

Our Big Fat Church

Saving Imperiled  
Congregations

When Conflict  
Creates Scapegoating

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# Adventist *Today*

**CRISIS &  
OPPORTUNITY**



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## Can COVID-19 Slim Down Our Big Fat Church?

By Loren Seibold

TALK TO ALMOST ANY MEMBER IN THE NORTH American Division (NAD)—with the possible exception of a few people on the top floor of 12501 Old Columbia Pike in Silver Spring—and you’ll learn that we Adventists are very fond of retiring NAD President Dan Jackson. Rarely has a top church administrator enjoyed such affection from so many. Dan is gentle, generous, friendly, good-humored, principled, tough when he needs to be, and a sincere spiritual leader. Many of us especially love Dan because he went to bat for the NAD in the women’s ordination wars. (I probably needn’t insert here that the ordination controversy is a proxy for a much larger set of issues having to do with our identity as a denomination and how we understand what it means to be an Adventist Christian 175 years after we expected Jesus to return.)

Yet (and I hesitate to say this of someone I admire), you must understand that in a time when some had begun to realize that we didn’t need so many denominational offices, and when there was a general sense that perhaps we should be more congregation-centered and less top-heavy, Dan Jackson presided over a significant expansion of our organizational machinery. The NAD went from occupying a wing in the General Conference to filling a massive building and swelling bureaucracy of its own. We accepted that because we appreciated a bulwark between ourselves and the bossy leadership in the General Conference office.

### 2015 Church Governance Report

Dan Jackson started out as a campaigner for streamlining. In 2015 he commissioned a report from the NAD Church Governance Committee, which showed how much money the church could save for frontline ministry by restructuring. The finding that caused a gasp in the room was this: if we got rid of all NAD conference offices and ran the church from the union conference offices, we would save *\$145 million every year*.

Please understand that most of the cost of a conference office is personnel, and unless we’d immediately lay off all of those workers and eliminate

a great many necessary functions—which would be both unwise and unkind—that’s not a realizable savings. You can understand why few in a room full of church administrators lined up at the microphone to say, “Let’s do it right now!”

We’ve been talking about reduction of our administrative structure for as long as I’ve been in ministry. For a long time, the conversation was about getting rid of union conferences. The union conferences, however, became popular again when they turned out to be the strongest line of defense against General Conference overreach—earning at least two union conference presidents, Dave Weigley and Ricardo Graham, Ted Wilson’s undisguised contempt and a humiliating public reprimand at the 2019 General Conference Executive Committee (EXCOM) meeting.

But in fact, with modern technology, the union conferences *could* run the church. This is, in fact, what is happening in many places in Europe right now. The current structure with its many levels is heavily redundant, and everyone knows it. It was designed when the fastest communication was a letter, and the usual method of travel was astride or behind a horse.

You’d think that after realizing how much money we could redirect to evangelism and congregation building, we’d have quickly started moving in that direction, if only incrementally, the moment we read the NAD Church Governance Committee’s 2015 report. But no. Not only has the report rarely been mentioned since, but it was at precisely that time that the NAD office began to bulk up.

So I was a bit surprised when, at his last NAD Executive Committee meeting as chair, Dan said: “I’m a firm believer that we don’t need 59 conferences and missions and nine unions and everything we have. We have inventions today, planes, jets, etc. One day our economies are going to dictate to us that we can’t have 59 conferences and missions, and nine unions, and \$20 million camps.”

You’re right, Dan. Some highly respected church leader—one who had a good, long run in his office—should have worked to reduce the NAD

As much as we talk about using our money wisely, and as much as we voice the notion that we should be doing more frontline work, we Adventists are very attached to our big fat church administration.

administrative overhead long before we found ourselves in the current crisis.

## Our Big Fat Church Administration

The problem, of course, is that as much as we talk about using our money wisely, and as much as we voice the notion that we should be doing more frontline work, we Adventists are very attached to our big fat church administration. We haven't consciously decided that our franchisees—the local congregations in places such as Steubenville, Ohio, and Enid, Oklahoma—are dispensable, but we can imagine communities without Adventist congregations more easily than we can imagine a conference without its own conference office.

The Ohio Conference, where I worked for 20 years, has had many of the typical small-conference struggles. A few years ago, it closed the denomination's oldest surviving

## Whose Fault?

Is this failure to “right-size” our structure the fault of a bunch of greedy, selfish church leaders? That would be an exceedingly unfair conclusion.

It's true that church leaders have little incentive to streamline the organization. They manage the money. They run constituency meetings. Their jobs are at stake if offices are eliminated.

We also have a church culture that says the mark of success in ministry is to leave ministry. If a pastor is still working in a congregation after 20 years, it's because he wasn't a very good pastor, or else he'd have moved up into a conference office or union conference office, or higher. Look through *Ministry Magazine*, or at the speaker lineup of any training event for pastors, and you'd quickly conclude that being *out* of parish ministry is what makes you an expert on how pastors should do their job.

**Organizations get the results they're organized for, and we have organized for inertia and control. Our church administration is like a heavy flywheel that keeps us moving in one direction.**

boarding school, Mount Vernon Academy. Although Ohio is home to some of the biggest metro areas in the United States, most of its congregations are small, with aging and declining membership. Ten churches out of 90 supply half of the tithe for the conference, and it regularly runs short. As for ministry, it's inevitable that many of the small churches will close, and districts will get larger and more spread out. (The last one I pastored covered 5,000 square miles, with congregations 100 miles apart.)

When the Ohio Conference was offered a new office in the Kettering area, the proposal flew through the constituency meeting without anyone suggesting that we do away with our local conference in favor of the union conference, or that we combine with a couple of other small nearby conferences. Even though the church governance study was available for the decision-makers to see, this kind of restructuring isn't yet on our agenda.

And, the door only swings one way: once you're in an office, you've got job security. Rarely does anyone return to humble parish work. I think a good case could be made that siphoning off the most talented pastors into offices has contributed to the weakening of local congregations.

Still, I've sat through too many constituency meetings to blame just the leaders. Lay people don't like radical change any more than leaders do. And leaders don't get re-elected if things change too drastically. So there's not much reward for taking decisive action, even if it might save the church.

## How Organizations Work

It's not just the leaders, but our Adventist lay people who can't imagine a denomination without a big bureaucracy. As Raj Attiken points out elsewhere in this issue, their hearts belong to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as much as to their local congregation, and they can't picture

it without those office buildings and charcoal-gray-suited administrators. Perhaps it's the feeling that we're part of something bigger than our little deteriorating church building, our mediocre district pastor with his mediocre sermons that we hear only once a month, our bickering church members, or our emptying pews? Somewhere, even if not here, the denomination is doing amazing things!

Please understand that this is not because either church leaders or church members are bad or have bad intentions. This is about How Organizations Work. Organizations get the results they're organized for, and we have organized for inertia and control. Our church administration is like a heavy flywheel that keeps us moving in one direction.

But, like a flywheel, it resists redirection, and that is its weakness. Some organizations (particularly those whose investors demand profits) reinvent themselves periodically as the world around them changes. Religious organizations are very poor at that, because a church's history is its identity. By definition, the product stays the same: it's what got us here, and it will take us through to the end.

Unless, of course, it doesn't. History shows that religious organizations generally do what they've always done until they fail, and then people move their loyalty to new formulations of faith. The term "Protestant Reformation," I would remind you, is a glaring misnomer: it did not reform the existing church, but instead spawned something new. Religion usually proceeds by revolutions rather than by reasoned, planned, and intentional change.

## What We Need

It comes down to this: "I want the church to change, as long as it doesn't affect me. Yes, church, please eliminate the redundancies and save millions of dollars each year for local ministry—but don't touch my local church, my school, my camp, my college, or the conference office where I work. I want the advantages, but not sacrifice. Streamline the church, but keep everything the same for me!"

The current situation may force us to act, though. Many conferences are already in crisis, and the pandemic will make that worse. Small conferences in the NAD that aren't self-sustaining exist not because they're necessary, but because no one has the courage to fold them into another judicatory. COVID-19 could be an opportunity to do what we've long known that we need to do. It only remains to be

seen whether or not our leaders are capable of leading us there.

Would it be easy? No, it would be painful and difficult. Some officers, clergy, and even many lay people would oppose it ferociously. But to say it can't be done is a failure of imagination, and—if you accept my premise that it would be better to err on the side of more frontline gospel ministry than of too many offices—possibly even a failure of faith.

It might actually revive our movement in the NAD. Not only would we free up money for local work, but people might again invest their hearts in their local congregations and communities. And it may make parish ministry a prestige position again rather than a stop on the way to an administrative job, since many who were promoted into offices because they were good pastors would go back to being good pastors again.

Can we do it? Or will we let this opportunity pass us by? **AT**

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# CAN WE SAVE IMPERILED CONGREGATIONS?

By Raj Attiken

**A storm has been quietly brewing for years, threatening the life of Adventist congregations. Voices here and there have sounded the alarm and urged action. But just when the storm was about to become a crisis, a tempest of a different kind hit us: COVID-19.**

These two storms—one slowly picking up steam and the other arriving suddenly—have converged to form a moment of creative opportunity for the worldwide church. Whether or not we seize the opportunity depends on our hopes for the future and on our collective resolve.

## **Era of Denominationalism**

The last century has been the age of denominationalism, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church has succeeded in sustaining and expanding its global identity. In addition to creating brand recognition and member loyalty, it has grown in numbers and garnered the financial support of congregations to maintain a vast and expanding bureaucracy. The church has sponsored a robust healthcare ministry and a broad system of education. From a denominational perspective, these have been good times for us.

Not every part of our enterprise, however, has shared in the success. Congregations in North America—particularly those that are small and rural—have experienced debilitating challenges. Yet in the most deliberative assemblies of our denomination, the local congregation has received little or no attention other than some general cheerleading for evangelism. Business has been conducted as if the future of Adventism is dependent on decisions made, and work done, by the “higher”

levels, which have elevated their own purposes above those of each individual church.

Over the decades, I have participated in many conversations with colleagues and church leaders about organizational levels in Adventism that are now needless or obsolete. Triggered by concerns that the current denominational structure has unnecessary and unproductive redundancies, we would debate over which level of the Adventist hierarchy is most dispensable.

Never, in these conversations, have I heard anyone suggest that the local congregation is the most dispensable entity in the hierarchy. Without local congregations, there would be no Adventist denomination. Yet, because restructuring to prioritize congregations would probably reduce or even eliminate the power of those in hierarchical leadership roles, very little administrative or policy discussion has recognized the central role that congregations play.

But now, as we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the era of denominationalism appears to be waning. Newer generations of Adventists in North America are disillusioned about denominational hierarchies and are generally suspicious of institutionalism. Supporting denominational structures isn't a priority, because they don't see the value of investing their resources in a system in which they have little or no voice in decisions about mission, direction, or the use of resources.



## The Primacy of the Congregation

Whatever successes the Adventist denomination has experienced over the decades, let's not forget that the Adventist faith is lived out largely in relation to local congregations. Local congregations sustain the Adventist mission and fund the Adventist enterprise.

I have never heard new converts claim that it was the church's hierarchical structure that attracted them to Adventism. Congregations provide the link between individuals and the Adventist faith. To illustrate: since the COVID-19 crisis, church families and congregation-supported ministries have made the greatest impact in serving members and their local communities, while (with few exceptions) denominational offices have been incapacitated, left impotent and irrelevant.

Congregations provide meaning to members that denominational structures do not. The local church is a connected community built through shared experiences. There people socialize while engaging in meaningful projects and ministries. Some find a haven of safety and stability from the vicissitudes of the world. Especially for the young, the congregation can be an audience on which to test out their talents.

Loving, healthy church communities support people in their transformational journey into spiritual maturity. In these communities, we shine a light on our brokenness and support people in their movement toward wholeness. Through fellowship, we encourage, teach, mentor, and interact personally in meaningful ways.

## A Warning on the Horizon

Congregations hold the key to the flourishing of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and if they fail, so will the denominational structure. Yet we cannot assume that congregations will continue into the future as we know them now. Storm clouds have been gathering.

One of the most ominous warning signs has to do with the demographics of churches and communities. Churches in rural America have faced an ongoing struggle to retain members as the population ages and younger people relocate to urban centers. Gray hair predominates, both in the pews and in church leadership. Older members may feel that they have to keep control of the church, to protect it from young people introducing new, possibly heretical ideas or changes. Conversely, as congregations see the disappearance of young families and children, they may prioritize young people as the key to revitalization, leaving the older members feeling marginalized.

As the Barna Group's *State of the Church 2020* report points out, declining loyalty is a common feature of churchgoing in the United States. "Americans aren't joining much of anything these days, and church membership is not as compelling as it once was," says David Kinnaman, Barna president.<sup>1</sup>

A loss of critical mass in a congregation translates into a reduction of people and financial resources to keep the church functioning. By some reports, between 75 and 150 churches close each month in America—upwards of 4,000 per year. Adventist churches are not exempt.

### Congregational Spirit

The seven churches in Revelation each had a distinguishing spirit, and so do modern congregations. Some have a wholesome spirit, others a pathological and toxic one. You can see it in each church's board or business meetings, sometimes even in its architecture and décor. Both in the visible and invisible, in the outer and inner, local churches express their unique disposition. In communities with multiple Adventist churches, people self-select into groups of believers with a personality they feel is compatible with their preferences and values.

In listening to the stories of dozens of congregations, I have learned that the spirit of many of them has remained fairly constant over decades, even after long-standing members are replaced with new ones. Similar to family systems, congregational systems perpetuate their distinctions and dysfunctions. Dysfunctional congregational systems require skilled strategic

suicide, substance abuse, sexual abuse, boundary violations, and more. These are beyond the scope or skill sets of our members, clergy, and denominational administrators, both to detect and to address. These would require the intervention of trained, trustworthy, experienced medical, legal, and mental health professionals, and few local churches know how to access such resources in their communities.

The denominational imprint creates yet another level of complexity. Many small congregations have a codependent relationship with the larger organization: they look to the denomination for a plan for their local ministry and the solutions to their problems. They derive their identity not from who *they* are, but from their connection to a network that has a global reach and prominent institutions. Their identity, if given voice, would be in effect, "Yes, we may be pretty pathetic here, but we don't mind it, because we're part of a much bigger thing—the

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interventions if they are to be placed on a healthy trajectory—which is usually beyond the ability of young pastors, who often intern in a district of three or more widely spaced, rural, and not infrequently declining congregations.

Local churches also risk losing their vitality when they are unable to create environments for worship that are fresh, authentic, dynamic, and real. Repetitive rituals and formalities, whether traditional or contemporary, rob worship services of spiritual vitality. Church bulletins serve as a convincing admission of the entrenched nature of church liturgy: they disclose a static and predetermined format week after week, month after month, with little variation, no room for awe, wonder, and astonishment. The Barna Group's research found that half of all Christians agree that "church as usual" is declining in popularity, and the storm cloud of static formalism that hangs over many congregations is one reason.

### 21st-Century Realities

Congregations are places of tradition and inertia, and many aren't prepared to grapple with 21st-century realities such as gender identity and sexual orientation issues, depression and

General Conference, Loma Linda, and the Hope Channel!" Their weaknesses and dysfunctions are masked by their vicarious appropriation of the success of the denomination, so they fail to build on their distinctive identities and strengths.

### Is This an Opportunity?

Congregations, while the essential building block of the denomination, have been gradually weakening over many years, for all of these reasons. Then the COVID-19 pandemic began. The current global crisis sits as a transformational moment, a potential catalyst for reshaping the church for the future. It seems a timely opportunity to visualize a better future and to do something about it.

What scenarios can we imagine in order to make the most of this situation?

**Back to Normal:** The church could easily dismiss the COVID-19 pandemic as just a passing storm, believing that we will soon return to the way we were. Many congregations, big and small, urban and rural, believe they will eventually continue with life as in the past. The denominational hierarchy, many suppose, will remain intact, and missionary endeavors will resume. Perhaps we'll hold a few more Zoom meetings, but mostly we expect that once this



coronavirus is under control, things will continue as before.

Although COVID-19 has shown us that traditions are the illusion of permanence, we continue to hold on to decades-long denominational practices. A tweet by General Conference President Ted Wilson on April 30 typifies this scenario: “We pray that soon the pandemic will be over and we can once again do evangelism in both big and small cities.”

The “back to normal” option does nothing to arrest the trajectory of decline that plagues many congregations. It perpetuates a system designed over a century ago that draws funds from local congregations to sustain a top-heavy administrative structure with multiple redundancies.

**Reshape & Recalibrate:** While it is not clear yet how radically the rise of digital life will recalibrate the connections that Adventists have to the faith and how these will reshape our institutions and structures, it’s time we experiment with a combination of brick-and-mortar buildings and virtual connections to reimagine the church experience. This scenario would have churches creating new “wineskins”—that is, new metaphors of what it means to be the church.

Included in this reimagining of church is the prospect of a faithful community that is present not just in physical spaces as it is now, but also in digital spaces—unbounded by time or space or location, ever present and available. Conversation about religion and spirituality moves from lectures by clergy into the lived experience of people. Religious storytellers, content producers, and journalists emerge who don’t require access to a church building. Their stories create the environment for conversation, experience, and rituals.

Knowing that younger generations have less interest in institutionalism than in humanitarian, environmental, and social causes, the church in its physical and digital forms could be a pathway for donors to support larger causes and for in-person volunteer involvement.

In this model, the church’s articulation of its identity and mission takes on the cadences, metaphors, and delivery systems of the varying cultures in which it operates and also leaves us freedom to be Adventists in culturally relevant ways.

**Flattening the Denomination:** Perhaps the age of hierarchical administrative structure and excessive bureaucracy has come to an end, and we are seeing the inauguration of the age of the congregation. But what do local congregations need in order to flourish? Can they, given this kind of freedom, maintain their purpose and distinctive identity?

Members are questioning the purpose and value of the current denominational structure, because the conditions that led the

church to organize itself as a multilayered hierarchical system do not exist anymore. The system has evolved into redundant offices that are unnecessary at best and burdensome at worst.

With enough courage, we could explore replacing this redundant system with something more agile: a fresh connectional system, where the bureaucracy is broken apart while the worldwide sisterhood of congregations keeps the church linked in a dynamic equilibrium between the local and the global.

## The Tipping Point

The current transformational moment offers the Adventist denomination incredible opportunities, particularly if traditional approaches and paradigms are questioned and challenged. Applying traditional responses could lessen the pain temporarily, but they are insufficient to solve the underlying problems. Conditions created within a paradigm cannot be resolved from within that paradigm. We must, therefore, challenge deeply held assumptions about how the church works and what are acceptable outcomes.

Going “back to normal” will require little or no creativity or courage. Resistance to changes in the hierarchical structure would expose the determination of those in leadership to retain power and control. The other two scenarios I have described are fragile projects that require brave hearts and skilled leaders.

Many ideas now recognized as transformative began with practically no resemblance to the final product they grew into; even their champions never imagined their ultimate form. Just as liquids suddenly change into solids with a small shift in temperature, small steps taken by individuals and congregations could transform the denomination.

This will not happen, however, with leaders who want the safe and familiar rather than something fresh for the flourishing of our church in the future. The risks involved in pursuing new paradigms cannot be fully eliminated.

Yet we may have reached the tipping point in the church where transformation, as difficult as it might be, is essential. COVID-19 and the other changes I’ve described have literally stripped us of the paradigms that have circumscribed us. But they’ve also flung open the doors of opportunity. Will we enter?

What opportunities we seize or pass up depend on our vision for the future and our collective resolve. As a lifelong Adventist, I can’t say I am optimistic, but I am hopeful. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Barna Group, “Signs of Decline and Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith,” *State of the Church 2020* (April 4, 2020).

# The Renewal of Essential Adventism

By Jim Walters

MANY OF MY GENERATION ARE ASTONISHED at how the denomination of our youth, which then numbered from 1 to 2 million members, has so quickly become a major player among world religions. The accounts of the first Sabbatarian Adventists suggest that they never envisioned the Advent movement as a church—and surely not a global organization of 20 million-plus.

But despite its success, this worldwide denomination is at a tipping point. Seventh-day Adventists face conflicts about the interpretation of Scripture, authoritarian vs. democratic church governance, gender and sexual orientation issues, and the relevance of historical doctrines such as probation and the imminent second coming of Jesus.

The question that currently faces our church is *how to reignite the spirit of Adventism in ways that allow authentic thriving in other cultures.*

This means that the genius of Adventism may take an altered form in the United States than it would in Kenya (each nation having roughly the same number of church members). It means that being *true to conscience*—the hallmark of our forebears—must by its very nature find its legs in hierarchical Brazil differently than in truly democratic New Zealand.

The upshot is that for Adventism to be true to itself, the church structure must change from a one-size-fits-all approach to one that allows, encourages, and even *demand*s that believers take essential Adventism and make it their own: an Adventism that is tailored to their best selves in their own cultures. Our goal should be a denomination that, while geographically global, is also structurally ethical.

What is the essence of Adventism that we must share around the world, even with our regional and cultural differences?

## The Spirit, Not the Rule

Ellen White's family members, the Harmons, were convinced that William Miller was correct about the second coming. But because this new belief was deemed heresy by the Methodist congregation of which they were members, the Harmon family was expelled. Although acknowledged to have "unblemished character and enviable reputation," the Harmon family was judged "guilty of walking contrary to the *rules* of the Methodist Church." After a hastily called church trial, the family left "with free *spirits*, happy in the consciousness of right and the approving smile of Jesus"<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added).

Even today, Adventism's essence should be seen as spirit, not as rules and propositions. It is not coincidental that young Ellen was soon to be gifted with the *spirit* of prophecy.

Rules (typically covered by the umbrella term "law" in the Bible) are good and essential. Who'd want to drive down a highway without a rule about which side of the road we all agree to drive on? Usually the rule and its spirit jibe: the practice of driving in the correct lane and the desire to live safely cohere.

But at times church rules and the religious spirit are at odds, as was the case with the Harmons' Methodist church. And such was the case of the apostle Paul, who found a stark contrast between religious law and intent. Paul speaks of living "in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6, KJV). Elsewhere he says that "the letter [or written code] kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6, NKJV). The written law states one's duty to God, but it doesn't inspire and motivate; the living power of the Spirit brings "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Elsewhere the Spirit is inward and dynamic, while

the letter is external and mechanical.

Today, in the spirit of Ellen and Paul, we should continue to be a Spirit-filled church.

As part of historic Christianity, Adventism is committed to a set of beliefs we have in common with other Christians: the authority of the Bible, belief in the Godhead, divine Creation, and the importance of church. But it is the emphases that uniquely characterize Adventist history and life—Sabbath rest, Advent hope, health, and education—that I want to explore.

## Rest Without Burdens

Sabbath rest is a precious treasure, possessing both immense health benefits and profound spiritual well-being. The tangible benefit to everyday life is captured in a couple of current book titles: *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*; and *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*.

Yet among the many authors in Amazon's catalog of books extolling the benefits of Sabbath rest, no Adventist author was readily evident! We've understood the Sabbath for 170 years, having learned it from Rachel Oakes, a Seventh Day Baptist. But rather than view Sabbath as the blessed gift it is, we've turned it into a scrupulous requirement, a test of salvation, and a reason to fear end-time persecution.

As a child growing up in an Adventist community, I was thoroughly schooled in Sabbath restrictions. I'd close my pious little eyes and in my imagination would vividly envision the words "THE LAW" emblazoned across the sky, and then there was little me, created to perfectly exemplify that eternal, perfect law.

But as an active 10-year-old, I hated to see Friday come, for I knew that the do-nothing Sabbath was just ahead. Later,

when a young married man, I believed that proper Sabbath observance forbade making love on Friday nights—and my wife and I largely followed this practice, until we learned that Jewish law held that Sabbath was the most proper day of the week for lovemaking!

Restrictions marked the Sabbath of legalistic Judaism—and often Adventism. But Jesus would have nothing to do with such tripe. When the Pharisees caught his disciples “threshing” on Sabbath, they confronted Jesus with the offense. In one of my favorite passages in the Gospels, he retorts, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, NKJV). You legalists have it backward, he says. The Sabbath was made for human flourishing. People don’t merely *illustrate* Sabbath observance; they are blessed by it.

## Hope Worth Sharing

The Adventist offer of hope is desperately needed today.

COVID-19 is only a portent of what may come. Many of our future crises will be a result of our technological prowess: eugenic transformation, artificial intelligence, climate change, and nuclear standoff. (*Black Mirror*, a Netflix series, dramatically explores how scientific advances could catastrophically boomerang.)

Of course, we Adventists have been hoping for a new, better world for a long time—175 years, to be exact. Will the end come in the manner I showed people while a student colporteur selling Uncle Arthur’s *The Bible Story* set? In a two-page, four-color spread on the closing pages of volume 10, artist Harry Anderson depicts the second coming: a brilliant Jesus descending in angelic glory to a multitude quaking with fear and wonder. Will every eye on Earth see Jesus’ bodily return?

But really, is that the central question about the future of planet Earth?

Secondary questions can tempt us to trivialize huge issues. But the idea behind the second coming, which is hope for humanity, is not trivial in any way. German theologian Jurgen Moltman’s *Theology of Hope* turns eschatology on its head, declaring that the “end of the world” is not so much theology’s *end* as its *beginning*. We Adventists don’t have any definitive word (*logos*) about the exact end of this Earth, but we do believe that God is involved in our world, as seen in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moltman criticizes mainline Christian theology for following Greek thought, seeing God existing *above* suffering, struggling flesh-and-blood persons. Rather, God accompanied Israel in their nomadic wanderings. Later Jesus displayed indiscriminate love: holding little Jewish children in his lap and raising to life a Roman centurion’s son. And because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the whole of nature—both humanity and Earth itself—will achieve new-creation status.

Years ago, at the Andrews University seminary, I first learned the term “realized eschatology.” It means that Jesus’ own ministry ushered in, or “realized,” the end of Satan’s reign. The Pharisees asked Jesus when to expect the kingdom of God, and he answered that it wasn’t “coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20-21, RSV). Though Jesus also spoke of a future, fully realized kingdom to come (see Luke 11:20; Mark 1:15), scholars now believe that when Jesus said that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17), he literally meant that God’s past relationship with the world had come to a climax with Jesus, and that a new era

had dawned. That was the gospel—the good news!

Because of the here/not yet dimensions of this good news, some speak of Jesus’ “inaugurated eschatology.” And this inaugurated hope is real, because our initial hope has been realized.

## Health

A passion for health is in the Adventist DNA. Yankee revivalist and abolitionist Joseph Bates was a temperance crusader for years before co-founding the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Ellen White has (count them) *five* books on health—the best-known being *The Ministry of Healing* and *Medical Ministry*. That early interest has mushroomed into five Adventist health systems that cover America, running hundreds of acute-care hospitals, nursing homes, clinics, and specialty services—a \$25 billion-plus per year ministry.

These hospital systems are all unabashedly Adventist, with the two largest ones the clearest in their church identity. For example, AdventHealth, based in Florida, has no fewer than 25 separate pages and features on its website under the “Whole Person Health” heading. The website for Adventist Health in Roseville, California, employs the terms *God*, *Christ*, *Adventist*, *whole person*, and *spiritual* no fewer than a dozen times in explaining its mission. Two of the systems speak in their mission statements of “extending the healing ministry of Christ,” and two others cite God’s loving care as the basis for their holistic approach to health.

Over 8 million patients visited Adventist hospitals last year—many times the total number of souls who lived in Galilee 2,000 years ago. How the healing ministry of Jesus has succeeded!

The Adventist denomination should



take more pride in how we're meeting basic human needs daily in our hospitals. Let the Holy Spirit convert; our job is faithfully to serve. Although only one of the 10 lepers came back to Jesus to receive holistic care, Jesus had gladly healed the other nine as well.

## Education

Our Adventist founders had little education. Much of New England in those days was very rural, and it still is. Ellen White had about three years of formal education, and her father was a hatter. William Miller was a farmer in upstate New York.

While of limited education, our forebears were intellectually curious, bright, and farsighted. White wrote four books on education. If only she and her husband, James, could see our educational system now! They'd be amazed, yes. But thrilled? Or horrified? Well, it depends on what's important: the letter or spirit of the educational advice in those four books.

Sometimes Ellen White seemed to see truth as set, static—already attained: She wrote that believers “are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith.”<sup>2</sup> Some Adventists take the prophet's writings as a grid for evaluating all religious truth claims. One believer said to me, “I don't need to read various theologians, because I have a shortcut to truth: the writings of Ellen G. White.”

On the other hand, White says that “The work of instruction begun here will be carried on to all eternity,” and that Jesus will “unravel mysteries...that have never before been understood.”<sup>3</sup> Further, in heaven we will be “ever exploring new fields of thought, ever finding new wonders and new glories.”<sup>4</sup> These statements imply that new knowledge will

sometimes contradict old knowledge, as today's science continually demonstrates.

I believe that Adventist education performs best when it instills a spirit of curiosity in the undaunted pursuit of truth, and the wisdom to know how best to evaluate new truth claims.

## The Renewal of Adventism

The spirit of Adventism that I see in 1843 at the Methodist church trial of the Harmon family—“free spirits, happy in the consciousness of right and the approving smile of Jesus”—is what ought to motivate us to this day. Beyond the four items I mentioned above, we need to begin to apply that spirit to contemporary issues that trouble us as a worldwide church of many different cultures.

For example, the spirit that worked through Ellen White continues to work through her sisters in ministry who have succeeded her. To deny women the right to further the ministry of this Adventist pioneer is to deny the spirit of prophecy. To thwart women who are called by the Spirit to the highest ministerial roles, merely because of their gender, betrays the Spirit that Ellen White heeded in this church. At least I and the great majority of North American church members see the Spirit thus. It's bad enough that women are *officially* denied ordination. But the issue is more basic: the current General Conference (GC) administration would impose on the whole denomination the idea that the headship of men in church leadership is a divine, noncultural mandate for all time. If male headship were ever truth, it's not *present* truth. It's contrary to the spirit of Adventism to force others to live contrary to their own conscientiously held positions—especially on issues as crucial as human equality.

The issue of equality in ministry has

also demonstrated that a historically non-Adventist model of church organization now reigns, one coercive of individual conscience, with the General Conference seeking to control all lower levels of organization and activity. This model is hostile to spiritual unity in Christ and is not conducive to calm and fair reasoning about how a diverse denomination can maintain spiritual unity in Christ.

Yet God's Spirit, and a world church concerned more about spirit than law, could change what seems inevitable. A new model, friendly to the spirit of historic Adventism, is imperative.

Ellen White prophetically called for a major reorganization of church structure at the 1901 GC Session. Visionary leaders could today call for a major rethinking of current organization and study how other Christian bodies organize themselves. In the early Adventist church, a band of 50 energetic believers fervently prayed, studied, and openly debated in Sabbath Conferences. Perhaps for the good of this diverse, world church, a series of new Sabbath Conferences are needed, this time to honestly and openly discuss how our church can be true to itself in light of our cultural diversity and history.

Here is one idea: perhaps the institutions we created can help us get back on track. Maybe Adventist health and Adventist education can, in this era, help to rebuild the Seventh-day Adventist Church. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1855), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> White, *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (1958), p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5 (1889), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (1913), p. 55.

# A RETURN TO PRESENT TRUTH

By Reinder Bruinsma

ALAN COLLINS WAS AN ADVENTIST ARTIST WHOSE WORKS MAY be seen in Guildford Cathedral in Great Britain and in many other places, including the campuses of a number of denominational institutions. But among Seventh-day Adventists, his best-known work is a sculpture of the three angels of Revelation 14 on the facade of the Trans-European Division (TED) headquarters building in St. Albans, England.

That this symbol is immediately recognized by many church members doesn't mean that it is meaningful to anyone else. When I worked in the TED office, our family doctor's office was almost directly opposite the building. When I told him where I worked, he responded that he liked the building but had always wondered why in the world its facade featured a sculpture of three rabbits! So much for a prominent Adventist symbol that is supposed to communicate who we are.

We can hardly blame a secular British physician for not recognizing this symbol. Do our own church members understand its meaning? Although most know the term, and many are adamant that belief in the three angels' messages is one of the defining aspects of our faith, only a minority would be able to summarize with any degree of clarity what these three messages are actually about. (I am not sure if any statistical information confirms that statement, but I have asked the question in a number of Adventist churches as I have gone around preaching, and the responses confirm my suspicion.)

Equally unfortunate is that those who *can* explain everything we believe use a vocabulary that people outside of our community don't understand—words such as remnant, loud cry, investigative judgment, beast from the sea, being in the truth, the spirit of prophecy, Babylon, the end of probation, justification, etc. Many of us are simply unable to speak about the doctrinal

content of our faith in a way that can be understood by others, including other Christians.

And the reality is that many—perhaps most—of our fellow Adventists have only a vague notion of what these words refer to.

## My Evolution

When I began ministry more than 50 years ago, I was, to a large extent, a traditional Adventist. In my Bible studies, I dealt with the doctrines of the church in the ways I'd been taught at home and in my ministerial training.

But much has changed. Society has secularized. Postmodernism had a profound influence on our Western world. Organized religion has lost its attraction, particularly for younger people. Interest in traditional doctrine has declined sharply. The concept of absolute Truth gave way to individual truths; no longer is the key question whether or not something is true, but whether it is meaningful to the individual.

I cannot deny that I have been affected by all of this. Graduate theological study, living and working in different cultures, the influence of my postmodern children—all have influenced how I experience the Adventist community.

Although I no longer move around within this community as I once did, I still have a reasonably accurate idea of what is happening in my denomination. A significant part of the world church still experiences and practices the Adventism of 50 years ago, but I feel less and less affinity with that segment of it. Perhaps some of them wonder whether or not I am still what they consider a “real” Adventist.

I now feel more at home among those who are exploring what their Adventist faith means for them in the 21st century, who have updated their traditional Adventism for life in the here and now. I belong to the growing group who want to see changes in our church, who long for more freedom and more tolerance for differences in thought and theology, who have a desire for genuine inclusivity regarding age, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and gender.

In my search for how to describe what I would like to see happen, I have coined the phrase “a return to present truth.” Present truth, which is how our pioneers described their kind of Christianity and its mission, can be infused with new meaning for those of us who long for a church that is relevant for us today.

## What Is Present Truth?

Before they were Adventists, the pioneers of our church were members of one of the many Christian denominations of



mid-19th-century America. The Millerite movement was highly ecumenical in its makeup. After the Great Disappointment, those who formed the nucleus of what would later become the Seventh-day Adventist Church had no major questions about the existence of God or the authority of the Bible. They believed in salvation through Jesus Christ and other key doctrines of Protestant Christianity, albeit mostly of the Arminian variety, with its emphasis on free will.

In this context, the early Adventists proclaimed a package of unique ideas that they deemed especially relevant for their time. *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* defines present truth as “a cluster of truths that surrounded the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14.”<sup>1</sup> These “truths” explained why the Millerite movement had ended in dismay, and what they believed had really happened in 1844. This explanation gave them a basis on which to rebuild their faith in Christ’s second coming and the events leading up to this. They had been wrong, but they had not been crazy in their pre-1844 Advent hope.

It was natural that a focus on apocalyptic prophecy, which was widespread in 19th-century America and which had led to the exponential growth of the Millerite movement, would continue, with people seeing the signs in their own time. The 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, the dark day of 1780, and the Leonid meteor showers of 1833—all seemed undeniable proof of the soon coming of Christ. And in a nation that was experiencing an unprecedented growth of Roman Catholic immigrants, the idea that Rome—believed to have introduced Sunday as a counterfeit Sabbath—was the end-time foe par excellence of a commandment-keeping “remnant” was a very convincing aspect of present truth.

However, this present truth has, in the view of many 21st-century Adventists, lost its sense of being present, and thereby most of its relevance. An 18th-century Lisbon earthquake doesn’t have the immediacy of a pandemic in 2020.

**Both leaders and members must allow God to reinvent his church so that it can once again become a movement with a present truth.**

And in a secular world, in which the church has in many ways been relegated to the margins, other denominations—perhaps even Roman Catholics—are not so much threats as they are allies in our fight against the dechristianization of society.

What some Adventists still call present truth is rapidly becoming a relic of the past.

### **Making Truth “Present” Again**

The Adventist pioneers didn’t foresee this “present” lasting beyond a few decades. Almost two centuries have passed since the Sabbath Conferences, where they came to a consensus regarding the contours of present truth. With passing years, the so-called delay of the second coming has become ever more problematic. The special truths have lost their urgency, and the language in which these truths are expressed have lost its relevance.

Many ministers are no longer preaching sermons about the old truths, and Adventist theologians are likewise moving on. Church members not only struggle with the meaning of traditional Adventist beliefs, but also ask fundamental questions about God, his ways of dealing with the world, and the meaning of life. Many now feel that their church didn’t focus enough on those essential elements of the Christian faith.

In recent years I have given a lot of thought to members who are on the margins of the church, who are desperately hoping for change. I wrote the book *Facing Doubt*, which was published in seven languages, about that very thing.<sup>2</sup> I have never been on the point of leaving, for the church is dear to me, and my entire life has been intertwined with the Adventist faith community. But the book does express my conviction, which has only strengthened since I wrote it, that both leaders and members must allow God to reinvent his church so that it can once again become a movement with a present truth.



## Key Elements of Present Truth

As I shared above, *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* refers to present truth as a package of special ideas that were not heard in other denominations and that were deemed to be especially relevant in the early history of our church.

I want to adapt this definition to what I see as the present truth for our generation: “A cluster of ideas that are rooted in Scripture and in the Adventist tradition and that are relevant for Christians in the 21st century.”

This cluster of ideas that we want to share with “the world” must have a solid Christian basis, which among others things would include a balanced picture of who our Creator-God is, what he did for us in Christ, and what he is doing for us through the Spirit that he sent to guide us through life. It must include a biblical view of the reality of personal and corporate sin and of the gracious provision God made for our salvation. Belief that death is not the end, but that existence beyond death has been assured by the victory Christ gained for us by conquering death, is also part of the foundation on which my understanding of “present truth” is built.

A key element of the package must be the biblical Sabbath, which is truly a day of rest. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: People who have come to enjoy the God-given rest of the Sabbath have experienced that the divinely instituted time rhythm of six-plus-one is highly beneficial, and true Sabbath-keeping will go a long way to beat stress and even burnout. The Sabbath is God’s gift to the world, and we can help to distribute this gift.

Adventists started as campaigners. They were heavily involved in reform movements. Ellen G. White used her prophetic voice to promote health reform, dress reform, and educational reform. These activities were not always original but were often ahead of what the experts of her time were advocating. The later challenges Adventism has faced with regard to racism and gender inequality belie the church’s original support for abolitionism and acceptance of female leaders. A return to present truth calls Adventists to once again be at the forefront, or even to take the lead, in the fight for racial, gender, and social equality, not to mention radical inclusivity.

For Adventists, caring for our body was not just sensible and a matter of longevity, but was motivated by the belief that our Creator expects us to take care of what he has given us. Sadly, we have not remained among the leading voices in the field of

healthful living. I fear that for a majority of church members, healthful living is mainly a matter of saying no to unclean meats and abstaining from tobacco, illicit drugs, and alcohol.

In my vision of present truth, stewardship is not limited to giving a tenth of our increase to the church organization. A truly Christlike way of handling our resources impacts our political choices—for instance, making sure that wealth and healthcare are fairly distributed. Enjoying the privilege of being stewards in the service of Most High should propel us to the forefront of responsible and sustained efforts against ugly, self-centered consumerism. And the conviction that God has called us humans to be guardians of this planet should give our present truth a green color and make us frontrunners in activities that reduce climate change and limit the warming of our planet.

These suggestions do not fully describe present truth, but they point in a direction where further search might take us. Sharing these ideas in a convincing and attractive way will, I believe, give the Adventist Church a new vitality for our time.

## Can It Work?

It will be hard—perhaps impossible—to convince most traditional Adventists that redefining present truth for 2020 is a legitimate exercise. Undoubtedly, some will argue that I am abandoning the old landmarks or that I am pleading for a kind of Adventist social gospel that obscures our real mission. Yet I believe, strongly and sincerely, that it is our duty to connect our religion with the times in which we live and to ask ourselves how we can be loyal to the principles of the gospel and to the ideals of the founders of our movement.

Some will wonder whether Adventism can survive the kind of change that I advocate. Indeed, it will not be easy to keep the various subgroups of Adventism together unless we give each other enough space. But I am convinced that not trying to return to a truth for this present will exacerbate the process of church-leaving that is already underway. And I believe that if we make a good-faith effort to make our truth once again “present,” many on the margins of the church will stay and again find enthusiasm for the mission of Adventism. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013), p. 1052.

<sup>2</sup> Reinder Bruinsma, *Facing Doubt: A Book for Adventist Believers “On the Margins”* (English ed.: 2016). Also published in Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, Russian, French, and German.



# CRISIS, SCAPEGOATING, AND CHANGE

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

IN HIS BOOK *THE CROSS AND THE LYNCHING TREE*, FATHER OF Black Liberation Theology James Cone writes that “the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbol of the African American community—symbols that represent both death and the promise of redemption.... Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings, and at the same time ‘an unquenchable ontological thirst’ for the life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.”<sup>1</sup>

Although we are plunged into a perpetual crisis of domination—the brutality of one to another, the knee on the neck—I believe that a deep consciousness of this very desperation can be the catalyst for cultural change.

## The History of Scapegoating

The word *scapegoat* originates in Leviticus 16, where Aaron speaks the transgressions of Israel with his hand upon the head of an innocent goat, which is then banished into the wilderness, thereby symbolically ridding Israel of death, disease, and other misfortunes.

James Frazer<sup>2</sup> and other anthropologists have shown that scapegoating isn’t unique to Israel but was known in cultures around the world. The purpose of the scapegoat was to bring healing and restore the community to union with the divine. As Jungian analyst Sylvia Brinton Perera puts it, the scapegoat “incorporates evil and death, life and goodness into a single unifying pattern” toward self-reflection and healing.<sup>3</sup>

But scapegoating evolved as a negative expression, as well. Analyzing it through a psychological and anthropological lens, Brinton writes: “Scapegoating, as it is currently practiced, means finding the one or ones who can be identified with evil or

wrong-doing, blamed for it, and cast out from the community in order to leave the remaining members with a feeling of guiltlessness, atoned (at-one) with the collective standards of behavior.”<sup>4</sup> She says that scapegoating allocates blame and seeks to “inoculate against future misery and failure” by evicting the presumed cause of misfortune. That is, someone or something must be sacrificed in the interest of security and survival.

This dynamic occurs because human societies, institutions, and communities define themselves by traditions, dogmas, rules, and ideologies—in other words, boundaries—the aim of which is to rein in everyone in order to maintain coherence and a sense of security. A scapegoat is found—usually a transgressor, real or imagined—when something threatens the security of society, institution, or community.

Once it is eliminated, the community is left to self-reflect and change in light of the crisis. Or, it may continue the cycle of scapegoating in defense of the egoistic self-identity. If it chooses the first, openness and growth may result. However, if the community chooses the latter, an us-against-them mentality prevails.

Social and psychological stagnation occurs when scapegoating remains the only way through a crisis. There develops a false sense that everything will now go well, because the community is united against one foe, of which it has rid itself.

## Scapegoating in Culture and Church

Currently we are seeing the scapegoating of black people in American society. Although many white-collar criminals, generally racially white, go unpunished for embezzlement and fraud, we see a black man lose his life for allegedly attempting to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill without ever having a chance to stand before a



judge and jury. He is unarmed and handcuffed, as a white police officer places his knee on his neck as though he were an animal.

It is typical in this matter of scapegoating that one group appears to be scapegoated for the problems of the larger culture. The chronic cultural conviction seems to be that if we can keep black people (especially black males) docile or out of sight, there will be peace and order in American society. This kind of scapegoating was most blatantly demonstrated through

**We are slowly waking up to the realization that the real pandemic that has dogged humanity since the dawn of time is a culture of domination, without which people do not seem to know how to survive.**

thousands of lynchings that took place, especially in the South, in the early part of the 20th century. Unsurprisingly, some today describe incidents of police brutality against black people as a kind of modern-day lynching.

Another example of scapegoating may be found within our Adventist community. In the latter part of the 1970s, the Seventh-day Adventist Church went through a serious crisis of biblical hermeneutics that threatened its identity and survival. The question of women's ordination had surfaced only shortly before

that crisis, at the same time as the rise of the feminist movement, and so it became entangled with it. The world church had pursued studies whose intent was to provide biblical reasons to ordain women.<sup>5</sup> But the very leaders of the movement to ordain women became the enemies of women's ordination when that issue appeared to symbolize a radical cultural shift in the church. It perceived women's ordination as a capitulation to the general culture war in America—a war that included serious challenges to systems of hierarchy built on a growing Adventist sympathy with American fundamentalism.

Although the church's accepted biblical hermeneutic doesn't necessarily lead to a rejection of women's ordination, this issue has become the scapegoat around which vigilante Adventists rally to "save" the world church from splintering.<sup>6</sup> They believe that as long as they can keep the church's women—even those who are clearly called by God to leadership roles—subservient, the church will remain intact. This is 2,000 years after Jesus transgressed the gender boundary and made Mary Magdalene his chief apostle of the resurrection, and only 175 years after God called a woman to be the extrabiblical voice of authority to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

All over the world, societies continue to subjugate women in the interest of preserving an "orderly" society.

### **The Current Crisis**

In the summer of 2020, the world is gripped in a crisis. We are trying to reopen after months of lockdown, taking shelter from a microscopic particle that is hardly even a living thing yet has left in its wake hundreds of thousands dead, millions upon millions unemployed, and institutions struggling to survive.



But that is not the deepest crisis. That is not the cause of protest. We are slowly waking up to the realization that the real pandemic that has dogged humanity since the dawn of time is a culture of domination, without which people do not seem to know how to survive.

All over the world, people are marching on streets and highways, some into the wee hours of the morning. They gather in large crowds, seemingly unmindful that they should maintain six feet of distance from one another. Perhaps they sense that this coronavirus is less dangerous than the entrenched ideologies that cause us to turn upon each other? Indeed, this latter crisis requires a lot more effort to stem.

## The real problem is that social systems, whether they be civic or religious, thrive by a “knee on the neck” policy.

Can we change it? This is more than a question; it is a primal scream echoing across the Earth through all races and classes of humanity.

George Floyd’s death is terrible, but it isn’t the problem. It is a symptom of the problem. The real problem is that social systems, whether they be civic or religious, thrive by a “knee on the neck” policy. This is the system of control that runs the world: some must remain at the top, with those at the bottom as their ego support beams.

It used to happen consciously, supported by ideological systems that at every level made one species of life superior to the other. But having become entrenched, it now occurs unconsciously, in spite of all the knowledge we now have that debunks those myths that sustain domination. It goes, in a sense, underground. It becomes unconscious, this fear that change threatens survival.

This oppressive civilization thrives because almost everyone buys into it. The ideologies that support it convince them that this is the way of survival. To maintain this practice of knee on neck, we misuse terms such as “law and order,” “unity,” “authority,” and “control.”

And this system of control perpetually plunges us into crisis, because it is not built on the reality of the nature of the human spirit. Reality is like air: the more pressure one places on it, the greater the explosion.

### Scapegoating Jesus

The Bible shows the Jewish leaders’ scapegoating of Jesus, though coming from a place of deep and chronic fear, as the agent of change for everyone who pays attention.

“The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.’ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death” (John 11:47-53, NRSV).

We see Jesus—both his teaching and actions—as a disclosure of divine love that liberates people from the burden of layers of religious dogma, ritualistic obsession, and hierarchical power structure. No wonder the crowds follow Jesus and listen! They witness his life-giving power in miracles. He teaches that the true kingdom of God is a spiritual experience, not ecclesiastical or political. He calls into question an egocentric religious system obsessed with its own survival. He subverts a Roman culture of domination and exploitation. The kingdom of God, he asserts, is not politically liberated Israel, or the Roman empire that colonizes them. It is right here with you (Luke 17:20-21). You control your destiny.

What is revealed in the drama of Jesus’ trial is that his teaching not only disrupts the structure of an entire religious system, but also threatens the authority of its leader, Caiaphas. The plot to kill him is taking place just before the Passover, when a multitude of Jews from all over the Diaspora are gathering in Jerusalem. The high priest, Caiaphas, must not lose control or lose face. He fears an uprising, and this uprising could be the end of the Jewish nation, because the Roman Empire is bent on maintaining control and brutally crushes any kind of uprising (John 11:45-51).

So Caiaphas advises the other members of the Jewish local government to scapegoat Jesus. “It is better to have one person die for the people.” And Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, conforms to the plot (John 19:1-16), because he is ultimately responsible to keep the peace—a brutal peace—in his province or else risk being deposed or executed.

In short, scapegoating Jesus served as the perfect answer to the domination aspirations for everyone in the story.

## Reimagining the Cross

As the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19 confronts us, the church has turned to technology to survive. It has had to reimagine community interaction via Zoom meetings. This type of change may turn out to be practical, but it is superficial. Science and technology do nothing in themselves to address our inhumanities and prejudices. They more often give us means to further our evil intent against, or compassionless neglect of, one another.

We need to reimagine ourselves in light of the crisis that led to the cross. We need to break the vicious cycle of scapegoating from which the church, especially, has been unable to escape.

Just before he is about to be executed, Jesus not only prays for his followers, but he calls them to change: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 13:34, NRSV). As familiar, almost clichéd, as this passage has become, it contains a profound depth that Christendom has overlooked in its obsession with Christological dogmas of control—that is, using Jesus as the chief of religious tribalism.

There are many who call upon the name of Jesus but know not Christ, the logos of God. And there are many who call *not* upon the name of Jesus, but it is evident through their love that they know Christ as the logos of God. For, to know is to be the logos incarnate, abiding in love—we in God, God in us (1 John 4:16, NRSV).

So change comes when we *know* God and show that through love, not when we *claim belief* and sign off on “articles of faith” to buttress institutional control and survival.

## The Scapegoat That Changes the World

John writes to address the meaning of the crisis that led to the scapegoating of Jesus of Nazareth. While he recognizes the actual socio-historical dilemma that led to it, when he writes, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins”—and not just ethnic Jews, but for the entire world (1 John 2:2), he invokes the Levitical scapegoat as the foundation of his argument for change. The original intent of the scapegoat is here called into the service of change—radical delivering love.

He is not the scourge that the community must purge, but rather, the harbinger agent of transformation. The call in John is to “walk as he walked” (2:6), to lay down one’s life for one’s friend (John 15:13). Mark puts it this way: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34, NRSV).

We are all called to be scapegoats of transformation.

The cross that George Floyd and countless other scapegoated black people bore—from slavery, through lynching, Jim Crowism, and systemic racism—is the cross that Jesus bore. All were scapegoated through fear and in the interest of survival.

This is the profound understanding of the cross that James Cone articulates in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Cone argues that when every person has the heart to not just see, but to feel the suffering of their fellow humans, then the cross—the scapegoat, the atoning sacrifice—becomes salvific.<sup>7</sup>

It is when all, regardless of race, nationality, gender, or class, join those protesters who lie down in the streets and chant, “I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe,” that we may see in the eye of the other our own selves; this is when we can feel the other person’s heart beating in our chest. It is then that the knee ceases to snuff out the life of humanity, and perpetual crisis comes to a halt.

The cross does not absolve us so that we can continue to thrive by scapegoating. Rather, it challenges us to take it up—to seek change. Though painful, it seems to be the way out of this vicious cycle of stagnation and death. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2013), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (1890, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Brinton Perera, *The Scapegoat Complex: Toward a Mythology of Shadow and Guilt* (1986), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *The Role of Women in the Church*, with an Introduction and Overview by Gordon M. Hyde (1984).

<sup>6</sup> Two popular books against women’s ordination published in 1994 and 1995 in anticipation of the Utrecht General Conference Session took aim at the “feminist agenda” as a threat to civilization as we know it. Some who formerly defended women’s ordination stood on the pretense that the issue was really about the Bible. See Raymond C. Holmes, *The Tip of an Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry* (1994); and Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women’s Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (1995). For full disclosure on the issue, see Olive J. Hemmings, *Sacred Texts and Social Conflict: The Bible and the Debate Over Women’s Ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Cone, p. 41.





*The Chronicle of Higher Education* said in February of this year: “We’re in the midst of what feels like a college apocalypse. You read about college closures, mergers, and dangerously low enrollment numbers, and those signals can scream that ‘the end is near!’ even if your institution isn’t like the ones you

- Employer expectations for proven competency-based education
  - The closure of Seventh-day Adventist schools in both preK-12 and higher-education sectors
- Each of these factors could undoubtedly warrant an article on its own. Combined, they make it clear that both higher

- A new Adventist model will involve these things:
- A spiritually nurturing Seventh-day Adventist campus with a focus on the redemptive love of Jesus
  - Affordable Adventist education available to students from families of all financial backgrounds, with less

# ADVENTIST HIGHER EDUCATION IN 2030

By Marc Grundy and Gordon Bietz

read about in *The Chronicle’s* pages.”

Adventist higher education is facing this apocalypse. Here are some of the things stacked against us:

- A declining population of traditional college/university students in the United States and Canada
- A decreasing ability for Adventist colleges and universities to get the contact information of Adventist prospective students, as college test companies change or eliminate “religious preference” as a demographic question<sup>1</sup>
- A decreasing capacity for Seventh-day Adventist families to financially afford private higher education, along with their decreasing willingness to borrow in order to finance, compounded by concern about value of investment
- An extraordinary increase in the costs of providing a traditional college/university experience over the past 25 years
- The increased availability of competitive educational modalities that no longer require a residential campus (e.g., free community college, online degrees, and subscription-based programs)

education in general, and Adventist higher education specifically, are now fully experiencing disruption fueled by dramatic social and demographic changes.

To illustrate, in the last seven years, enrollment in Adventist colleges and universities in North America has declined by 14 percent, averaging a loss of 548 students a year. In the fall of 2019, combined enrollment was down by 633 students from the previous fall.

The writing is on the wall: Adventist higher education must find a way to rebound by 2030. We either pivot toward a new model or else face a future of incremental efforts for change with likely substantive declines, increased financial subsidies, and a severely marginalized educational offering.

## Making Changes

While Adventist colleges and universities have been aware of these trends, we have not done enough to initiate change. COVID-19 has pushed us to confront the vital importance of transformation to a new higher-education model.

dependence on student loans and long-term debt

- System-wide support through a teaching and learning center that focuses on pedagogy and andragogy, different modalities, current as well as future technologies, and research
- Meaningful and measurable preparation for internships that are successful during studies, and employment after graduation based on industry perspectives and needs
- Customized degrees enriched through micro-credentialing, digital badging, and competency-based learning
- One division-wide platform for online higher education.

## The AACU

How do we work toward these goals? Since 2003 the Association of Adventist Colleges and Universities (AACU) has been bringing together leaders and constituencies to assess the data and lay plans for collaboration, with varying degrees of success. One success was a central office for strategic enrollment management/marketing, which has produced 2,955 new students for the

colleges and universities over the past 16 years. In 2009, the AACU established a planning committee to explore the above-described model and hired its first employee to coordinate marketing efforts.

Some low-risk partnership activities have been tested and are underway among the 13 schools. At a gathering in 2015, North American Division (NAD) union presidents and college presidents agreed that the new structural model necessary to produce lasting positive change would be virtually impossible to achieve without constituency buy-in and support. Consequently, at the “Chicago Summit” held in August of 2018,<sup>2</sup> more than 90 percent of the 200 NAD higher education leaders, church leaders, and lay people in attendance voted to explore a coalition of willing partners, with the goal of first piloting and then evaluating the efficacy of an eventual new Adventist higher-education system.

### A Division-wide Platform

While each of the above objectives are important, a division-wide platform for online higher education offers the most potential.

For example, rather than teaching 13 similar versions of an online class, we could take the best parts of each and offer one incredible digital course, offering as many sections as needed. We could also share limited faculty resources across all campuses to expand degree offerings. (Data suggest that 80 percent of students apply to 20 percent of the majors/careers in higher education; an online platform could allow us to collaborate in cost-saving/quality-enhancing ways on that 80 percent.)

Institutions could streamline general education requirements in such a way that students who can't participate in the residential campus experience would have

## THE LOOMING ENROLLMENT CRISIS

### Enrollment is projected to decline

High school graduates in the U.S. (projected change, in millions)



Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates, 2016*, [www.wiche.edu/knocking](http://www.wiche.edu/knocking)

“The Great Recession did not simply delay births—it eliminated them.”

—Nathan Grawe, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*

### It's not just demographics

Families are increasingly price-conscious and skeptical about the value of the college degree

Americans who say higher education is going in the wrong direction:

**61%**

THOSE WHO SAY A MAJOR REASON IS:

Tuition costs are too high:

**84%**

Students don't get the skills they need to succeed in the workplace:

**65%....**

Source: Pew Research Center, 2018 American Trends Panel

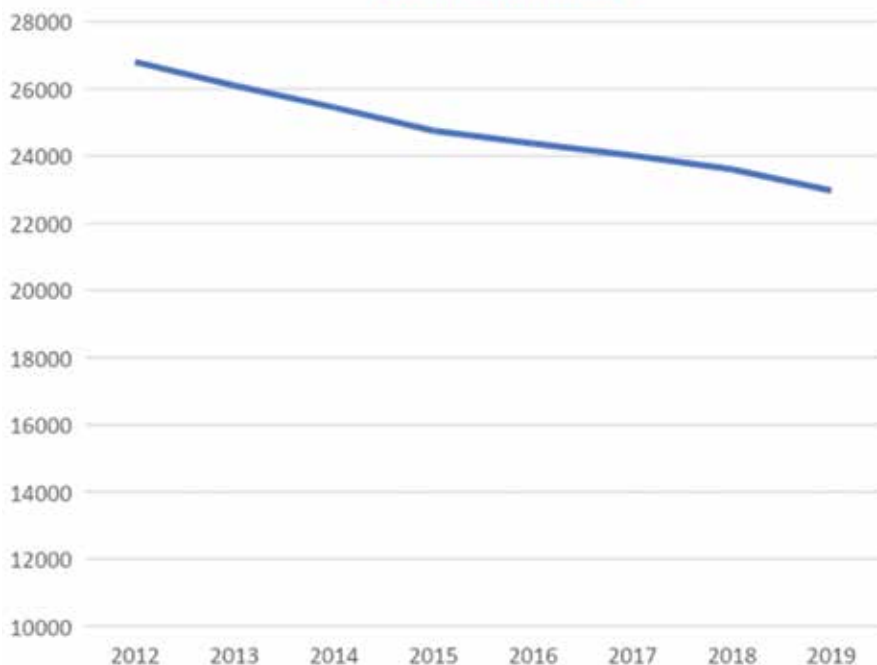
an Adventist online option at home instead of going to a local community college—especially since community colleges have an extremely low retention rate.

A division-wide online platform could make Adventist higher education more affordable. Most importantly, we would be able to stay connected with these students and not lose them from our church in such high numbers, as too often happens when individuals attend public colleges. In 2014, “A Study of the College Experiences of Alumni of Adventist Colleges/Universities and Adventist Graduates of

Public Colleges/Universities in North America” showed that students attending Adventist higher education were:

- 7 times more likely to develop a deeper relationship with Jesus
- 7 times more likely to experience professors who studied the Bible with students
- 5 times more likely to participate in mission service or mission trips
- 3 times more likely to work on campus
- 3 times more likely to participate in campus activities and experience positive dating interactions.

## AACU TOTAL ENROLLMENT



### The Residential Experience

Any new model for Adventist higher education must not neglect the essential nature of the residential living environment, where young people aged 18 to 23 live with peers and mentors of a similar faith.

Outside of a moral frame of reference, mere accumulation of information can be dangerous. D. L. Moody once said, “If a man is stealing nuts and bolts from a railway track, and in order to change him you send him to college, at the end of his education, he will steal the whole railway track.” In Ecclesiastes 1:13-14, Solomon says: “I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. ... I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind” (NLT).

Seventh-day Adventist education must be more than chasing after the wind.

Alexander Austin wrote: “Viewed as a whole, the many empirical findings from this study seem to warrant the following general conclusion: *the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years.* ... “When it comes to the student’s affective development, one generalization seems clear: student values, beliefs, and aspirations tend to change in the direction of the dominant values, beliefs, and aspirations of the peer group.”<sup>3</sup>

### It’s Time

A new model of Adventist higher education must be appropriately marketed to our prospective students and their families, in the North American Division and beyond. Our educational endeavors should attract to our campuses more individuals who are not affiliated with a Seventh-day Adventist church. This, too, is evangelism: Adventist education should not be held under a

bushel for the exclusive use of church members.

We believe that the church in North America will be as strong as its educational system. Yet we have been talking about these necessary changes for almost three decades, with minimal action. Enough talk; we can no longer remain in our institutional and organizational silos. This is not about the survival of one or two of our 13 schools. This is about creating a new form of Adventist higher education that provides high-quality preparation for a life of service and a productive career.

So how will Adventist higher education be different in 2030? It depends on our courage. As John le Carre said, “There’s one thing worse than change and that’s the status quo.”<sup>4</sup> We must not relax in the belief that tomorrow will bring solutions. We either prepare for the future or prop up a soon-to-be-obsolete past.

This is a defining moment. We cannot afford to waste the opportunities of the current crisis. We can present to the world the unique, holistic education of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, or we can let our system fail. This time we must follow through. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Many families say that they hear very little from our Adventist colleges and universities in comparison to other schools. Fortunately, the North American Division’s eAdventist system has the names of all Adventists in the division, and 49 of the 59 conferences have authorized us to contact members with college-aged children.

<sup>2</sup> To review presentations from the Chicago Summit, visit [www.adventistthe.org](http://www.adventistthe.org).

<sup>3</sup> Alexander W. Astin, “What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited” (1997), p. 398.

<sup>4</sup> John le Carre, *Smiley’s People* (2002), p. 302.



# THE REST OF THE STORY OF SALAMANCA: SOLVING THE MYSTERIOUS DIARY DATES

By Ronald D. Graybill

IN 1961 MERVYN MAXWELL HAD A BRIGHT idea. Perhaps he could get a photocopy of Ellen White's actual handwritten diary page where she described, on the basis of a vision, a meeting that did not take place until four months later. Then he could show the document to the students in his Prophetic Guidance course at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, and bolster their confidence that Ellen White was a true prophet. After all, the diary would prove that she knew in advance about an event that was still in the future. Or would it?

The story of the Salamanca vision of November 3, 1890, and Ellen White's recounting of it at a ministers' meeting on March 8, 1891, was already well known. Her secretary and research assistant, Clarence Crisler, had added it to her book *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* in 1915.

Back in 1891, Mrs. White's description of her vision had amazed her listeners, because it matched a controversial ministers' meeting of the previous night. But Ellen White, in that March 8 morning meeting, made no claim to have written an account of the earlier meeting before it happened. Arthur White introduced the "written in advance" idea in T. Housel Jemison's 1955 college textbook, *A Prophet Among You*, and announced, "We have the handwritten record in our vault."

When Maxwell visited Adventist headquarters in Washington, D.C., in 1961, he asked Arthur White if he

could have photocopies of the crucial diary pages. White promised to see if "something could be done," but two years passed, and Maxwell heard nothing. He wrote in 1963 to renew his request and, again, got no response.

Finally, in 1964, Maxwell turned up the heat. "It would be untrue to say that I am beginning to suspect that the whole story is a pure hoax," he wrote. "I still ... assume that the story is probably true, even if some of the details are fuzzy and have been exaggerated." Arthur White responded immediately this time, saying he would submit the request to the Ellen G. White Estate board of trustees in February.

After the February board meeting, there were further delays. A frustrated Maxwell wrote F. D. Nichol, chairman of the board, stating: "As things stand at present, I shall have no choice but to tell them [my students] that though I have heretofore believed this story, as a trained church historian, I can no longer—within the bounds of professional ethics—encourage them to believe it as true, since I cannot obtain, even after years of trying to, any documentary evidence to support it."

Nichol thought that position "remarkable," because most of the historical information that we believe has come to us from reliable chroniclers who have examined the sources, and not from examining the sources ourselves. Maxwell

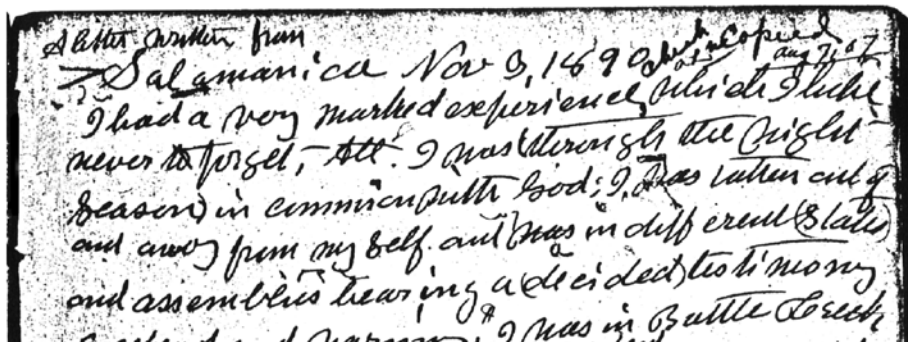
could have responded (but didn't) that if those chroniclers were requested to share their sources, but refused to do so, their reliability would be open to question.

When the board of trustees took up the matter again in June, they said, "Because of the complexities of the intermingling of subject matter in the diary record, the steps to be taken are not entirely clear to the Trustees..." In truth, "complexities" and "intermingling" only begin to tell the story of the mysterious dates in the Salamanca diary entries.

## Details of the Salamanca Vision

C. C. Crisler's account that was published in *Life Sketches* does not mention the diary and its problems. According to him, Ellen White had a vision in Salamanca, New York, on the night of November 3, 1890. The next morning, she started to tell what she had seen, "but her mind immediately turned to other matters, and she did not relate the vision." During a sermon in Battle Creek in March of 1891, she was again about to relate the Salamanca vision but "proceeded to other lines of thought."

That evening, a group of Adventist leaders met to debate whether their religious liberty journal, *The American Sentinel*, should continue to advocate the seventh-day Sabbath or confine itself to general religious liberty topics. The meeting grew contentious. A. F. Ballenger arose, held up a copy of the journal,



pointed to an article on the Sabbath, and passionately declared that “this must come out.” The meeting continued that Saturday night until after midnight and concluded in the wee hours of Sunday, March 8.

Ellen White was not in the midnight meeting and had no intention of attending the ministers’ meeting the next morning. But she awoke early that Sunday morning with the “decided impression” that she should “go into the ministers meeting and bear the message which the Lord had given me in Salamanca New York.” She arrived unexpectedly and described in detail what had been shown her in her vision in Salamanca, including a scene where one of the ministers held up a copy of *The American Sentinel* and declared that “this must come out.” The burden of her vision was quite the opposite: The *Sentinel* should not compromise with the world; it should uphold and advocate distinctive Adventist truths, especially the seventh-day Sabbath. The men were stunned and amazed. They told her the meeting she’d just described had taken place only the night before. “Last night!” Ellen White exclaimed in amazement. She had thought the meeting took place back in November, at the time it was revealed to her. Ballenger rose, confessed he was the man who’d held up the *Sentinel*, then said he had been on the wrong side and would now be on the right side.

That version of the Salamanca story, which Mervyn Maxwell had been telling his students, came into question when he couldn’t secure copies of the crucial diary pages.

### “Backdated” Diary Entries

When I worked at the Ellen G. White Estate in 1982, I studied Ellen White’s diary entries about Salamanca and concluded: “The weight of evidence indicates that they were not written until after the morning ministers’ meeting of March 8.” Robert Olson, who was Secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate at the time, wrote an introduction to my Salamanca paper and declared that the evidence it presented was “given so that the matter could be seen just as it is.” He also said, “At times it may even appear that she [Ellen White] ‘back-dated’ some entries.” I had, in fact, used that term, claiming that Ellen White “backdated” the entries that appeared to describe the March 7 midnight meeting months before it occurred.

Arthur White believed I had used the term “backdated” to imply deception on Ellen White’s part. To him, my paper indicated that I was “ready to catch at anything which might call in question or discredit Ellen White’s integrity” and thought I’d found “evidence of conniving and dishonesty.” He thought I had attributed “dishonest motives” to Ellen White and others who retold the story.

Actually, I had not accused Ellen White of “conniving” or “dishonesty,” nor had I attributed any “dishonest motives” to her or anyone else. We cannot say that Ellen White intended to deceive with her Salamanca entries, because we do not know her intentions. We only know that the dates she ascribed to those entries deceived others, most notably Arthur L. White.

A number of entries in Ellen White’s 1890 diary can be described as “backdated.” If the term implies a deceptive practice to some people, they will need to judge whether the evidence demonstrates deception or merely innocent aberrations. Some argue that there was no mistake at all in the dates ascribed to the entries—the dates refer to the date the events took place, not the date the entries were written into the diary. While it is true that one might neglect one’s diary for a few days, then go back and fill in the events of earlier days, attributing those entries to the dates when the events occurred, going back four months to add extensive entries would be more than a little unusual.

What do Mrs. White’s diaries for 1890 and 1891 actually show? They show that she experienced a healing reverie on the evening of November 3, 1890. “The whole room seemed filled with a soft, silvery light, and my pain and disappointment and discouragement were removed.” She made no mention of a dream or vision in the initial entry or in the days immediately following.

Mrs. White used a blank book as her diary in 1890, so she supplied all of the dates for her entries; they were not pre-printed. On any given page of the diary, she might write only a few lines, she might fill it, or she might leave it blank entirely and then write on the next page. An entry dated Nov. 3, which begins after the last entry for December 31,

1890, is headed with the words: “A letter written from Salamanca Nov. 3.” That November 3 entry in the back of Diary 16 is online now at [egwwritings.org](http://egwwritings.org) as part of Manuscript 44, 1890, but with an important editorial note explaining that the entry, though dated November 3, was probably written after December 31, 1890.

It is doubtful that the November 3 date can refer to the subject under discussion and not to the date of writing. If the place of writing merely slipped her mind, she did not intend to deceive. However, the statement “written from Salamanca Nov. 3, 1890” is a claim that the document was written while Ellen White was in Salamanca, New York, in November of 1890.

The November 3 date is problematic for another reason. November 3 was the Monday when she had her healing reverie. She makes no mention, in this letter or in any diary entry at or near the time, of doing any writing that night. In fact, sometime later she interlined her diary entry for the next day, November 4, with a sentence that said: “I longed to be where I could write out the things that were opened to me the past night.” Clearly, she had not written anything during that night.

The entry dated November 3 in the back of the diary touches in a general way on the content of the Salamanca vision, but not in as much detail as one that appears earlier in the diary and is backdated to November 21. However, a careful examination of that November 21, 1890, entry indicates that it was written in Battle Creek in 1891, at a time which cannot be proven to have been before the crucial March 8 morning meeting. Probably just after the March 8 meeting, Ellen White went back to page 321 of her 1890 diary and after the original six-line entry for November 20, she launched

into a long entry she dated November 21. However, that entry would fill three pages that had previously been left blank and the space below earlier original entries for November 21 and 22, thus intermingling with those original entries.

On November 21, 1890, Mrs. White was in Brooklyn, New York, as part of a three-month tour of the East that included the visit to Salamanca, New York. But as she made this long new November 21 entry, she seems to have forgotten that she was in Brooklyn on that date, and she used the expression “here in Battle Creek.” When the November 21 diary passage was first typed up, Ellen White’s secretary omitted the word “here” from the line “here in Battle Creek.” The deleted word was not restored to the official file copy and online version of the passage until after my paper was written in 1982.

Some have suggested that writing “here in Battle Creek” when she was actually in Brooklyn was the sort of inadvertent mistake any traveler might make. But elsewhere in her 1890 letters and diary entries, Ellen White uses the expression “here in Battle Creek” 10 times, but only when she is, in fact, in Battle Creek.

Another indication that the passage was written in Battle Creek is found in a familiar passage Mrs. White quotes from Friedrich Krummacker’s book *Elijah the Tishbite*. The longer passage she quoted includes the words: “God ... never leads [His children] otherwise than they would wish to be led if they were able to see as clearly as He does....” It is unlikely Mrs. White had carried the book with her to Brooklyn. She doubtless used the book from her own library in Battle Creek.

### What Was the Miracle?

These considerations show that Ellen White did not write a description of the

contentious March 7 midnight meeting before she described it on March 8. However, the diary entries do not preclude a miracle taking place when Ellen White described orally the meeting she had not attended the previous night.

Starting in 1914, a number of eyewitnesses to the morning meeting of March 8 affirmed their belief that a miracle occurred. Robert Olson included those eyewitness statements along with facsimiles of the relevant diary entries in his 1983 paper “The Salamanca Vision and the 1890 Diary,” now available online at [ellenwhite.org](http://ellenwhite.org). It was this Olson paper that Calvin Edwards relied on to write his exhaustive analysis of the Salamanca story for *Adventist Currents* in 1986, “The Salamanca Experience: Confirmation of Ellen White’s Prophetic Powers?” Edwards’ answer to the question posed in his title was “no.”

One witness offered a different explanation of what happened in the morning meeting on March 8: a natural rather than a supernatural one. That one contrary witness was W. A. Colcord. He had been in the meeting in 1891, and in 1929 he wrote to Frank Belden, saying, “Will White was at that [midnight] meeting, and I feel morally certain that he went directly to his mother and poured her ears full of it.” Colcord probably meant that Willie White informed his mother of the midnight meeting not in the middle of the night, but before the ministers’ morning meeting.

It is true that W. C. White was in the contentious midnight meeting, and it is true that he saw his mother early the next morning and, in fact, escorted her to the morning meeting where she related her vision. Ellen White insisted in 1905: “No one had an opportunity to see me or speak with me between the evening meeting and the morning meeting that



I attended.” Perhaps she forgot that her son had had just such an opportunity. Whether Willie said anything to his mother about the midnight meeting before she entered the morning meeting cannot be known, but he did have an opportunity to do so.

Arthur White dismissed W. A. Colcord’s letter to Belden by pointing out that Colcord, who was separated from the church when he wrote it, was “malevolent and bitter” and that Belden was an apostate as well. Colcord’s letter was not written until 1929, nearly 40 years after the event. We will never know what his impressions were when he walked out of that morning meeting back on March 8, 1890. It appears that he only expressed his “moral certainty” after years of bitterness against Ellen White and the denomination. In 1934, Colcord apologized for his criticisms of the church and was rebaptized. He did not say that any of his criticisms had been unwarranted, only that they resulted from his having allowed the “roots of bitterness” to spring up. By the time Colcord made his confession, he was in serious ill health. Facing death, he may have decided repentance was in order. He required constant care until he died in November of 1935.

It appears that Ellen White proceeded to pen her backdated diary entries in the days immediately following the March 8 meeting. In her diary entry for March 11, 1891, she included the sentence, “The particulars of this are given in my diary of 1890.”

## Conclusions

After all that has been written about the Salamanca diaries and their problems, some students of the topic favor a completely benign explanation. The dates on the entries are merely the dates when

the events described therein took place, not the dates the entries were written. The entries were inserted back into the 1890 diary simply to keep them in the context of the other events that took place at that time. As for the “letter written from Salamanca,” this line of argument asserts that since it was added to a diary entry and not a letter, it must refer to some other document entirely, namely a letter written at that time.

Back in 1982, I sent my paper on Salamanca, together with photocopies of the diary pages involved, to Mervyn Maxwell. By then the “Elder Maxwell” of Union College days had acquired a University of Chicago PhD (in 1966) and become “Dr. Maxwell,” head of the Church History Department at the Adventist Theological Seminary. He studied the paper carefully and agreed that the “letter from Salamanca” entry in the back of the diary was not written in 1890 but said he was “inclined to think ... that the November 21 entry was made roughly contemporaneously with the vision that it describes.” Thus, my paper convinced neither Arthur White nor Mervyn Maxwell that that entry was written much later. However, in 1982, when Robert W. Olson sent revised (“here in Battle Creek”) copies of the November 21 entry (Manuscript 29, 1890) to the Ellen G. White Research Center directors, he stated flatly: “Mrs. White was in Battle Creek when she wrote those words; therefore, they should not have been edited [out] by the [original] typist.”

Arthur White’s version of the Salamanca story, the one he added to Jemison’s 1955 book, was also included in his widely circulated biography of his grandmother. Robert Olson’s letter to the Research Center directors was known only to them. It is not surprising, then, that *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* in

2013 followed Arthur White’s lead and repeated the claim that the diary contained a passage describing details of the March 7 midnight meeting before it occurred.

While Ellen White’s diaries cannot prove or disprove the story of the Salamanca miracle, they can show that her diary notes on the details of the Salamanca vision were probably not written until after the meeting had taken place.

I have been careful thus far to state only what I believe we can know for sure about the Salamanca vision and its aftermath. But let me now say what I think happened—or, should I say, let me speculate about what actually happened. I think that Willie White, as he walked with his mother to the morning ministers’ meeting, did tell her about what had happened in the midnight meeting the night before. By 1906, that uncomfortable fact had slipped from her mind, and she said no one had had an opportunity to tell her about the previous meeting.

I also think Ellen White came to believe that she really had seen all the details of the midnight meeting when she was back in Salamanca. She believed the Lord had hidden that part of her memory until the time came for her to relate the details of the vision, so she felt justified in backdating entries about it. I think she did intend that readers of her diary would believe she wrote the Salamanca entries on the dates she ascribed to them. She certainly didn’t consider it an intention to deceive, but the entries had a deceptive result. So the action was morally imperfect, even if the intention was not. Alas, prophets are people, and people are imperfect. **AT**

*A longer, annotated version of this article can be read at <https://tinyurl.com/AT-Salamanca>.*



## The Zoom General Conference?

By Alden Thompson

“YOU KNOW THAT THE RULERS OF THE Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28, NIV).

Jesus’ lofty ideal of egalitarian church governance is at risk today. Two recent publications have highlighted the urgent need for Adventists to rethink how the church does its business. William

### Vision of Our Pioneers at Risk

From my study of Adventist history, I have distilled five key principles that I believe are crucial for the church. Each of these principles, which were so precious to our pioneers, is now on shaky ground. I list them here in order of importance:

1. **The Bible as our only creed.** This first principle is our bedrock foundation for both unity and diversity. It seemed secure until the General Conference of 1980, the first time a General Conference in Session discussed and voted on a statement of beliefs. In spite of recent attempts to undermine it, this principle

and anguished response from believers in Europe. In the most recent printed edition of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (2018), the offending phrase has been removed from Fundamental Belief No. 18, but the “only” has not been restored in No. 1 and remains solely in the preamble.

2. **A simple, signed covenant instead of a long list of beliefs.** I am firmly opposed to the idea of using our 28 Fundamental Beliefs as a touchstone for church employment, but I would gladly sign something like the original church covenant. This simple covenant was used at the organization of the first

**If we take the whole Bible as our creed, then we have plenty of room to see things differently; if we allow a simple covenant to bind us together as a community, we can afford to allow some loose ends; and finally, if our statements of belief are descriptive, not prescriptive, we preserve our diversity while affirming our unity.**

Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review* from 1982 to 2006, reflecting on the aftermath of the San Antonio General Conference, bluntly states that it’s time to rethink the GC Session.<sup>1</sup> His suggestions are far-reaching. Similarly, Lowell Cooper, who served at the General Conference from 1994 to 2015, including 16 years as general vice-president, boldly proposed five propositions for change in a recent issue of *Adventist Today*.<sup>2</sup>

A virus may bring about those changes more quickly than we anticipated.

is still clearly stated in the preamble: “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scripture.”

In 1980, some Adventists were apparently fearful that the turmoil surrounding Ellen White had diminished her authority in the church. The result was the removal of the word “only” from statement No. 1 on The Holy Scriptures. In Fundamental Belief No. 18 on The Gift of Prophecy, the writings of Ellen White were then described as an “authoritative source of truth,” a phrase that triggered immediate

local Adventist churches in Michigan, 1861: “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].<sup>3</sup> The General Conference was organized two years later (1863), but the covenant itself seems to have vanished without a trace. May it rise from the ashes and find its rightful place at the head of our statement of beliefs, making clear that it is the covenant that holds us together!

While I would not urge (or expect!) that this change be adopted at the

upcoming General Conference Session, I will continue to pray that this dream could become a reality once again.

3. **A nonbinding statement of beliefs that is descriptive, not prescriptive.** If a simple, signed covenant were central, then our statement of beliefs could return to being descriptive, as it was in our first (unofficial) statement of 1872: “In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, 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, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.”<sup>4</sup>

4. **Simplicity, with room to disagree.** If we take the whole Bible as our creed, then we have plenty of room to see things differently; if we allow a simple covenant to bind us together as a community, we can afford to allow some loose ends; and finally, if our statements of belief are descriptive, not prescriptive, we preserve our diversity while affirming our unity.

The hard truth is that we currently have neither simplicity nor room to disagree. Perhaps that’s why an increasing number of loyal and thoughtful Adventists are simply ignoring the General Conference.

In 1853, Adventist co-founder James White expressed this idea of unity in diversity when he responded to an inquiry from a Seventh Day Baptist (italics added):

“As a people we are brought together from divisions of the Advent body

[the Millerites], and from the various denominations, holding different views on some subjects; yet, thank Heaven, the Sabbath is a mighty platform on which we can all stand united. And while standing here, with the aid of no other creed than the Word of God, and bound together by the bonds of love—love for the truth, love for each other, and love for a perishing world—‘which is stronger than death,’ [cf. Song of Songs 8:6] all party feelings are lost. We are united in these great subjects: Christ’s immediate, personal second Advent; the observance of all of the commandments of God; and the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, as necessary to a readiness for his Advent.”<sup>5</sup>

5. **Willingness to trust one another.** Given the recent zeal to force compliance and conformity, Ellen White’s words from 1892 could jar us back to reality: “We cannot take a position,” she declared, “that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light.”

James White was explicit in affirming the unity of the community while allowing for differing views on some subjects. As I see it, virtually any form of church governance can be effective if the believers trust one another. Conversely, the most perfect “form” of governance will fail where there is no trust. When Jesus summarized his teaching in its simplest form, he focused on human relationships: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12, NRSV).

## Zoom to the Rescue?

Given the erratic behavior of the coronavirus, no one knows exactly what the next GC Session will be like. But if all or part of it were conducted by Zoom, several changes would happen “naturally,” most of them structural. Some suggestions made by Johnsson and Cooper would inevitably take place, including a shorter GC Session with less travel and fewer hotel bills. The savings could be used for missions or for humanitarian aid (ADRA), to mention just a couple of possibilities.

Bad things could happen, too, of course. But I would like to mention one huge potential benefit, with significant implications for the realization of Jesus’ vision of servant leadership and the list of “Adventist” ideals noted at the beginning: secret ballot. This would be a huge improvement over block voting, with its inherent potential for reprisals against those who step out of line.

While we wait, ponder, and pray, the King James Version of Revelation 22:20 will surely be ringing in our ears: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” **AT**

<sup>1</sup> William G. Johnsson, *Where Are We Headed? Adventism after San Antonio* (2017), pp. 75-82.

<sup>2</sup> Lowell Cooper, “General Conference Sessions: Five Propositions for the Future,” *Adventist Today*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 2020), pp. 12-15.

<sup>3</sup> “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5 & 6, 1861” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, p. 148, also published in *SDA Encyclopedia* (1996), p. 416.

<sup>4</sup> As printed in Gary Land, editor, *Adventism in America*, rev. edition (1998).

<sup>5</sup> *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Aug. 11, 1853), p. 52, also published in *SDA Encyclopedia* (1996), p. 464.





## NEWS BRIEFS

BarelyAdventist ([barelyadventist.com](http://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.

### Twitter Fact-Checks Amazing Facts Feed

GRANITE BAY, Calif. — Social media giant Twitter has extended its fact-checking practices to tweets by the Adventist media ministry Amazing Facts.

Recently Twitter added “learn the facts about cave-dwelling” tags beneath tweets from the ministry about the pros and cons of cave homes and any related off-the-grid survival strategies.

Many Adventists are up in arms about this fact-checking of the organization. “If there’s anyone who knows anything about cave-dwelling, it is Pastor Doug Batchelor,” said lifelong Adventist Stella Katite, defending the Amazing Facts speaker. “This is not only an attack on free speech, but it could threaten the religious freedoms we enjoy

as Adventists,” alleged Katite, promising never again to live tweet a Bible Bowl.

“You know Twitter won’t stop here,” added an indignant Katite. “Next they are going to be fact-checking Dwight Nelson on the random Japan trivia he keeps sharing.”

### Footwashing Service Soon to Be Contactless

SILVER SPRING, Md. — When Adventist churches finally reopen, members can expect to see changes in many Sabbath-morning rituals, including the ordinance of footwashing.

“Instead of sloshing around water with those little plastic basins and having to touch the feet of the other person, church members will now take turns spraying down each other’s feet in the church parking lot with a

high-pressure garden hose,” said Kam Biando, General Conference director of COVID-19 workarounds.

The director warned that the revised Adventist footwashing protocol will require an entirely new set of skills.

“You will no longer be judged on your ability to walk without spilling water all over the Kindergarten room floor as you head over to your footwashing partner,” said Biando. “What matters now is aim. You’ve got to wet their feet and their feet only with the hose,” he said. “Your average Adventist is not going to take kindly to being washed head-to-toe, Peter-style.”

### Altar Calls Proving Difficult via Zoom

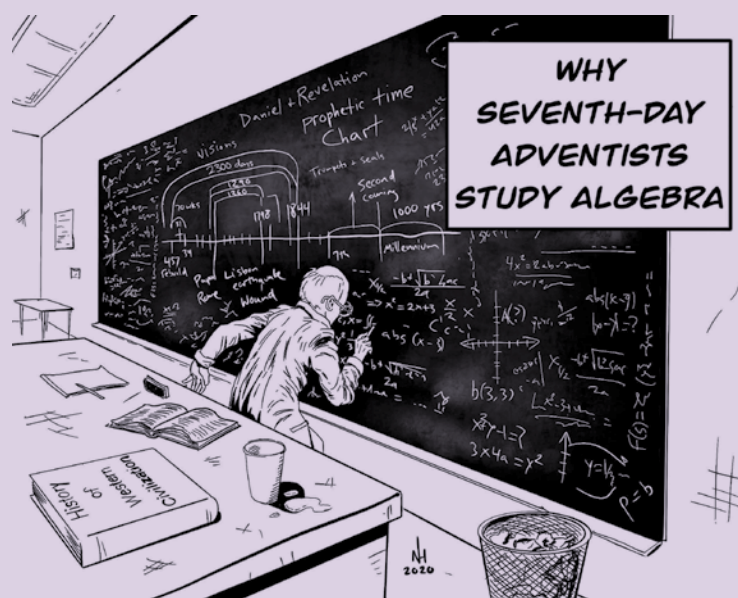
ADVENTIST WORLD — High-pressure altar calls have taken a serious hit during the coronavirus crisis, according to a report in the magazine *Anyone Else?*

Evangelists who are used to telling packed, captive audiences that there is “still plenty of room up front” have lost the ability to hold a crowd hostage for an extra half-hour.

“People just log off the Zoom meeting if we keep an appeal going with more than three renditions of ‘I Surrender All,’” said Pastor Stan Mina. “We’ve got to get creative here, or everlasting altar calls could be gone forever.”

## “WELL, THERE’S THAT...”

By Nate Hellman



Mina told *Anyone Else?* that social distancing “is the worst thing for quality altar calls since cell phones.” He concluded his interview with a plea for Zoom to add a “Bringing in the Sheaves” function.

## Church Finally Shuns Racist Children's Song

SILVER SPRING, Md. — Adventist Sabbath Schools will no longer sing the chorus “Jesus Loves the Little Children” after what relieved members have described as a long-overdue acknowledgement of the song’s racist classifications.

“This relic of a song calls little children ‘red and yellow, black and white,’” lamented Andrews University anthropology professor Sal Suffit, who praises the denomination’s decision to finally nix the chorus.

“Even after some progressive Adventist Sabbath School teachers changed the line to ‘brown and yellow, black and white,’ it remains offensive on the most basic of levels,” he stated. “Nobody relishes being described as yellow.”

Suffit said the song may originally have been intended to promote a spirit of inclusion, but it has been accomplishing the opposite today. “This song is about as embarrassing, backward, and offensive as ‘Onward Christian Soldiers,’” he added.

## Contributors



**RAJ ATTIKEN** is an adjunct professor of religion at Kettering College, the Adventist higher education institution in Dayton, Ohio, and he is a former president of the denomination’s Ohio Conference.



**GORDON BIETZ** is a graduate of La Sierra University and Andrews University. He has been a pastor, conference president, and university president. In retirement he serves part-time in the North American Division’s Department of Higher Education and as executive director of the Association of Adventist Colleges and Universities.



**REINDER BRUINSMA** lives in the Netherlands with his wife, Aafje. He has served the Adventist Church in publishing, education, and church administration on three continents, his last post as president of the Netherlands Union. His latest books are *In All Humility: Saying “No” to Last Generation Theology* and *I Have A Future: Christ’s Resurrection and Mine*.



The early scholarship of **RONALD D. GRAYBILL** earned him an invitation to work at the Ellen G. White Estate. During his 13 years there, he completed his doctorate in American Religious History at Johns Hopkins University, then taught for a decade at La Sierra University. Ron spent another decade preparing annual community health reports for Loma Linda University Medical Center and leading grassroots community health projects.



**MARC GRUNDY** is the director of marketing for higher education at the North American Division. Previously he was vice president of enrollment management at Southern Adventist University. Marc is passionate about Adventist education and making it possible for every student to attend one of our schools.



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## Adventist Today

### EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

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

# JOURNALISM CREATES COMMUNITY

## The Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar

Have you ever wanted an opportunity to discuss the articles you read in this magazine or the commentary articles on our Adventist Today website? Well, now you can.

Every Sabbath at 1:30 p.m. Eastern Time, Loren Seibold hosts a Zoom meeting. Join the author(s) of an article for a short presentation on the topic at the beginning, and then dialogue with participants from around the world. It's a very engaging 90-plus-minute conversation.

You get the link and password at our website or AT Update newsletter. The topic and presenters are promoted on Facebook, as well as our website, from midweek to Sabbath. The conversation is not recorded for future listening; you need to be present to listen and participate.

Please tell your friends about this exciting opportunity. We can't wait to see you there!



To keep hope alive that one day we will be together again for an AT1 gathering, we are providing new virtual meetings by video every Friday that may be viewed at any time.

Each week a diverse group of Adventist Today team members host Anticipating AT1. Each edition contains three elements:

- a message of hope by a presenter from our live AT1 events
- an AT Trending News segment from current stories covered on our 8 channels of communication that week
- music by AT readers that lifts spirits and brings peace

We hope that Anticipating AT1 will prompt personal reflection and serve as a discussion catalyst with your family and friends. Discussion questions are provided each time on each topic, for your convenience. You'll find these engaging videos on our website and Facebook page.

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