themselves as having one unique mission (i.e., to communicate a special end-time message to all the world), then how this is done and by whom can be decided by the local entities. Such details need not be imposed by administrators who live and function in a different world—which was, in fact, the major reason for the creation of union conferences in 1901.

Third, for the sake of unity in Christ based on our understanding of the priesthood of all believers (which is a strong impulse in presbyterian governance), we need to reappraise our understanding of what it means to be an ordained leader. At the heart of our understanding of the gospel is the message that church leaders are not to be masters but, rather, servants of the people (Matt. 20:25-27). It is natural, in an episcopal form of church governance, for church leaders to wield more and more authority. Hierarchical upward mobility is perceived as a blessing of God. That natural tendency must be checked, and we should consider seriously the value of term limits on church leadership positions at all levels—something commonly done in the presbyterian system.

Fourth, because the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers will often create tension within a hierarchical episcopal church structure, we need to rethink the roles of our church leaders. The title of "president" held by our top leaders is functionally a synonym for "bishop," given their roles and functions. That title assumes authoritative role and functions. Should we reconsider what our presidents do and reshape our administrative structure to give them the role of moderator or general secretary instead? Such a change would transform the dynamics of our committees and require a rewrite of our *Church Manual* and policies, but it would immediately add value to the voice of lay people on all committees, and it would enhance the servanthood principle of our leadership positions.

Lastly, the most important spiritual gifts needed by church leaders in an episcopal structure at risk of schism are humility, gentleness, meekness, servanthood, and repentance. May God grant these gifts of his Spirit to all of us.

[1] A good explanation of the various models can be found in Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), pp. 249-317.
[2] "Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs," *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016), p. 166.
[3] *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, pp. 24-30.
[4] Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), p. 99.
[5] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, p. 302.
[6] Many ecumenical documents have admitted the second-century roots of the episcopal model. See, for example, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. 24.
[7] Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, p. 267.
[8] ibid., p. 302.
[9] *Church Manual*, p. 31.
[10] ibid.
[11] ibid., pp. 36, 40.
[12] ibid., p. 77.
[13] ibid., p. 50.
[14] ibid., pp. 120-121.
[15] In the United States, the Columbia Union Conference and the Pacific Union Conference have decided to practice gender-inclusive ordination. Some conferences (Oregon, South Atlantic) in other union conferences have also allowed for men to be commissioned as pastors rather than ordained. In Europe, some countries practice gender-inclusive ordination while some countries have attempted to discontinue ordination altogether.
[16] Some conferences have practically eliminated any of the restrictions for commissioned ministers in the performance of certain functions reserved for ordained ministers: the ordination of local elders and deacons, the organization of new congregations, and the supervision of disciplinary actions of church members. Some union conferences have also asked to eliminate the restriction that a conference president must be an ordained minister.
[17] In his most recent book, George R. Knight provides a good history and interpretation of these various changes to Adventist ecclesiology. See *Adventist Authority Wars, Ordination, and the Roman Catholic Temptation* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2017).

THE BIG-TENT C

By Lisa Clark Diller

Back in 2008, my husband and I with a few other friends were invited by Pastor Mike Fulbright to plant a church in downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee. We spent nine months meeting every week, hammering out what we thought should be our mission, practices, and priorities. We wanted a tight community where people love one another, a church that lives up to the promises of the New Testament; where people across the entire spectrum of ethnicity, class, gender, and personality come together to worship Jesus and declare the gospel, all using our spiritual gifts in a way that would help God's kingdom flourish.

The most painful part, and the place where we actually lost some people, was when we looked at what it meant to be a "member" of our church. Would membership be synonymous with Adventist denominational membership? What about those who hadn't yet chosen to be baptized? Or those not baptized but married to a member? How about someone becoming a member who rarely shows up? We talked about people being part of small groups, engaged in community service, and helping others to know Jesus.

What would a fully engaged core member of the church look like? Any attempt at defining full-fledged membership too closely made some people feel uncomfortable.

The Almost-Impossible Community

We were basically asking questions about discipleship—the next step after saying, "I'm with these people," which is what we do when we join a church. Are there multiple levels to membership, to being the Body of Christ? Is this biblical? It seemed like sometimes we were saying we wanted a whole range of diverse people to be part of our church, but also that we wanted them to end up behaving or prioritizing in the exact same way.

As we talked about our expectations, we felt the push-back of some in our planting team. We were, in a sense, talking about two or more "tiers" of membership. A person could say this was their church, but the leadership might be communicating that we wouldn't really think of them as a fully actualized member unless they matched our description.

Additionally, we observed unspoken markers of those considered to be fully part of the community. We'd all had friends who had been welcomed to other churches as observers but then prevented, because of their sexual orientation, from fully participating in the life of the community. We wanted to avoid this sort of exclusion. But beyond that, we realized we might also accidentally create criteria for full inclusion that presumed certain economic levels, political loyalties, physical abilities, or ethnic identities. Despite our best

HURCH?

Being the Body of Christ in a Pluralist-Individualist Culture

intentions, the tight culture formed by our leadership team might result in a space that said some were more welcome than others.

It was a lesson in how difficult it is to create a flourishing community of worshipers who reflect the whole spectrum of society and serve the world and each other through the power of the Spirit. I think that today the leadership team would admit that we've planted a church that mostly reflects a culture that could be called "aging hipster." We're mostly white, college-educated, young-ish coffee-lovers who are progressive in our politics and invested in the joys and quirks of urban life; in other words, we're not as diverse as we had hoped. We found that in a world full of so much choice, people go places where it is easiest to belong, where they don't have to explain themselves too much. If they find it very hard to fit in, they often choose to withdraw from the bonds of our community altogether.

So here we are, trying to decide if we can actually be a big-tent church. Can we include people whose gifts or dreams for God's kingdom aren't in keeping with the larger group? In this article I will explore how modern individualism and superficial pluralism impact our local churches and how, in spite of that, we might create "thicker" communities—spaces where grace and forgiveness and the gospel are practiced.

The Historical Context

Local Christian communities in the pre-modern world were focused on coming together for communion. Communion—the Lord's Supper or, in the Roman Catholic world, the Mass—enacted their beliefs and represented their unity in Jesus.

However, just before the Reformation, an increasing number of (primarily rich) people were paying to hear private masses. The reformers saw this as a distortion of the gospel, because it took individuals away from the unity Jesus called us to—that unity acted out in the communion meal.

The Protestant reformers not only called people out of what was seen as a corrupt church, but also formed them into new communities. This was a particular challenge, because for most of Christian history one of the most heinous sins was "schism," or breaking away from communion with the church. Jesus' prayer for unity seemed impossible to fulfill when people were choosing to not worship with their neighbors and, instead, to be part of a different communion. Reformers had to explain explicitly why they were starting a new church rather than persisting in community with the church they were born into, often arguing that it was so completely corrupt that no one could stay in it and still be a good Christian. These aren't

arguments most of us think we need to use today when we change denominations.

Christians don't hear much about the sin of schism anymore, which is partially because our assumptions about community and unity and belonging have changed. Those of us who study the origins of the modern world, such as the development of liberal political institutions that are largely based on voluntary organizations and individual rights, have observed a change in the expression of the human need for community. We organize ourselves differently now. Through most of human history, people took for granted that their identity and privileges were ones they were born into, with little room for change. Today we have political rights as individuals, not as groups. Moreover, we think of ourselves as *choosing* groups—such as clubs or churches or political parties or other institutions—to identify with, rather than being born into them. In fact, much of our current notion of freedom comes from the idea that we can leave our families and point of origin and join another community or group or identity.

When we don't learn how to negotiate and cooperate over the long term with a specific group of people, we suffer.

The normalization of religious choice started with the Great Awakening, when the idea of conversion and joining the church as a result of a personal experience became common. Churches that formed using the model of conversion and personal choice could also excommunicate members who didn't live up to their ideals, and pressure to fit within one's church of origin enforced a strong sense of belonging. Participation in and adhering to the standards of a denomination or a local congregation not only became the criterion for church belonging, but also helped create the paradigm for what we call civil society. It's this multilayered belonging and participation in debate and collective action through non-governmental organizations that gives liberal democracies their flavor. Today, scholars are concerned that our civic skills are declining, along with our abilities to make liberal democracies work, because in the last three decades, fewer people are belonging to clubs and other voluntary groups.

We have here a double-edged sword, which damages us mostly because we don't realize it's there. We want the ability to come and go between groups as we please, or to not join a group at all if it doesn't suit us exactly. But when we don't learn how to negotiate and cooperate over the long term with a specific group of people, we suffer. On the other hand, if we can choose our community, then we don't have a "right" to belong to it. If we don't fit with one club, we simply choose another.

And this is the other side of the sword: we don't understand that our most important ways of belonging (family, faith, ethnicity, even citizenship) may not actually be *chosen* at all. We are born into these categories and only move from them with great trauma. Our entire view of freedom, both our ability to leave a group and a group's right to kick us out if we don't fully belong, ignores the deep pain that comes from exclusion. We can see this in the pain that people feel when they feel pushed out of their churches and the sadness and emotional alarm many of us experience when our friends or family leave the church. These are deeper emotions than we have when we simply neglect to continue our membership in a club.

So where does that leave the idea of an organic Body of Christ—that holdover from a day when such metaphors worked?

The Challenge

Those of us who have been in church leadership, and especially those of us who have planted churches, know how important it is to shape a local church culture, to create a sense of communal mission and identity. Anyone who has a pastoral care for their church has goals for the people with whom they are discipling and worshiping. Hopes for how they will grow and participate in mission and kingdom-building.

In our church plant, we have attempted to articulate strong missional goals for the congregation and a clear identity about who we are and how we do what we do. Sadly, those who don't think they are "living up to" those ideals sometimes feel that they are second-class members of the Body of Christ. Our goals for being an effective and tightly formed community can result in hurt and misunderstandings. As we elevate some members to congregational/community leadership who help create the church culture we want, others feel left out. Maybe we unintentionally make it look as if only the college-educated are qualified to be spiritual leaders. Or that those who never marry aren't as fully formed spiritually as those who do. Or that one ethnic culture is more desirable than another.

On top of the challenge of communicating ideals and plans without making people feel excluded or "less than," we struggle with the difficulty of creating strong bonds in a culture that privileges individualism. We are operating counterculturally when we create missional communities, whether within small groups or in a congregation as a whole. We are asking people to love each other, hold each other accountable, and show up for and forgive each other. For many of us, this seems like a lot of work in a world where there are so many demands on our time—and a multitude of worship options. Perhaps some of us even believe that we have enough support without the deep fellowship that the bonds of communion and the kingdom are intended to provide.

It seems that the very good things liberal political culture has provided (i.e., freedom of choice and the right to leave or join voluntary associations) work against our "thick" community. The superficiality of a pluralist culture is on display when we insist we want to get to know people who are different from us, yet we continue to silo ourselves off into groups of people like ourselves. By creating a community bound by love and obligation, we are trying to combat the toxicity of individualism within a culture that values pluralism only in shallow ways.

Five Principles

In thinking about how to practice love, I have looked to biblical principles that I have seen work in big, complicated families as well as in churches.

1. Show up. For people who have many choices, this is harder than you might suppose. Yet there is no biblical possibility for being Christians outside of community. Jesus uses the people in our congregation to help us love and serve and be who He was in the world. We *are* the Body of Christ collectively. Although the denominational network supports us, this kind of gathering is a local thing.

As I said above, our culture tends to emphasize "*my* rights" or "what I need to do for *me*." This radical individualism has been widely and correctly decried; we are lonely, fragmented, less healthy, and less human when we make decisions and live in ways that take only ourselves and our immediate needs into consideration. Romans 14:7 articulates this to a struggling church community: "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself" (NKJV).

A recorded interview with anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson (daughter of Margaret Mead) reminded me that liberal individualism doesn't acknowledge often enough our "rights" to *each other*—to relationship. Bateson argues that our rituals and obligations are to the larger community and that in our language of individual rights, we may forget the community. We are embedded in networks of relational obligation. She encouraged her listeners to consider that we have the right to mourn each other and celebrate with each other and worry about each other. Love creates networks of obligation. We don't live for ourselves alone.

In families, we frequently sacrifice personal goals for the greater good: sharing the car, rearranging the schedule, losing sleep to nurse a sick family member. My goals aren't always accomplished, and my own ideals aren't always lived up to, because other people are around who have different needs than I do.

This is true in churches, too. For instance, I am living for myself when I judge people in my congregation for not signing up for the program I initiated. Or when I pick and choose my local church based primarily on what doesn't annoy me in the sermons.

The superficiality of a pluralist culture is on display when we insist we want to get to know people who are different from us, yet we continue to silo ourselves off into groups of people like ourselves.

Many church leaders are people who are well connected and could spend each Sabbath with their friends and family, or out in nature, rather than in a local church. Spiritually and communally, they would be just fine. But what of those who have nowhere to go if the church isn't their family? I need to be there for them.

2. Tolerate—don't judge. Tolerating the differences between us seems like a rather low bar. But learning to accept the annoying and the (to us) inexplicable in the lives of those around us is an important starting point for community. Romans chapter 14 also contains a rich reminder that we may be in community with people whom we genuinely cannot understand. "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or

falls. … So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (verses 3, 4, 12, NKJV).

I may be worshipping and serving with people who make choices or have personalities or lifestyles that seem out of keeping with what I understand the gospel to be, but Paul says that "to their own master they stand or fall." Part of creating thick community is suspending some of my judgment about other people's temperaments or priorities or actions.

In addition, we create thicker community by not front-loading the differences we have with others. Romans 14 advises us to keep some of our strong ideas to ourselves, while not feeling like we need to give them up or feel badly about them. Some of the passages sound a bit relativistic, not unlike our modern world. For example: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (verse 5, NKJV). It is a radical idea to love and live for others when we have different convictions, not allowing ourselves even to indulge in passive aggression against those who differ from us.

Our Adventist denomination increasingly functions like the big mainstream churches, but our Anabaptist roots remind us what it means to respect the differences in others. In practice, this requires constantly forgiving each other.

I think this is an experiment that is going on all of the time, in healthy local churches as well as in families.

3. Appreciate and enjoy. Too often congregations operate in a culture of scarcity, more aware of what we don't have financially or in personnel resources rather than enjoying the community, gifts, and fruits of the Spirit that God has given us. Our sacred text reminds us that all good things are from God and that we should enjoy them as his gifts (James 1:17). When I'm grateful, I'm much less likely to see others as the enemy or to judge them.

We show gratitude in our local congregation by celebrating each other more and trying to get to know the hobbies, lives, interests, gifts, and passions of the people we are worshipping with. We find ways to utilize those gifts—and to help people grow them. We don't wait until our children are concert pianists to let them use musical talent for the glory of God and the good of the community. We allow ourselves to be impressed and to watch them grow, and eventually to be led by the children-become-youth-become-skilled adults in our lives.

We must do the same with all of our brothers and sisters in the faith. We are blessed by those we are in fellowship with when we move beyond mere efficiencies to enjoying the special humans-made-in-God's-image who are around us. I have found that the emotional barriers, resentments, and hurts I hold against people in my church can be overcome by a genuine attempt to get to know them and their perspective. This is especially true when I take chances to notice and to tell them the things I appreciate about them. Flourishing community requires enjoying each other.

4. Tell the truth. Enjoying and tolerating each other doesn't mean allowing bullying, toxic interaction, or dysfunction to dominate our congregations. Diversity should have a purpose. Our unity is based on the mandate to be a reconciling people and to confront each other, as needed, using the principles in Matthew 18.[1]

Our Adventist denomination increasingly functions like the big mainstream churches, but our Anabaptist roots remind us what it means to respect the differences in others. In practice, this requires constantly forgiving each other.[2] The Anabaptist tradition argued that such unity and reconciliation was found in gathering together for worship. This is what we see in the Trinitarian imperative in John 17—that we are one through worship, as God is one. Part of what is tempting about avoiding church services is that we won't have to be around people who say hurtful things. But we need to gather for worship, so we should help hold such bullies accountable, even as we forgive them.

Many Anabaptist writers are critical of generic modern pluralism. "Celebrations of 'pluralism' [Howard Yoder] argued, can be a way to avoid holding one another accountable by asking if we believe what we say to be true… Too often celebrations of diversity are attempts to avoid the hard 'duties of reconciliation, postponing long range investment in tasks that take time and that demand occasional readiness for suffering.'"[3] We must go beyond thinking of diversity as simply having people with different colors of skin in our churches, or enjoying food from a wide range of countries. We need to persist through the challenge of hearing

that some of our language appears racist, or that we aren't doing enough to include people with physical disabilities.

All of this must happen at the local church level. Though Adventists may have stronger denominational ties than most Anabaptists, we also have robust local church traditions and can see our "visible unity" best in the local congregation. We don't get to practice being the Body of Christ simply by listening to sermons on podcasts and reading private devotionals. We must show up and tell the truth in person.

Ideally, then, we will confront the things that need to be confronted, and we will be willing to hear people say things that hurt our feelings sometimes. We will say "I'm sorry" more often. In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus says that if someone has something against us, we should go directly to that person to seek reconciliation. It doesn't matter who is right or wrong. Even if the other person is the one (in our opinion!) with the real problem, we are to assume responsibility for making the relationship loving again. This sort of truth telling goes beyond the self-congratulation of superficial pluralism.

It may be painful, but as members of functional families know, working out the problems actually creates opportunity for love to flourish.

5. First persist—and then sometimes let go. The benefits of thick community don't happen immediately, and it is worthwhile to work through some of the challenges in order to get to a point where we can appreciate and serve well together. Families understand the benefits of long-term relationships and the richness that comes from showing up together over years and decades.

However, sometimes we must let people go when they need to leave. This is hard for those of us who are church leaders, who want everyone to love our church and feel good and stay. Romans 14:13-15 warns us not to put stumbling blocks in the way of our ability to practice love. To force people into our mold, to insist that they stay with us no matter what, can be very stifling. Barnabas and Paul had different concepts of ministry. When pursuing their calling together didn't work, they went their separate ways. Sometimes the most considerate action, the thing that removes the stumbling block to love, is to allow someone to go to a different congregation—or maybe even another denomination.

This might sound like we are giving in to selfish pluralism again. But the reality is that people have choices, and when they are convinced they need to leave, after all of the appropriate articulations of love and attempts at reconciliation, perhaps we should let them. Still, it is vitally important to make sure that we've tried to pursue God's calling together before we decide to go our separate ways.

Living the Dream

Even when we try to follow these principles, structural realities interfere with our desire to include a wide range of people in loving, missional fellowship. I remind you again that we live in a pluralist world, and the Christian version of that is to allow for diversity of practice and belief within the context of our shared commitment to the kingdom of God. We actually *are* very different from one another, and each congregation will have its own particular priorities, practices, and identity. Sometimes larger congregations find it easier to include diverse missions without isolating the outliers. But in small churches, where it is glaringly obvious who is in and who is out, making people feel fully included will require massive amounts of social skill, emotional energy, love, and personal care. Not all congregations—large or small—are up to the task.

I'm inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together.* "Just as Christians should not be constantly feeling the pulse of their spiritual life, so too the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be continually taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more assuredly and consistently will community increase and grow from day to day as God pleases." I read this as an argument that we actually *are* the Body of Christ, and we should take more joy in that as we practice trying to love these people who are the best representatives we have of the presence of God in the world.

Which is to say: don't let your ideal church kill the one you actually get to be part of. We want thick communities of grace. Maybe they are actually here all around us. Bonhoeffer's exhortation remains as true today as it was 80 years ago: "The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."

[1] Importantly for Seventh-day Adventists, this is an apocalyptic directive:
"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.
And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children,
And the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:5-6, NKJV).
[2] Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 109.
[3] ibid., pp. 107, 110.

A DREAM *of* DOCTRINAL REVIVAL

BY SMUTS VAN ROOYEN

Doctrine has become an unwanted heirloom, like china displayed in the dining room curio cabinet: it's beautiful, but the children have no interest in taking it home. The value of an ecclesial set of beliefs has plummeted drastically. The mantra now is "We want Christ, not doctrine!" Many, I'm afraid, regard the teaching of the church as no more than a fly encapsulated in amber: it once lived and flew and slurped sugar, but it's now trapped in ancient resin with fossilized wings held close.

While aware of the demise of the very notion of doctrine (let alone specific doctrines) in much of the church, I do not take so dim a view of it. My dream is for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to experience a doctrinal revitalization. I want my church to come alive again, and history has shown that every genuine revival and reformation that has ever occurred in the Christian church found a theological structure to hold it upright. Ideas do have consequences.

So here is my dream, offered by an aging codger who hopes the prophet Joel had him in mind when he said, "Your old men will dream dreams" (2:28).

Yeasted by the Kingdom of God

Christianity has always maintained that Christ is the precipitating cause of its confession. What soil is to flowers, what volcano is to lava, what a spring is to water, so Jesus is to doctrine. He lived so profoundly and excellently that people climbed trees just to see him, and they sat by the thousands in the sun without lunch to hear him. Never man spoke or thought of God as Jesus did. This is why we Christians have based our thinking about God in the story, the life of Christ—and I, for my part, wish to reflect some of his thoughts in the hope it will rejuvenate Adventist teaching.

Jesus was filled with wonder and delight at the realization that God was his Father—and ours, too. He and we,

he claimed, live in our Father's world and are in his hands. The fatherhood of God was his overriding consciousness, always gentle on his mind. As a child Jesus went about his Father's business (Luke 2:49, KJV) and lived his entire life by that relationship (John 14:11), until he finally ascended to the Father (John 16:28). The burden of his preaching was to explain what it is like to live in his Father's household, or on a grander scale, what it is like to live in the kingdom of such a King. His favorite phrase became: "the kingdom of God is like…".

My aspiration for Seventh-day Adventists is that we would take seriously the kingdom of God, as Jesus proclaimed it, and yeast our entire doctrine with it (Matt. 13:33). Imagine if we all rolled out of bed in the morning and in dreamy anticipation exclaimed, "My father is king, and I get to live in his world all day!" That, in my view, is what being Adventist should feel like.

Embracing the Valuable Present

Every Adventist child knows the prophecy in Daniel of a stone from heaven striking the toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image and bringing the whole kit and caboodle crashing down. Perhaps this is why we instinctively feel that the kingdom of God arrives only at Christ's coming. The end of our world is a part of the story, but it's certainly not the whole. The kingdom cart has two wheels: the present and the future. Taking off either one of the wheels leaves the cart wobbling around lopsided. For Jesus said, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then *the kingdom of God has come upon you*" (Matt. 12:28, NIV, emphasis added). The kingdom of God is present at this moment, on this planet!

Consequently, we have homes to build, forests to preserve, turtles to protect, and many wonderful people to help and love to bits. Prophecy must look backward as well as forward. In our case it needs a rearview mirror. Perhaps a reverse gear. Maybe even a GPS device to remind us: "Recalculating, recalculating."

A friend of mine who was traveling by train from Somerset West to Cape Town found himself surrounded by a group of students from the nearby Adventist college. They were clearly intent on witnessing for Christ. One of them said: "Africa is riddled with war and with famine. It's a clear sign; Jesus is coming soon." The others grunted in approval. The speaker continued: "The world economy is on the brink of collapse, and the rich are about to howl, for their gold will become worthless. It's a sign that Jesus is coming soon." More low grunts. "And there is no faith left upon the Earth now, only cynicism. Everybody lies. Jesus is coming soon." A young couple that seemed to be very much in love was sitting near them. When the grunters became affirming yet again, the young man turned to his girlfriend, and my friend overheard him exclaim, "The poor things!" And she replied: "Yes, nothing is beautiful for them anymore. The world does not matter."

Adventist doctrine tends to be yeasted through by prophecy and seems to be possessed of a negative future expectation. We worry ourselves with what is to come. We hold to the Sabbath as a frightening end-time test of loyalty to God. We fear being deceived by evil spirits if we should not have a correct understanding of the state of the dead. Our evangelism (the root word, please recall, means "good news") is an apocalyptic last-day warning message—though there is no security in it, for we believe that we will know that we have salvation only when Jesus comes.

No wonder we're scared! It is as though we are sitting at a bus stop in a dangerous neighborhood at night, waiting for a bus that is late in coming. Someone needs to stand on our street corner and shout, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32, KJV)!

The Kingdom Abolishes Legalism

When I asked my wife for feedback on this essay, she said, "You're not dealing with our legalism."

I retorted, "But we gave up on legalism years ago."

She replied: "Yes, it's dead, but its stench still hangs heavy in the room. It needs to be buried once and for all."

It set me to thinking of the vestiges of legalism that remain and keep our church in bondage to law. First is this business of "getting ready" for Jesus to come. In my view, it's a spiritual disease akin to anorexia. When is skinny skinny enough? When is ready ready enough? When is perfect perfect enough? If the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) teaches us anything, it is that *being* ready for the bridegroom is better than interminably trying to *get* ready for his coming. In the story, the bridegroom came and caught the five foolish off guard and in the taxi "while they were on their way to buy the oil" (verse 10, NIV). It's far better to be ready than to be getting ready.

My aspiration for Seventh-day Adventists is that we would take seriously the kingdom of God, as Jesus proclaimed it, and yeast our entire doctrine with it (Matt. 13:33).

My brother once said to me, "I'm ready for Jesus to come," so I told him that he was thoroughly and properly mad.

He responded: "Well, all I can say is that this morning I thanked the Lord for dying

for me and gave myself to him. I don't know what more I need to do."

That the whiff of legalism is still in the Adventist air is evident in the network of rules that govern the Adventist lifestyle. We have standards for everything: eating and drinking, dating, marrying, recreation, dressing, raising kids, Sabbathkeeping, and the list goes on. It's just too much.

Recently, I had lunch with a fellow church member. He ordered a glass of dry wine and drank it during the course of the meal. Although I did not have a glass, for reasons of my own, I told him that I admired the freedom he had found in Christ. He smiled and reminded me of the statement by Paul, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17, NIV).

The problem with creating an endless list of standards and principles is that they keep people from coming to God. Jesus pronounced a woe on the teachers of the law because in this very way they "shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those who are trying to" (Matt. 23:13, NIV). Such an approach robs the kingdom of God of its joy. To Jesus the discovery of the kingdom of God is like finding a great treasure in a field; it makes you yearn for it—and sacrifice to buy the field and thus make the treasure yours (Matt. 13:44). The point is that finding a law book in a treasure hunt is just not exciting for most of us. The kingdom is about joy, peace, fun, and going to a party (Luke 14:13-23).

We could continue with this sad, legalistic theme by referring to the authoritarian style of leadership that characterizes so much of Adventism. Or by the fact that we define the remnant in terms of commandment keeping and not in terms of grace (Rom. 11:5-6). But enough already!

Jesus said in Matthew 20:1-16 that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired workers for his vineyard. He hired them at different times throughout the day and then paid them all the same amount. Those who had borne the work in the heat of the day kicked up a real fuss about what they saw as his injustice. To them he replied: "I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" (Matt. 20:14-15, NIV).

In my view grace needs to be so abundant that it becomes controversial and would confuse any decent labor union. It must shatter all conventional thinking of a quid pro quo. The church is simply not preaching grace well if its preaching doesn't raise the question, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1, KJV). Grace is radical. It should create a crisis (Luke 5:8-9). And the church must not fear the chaos grace tends to engender but, instead, work through it by simply accepting that God has the right to do what he wants with his abundance.

Relevant to Every New Situation

Jesus said, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matt. 13:52, NIV).

Here is very good news for a beleaguered church that faces issues it has never seen before: there is new treasure to put on the table. Beautiful and valuable solutions are at hand when old solutions are not enough.

But recognizing those solutions requires leaders who are instructed in the principles of God's kingdom. The solutions they propose will be drawn from their compassion for people and from God's love for them. Because they live in the present, they will be able to assess the zeitgeist of the day and keep what is good.

I am convinced that what Western society values most is already encompassed by the kingdom narrative of Jesus. We can speak to its yearning for the equality of all people by living the parable of the Good Samaritan. We can address the urge for fun and joy with the celebration and music of the return of the prodigal son. (Do you remember that it was the older brother who was the party pooper?) We can even appreciate science by considering the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Maybe that's a stretch—but I'm a dreamer. I ask, "What is to be done when the old has lost its relevance?" Well, something new.

There is hope. Don't you love it when church leaders are adaptable and surprise you with fresh thinking? Don't you just love those leaders who see grand expanses of new territory beckoning and who understand that the kingdom of God is never static? Great Christians are always backed by the splendor of Jesus' thinking and courage. Kingdom thinkers know that the first task in raising the dead is to get the dead to raise a skeptical eyebrow. Revival awaits our willingness to sail the oceans of new thought that call to us.

I must go down to the seas again,
to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship
and a star to steer her by;
And the wheels kick and the wind's song
and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face,
and a grey dawn breaking.
(from "Sea Fever" by James Masefield)

There *is* a star to guide the church. Its brilliance is the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

WHY WE NEED AN EDUCATED PASTORATE

By Jiří Moskala

In today's Christian world, theology is despised—and to my amazement, this aversion is widespread even within our church. Theological education is considered an unwelcome and (un)necessary evil. I have heard people argue that time is short, so there is no need to mess about with Hebrew, Greek, exegesis, and hermeneutics, much less to learn about higher criticism or psychology, because natural skills are more important than education. Some will even say that if you study theology you will be less able to win souls, so it's better to receive only three to nine months of Bible training.

The principal tasks of pastors are to present a right image of God, cast vision, preach, protect against false doctrines and interpretations of the Bible, and care for God's people. But how can the clergy do these things if they do not correctly understand the important issues? These include God's character of love, the great controversy, the plan of salvation, the centrality of the cross, the relationship between the covenants, the end-time prophecies, hermeneutics, the meaning of Christ's intercessory ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, service in the community, noncombatancy, relationship to non-Christian religions, the nature and authority of the church, immigration problems, and questions regarding contraception, abortion, divorce, stewardship, near-death experiences, hell, immortality—to name just a few. Addressing all of these depends on an understanding of theology.

Faith and Life

According to popular view, practical faith and a pious life are what count, not theology. At first glance, this view is attractive. But how can one know without theological reflection that her faith is genuine and her Christian life balanced?

This type of reasoning—that a pious life is important while a theological understanding isn't—presents a false dichotomy. It is like saying that we need Jesus but not the church, or that what matters is a relationship, but not doctrines. These are artificial contradictions, for both are indispensable.

Our spiritual growth depends on theology. The Lord's declaration in Isaiah 66:2b is very relevant for thorough study of the biblical message: "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (ESV).

Practical Theology

I have heard others formulate their objection this way: what we need in our churches are pastors, not theologians. This betrays a misunderstanding, because good biblical and theological training *is* practical. Applied theology is the crown of all theological studies. Even the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, if rightly taught, are thoroughly practical. It has been said that the most practical thing in life is theory, and here it is demonstrated: Hebrew and Greek are a fountain of theology, and an understanding of these tools helps us interpret the biblical message. Thoughts of God, the prophets, and the apostles are expressed through language, which is a mirror of their minds. Their vocabulary, grammar, and syntax reflects their thinking, from which springs our understanding of how to live the Christian life.

So biblical-theological thinking is the bread and butter of every pastor. It is essential equipment for those who preach the Word of God and are called to care for his people. Practically speaking, whatever we say in our conversations, Sabbath School discussions, preaching, articles, books, songs, prayers, and

worship about humanity, life around us, life after death, and the future reveals our theology. These reflections must be well informed.

The Pastor as Theological Guide

C. S. Lewis once lamented that many Christians like practical religion but despise theology. He said that he personally escaped this wrong dilemma because "any man who wants to think about God at all would like to have the clearest and most accurate ideas about Him which are available."[1] "If you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones—bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas."[2]

There is a sense in which every believer is a theologian. Theology is our systematic and comprehensive reflection on God's revelation. It involves thinking deeply on the meaning of the various aspects of life from God's perspective. It also involves a *prospection*, that is, looking into the future. This reflecting-prospecting process is rooted in the Holy Scriptures, and it must be done with consistency.

And yet, because it is our own endeavor, it is subject to criticism and improvement, and that process never ends. Here is where a theologically astute pastor is essential. To borrow an example from the medical field, a trained healthcare provider can assist a sick or injured person much better than an uneducated individual, even though the latter may be good-hearted. A person with the knowledge of first aid, a nurse, a family doctor, a surgeon, or a specialist in cancer or cardiovascular care can offer help—but each one on a different level according to training and ability.

Similarly, within the church different people can help differently: untrained new members, educated members, lifelong members with a basic biblical knowledge, pastors, Bible scholars, or theologians. We would refuse to go to a nurse for a complicated surgery, but often we dare to think that almost anybody in the church can answer deep biblical issues and theological or ethical problems—or give wise advice to solve life's challenges.

Theology in Community

True, broad, and balanced pastoral education is a *sine qua non* to acquiring right biblical-theological training that includes the study of the Bible, historical theology, dogmatics, ethics, church history, mission, discipleship, and practical theology. The opposite of "bad theology" is not "no theology," but "good theology."

Let me emphasize that true theology is always practiced in the church and for the church. It does not make sense outside of the church, because it is always in the service of the church. We can aptly state that the task of Adventist theology is threefold:

- to explore and present the beauty and relevance of the Adventist message and mission
- to advance in the understanding of truth and to discover new things and connections
- to refine the church's current understanding of the Bible and to be an educated voice in the church

Thus, believers can follow balanced biblical teaching and can grow in Christ and truth rather than in their own thinking or traditions. Adventist theology prepares people to know the truth, love the truth, obey the truth, live the truth, proclaim the truth, and be ready for the second coming of Christ.

I BELIEVE IT IS DANGEROUS TO PRESUME THAT THEOLOGY BELONGS ONLY IN THE SEMINARY AND IS GOOD SOLELY FOR ACADEMICIANS AND RESEARCHERS.

Intellectually Lazy Pastors

In an article titled "Diligence a Necessary Qualification in the Minister," Ellen White complained: "Our ministers are too well satisfied with themselves. They need intellectual discipline." They "have become intellectually lazy." Instead of being "intellectual giants," they became "dwarfs in spiritual and mental growth." She emphatically states: "To the diligent Bible student new light, new ideas, new gems of truth, will constantly appear, and be eagerly grasped."[3]

"Hard study and hard work are required to make a successful minister or a successful worker in any branch of God's cause."[4]

The Benefits of a Theological Education for Pastors

By Jiří Moskala

Theology helps pastors to formulate messages centered on Christ and God. The indicative of the gospel must precede the imperative of the gospel.

Theology assists in preserving biblical truth through a competent, responsible, and relevant exposition of God's Word in preaching, thus avoiding bad scholarship, the sensational and emotional, and intuitional "fake news" filled with conspiracy theories.

Theology equips pastors to answer questions intelligently. Life is complex, and many in our churches have profound questions related to postmodern, post-Christian, agnostic, and atheistic convictions. Pragmatic religious materialism and religious spirituality create new issues that demand honest answers.

Urban settings need trained, thoughtful evangelists and pastors. Cities represent a unique challenge for those who want to proclaim God's Word in a meaningful way.

Theology edifies the church and keeps her memory refreshed so that we don't forget key events and past discussions related to the understanding and interpretation of the Bible.

Theology helps us to communicate the full gospel to a wide diversity of cultures and worldviews.

Theology gives us a big picture of God's revelation. It points to crucial events in the drama of the biblical metanarrative, demonstrating how all truth is connected, as well as defining the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

Theology equips us to lead meaningful dialogues and contemporary, relevant conversations. It makes us perceptive and competent to address the Christian, post-Christian, and non-Christian religious and atheistic communities.

Theology brings professionalism, expertise, and confidence into the pastoral ministry. The certainty of the understanding of the biblical truth as a coherent system strengthens the Adventist identity so that pastors can speak, teach, and preach with conviction and passion for truth. At the same time, a thoughtful acceptance of our limited knowledge leads to humility and tolerance.

Theology does not just spell out the importance of what we believe, but also explains why it is relevant and how it should be lived.

She laments that many gospel workers "do not dig for the hidden treasure. Because they only skim the surface, they gain only that knowledge which is to be found upon the surface."[5] This is why she warns: "The times demand an intelligent, educated ministry, not novices"[6] and "A great injury is often done our young men by permitting them to begin to preach when they have not sufficient knowledge of the Scriptures to present our faith in an intelligent manner."[7]

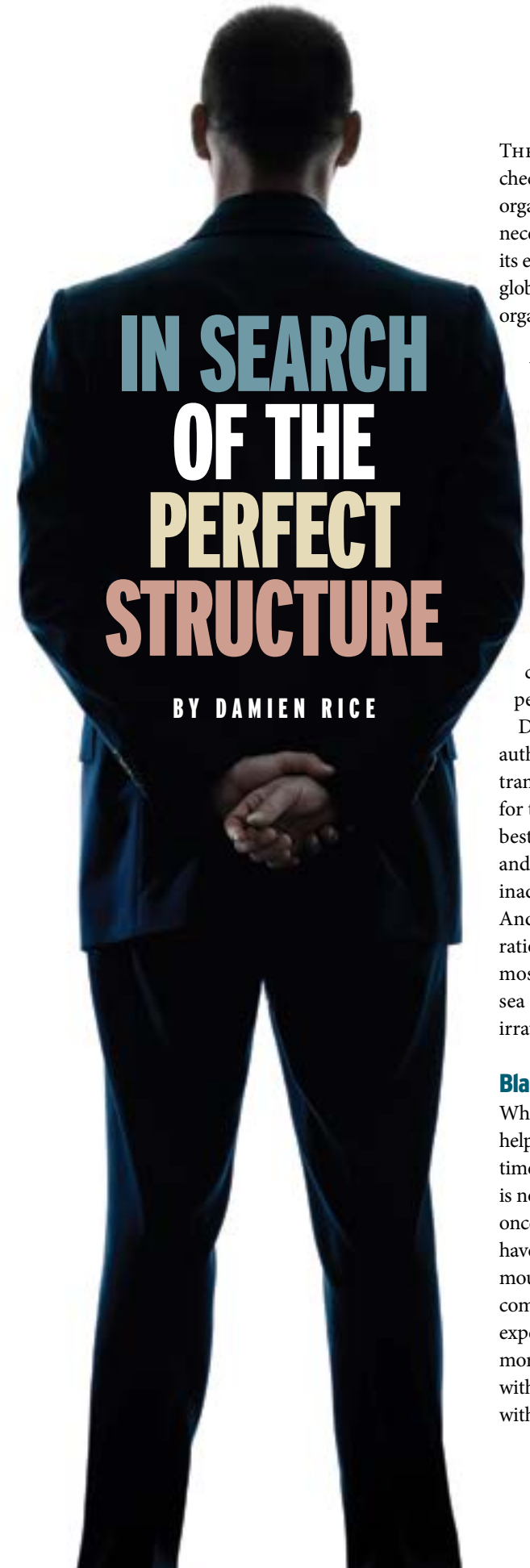
She advised that "Young men who desire to enter the field as ministers, colporteurs, or canvassers, should first receive a suitable degree of mental training, as well as a special preparation for their calling. Those who are uneducated, untrained, and unrefined, are not prepared to enter a field in which the powerful influences of talent and education combat the truths of God's word. Neither can they successfully meet the strange forms of error, religious and philosophical combined, to expose which requires a knowledge of scientific as well as Scriptural truth."[8] Again: "Ministers should devote time to reading, to study, to meditation and prayer. They should store the mind with useful knowledge, committing to memory portions of Scripture, tracing out the fulfillment of the prophecies, and learning the lessons which Christ gave to His disciples."[9] Pastors, she says, should "search the Scriptures diligently and prayerfully that they may become giants in the understanding of Bible doctrines and the practical lessons of Christ."[10]

Broad Theological Education

Proper ministry to people's spiritual needs depends on a broad theological understanding. It is a matter of life and death, because a person's eternal destiny is related to a right presentation of the gospel. Being a pastor requires a total dedication of the whole person to this noble task, for it is not a job but, rather, a life vocation.

I believe it is dangerous to presume that theology belongs only in the seminary and is good solely for academicians and researchers. Of course, as humans, we have only the second-to-last word; the last word belongs to God as revealed in the Scriptures. He is the ultimate Judge of even the best of our theology.

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 135.
[2] ibid., p. 136.
[3] Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald*, April 6, 1886; see also *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 194, and *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, pp. 412-415.
[4] White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1915), p. 70.
[5] ibid., p. 93.
[6] White, *Testimonies for the Church,* vol. 5 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1889), p. 528.
[7] White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 71.
[8] ibid., p. 81.
[9] White, *Testimonies for the Church,* vol. 4 (1881), p. 412.
[10] ibid., p. 414.



IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT STRUCTURE

BY DAMIEN RICE

The Adventist Church has a checkered relationship with structure. Our organization in 1863 was a reluctant albeit necessary one. The growth of the church, its expanding institutional footprint, and its global ambition not only called for further organization, but were aided by it.

The pioneering spirit gave way to bureaucratic wrangling, and the Kellogg crisis of the early 1900s caused the institution to buckle down the hatches. It seemed at first that the 1901 restructuring that established union conferences and departments had effected a balance between organizational unity, local autonomy, and individual conscience. But since that time, the church has struggled to resist the urge for greater centralized control.[1] Are we still in search of the perfect structure?

Dr. Peter Fuda, an international authority on business and leadership transformation, maintains: "The search for the 'perfect' structure is elusive at best, and can be expensive, demoralising and futile at worst. All structures have inadequacies that must be managed. And while structure may be seen as a rational extension of the aspirations, the most rational structures usually land in a sea of human emotion, self-interest and irrationality."[2]

Blame the Men

While augmenting structure may prove helpful or even necessary from time to time, the problem that the church faces is not structural, but human. And for once, we can blame men. Men whose egos have grown to match their positions as mouthpieces for God. Insecure men, who compete for position. Weak men for whom expedience, perception, or reputation are more important than principle. Strong men with hard heads and clenched fists. Men with boyish dreams of changing the world and leaving their mark. Supermen who've exchanged capes for suits and imagine themselves as saviors of the modern church. Desperate men whose last bastion of control is the church. Men driven by ambition—or simply by the need for secure employment and a villa in a nice Adventist retirement village. Men for whom the sacred vocation of pastoral care has become little more than a political game. Men who are afraid.

And they should be afraid. Our structure successfully staves off the bands of zealots on the right as well as any remaining radicals scattered on the left. It subdues the uninformed masses who foam at the mouth during constituency meetings. It constrains individuals, groups, and conferences that would otherwise leave, taking members and resources with them.

Fortunately, our structure is stable and secure in the hands of a well-established clerical hegemony masquerading as representational democracy, in which the laity do little more than carry their national flags. Some men identify so strongly with the church that defense of the church is more like self-defense. Sadly, the armor of God is more often needed to protect hurting leaders from attacks from within than from the devil himself.

Ergo Ego

Fuda suggests that "with the right values and behaviours, almost any structure can work."[3] Good leaders, godly leaders, gracious leaders can work effectively regardless of the structure. The converse is also true. Every structure, even one designed with prophetic guidance, is open to the creeping fingers of control and manipulation which, when left unchecked, give rise to presidential regimes leading to decades-long sidetracks for the denomination.

There is an obvious solution to the symptoms of patriarchy, but the inclusion

of women in leadership is only one step.

Do we need a looser association of judicatories? Term limits? Fewer administrative levels? While it is tempting to occupy our imagination with organizational realignment, the question of structure is a distraction from what lies within the hearts of all of us. The greatest want of the church is the want of men and women—men and women who will not be bought or sold, who in their inmost souls are true and honest.[4] Preoccupation with the business and theology of the church has led to the neglect of character formation in leaders and members. We are more concerned with compliance than consecration. The babble of our egos doing battle in boardrooms is sanctified with prayers and the recitation of prophetic utterances.

Were our co-founder Ellen White here today, she might argue for organizational safeguards against the threat of high-mindedness and heavy-handedness, but I suspect she would also urge upon us, among other things, "the spirit of Christlike forbearance."[5] She would go on to encourage us to "sit down in Christ's school and learn of Christ, who declares Himself to be meek and lowly of heart."[6]

What Do We Need?

The church needs leaders who are open and humble enough to learn, who don't think they have all the answers, and who are willing to acknowledge when they are wrong. We need next-level leaders whose principle is tempered with pragmatism and who are more compassionate than controlling, more pastoral than political. Leaders should model for our church robust intellectual engagement with scripture, science, and social issues that results in pragmatic guidance to meet the challenges of real-life followers of Christ.

To do this, leaders need to be engaged beyond the confines of church space and culture. The church needs workers who are spiritually formed as much as they are professionally developed. Men and women should be appointed who are secure in their personal and God-given identity, who are emotionally healthy and capable of fostering respectful relationships and cooperation. The church needs courageous leadership.

Increasingly, leaders are distracted by growing burdens of governance and management, under which spiritual and visionary leadership suffers. What if denominational administrators were freed to provide this type of leadership by other, more aptly qualified individuals who are empowered to care for operational concerns? The need for greater specialization in many professional disciplines—such as business management, corporate governance, and human resource management—may mean that smaller entities could merge or that administrators could delegate these functions. No promoted pastor can or should be expected to possess such broad expertise; in fact, when they are, the work suffers and higher-order leadership is neglected.

Wide spans of control become unworkable, so responsibility for oversight could be further devolved to local and regional levels. This means relinquishing control. It means avoiding the temptation to engineer the church to meet one's pet methods or personal preferences.

At the same time, a great deal of duplication is taking place that is not only inefficient but creates inconsistencies of policy and practice within jurisdictions. Assigning various functions and authority to respective levels of the church is not as simple as it sounds, because the most appropriate level will vary depending on the size, maturity, and capacity of any given organization and its leaders. Solutions will likely require a more agile organizational structure.

Trust or Obey

I believe that the greatest need of the church today is trust: trust between members and leaders, between administrators and pastors, and between parts of the organization. The lack of trust (and often basic Christian charity) is symptomatic of a lack of trust in the Spirit of God. We may feel that leaving things to the Spirit is just too unpredictable, too unreliable, too uncontrollable. We may subconsciously believe that the Spirit cannot be trusted to guide innovation, to move at different times and in various ways, or to lead God's people without the constraints of uniform policy, vigilant oversight, or direct personal control.

But if we remain in control, God is not.

Our prophetic movement has become a bureaucracy in which structure is no longer our servant, but our master. Prophetic voices are stifled while we pay lip service to the Spirit of Prophecy. Our loud cry has become a muffled murmur calling "question" to self-serving motions in stuffy meeting rooms.

As the latter rain falls, I suspect the first work of the Spirit will be to divest us of dependence on our structure.

[1] A summary of this history and the accompanying dynamics is available online at adventistunity2017.com. See George Knight, "Catholic or Adventist: The Ongoing Struggle Over Authority + 9.5 Theses" and Barry Oliver, "Reorganisation of Church Structure, 1901-03: Some Observations."
[2] Peter Fuda, "The Futile Search for the 'Perfect' Structure," blog post at www.peterfuda.com, Feb. 19, 2015.
[3] ibid.
[4] Cf. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), p. 57.
[5] In response to discord at the 1888 Minneapolis GC Session, Ellen G. White wrote this in Manuscript 24, 1892, published in *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 11 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), p. 266.
[6] ibid.

ROMANS 14:17

BY OLIVE HEMMINGS

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17, NIV).

Righteousness by faith is sometimes seen as merely a logical, philosophical explanation of salvation. In fact, Paul's teaching about righteousness is a radical ecumenism that calls for inclusiveness in the community of the faithful, which accepts different ways in which members practice their spirituality.

Roman 14:17 is part of a broad conversation that begins in Galatians, is further applied in 1 Corinthians, and is expanded in Romans. Jews associated God's righteousness with ritualistic purity and observances. The covenant had devolved into andro-ethnocentricity: a pact with Jewish males. Since the Jesus movement was originally a sect of Judaism, some Christians had defined the gospel in terms of ritualistic observances and traditional practices within the Jewish faith and culture, a definition that became increasingly problematic as the hearers of the gospel become increasingly diverse (i.e., non-Jewish). Many Christian leaders required that Gentiles become Jews through circumcision, which was the seal of the Abrahamic covenant. Non-Jewish believers properly resisted what they perceived to be cultural norms: circumcision, dietary rule, and even observance of days.

Paul argued that righteousness comes through the faithfulness of the Messiah, a deeply spiritual experience in which the church participates. This participation recognizes that God is One: not only the God of the Jew, but also of the Gentile, for God transcends all of our finite particularities. God will justify both the Jew without the Torah and the Gentile with the Torah. A body of beliefs and practices cannot define God, and a religion of culture is a perversion of the gospel.

The message of Romans 14 is that righteousness is not about taboos—about what to eat or not to eat, what days to observe or not observe, what to wear or not to wear, who should or should not partake or participate. These taboos are divisive, and that is precisely why Paul addresses them here.

Righteousness

In Paul's writings, righteousness is not that of the believer; it is God's righteousness, or more precisely, God's justice (Rom. 3:21-22). The term that English translations render "righteousness" (*dikaiosunē*) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *tsedakah*, which is the Hebrew prophetic plea against oppressive structures, corruption, greed, and the exploitation of the vulnerable. It calls us to be just as God is just, to love as God loves.

This is what Paul means in Romans when he says, regarding the many contentions over circumcision, diet, and other observances: "Owe no one anything, except to love…. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10, NRSV). It is also the focus of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, summed up in the golden rule (Matt. 7:12)—hence Jesus' call to "seek first the kingdom of God and God's justice" (Matt. 6:33, personal translation).

When the people of Israel called out from their oppression in Egypt, Scripture says that God "remembered his covenant" (Exod. 2:24). Jews

believed the covenant was theirs by promise and that anyone who would access it must become a Jew. The promise of God's justice, which is God's vindication on behalf of the oppressed, is not sealed by circumcision and the other Torah traditions and rituals that go with it, but by the faithfulness of Messiah. Consequently, non-Jews also have access to the promise of God's justice.

The Faithfulness of Messiah

As for faith, the English word "belief" does not capture the biblical meaning of the Greek *pistis*. In Greek argumentation, the *pistis* is the proof of, or faithfulness to, one's claim. Paul speaks of the faithfulness of Abraham in Romans 4 as Abraham's commitment, trust, and devotion, not merely an intellectual affirmation *vis a vis* doubt, as the word "belief" implies. Similarly, the faithfulness of Jesus Messiah is his obedience to God, fulfilling the promise of the covenant.

When Paul says in Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:22 that righteousness is through "faith in Jesus" and not by works, he does not mean that one accesses God's righteousness by believing something, but though *faithfulness*. Just as "righteousness" as it relates to the Abrahamic covenant is God's delivering justice, so the *pistis* (faith[fullness]) through which one receives it is Messiah's, not the "believer's." The phrase that translators render "faith in Jesus Christ" literally translates "faithfulness of Jesus Messiah" (*pisteos Iesou Christou*). The

Righteousness is about openness in God, through which one enters the life of God "just as I am," in spiritual communion rather than fleshly ideals.

"belief" that Paul elicits in Galatians 2:16b ("we ourselves believe in Messiah Jesus") and Romans 3:22 ("all who believe") is specifically the call to perform the faithfulness of Messiah by delivering God's justice.

So the teaching of the early church—what we today term "faith [in Christ]"—is not about a belief system or about acceding to the credibility of an idea. It is a call away from the very things we enforce today as faith, for that understanding of faith transforms religion into a culture of intolerance. "Righteousness by faith" is not about the believer at all. Righteousness is about God's delivering justice, and faith is Messiah's faithfulness. So *our* righteousness by faith is our resolve to love as God loves through just relations in community.

Belief Systems

One need not subscribe to a particular belief system to participate in the life of Christ, which is a life of delivering justice. In what is an astonishingly radical statement, Paul says, "When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves" (Rom. 2:14, NRSV). In 1 Corinthians and Romans he takes the ecumenism of the covenant from the universal to the local, arguing that members have the liberty to practice their spirituality as long as they practice justice: delivering nonjudgmental love. 1 Corinthians 13 and Romans 14 are his radical conclusions to all of the quarrels over different opinions and practices. Love, he insists, is the thing that matters.

In the context of this conversation, Romans 14:17 is a plea to the community to quit fighting over the different ways in which members practice their spirituality and, instead, to participate in the faithfulness of Messiah so that the justice of God may manifest itself in the community of the faithful. Enforcing dietary rules, ritual observances, and so on is actually *unrighteous*. Righteousness is about openness in God, through which one enters the life of God "just as I am," in spiritual communion rather than fleshly ideals.

This makes salvation an ecumenical ideal rather than a separatist contention. Faith as it relates to God's salvation is not a belief system of taboos and ritualistic practices and observances. Rather, it is a life of faithfulness in which one shares in the life of Messiah by becoming righteous (just) as God is righteous (just).

CRISIS IN THE LIBRARY

BY MAYLAN SCHURCH

The most anticipated moment in the church library's week came as the needle-like notes of the organ postlude began to sound. That meant that people began pouring out of the sanctuary—and might possibly drift into the library.

Since *Young's Analytical Concordance* was wider than the rest of the books, it jutted further out on the shelf, which made it the designated lookout.

"Glorious news!" *Young's* cried. "A family is coming!"

"A family!" squealed the *Detective Zack* books in a youthful chorus. "We haven't had a family in four months!"

50 Dynamic Tips to Successful Ingathering asked alertly: "Kids? Are there *kids?*"

"Brother Young," intoned an elderly copy of Uriah Smith's *Daniel and the Revelation*, "may I ask if any of the children are wearing spectacles?"

50 Tips snorted. "Drag yourself into the 21st century, Uriah. We call 'em glasses."

"One of the boys is wearing glasses," said June Strong's *Mindy.*

"In my day," Uriah continued, "children with spectacles were often voracious readers. And even more so if they were educated at home. Once, years ago, a homeschooled child checked me out—and even paged slowly through my index! Unfortunately, his younger sister availed herself of my back end-papers to make several drawings of horses, some of them quite lifelike. I always hold out hopes for bespectacled children."

One of Harold Shryock's *You and Your Health* volumes put in: "Many children who wear glasses are nearsighted. Being nearsighted makes it incredibly easy to read in bed."

"How *old* are the kids?" asked *50 Tips.* "Wait. Now I can see them. Two boys and a girl. Ah, cute, cute. Perfect."

In a stentorian voice, a well-preserved copy of Carlyle Haynes' *When a Man Dies* shouted, "Perfect for what?"

"Ingathering, of course," *50 Tips* replied. "What else?"

"Let's change the subject," *Mindy* said quickly. "Been there, done that, got the T-shirt."

"I confess to being confused," Uriah said. "What do you mean by 'T-shirt'?"

"You're *always* confused," snapped *50 Tips.* "And anybody who would take the trouble to open me and read what's inside would quickly discover that Ingathering needn't have faded away like it has. Even today, if people would follow my 50 tips, they'd find they were dynamite."

"Dynamite?" cried an eager *Shadow Creek Ranch* volume. "Where?"

"Silence, everybody!" roared *Young's.* "The family is staring at us."

"They are not able to hear us," said the middle volume of *You and Your Health.* "We do not make noise."

"Anyway," *Young's* resumed, "it is not our role to bicker. It is our role to look interesting! *Zack* books, try to get their attention! Laugh. Scream."

"They can't hear us," repeated an exasperated *Mindy*. "That's superstition."

"My book could shed light on certain common superstitions," said Sir James Frazier's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion.*

"Who is speaking?" asked Uriah. "Is that by any chance Sir James?"

"It is," said Sir James.

"May I ask," Uriah rumbled, "why you are taking up space in our library at all?"

"Estate sale," *Mindy* said briskly. "Somebody donated him a month ago." Suddenly she paused, then continued in a whisper: "Don't anybody move. The girl is staring right at me. Oh, please check me out, sweetie. Take me home with you."

"Don't beg," said *50 Tips*. "They can tell when you're begging."

"No they can't," *Mindy* said. "And how would *you* know? How many people have ever checked *you* out?"

"That's not the point," said *50 Tips*.

A beseeching chorus of "Take me! Take me! No, our library doesn't have any *Wimpy Kid* stories!" arose from the *Detective Zack* books, as well as the nearby *Shadow Creek Ranch* series. What Uriah would have called a bespectacled boy was studying their spines thoughtfully.

"Oh, he's perfect," said *50 Tips*. "Glasses-wearing kids are the cutest. Put them out in front of the carolers, holding that oval can with the 'Hope for Humanity' torch on it. If you do that, your can will be jammed with five-dollar bills before you know it. And if the kid grins adorably, you'll get tens. And if he grins adorably while trying to say 'medical, educational, and welfare purposes,' and garbles it up because he lisps, you'll get twenties."

"I fail completely to follow what I have just heard," Sir James said. "Monetary currency seems to be involved, if I am not mistaken. Might I inquire what you are discussing? Is it a common superstition?"

"Don't ask," *Mindy* said. "You'll stir up *50 Tips* again. Wow, this family is really taking its time checking us out. Is there potluck today?"

"Anybody who would take the trouble to open me and read what's inside would quickly discover that Ingathering needn't have faded away like it has."

"Yes, there is," said a first-edition *Ten Talents* cookbook. "I can smell food, but it's nothing I recognize. No Wham, no Nuteena, no Choplets. Not even Special K loaf."

"Asian, probably," *Mindy* said. "Asian is the new Special K."

Ten Talents sighed. "What is the world coming to?"

"To our potluck tables, evidently," *Mindy* replied.

"Look sharp!" *50 Tips* called out. "They're choosing their books."

Sure enough, one of the boys took a *Detective Zack*. The other boy, the bespectacled one, chose Sterling North's *Rascal,* and the girl grabbed *Mindy,* who was at her exact eye-level. Mom chose a popular Max Lucado, and Dad selected a George Knight he hadn't read yet.

"*Mindy! Mindy!*" the other books shouted. "Find out what's the latest in Amish romance novels! See if you can overhear what happened at the last Annual Council!"

You and Your Health asked for updates on osteoporosis. The thin lavender *Wayout* youth songbook from the '70s asked her to check if Wedgwood Trio and Take Three songs were still being played in Sabbath-afternoon living rooms.

"I'll do my very best," *Mindy* promised before she disappeared around the corner.

After an annoyed snarl at the departing family ("You'd better Ingather this year—or else!"), *50 Tips* subsided into a sulky silence.

Suddenly there was the sound of a literate though dusty throat being cleared.

"Quiet, everybody!" announced the *Wayout* songbook. "Adlai Albert Esteb has a new poem for us."

"Yes, I do," said a sturdy hardcover copy of *Driftwood.* "While the rest of you were speaking, I felt inspired to compose a short ballad."

"Ballad?" *Wayout* asked. "Mind if I give you some background accompaniment?" *Wayout* could imitate a '70s folk guitar with eerie accuracy.

"Please do," said *Driftwood.* "Ahem." *Wayout* began to noodle, and the poet spoke:

We huddle silent on our shelves,
Our edges thick with dust.
But ah, ideas we contain—
Some thoughtful, some robust—
The fruit of many minds and hours,
And often quite well-said,
Are standing here for all to share—
Yet we remain unread.
To rectify this poverty,
I'd pose a simple creed:
That all the folks in ev'ry church
Should learn to love to read!

The Church of My Dreams

By Alden Thompson

Every year at the annual Society of Biblical Literature convention, Adventist scholars come together as the Adventist Society for Religious Studies (ASRS) to present and discuss formal papers from an Adventist perspective. In San Antonio in 2016, the theme was "The Church of My Dreams." I'm adopting that title here.

While good things happen in the local church, administrative decisions at all levels still affect us, sometimes powerfully. And at all levels, two choices offer us the opportunity to realize our dreams: diversity instead of uniformity, and trust instead of coercion.

Diversity Instead of Uniformity

The early Adventist emphasis on "truth" has sometimes made it difficult for us to see truth as multifaceted. We too easily slip into a simple binary model: truth vs. error. If individuals trumpet personal views as "truth," other perspectives easily become competitors rather than allies.

Reading Scripture inductively can supply us with plenty of evidence for both/and diversity. But just because something is in the Bible doesn't mean that believers will actually see it. Helping the church see diversity in the biblical witness may be our greatest challenge.

Adventists have a secret weapon in the writings of Ellen White, even though her writings are often part of the problem rather than a pointer to a solution. Here I want to show how she can point us toward a healthy diversity.

Two Ellen White quotations are crucial, the first from the opening lines of the chapter "In Contact with Others" in *The Ministry of Healing.* It offers an astonishing corrective to the either/or model: "Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing."[1]

The second quotation, from *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students,* offers an even more astonishing corrective to the either/or model. The teaching of Scripture to the youth, Ellen White writes, "is not to be left wholly with one teacher for a long series of years. … Different teachers should have a part in the work, even though they may not all have so full an understanding of the Scriptures."[2]

She then argues that the diversity of writers in Scripture (i.e., "a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul") is necessary "because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain Scripture truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than of others." And she goes on to say: "So today the Lord does not impress all minds in the same way. Often through unusual experiences, under special circumstances, He gives to some Bible students views of truth that others do not grasp. It is possible for the most learned teacher to fall far short of teaching all that should be taught."[3]

In short, laying the words of Scripture side by side—rather than trying to force one view to reign over all—provides a rich recipe for diversity in the church. And we are no longer a threat to each other, for we do not exclude the words of Scripture that are a precious blessing to some, but not necessarily to all. And that brings us to our second choice.

Trust Instead of Coercion

An either/or model of truth inevitably tempts the "winners" to force fellow believers to come into line with their view of truth. But Ellen White warned against using voting as a way of forcing unity on the church: "The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions," she wrote, "but we cannot force the mind and will, and

thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance."[4]

The anguish of recent General Conference Sessions, especially the last one at San Antonio, looms large here. Can we transform the General Conference Session into a decision-making gathering based on trust? I believe so, and the General Conference website, no less, has given me a glimmer of hope. I shall return to that below, but first let me say candidly that I am strongly leaning toward the position that we never should have voted a statement of beliefs at the General Conference. Three moments in Adventist history point me in this direction.

1. The simple signed covenant of 1861. When Adventists began organizing local churches, they used a simple, signed covenant. Although I would bristle at the suggestion of signing a statement of belief if I thought it were an attempt to be coercive, this covenant is one I would gladly sign: "We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ [Rev. 14:12]."[5]

That's all. Just 29 words. I imagine it at the head of our statement of beliefs so that everything following it would be seen as commentary on that covenant. Give me a pen.

2. The merely descriptive statement of belief of 1872. Titled "Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists," this statement was our first. But it was not "official." Though written by Uriah Smith, it was published anonymously and was never voted. It was not created for believers but was a "synopsis" presented "to the public" as "a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity" held by Adventists.

For our purposes, the crucial words are these: "We wish to have it distinctly understood that *we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them....*"[6]

3. Rejection of an official church manual in 1883. In 1882, nearly 20 years after the formal organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a proposal for an official church manual was presented to the General Conference. A committee was appointed to write the manual and have it serialized in the *Review.* It was to be discussed and voted at the next General Conference Session.

The committee did its work, but in 1883 it recommended that the General Conference Session *not* accept the proposed manual. The session delegates agreed. Not until 1932 did the first official manual appear. The rationale of the 1882-1883 committee is remarkable: "It is the unanimous judgment of the committee that it would not be advisable to have a Church Manual. We consider it unnecessary because we have already surmounted the greatest difficulties connected with church organization without one; and perfect harmony exists among us on this subject. It would seem to many like a step toward formation of a creed, or a discipline, other than the Bible, something we have always been opposed to as a denomination. If we had one, we fear many, especially those commencing to preach, would study it to obtain guidance in religious matters, rather than to seek for it in the Bible, and from the leadings of the Spirit of God, which would tend to their hindrance in genuine religious experience and in knowledge of the mind of the Spirit."[7]

For years I have trumpeted the merits of the preamble to the 1980 Statement of Belief, the first statement to be debated and voted by a full General Conference in session: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."[8]

Helping the church see diversity in the biblical witness may be our greatest challenge.

As I said above, given the tragic chaos of recent years, I am questioning the value of voting on statements of belief at all.

On the General Conference website awhile back, I found a discussion of our beliefs presented with names, faces, and signed articles! For each fundamental belief, the site offers a skillfully produced video and a cluster of links to additional articles. As I checked out the links, I began to sing the doxology, for diversity and creative presentations were everywhere evident. Not all of the video presenters were named, but those who were represent a remarkable variety of Adventist voices: John Bradshaw, Cindi Tutsch, John Brunt, Chris Oberg, and Tim Gillespie. The authors could build their own cases and use their own texts. Wonderful! We best define Adventism by writing articles and signing our names, not by voting official documents.

What We Should Do

In conclusion, I will summarize my suggestions and note some potential implications.

First, let's place the original 1861 church covenant at the head of our fundamental beliefs to show clearly that what follows is commentary on that covenant.

Second, I suggest we incorporate the language of description from the 1872 statement so that our statement of beliefs describes and summarizes Adventism while making clear that these statements are not to be used as a prescriptive authority.

Third, our General Conference president would be a servant leader in keeping with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 20:25-26: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (ESV). The president would be a servant to the church, coordinating rather than mandating its mission.

Fourth, under such leadership, the General Conference Session would focus primarily on mission. But could it also discuss teachings of the church?

Back in 1975 the Southern Publishing Association brought out a good book that could serve as a model for us. *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* featured four essays by Adventist authors: Herbert Douglass, Edward Heppenstall, Hans K. Larondelle, and C. Mervyn Maxwell.[9] All were Adventists in good and regular standing. The book contained no pseudonyms, no mandates; it simply displayed a variety of perspectives from within Adventism. Both Zondervan and InterVarsity Press regularly adopt this format with a variety of topics. Why not again in our denomination? The essays could be peer reviewed, and their presentations could be the highlight of General Conference Sessions.

Finally, my dream would be to see a close working relationship between official Adventist publications, *The Adventist Review* and *Ministry*, and the independent Adventist press, *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today.* Some topics the church papers should address, while other matters are best presented by an independent press. The editors should constantly be talking and praying with each other to discern how they can best serve the church.

That's the church of my dreams: a church where the study of God's Word is fresh and alive, rooted in Adventist landmarks, but ever pressing ahead in search of Present Truth. Somehow, I suspect Jesus dreams of that kind of church, too.

[1] Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), p. 483.
[2] White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1913), p. 432.
[3] ibid.
[4] White, Manuscript 24, 1892; *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (1987), p. 1092.
[5] *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1861, cited in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, second revised ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996), p. 416.
[6] For the full statement, see Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 231-237.
[7] *Review and Herald,* Vol. 60, No. 46 (Nov. 20, 1883), p. 733. In 1946 the General Conference voted that all future changes in the manual must be voted by a full General Conference in session.
[8] Land, pp. 241-242.
[9] Don Short, ed., *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1975).

A CHURCH WITH ELBOW ROOM

By David Neff

In 1980, in the wake of the Glacier View debacle and the banishing of Desmond Ford, I realized I needed more ecclesiastical elbow room. I knew Des to be a passionately loyal Adventist. It seemed to me that his revisionism was actually a way to hold on to a sense of the church's special mission, while bringing its foundations into line with good biblical scholarship. If Adventism wasn't elastic enough to include dedicated Des, it certainly didn't have room for me as a pastor at Walla Walla College.

Glacier View wasn't the only clue that Adventism's skies weren't spacious enough for me. Our Walla Walla faculty members were fending off General Conference attempts to control what we taught about origins. And one day, when I went shopping at Andy's Market, a church member accosted me and told me not to buy the saltine crackers in my shopping basket: they contained lard.

At that point in my journey, I couldn't give a rip about the fine print on the saltine box. But that grocery store encounter made me determined to find elbow room.

I'd had a 20-year history of playing the organ for "Sunday churches," so I wasn't starting from scratch. After moving to Illinois, my wife and I settled on an Episcopal parish that seemed promising. I knew that the Episcopal Church's mother church (the Church of England) had three distinct streams: low church (little ritual, hospitable to evangelical beliefs), high church (much ritual, hospitable to Catholic-tinged worship and belief), and broad church (indifferent to ritual and hazy in theology, but noted for its passion for social justice).

If these three streams could peacefully coexist within a single denomination, I thought I might indeed find the elbow room I was looking for. In my new congregation, I found a gracious willingness to embrace just about anyone who showed up. Some of those who showed up were mighty strange.

This had not been my experience, generally speaking, within Adventism. Some Adventists just had to read the fine print on other people's boxes of soda crackers. As long as the Red Books are read, Adventism will be a seedbed for judgmental moralism.

Yes, I had seen examples of welcome and compassion in my years of Adventist ministry. I was especially proud of a small rural congregation I pastored when the members gave a warm welcome home to a wandering son of the church, with hippie hair and flower-child clothes. This prodigal loved his welcome and came back for more.

But this was the same congregation where I had to overrule objections to a mixed-race couple serving as greeters. Welcoming grace was, it seems, the exception.

In our new context, *welcome* and *inclusion* became watchwords. For my wife and me, church growth is not about numbers, but about including new and different people in our fellowship. My present Baltimore parish has some skeptics who don't believe much of anything, as well as traditionalists who still believe what they were taught as children. We have a mystic who hears God's voice and tries to launch impossible ministries. We have immigrants and refugees. We have gay adults and families with gay children. We have people who face hunger and people who are overfed. We have several racially mixed couples. When I look around, I see about two-thirds pasty-faced folks like us and one-third people of color.

A young African American gay man has felt a welcome in our midst that he never felt in his home church. But he was confused: how could different churches with their different teachings all lead to the same heaven? It isn't what you believe that saves you, I told him. It is who you believe in: Jesus.

Doctrine is not unimportant, but it is only important insofar as it gives us a clearer picture of Jesus. The people I worship with really do want to follow Jesus—want to act like him. That means that they don't just talk about hunger; they make sandwiches for the Salvation Army to distribute. They make quilts for the homeless. They reach out with literacy programs. They minister to the effectively stateless people who work on the ships that come into Baltimore harbor.

We have a fairly low sense of denominational identity—especially since we were joined by an aging Lutheran congregation two years ago. After blending these two congregations, it is easy to forget who is (technically) an Episcopalian and who is (technically) a Lutheran. We read exhortations from two denominational headquarters instead of one. That actually lowers the pressure. I sense nothing like the threat of denominational control that hovered over us when I served at Walla Walla.

Yes, we still have differences and petty power plays. You can expect the occasional left vs. right political argument in our adult classes. But in the end, you can count on everyone to work for the good of all, as we have opportunity (Gal. 6:10).

This experience of being in a community of welcoming grace is what I wish for my Adventist friends.

Editorial *continued from page 3*

owned and valued by people who invest in it at the congregational or regional level, it probably hasn't much of a chance. Too much of the progressive spleen is vented on General Conference leaders, as though there's nothing local we can do to be active, admirable Adventist Christians. Second, the one contribution leaders could make is to be less intrusive globally while developing stronger teams regionally, such as at the conference level. More on that another time.

What follows in this issue are some additional thoughtful reflections on who we are and what, with the right leadership, we might become. These are people who want to do something more than just be Seventh-day Adventists, in a passive believing-the-message way. They want to see this denomination become a strong force for God and for good. They have aspirations for this denomination: they want to help shape our beliefs, our congregations, our leadership, and our workforce.

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NEWS BRIEFS

Beverage Mix-up Aids Camp Meeting Revival

SLEEPY HOLLOW, Colo. — A Rocky Mountain Conference camp meeting reported a "tremendous revival" with crowds of Adventists talking, singing, and preaching excitedly at an energy level never before witnessed. A sense of renewed vigor and unbounded optimism swept over attendees at the annual Sleepy Hollow camp meeting after what catering staff are calling a "minor mix-up" during a break for refreshments.

"We accidentally served real, leaded coffee instead of Roma," admitted catering coordinator Noemi Miaculpa. Those attending camp meeting seemed to be minimally troubled by the catering mistake as they skipped around the campground whistling hymns, high-fiving complete strangers, and raising holy hands in song service.

Church Tells Newbies: "OK to Stop Thinking"

COLLEGEDALE, Tenn. — Fresh from the waters of baptism and, before that, significant soul searching and Bible study, Bethany Olson has been told by her new Adventist brothers and sisters that she can stop thinking. Now that she has accepted all available new light and taken a leap of faith into vegetarian Sabbath keeping, her flock is satisfied she has arrived. In stark contrast with prior instructions from church members encouraging her to "forget what you think you know," "study the Bible for herself," and "dare to dig deeper," she has been assured that she can now leave the heavy doctrinal lifting to the experts. "The beauty of having the present truth is that you have finally made it, beliefs-wise" said Olson's Sabbath School teacher. "From here on out, the motto is *Reinforce, Don't Revise*. And maybe reach for the stars with a vegan cooking class."

Headstrong Adventist Given a Dire Diagnosis

BURBANK, Calif. — Fifth-generation Adventist Adam Abborhd was rushed to the emergency room of Saint Joseph Medical Center after the size of his rapidly swelling head became a cause for alarm among his friends, neighbors, and even a few perfect strangers.

As Abborhd was carried in on a stretcher, his cranium barely fit through the extra-wide ER automatic doors. Ignoring questions posed by the medical personnel trying to treat him, the patient launched into a fiery lecture about the joys of being "glory bound" as part of the "remnant within the remnant." Abborhd offered his Catholic physician a tract chronicling the failures of Rome while simultaneously checking the doctor's wrist and forehead for any visible "666" markings.

After diagnosing his patient with the potentially life-threatening Arrogant Remnant Syndrome, the ER doc prescribed an extra-strong dose of self-awareness as well as humility steroids. He warned Abborhd not to do any talking for the duration of his recovery.

Gordon Ramsay Hosts New *Heaven's Kitchen*

CULVER CITY, Calif. — Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay has decided to add a new show to his current filming schedule. The series, to be called *Heaven's Kitchen,* will attempt to single out the Adventist in the United States with the most talent for potluck preparation. *Heaven's Kitchen* will be similar to *Hell's Kitchen* in that contestants will initially be divided into teams competing to win a series of challenges. As Adventist contestants on *Heaven's Kitchen* are eliminated, the final seven will compete individually, preparing dishes for what Ramsay promises will be a collection of the "strictest and pickiest vegans the Loma Linda Blue Zone has to offer." The contestants will be nominated by their local Adventist church and will compete under strict conditions that show producers have called "the typical hour or so before Friday sundown when Adventists start panicking about what to bring to potluck the next day." Ramsay has promised to rein in his famous temper, which results in profanity having to be "bleeped out" of interactions with *Hell's Kitchen* contestants. With the Adventist show, Ramsay has vowed to use only "vegetarian curse words."

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.

Adventist Today's

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