

What the Church Can  
Learn From *Star Trek*

Ten Celebrations of  
Adventist Theology

In Search of an Effective  
Adventist Witness

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# Adventist *Today*

## Aspiring to Be Our Best

Toward a long, happy,  
and productive future for  
Seventh-day Adventists

## features

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## Boldly Adventist

By Jim Walters

### OUR CHURCH'S PIONEERS WERE BOLDLY

Adventist—no hesitancy, no shame, no apology. I invite you to join me in being boldly Adventist, too, along with James and Ellen White and Joseph Bates. Too many of us are tempted to see ourselves as “barely Adventist.”<sup>1</sup> Maybe it’s because the General Conference bans women’s ordination. Or there could be a dozen other ideas with which we’re uncomfortable. But, come on, most groups we belong to have at least a few questionable concepts, or ideas in transition.

Adventism has great core tenets: rest, hope, holism, and health; however, an obsession over Adventist ideas—be they good or questionable—is wrong-headed. Instead, I propose a contrasting Adventism. One for which we’ll never have to apologize. One that I hope fits us to a tee. One that underscores our spiritual best.

Be boldly Adventist *in spirit!*

Adventism-as-ideas pales beside Adventism-as-spirit. The Adventist narrative I’m advocating is the Adventist spirit of seeking truth in its fullness.

### Adventism as an Affair of the Spirit

Adventism at its best is an affair of the spirit. That’s how it began. That truth-seeking spirit was on grand display among Adventist pioneers.

Take Joseph Bates. He was a New England adventurer who left home at the age of 15 for the open sea. He fought in the Navy in the War of 1812, and when shipwrecked and captured, he insisted on being a prisoner of war. After going on to become a successful captain, Bates found God at age 32 and dedicated himself to reform. Among other things, he was:

- an abolition activist, once almost killed
- a health crusader, forsaking alcohol, tobacco, coffee, meat, and “greasy, rich foods”

- a Millerite leader who initiated the Boston General Conferences

- the author of eight books, who is called “the real founder of Seventh-day Adventism” by the dean of Adventist historians, George R. Knight.

Joseph Bates, sincere and impetuous, set the standard for being boldly Adventist. After being introduced to the Sabbath, Bates put in an all-nighter in May 1845. The next day Bates saw his neighbor, James Hall, a fellow Millerite. Hall shouted: “What’s the news, Captain Bates?”

“The news is that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord our God,” Bates shot back. Hall himself studied the issue and soon joined Bates.

Bates joined with James and Ellen White, and together the three were key leaders in trying to convince more mainline adventists [yes, lowercase “a”] that God was surely at work in the 1844 disappointment and was leading the believers to new truths (end-time Revelation prophecies, seventh-day Sabbath, and heavenly sanctuary) that were debated in the “Sabbath conferences.”

Ellen White confessed that much of the time she didn’t understand the issues being debated. She admitted that when the brethren “came to the point...where they said, ‘We can do nothing more,’ the Spirit of the Lord would come upon me, I would be taken off in vision, and a clear explanation of the passages we had been studying would be given me.” She further explained: Because the others “knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters ... they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given.”<sup>2</sup>

The traditional narrative holds that throughout her lifetime, Ellen White announced supernatural truth because of her prophetic gift. Prophets, by definition, don’t make mistakes. The flipped

**Early Adventists may have been literalist/fundamentalist in their view of Scripture and prophecy, but unlike later American fundamentalists, early Adventists embraced progressive notions of women’s rights, prohibition, health reform, dress reform, and particularly abolition.**



narrative acknowledges and celebrates Ellen White as possessing the prophetic gift but doesn't lift her above the humanity of all who bear the eight spiritual gifts listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. Prophecy, after all, is number six in a list that begins with wisdom, knowledge, faith, and healing. Ellen White, as historians are beginning to underscore, was very

**Joseph Bates, sincere and impetuous, set the standard for being boldly Adventist.**

human and made mistakes in both her personal life and in her prophetic role. And that's OK. Ellen, along with her Adventist co-leaders, led their fledgling group in a bold pursuit of truth.

#### **Present Truth in Adventist DNA**

After the Great Disappointment, most Millerites—tens of thousands of them—sorrowfully went back to their home congregations. Some, at an Albany Conference in 1845 with Miller himself, regrouped and formed the Advent Christian church, which continues today with a minimal membership. But the most ardent kernel of Millerites reinterpreted the Great Disappointment as a big misunderstanding. And with a novel interpretation of heavenly sanctuary cleansing, they revived the Millerite banner of “present truth” and boldly pushed on.

Present truth captures the dynamism of the Adventist spirit. Millerites first used the term in 1844, but Sabbatarian Millerites commandeered it to emphasize a growing understanding of how God was leading. Soon “present truth” became the comprehensive reference to a cluster of truths emerging from the Sabbath conferences.

The core idea of “present truth” became an integral strand of the Adventist DNA, as seen in one of Ellen G. White’s later books, *Christ’s Object Lessons*: “In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation.”<sup>3</sup> Eight years earlier, White had extended the notion of progressive learning when she wrote: “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn.”<sup>4</sup>

Whatever our Adventist pioneers lacked in sophistication and education, they were certainly blessed in seeking truth that made sense of their present, lived experience. The principled application of the term “present truth” far exceeds its originators’ immediate use—be they Millerites or early Adventists.

### **Staunch Anti-creedalism Recedes**

Seventh-day Adventism was born in the “burned-over district” of western New York. Our founders naturally accepted the scriptural literalism of this hotspot of religious and social fervor in the early 19th century. Some scholars speak of the region’s “folk religion,” in which the mode of biblical interpretation was far removed from the non-literalistic methods taught to divinity students at Yale and Harvard for more than 100 years.

Early Adventists may have been literalist/fundamentalist in their view of Scripture and prophecy, but unlike later American fundamentalists, early Adventists embraced progressive notions of women’s rights, prohibition, health reform, dress reform, and particularly abolition. Joseph Bates, John Andrews, Uriah Smith, John Loughborough, and Ellen White all wrote against slavery. “The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master we are not to obey,” wrote White.<sup>5</sup>

This bold spirit of the times fueled Adventist pioneers’ suspicion of religious organizations—including formation of their own—and their rejection of a static view of biblical truth. This spirit is best seen in what Loughborough wrote two years prior to the formal organization of the church: “The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of

fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such.”<sup>6</sup>

This anti-creedal sentiment held for a quarter-century. Then, for another 50 years it yielded to increasing demands for a fundamentalist orthodoxy—not coincidentally influenced by the evangelical fundamentalist movement in the United States, well documented by Michael Campbell in his newly published book *1922: The Rise of Adventist Fundamentalism*. The bold and independent spirit of Adventist pioneers has raised its questioning head throughout our church’s short history, but it has not yet carried the day, as seen in the current General Conference (GC) president’s pushing through his “compliance committees” in 2018.

In broad brush strokes, I outline significant developments in the church’s retreat from its anti-creedalism:

A proposed draft of a “church manual” was rejected at the 1883 General Conference Session, because it was seen as “potentially dangerous,” says Adventist historian Rolf J. Pohler, since it could lead to uniformity in matters of “practice” and stiffen the understanding of “faith.”<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, at the 1885 GC Session, it was: “Resolved ... that no person be ordained ... who is not sound in faith and practice upon all Bible doctrines as held by Seventh-day Adventists.”<sup>8</sup>

Not until 1931 did a formal listing of “Fundamental Beliefs” appear in the annual Yearbook. The 22 fundamentals were drafted by Review and Herald editor F. M. Wilcox and informally approved by three others, without any Annual Council or GC Session involvement.

Twenty years later, in 1951, Adventism had a robust Church Manual, which stated: “Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same” is reason for disfellowshipping.<sup>9</sup>

The 2018 Annual Council approved “compliance committees,” which were top-down in conception and execution and had no provision for external appeal.

Prior to approval, five committees were established and populated mostly by General Conference employees: (1) Distinctive Church Beliefs, (2) Church Core Policies, (3) Church Position on Creation, (4) Church Position on Homosexuality, and (5) Church Position on Ordination.

**Majoritarian Fundamentalist Lapses**

Until the last several years, most Adventist historians focused on the formative years of our church's history, roughly spanning Ellen White's 70-year

**We have many notable examples of courageous thought leaders who have stood up, in the best Adventist tradition, to question partisans' efforts within the organized church.**

ministry. Gilbert M. Valentine's *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Change in Adventism 1966-1979* (2022) and the earlier-mentioned books by Campbell and Pohler—all published within the last two years—significantly portray us in 3-D. These authors at least implicitly acknowledge the biblical literalism/fundamentalism of William Miller that has formed popular Adventism to this day, in contrast to a courageous streak of more progressive Adventists. These historians build on the shoulders of like-minded Adventist historians.<sup>10</sup>

Progressive Adventism, embodied early on in persons such as John Harvey Kellogg and W. W. Prescott, has only grown stronger because of the church's historic emphasis on education. Adventist higher education is now beginning to flourish in the church's Global South, where some 95 percent of members live. The reasons why a denomination with deep literalist/fundamentalist roots would retain that mentality overall are very understandable. However, our "true believer" mentality, which seems particularly susceptible to advocates who take morally questionable positions, is a failure to live up to our best selves.

By contrast, we have many notable examples of courageous thought leaders who have stood up, in the best Adventist tradition, to question partisans' efforts within the organized church:

- Regarding the efforts to get a compliance-committee-related Reconciliation and Adherence document onto the Annual Council agenda in 2017, Adventist historian George Knight said the General Conference president was guilty of "blatant and deceptive manipulation."<sup>11</sup>
- Related to compliance committee maneuvering, retired *Adventist Review* editor William Johnsson wrote, "I am appalled that GC leaders seem embarked on a course to shut down women in ministry by hook or by crook—and more by crook than by hook."<sup>12</sup>
- Raymond F. Cottrell wrote of the "doctrinaire, authoritarian atmosphere [of former General Conference president Robert Pierson's administration] that stifled responsible study, prevented progress.... [It] polarized church administrators and Bible scholars and resulted in two destructive doctrinal explosions."<sup>13</sup>
- Former Andrews University president Richard Hammill personally acknowledged that he needed "decades of thousands of years" to accommodate ancient ice ages.<sup>14</sup>
- Adventist archaeologist and Bible scholar Siegfried Horn, regarding the longstanding General Conference Daniel and Revelation Committee on which he sat, wrote in his diary that "from an exegetical standpoint we cannot arrive at the conclusion that Dan 8.14 refers

to the heavenly sanctuary, and that the 2,300 days end in 1844.”<sup>15</sup>

- Influential scholar and administrator W. W. Prescott “warned the White Estate in 1915 of a crisis that would come to the church sooner or later, precipitated by wrong impressions of the work of Ellen White that had been fostered, even if inadvertently, by the White Estate people themselves.”<sup>16</sup>

- Pastor and teacher H. Camden Lacey believed in Ellen White’s inspiration; however, he held that her authority wasn’t in “intellectual accuracy in historical and theological matters ... but in the spiritual light it throws into our hearts and lives.”<sup>17</sup>

- Arthur G. Daniels, the longest-serving GC president, courageously convened the 1919 Bible Conference—at which divine inspiration was maturely discussed—and was later accused by ultra-fundamentalist Judson Washburn of being liberal and soft on the inspiration of Ellen White; consequently, he endured a “very undignified and painful exit” from presidential succession.<sup>18</sup>

## Dominant and Flipped Narratives

If not for literalist/fundamentalist Adventism, I wouldn’t be writing this editorial at the end of a 50-year career in my beloved church. But this doesn’t mean that a fundamentalist belief in a Disappointment-turned-Sanctuary doctrine anchors the most valuable Adventist narrative (even if it long remains the dominant one). Since this doctrine is the only contribution to Christian thought that’s acknowledged to be uniquely Adventist, it’s what makes many believers feel special. It has led to a whole eschatology around God’s “special people.” Sanctuary, special people, eschatology—these are all in the realm of ideas, and ideas can be right or wrong. We confess, in the prophetic words of Ellen White, that we’ll be “unlearning” some ideas throughout eternity.

More important than ideas—although ideas are vital—is spirit. The apostle Paul is eloquent in his weighing of letter and spirit: “For the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6, RSV). In this Pauline contest, spirit is the clear winner!

Joseph Bates was born a bold and free spirit, and that, combined with the Holy Spirit, led to the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Adventist believers today, as 170 years ago, openly pursue truth that makes sense to our own contemporary experience. For example, the early chapters of Genesis continue to powerfully inform bold Adventist believers. Genesis proclaims God as Creator of all. It was never a literal how-it-was-done manual of science. Genesis addresses the profound issue of why; science deals with the more mundane what and how.

Every honest inquiry into areas of human knowledge can lead to thoughtful conclusions that faithful Adventists can and should enthusiastically embrace. In this flipped narrative—ideas versus spirit—ideal Adventists are those who love Jesus, know and esteem the rich Christian/Adventist tradition, and pursue present truth in all its fullness and grandeur! **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Apologies to the creators of BarelyAdventist.com, whose church-affirming website helps a healthy church laugh at itself!

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (1979), pp. 68-69.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (1900), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (July 26, 1892).

<sup>5</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (1855), p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> John N. Loughborough, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861), pp. 148-149.

<sup>7</sup> Rolf J. Pohler, *Dynamic Truth* (2020), p. 261.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>10</sup> Fifty years of genuine Adventist historical scholarship precedes the work of Campbell, Pohler, and Valentine. It includes the significant work of these historians: Jonathan Butler, Ronald Graybill, George Knight, Gary Land, Benjamin McArthur, Donald McAdams, Ronald Numbers, and William Peterson.

<sup>11</sup> George R. Knight, *Spectrum*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2018), p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> William G. Johnsson, *Spectrum*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2018), p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond F. Cottrell, “Architects of Crisis: A Decade of Obscurantism (1969-1979)” (1984), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert M. Valentine, *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Change in Adventism, 1966-1979* (2022), p. 199.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

# 10 CELEBRATIONS OF ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

BY CARSTEN THOMSEN

A FEW MONTHS BACK, I LISTENED TO TED WILSON'S ANNUAL Council Sabbath sermon in its entirety. What an oratorical masterpiece! Speaking with great confidence and conviction, leaving nothing open to discussion—with all of the pieces of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, identity, and purpose clearly enunciated—it took me back to 1960, when Fordyce Detamore crusaded for three weeks in the Battle Creek Tabernacle and persuaded me to be baptized. Things were so simple, so clear, when I was 11 years old.

There is no doubt in my mind that a clear message like Wilson's, spoken with great conviction, is reassuring to members who long for certainty. Some individuals feel the need to entrust their systems of belief to the hands of confident, inspired priests of the church. And realistically, it might well enrich their lives, assuming it does not lead them to extremism.

But this time, I wasn't seduced. Now, these many years after I was baptized by Detamore, I received Wilson's speech as a masterpiece of manipulation and circular reasoning. Because it presents all Seventh-day Adventist truths as irrefutable, God-given facts, it actually diminishes faith in God and replaces it with blind acceptance of a gripping but overly simplistic message—a message that trumps theology and science.

It became very clear to me that this is not the kind of Seventh-day Adventist I now am or want to be. When I look back over the many sermons I preached as a lay person and at the Sabbath School discussions I led through the years, where I gently tried to share my search for a bigger, more gracious God and church,

I must pronounce myself guilty of not being in compliance with either the beliefs or the attitudes enunciated at this year's Annual Council.

What kind of Seventh-day Adventist do I want to be? In an attempt to turn my disappointment into something positive, I have written the following 10 Celebrations of Adventist Theology. (Any relationship to Mark Finley's "10 Theological Issues Facing the Church" presented at the Annual Council is not coincidental.)

## 10 Celebrations of Adventist Theology

1. *The Life-giving Bible*: I believe that the Bible is the inspired story of humanity's relationship to God and his view of the divine through the ages. I believe it must be read through the eyes of Christ, who is the closest direct divine revelation available. His perspective of an almighty and loving God must permeate every reading of the Scriptures.

2. *A Dynamic Adventist Identity*: I believe that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination arose as a protest against the stagnation of mainstream churches. At that time it was a movement that mobilized its believers with new faith and fervor. Recovering from early stumbles in understanding Scripture, the church showed a vitality in its ongoing evolution of faith. With a unique focus on the whole man, God's will for salvation of all people, and a hope for a better life now and beyond, it inspired a dynamic worldwide movement.



3. *The Grand Prophecies*: I believe that God gave prophecies for all time, painting grand pictures of the mystery and power of the divine that find relevance and deep spiritual meaning for every generation and culture. The ultimate victory of love over evil, both in our hearts and cosmically, is the red thread binding all prophecies together.

4. *Miracle of Creation*: I believe in the incomprehensible miracle of creation. I stand humbled and in awe of what I don't understand but feel joy and responsibility of being a co-creator with God and an entrusted caretaker of his creation. The beauty of the seven-day cycle, with the Sabbath for rest and worship, is a special gift of deep importance for all mankind.

5. *The Jesus of Love*: I believe that Jesus drew a line in the sand and lifted our sights to the divine principles of love for God and love for our fellow man. With our God-given conscience and intellect, we are trusted to apply these principles in all aspects of life, freed from narrow rules that make us slaves of the law.

“good enough.” It gives me confidence that he has won the Great Controversy in my soul and provides hope for a cosmic second coming in the future.

8. *Freedom of the Sanctuary*: I believe that the beautiful symbolism of the sanctuary points to the dramatic sacrifice of Christ, freeing us once and for all from the fear of sin and death and giving all generations comfort in a just and loving judgment.

9. *Prophet of Change*: I believe Ellen G. White played a pivotal role as a guiding light in the revolutionary development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In her own spiritual journey, she evolved with the church toward a deeper understanding of God's love. Her prophetic voice speaks today, encouraging us not to stagnate in our view of God and to be flexible and creative as we move forward.

10. *Beauty in Our Diversity*: I believe that God speaks to us in multiple languages and cultural expressions that meet us where we are. He listens to us, accepts us, and guides us forward in love.

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**When I look back over the many sermons I preached as a lay person and at the Sabbath School discussions I led through the years, where I gently tried to share my search for a bigger, more gracious God and church, I must pronounce myself guilty of not being in compliance with either the beliefs or the attitudes enunciated at this year's Annual Council.**

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6. *Compassion for All*: I believe all moral viewpoints must be derived from love. We may not always understand the complexities of sexuality, and in a turbulent world we must navigate with love and care, listening to those we don't understand. We must overcome the challenge of revulsion and condemnation we may feel and, following Christ's example, remember that all humans are our siblings, created and loved by the same God.

7. *Advent of Joy and Hope*: I believe that Jesus pointed to a second coming where he would make all things new. For me, he came again when I was swept off my feet by the revolutionary power of his love. It gave me inner peace and joy, because I know Jesus carries my burdens and relieves me from the yoke of being

He expects us to reflect that same depth of love to all mankind as we celebrate our diversity.

Comparing the above list to the messages at the Annual Council makes me wonder whether I still belong. The intellectually honest thing to do, I suppose, would be to resign my church membership. If there were a way to do so, I would prefer to cut my ties with the General Conference but keep membership in my local church, where openness and mutual support in our individual journeys of faith are valued. **AT**

# Of a Fundamentalist Faith & Spiritual Growth:

## ADVICE TO MY ADVENTIST FRIENDS

By John R. Landgraf

I HAD ALWAYS KNOWN ABOUT SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS, BUT I didn't make you part of my world until I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of my first Adventist friends was *Adventist Today* editor Loren Seibold (then a parish pastor). I branched out from there and came to admire a number of Loren's fellow pastors and Adventist educators in my bailiwick, along with many others like them. But I also saw in them great inner conflicts and concerns about their faith and practice—struggling with what to keep and what to toss, what was gold and what was dross.

As time has gone by, I've seen how fruitful that struggle has been in the lives of the Adventists I know best and admire most. I have come to believe that your church's greatest asset is these wonderful people who have worked their way through soul-killing fundamentalism and come out as individuals of depth, substance, kindness, and knowledge—such that they're able to include non-Adventist Christians like me. They still appreciate the tradition that brought them here, but they no longer let it eclipse the grace of the gospel or force them into intellectual self-deceit.

### My Story

As a lifelong Baptist, I understand the struggle of these noble and courageous Seventh-day Adventists probably better than you realize.

I had plenty to rebel against. Reared a fundamentalist Baptist, I was exhorted to believe what I was taught, not question it—and there was plenty I was told to never question. As a lad I attended Sunday School and summer camps and Bible conferences focused on (dispensationalist) prophecy. Gifted with musical talent, I also played piano and organ for revival meetings in local churches and sometimes citywide evangelistic “Crusade for Christ” meetings, as epitomized by Billy Graham. “Conservative” and “Evangelical” were proud words in my church and home.

Then, when I was a young adult, the culture around me began to change rapidly. The Bob Dylan song was right: “The Times They Are a-Changin’.” While the gospel was still good news and

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8, NKJV), I began to realize that how we live it and share it must change, lest we become archaic, dinosaurs. Jesus spoke Aramaic; we do not. He slept mostly on the ground; we do not. As far as we know, he never wrote down his teachings; we write down anything we deem important, including books and articles such as this one.

Through the years I've kept track of my undergrad classmates from Moody Bible Institute (Chicago) and Wheaton College (just west of Chicago). Some have not changed their beliefs one whit in 50 years and are, in fact, proud of their doctrinal juvenescence. At the other extreme, some have left organized religion altogether, though they still consider themselves deeply spiritual. Still others have migrated from one Christian tribe to another—Baptist to Presbyterian, Mennonite to Methodist, Lutheran to Episcopalian, etc.—often quite happily. (Sometimes this happened because they married across denominational lines.)

### Building Character

Now, as an elder statesman of the Christian faith, here's what stands out to me.

Struggling with a stubborn, self-righteous belief system builds character and fosters growth into spiritual maturity, wherever it leads the strugglers—provided they don't flush the baby with the dirty bath.

Conversely, not struggling—simply clinging to received premises of childhood and youth—is not only stultifying but ultimately unsatisfying, because it leads to theological incompetence if not impotence, a kind of spiritual constipation. I've met Christians whose barrenness renders them totally unproductive, at least when it comes to embodying the good news of the gospel in a winsome way. They come across as what my mother used to call “sourpusses.” No one wants to be around them.

Here, in a nutshell, is my advice to my Adventist friends: come to terms with your religion and let the process of making peace with it make you strong, spiritually mature, and above all, happy.

The apostle Paul offers us a prime example of this kind of maturing—in his case, from zealous Jewish fundamentalist to unmitigated grace (Eph. 2:8-9). Starting with his stunning encounter on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9), Paul journeyed up and down, down and up, through treacherous valleys (Romans 7) to glorious mountains (Romans 8). He emerged victorious enough to make him the revered leader he is, with 13 New Testament books to his credit. (That doesn't mean he was always unaffected by the culture he lived in. Many of us believe Paul still had a ways to go—for example, in how he viewed women's roles in the church.)

Don't all of us start from a sort of childhood "fundamentalism" about life—simple questions and answers and rules—before moving on to adolescence and full adulthood? And even then, we have our developmental lags; we all fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

As a sojourner en route to the glory land, one of my most important learnings has been that my pilgrimage on Earth is a journey of spiritual discovery rather than a place where I will arrive, fully perfect. Good theology recognizes that we have been saved, are being saved, and shall be saved; all three tenses are true. The joy is in the journey!

## How Not to Become a Sourpuss

Working against resistance is the key to growth. Like exercise at the gym, we gain strength (or, at my crabbed age, fend off atrophy). The most impressive spiritual heroes learned to creep before they crawled, crawl before they walked, walk before they began to run, and intelligently trained to become marathoners. Want to learn about it from three champions of the faith? Check out Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4; and 2 Peter 1:3-9. Paul, James, and Peter spoke from personal experience: they wrestled not just against Roman politicians, but against the fundamentalism of Pharisaic Judaism.

And so it is with my Seventh-day Adventist friends. I see the best of you as having fought and overcome not only your battles with the world, but also your battles within the church, the temptation to be sectarian legalists. You have emerged victorious without becoming hateful or embittered against your church family. Bravo!

So, how does one work through spiritual battles without becoming an embittered defeatist? Well, I don't know about you, but I know about me, a recovering fundamentalist Baptist, and I know it can be done. My faith struggle has been worth every ounce of effort I've put into it.

My mature Adventist friends would say the same thing. I admire them greatly. I delight in their company. I know a "pair

of docs" (married physicians) who fit that category, Adventist musicians and teachers, missionaries, and male and female pastors. They are walking the road to the Land of Fadeless Day by my side. I love them as my sisters and brothers in Christ.

## More Advice

Beyond these wonderful Adventist friends who have deconstructed the legalistic ties that bound them, what is the Adventist Church at its best? I offer here three additional thoughts.

First, you Adventists aren't at your best, methinks, when you spend most of your time revering your founding mother or invoking your 28 fundamental beliefs. You are at your best when you say, "All are welcome here, and by 'all,' we mean all." Frankly, most people don't care about Adventist history or ecclesiology. What they care about is getting to know people who embody good news. Ask any pastor.


Second, all Christian "tribes" have idiosyncrasies that handicap them one way or another, be it infant baptism, communion every Sunday, or whatever. The Adventist Church is at its best when its burdens become blessings. For example, dietary restrictions can be touted as living clean and healthy, which is no deprivation at all. And Sabbath worship? It's a blessing for observant Christians married to observant Jews, if neither wants to convert. Should seekers or new Christians ask you to explain why Saturday instead of Sunday, tell them the reasons it's an Adventist belief. But from my point of view, there is little gain in implying that it's the only "right" teaching, much less the only one that saves.

As for the second advent of Jesus, in Christianity you are in the company of many who hope joyfully in the second coming of Christ. But why make yours so immediate that you are constantly having to defend your predictions of "soon," and so scary that your evangelistic brochures make you look like conspiracists? Jesus will return to Earth. He said he would. Isn't that enough?

Third, in my experience the Adventist Church is at its best in its fine schools, excellent hospitals, and effective global missions, such as Adventist Development and Relief Agency. Emphasize that.

Add the embodiment of the gospel and a loving Christian community, and what's not to like?

Do denominations matter at all? I suppose they do. They provide oversight of ordination or commissioning, ensure best practices, and offer fellowship of kindred minds within the family of God.

But when we all get to heaven, no one will care one iota about any of that. We will be too euphoric basking in the fullness of God's perfect love (1 John 4:16). 

# Becoming a Spirit-Led Church Again

By Pilira Zapita

“I TAKE THE GROUND THAT CREEDS STAND in direct opposition to the gifts. Let us suppose a case: We get up a creed, stating just what we shall believe on this point or the other, and just what we shall do in reference to this thing and that, and [say] that we will believe the gifts too. *But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light* that did not harmonize with our creed; then, if we remain true to the gifts, it knocks our creed all over at once. Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement. *God put the gifts into the church for a good and great object*; but men who have got up their churches, have shut up the way or have marked out a course for the Almighty. They say virtually that the Lord must not do anything further than what has been marked out in the creed.”

—James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861)

You may have heard it said that if Adventist pioneers were to see the church as it is today, they would not recognize it. While growth naturally brings change, this article discusses how integral to any Christian movement is openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit, as a signifier of God’s presence and power among people and communities of faith.

## Openness to God’s Revelation

A study of our Adventist heritage reveals much about the charismatic experiences of the pioneers, which they interpreted as evidence of God’s presence in their midst and confirmation of the new truths that were being revealed. While Millerism had separated itself from manifestations of the Holy Spirit such as tongues, being “slain in the Spirit,” dreams, and visions, the early Adventist pioneers were open

to them; in fact, the truths that founded the denomination were often confirmed by such.

This openness to God’s revelation in ways that the Holy Spirit chose became foundational to the young denomination and was expressed as a key principle: be open to the “present truth” that the Holy Spirit reveals, throughout the waiting period till Jesus returns. Early Adventists regarded and defined present truth as progressive and not static, and with this came a determination to have the Bible as the church’s only creed.<sup>1</sup>

As the pioneers learned new truths from the Bible and began to document these as clarification of the beliefs they had agreed upon, they struggled with the concept of formulating statements of belief, which they initially called a “covenant.” They resisted developing a set of creedal statements.

However, as Adventist theology developed in the next 40 years, the denomination became less charismatic in its expression of faith. In the face of holiness revivals and expressions of fanaticism in that era, peaking in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the pioneers turned toward greater formality.<sup>2</sup> Those who propagated a charismatic spirituality and an openness to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, like that of the early Adventist days, were viewed with suspicion, and some were ultimately disfellowshipped.<sup>3</sup>

The rise of Pentecostalism, with the social, cultural, and political issues and fanaticism that surrounded it, affirmed the church’s suspicion of charismatic expressions and led to a cautionary approach regarding the Holy Spirit and experiential faith.

Simultaneously, as more truths were added to the denomination’s

understanding, many felt the need for formal statements of beliefs to protect the agreed-upon doctrines.

## Corporate Control and a Creed

The pioneers valued a Spirit-led church, but as decades passed, the main source of the Spirit’s leading in the church became Ellen G. White. Although she spoke of the Bible alone as the source of our faith, she didn’t always resist the temptation to flex her own prophetic authority. It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that following White’s death, her writings were elevated and perceived as the only prophetic and Spirit-led voice from God. Many took the position that God would never again speak prophetically to the church. Thus, the Holy Spirit was locked up in a set of writings, whose contents were heavily controlled for almost a century.

As Adventism and part of the Christian world resisted a modernity that undermined and threatened the traditional biblical beliefs, the Seventh-day Adventist Church seemed to corporatize and institutionalize White’s writings, making them more authoritative than she would probably have liked.<sup>4</sup> In their book *Seeking a Sanctuary*, Oxford University professor Malcolm Bull and London-based journalist Keith Lockhart described how the church became less flexible and, thus, less open to the Holy Spirit’s potential to new revelation of truth after Ellen White died. The first set of Adventist fundamental beliefs was written in 1931, 16 years after her death, and revised into its current form in 1980.

While Adventism says that the Bible is our only creed, our beliefs, no matter how well intended, appear to have become what pioneer minister J. N. Loughborough warned about in 1861: “statements that tell

us what we must believe, that are made into a test of fellowship by which members are tried, and the denouncing as heretics and persecuting those who do not affirm it.”<sup>5</sup>

Instead of being an agent of God’s grace and welcoming space, the doctrinal statements began to be used to control who is allowed into the denomination. At times these statements seem to exist to defend and protect official beliefs— isolating individuals who are deemed as violators of them.

The result is a legalistic spirituality, where members focus on following the beliefs to the letter. And most disturbing of all is the resulting impression that compliance to the beliefs equates with access to God’s love and grace, and eternal salvation.

### **The Spirit-led Early Church**

Even before Jesus’ followers were sent to continue the mission he had started, he insisted that they wait in Jerusalem until they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Thus, Acts records a community of faith in which charismatic happenings were part of the evidence of the Spirit at work.

In that early church, Scripture was reinterpreted in the light of Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection. The Spirit worked with a community that was ultimately flexible enough to incorporate the “present truth” of that era, in countercultural interpretations that cost some of them their lives.

The Spirit, who is the creator, diversifier, and unifier of communities of faith and gifts of ministry, enabled the working together of “Greek and Jew, male and female, slave and free,” despite the expected tensions that likely ensued from ethnic and cultural differences. This necessitated an abandoning of past truth

in order to embrace new truths the Spirit was revealing.

The church also needed to be flexible in allowing the Spirit to appoint, commission, send, and gift whomever the Spirit chose, for whatever was required. While working with human agents, the Spirit had the ultimate say on the work of the kingdom, creating a united—not uniform—yet diverse community of faith that was able to pursue Christ’s mission in its time.

The points of agreement are illustrated in the final verses of Acts 4 (NIV):

- “All the believers were one in heart and mind” (verse 32).
- “The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (verse 33).
- “God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them” (verses 33-34).

We find no list of fundamental beliefs to which the believers had to subscribe. Community, Christology, spirituality, and social justice were the components defining unity in the Holy Spirit.

### **The Early Era of Adventism**

I suggest that the era within which Adventism was born resembles this Acts community of faith more than the Adventism of today. From the Second Great Awakening of the late 19th century through to the early 20th century, America underwent a period of change— social, political, economic, spiritual. In the birthplace of Adventism, new interpretations of Scripture prevailed and charismatic manifestations abounded. Because the church rose simultaneously with some “secular” social and political movements, people’s eyes were opened to the God of justice and the liberating and life-giving work of the Spirit. Lives and

societies began to transform as awareness grew and people resisted the chains that had bound them for so long.

Thus, as in the days of the Old Testament prophets, the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit could be traced through challenging, disturbing events, but ultimately this led to a new understanding of truths that are relevant to contemporary situations throughout history. And as Jesus’ mission statement in Luke 4:18-19 suggests, the Spirit calls the church to a work of liberty and justice for the poor and oppressed. Indeed, 2 Corinthians 3:17 states that one of the manifestations of the Spirit at work is liberty.

### **Allowing the Spirit to Operate**

The church we aspire to see today can learn from this openness to the Spirit, this willingness to change mindsets and beliefs, and a resistance to oppressive structures while participating in God’s holistic mission of liberation.

Wherever there is control, coercion, fear, looking over one’s shoulder, judgmentalism, and where people feel labored by institutional, personal, or corporate demands and fail to breathe with “the liberty by which Christ has made us free” (Gal. 5:1, NKJV), we need to ask whether the Spirit’s life-giving presence is being allowed to take effect or is being suppressed. When church becomes a place where people feel (and actually are) condemned, ostracized, and isolated because they have a different perspective from some set beliefs—or are somehow unable to fit into the mold—we must question how much the Spirit of God is being allowed to operate in such spaces.

Postcolonial theory has highlighted how a re-reading of the Bible that is not laden with oppressive ideologies reveals

an inclusive God, who stands in solidarity with the marginalized.<sup>6</sup> It shows a God who “did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17, NKJV). Thus, also to be questioned are environments where unity in Christ is threatened and where diversity continues to be a threat and reason for limiting the Spirit’s appointing and commissioning for service and ministry.

In addition to the Spirit’s presence and activity within the church, we need to recognize that the activity of God, Creator of all, is not confined to ecclesial circles. The Bible contains many examples of times when God used people outside the covenant community to accomplish his purposes, which always have the ultimate good of all creation. The Spirit, therefore, can choose to communicate and work with or through whomever or whatever, with no partiality.

### Dangers and Opportunities

Throughout recorded history, counterfeit spirituality and religious fanaticism have existed alongside manifestations of the Holy Spirit. This has created fear and suspicion of the Spirit and all things Spirit-related, especially among traditional Christian denominations. Adventism has not escaped this deficiency of the Spirit, robbing itself of the potential and possibilities a full openness to the Spirit can bring.

Indeed, recognizing the reality of the cosmic conflict within which we operate, it is crucial for all who seek a lived experience of the Spirit of God to be discerning. As a people who lean on the Bible alone as the source of ultimate truth and God’s self-revelation, the Bible remains the book for answers.

In order not to get lost in the weeds of opinion, we need to find a balance between the Spirit and the Word. The whole of Scripture provides insight into how the Spirit works, while leaving room for surprise, as God is at liberty to self-express in any way.

However, some ways to tell the true from the false include: God’s character of love as revealed in all of Scripture and in Christ; the principles that undergird this revelation and God’s kingdom; the fruit described in the Bible as evidence of the Spirit’s presence in people and communities; and the totality of the gifts given by the Spirit.

Thus, “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20, KJV) refers to what the whole Bible teaches about God. The test cannot be limited to one perspective, let alone judged by a set of beliefs that leave no room for God to act to the contrary.

Perhaps most importantly, the promise of God’s faithful character in keeping those who have committed themselves to Christ’s care is more important than obsessing over the fear of deception if some dare to open themselves to all the possibilities of an experiential life in the Spirit. As Jesus stated in his dialogue with Nicodemus, unpredictability comes as part of the package of a Spirit-filled life (John 3:8). As frightening as it sounds, we must embrace this tension between control and freedom, even when the path of freedom threatens corporate growth.

### Portrait of a Spirit-led Church

We have explored, in a sense, the essence of a Spirit-led church:

- A church that recognizes all believers as equal and united in Christ
- A church that is not controlling but, rather, gives people permission to live out their God-guided liberty and experience of God
- A church whose members take a humble posture of being perpetual learners from God and never arrive at fixed truths whose barriers even the Holy Spirit cannot penetrate
- An inclusive church that allows people to participate in Christ’s life and mission in accordance to the Spirit,

without excluding people on account of their gender, race, sexual orientation, status, age, or other boundary markers perpetuated by respective cultures

- A church that is involved in the Spirit’s work of justice, liberty, and life—proactively, not reactively only—by engaging in work that sets people free in all aspects
- A church that sees Christ’s mission of present liberation as part of, not separate from, the gospel
- A church open to being surprised and challenged by the Holy Spirit
- A church waiting in peace to meet its God, having not hindered any aspect of redemption’s efficacy in an attempt to defend its beliefs
- A church whose individual members have experiential knowledge of Jesus through the Holy Spirit and collectively engage in God’s mission of love, restoration, and liberty on Earth

This is a call for us to fully embrace life in the Holy Spirit, without fear. It is a call for us to give the Spirit liberty to move in and among us, in order to truly be a Spirit-led church. That is the only way we can transform and effectively participate in God’s holistic worldwide mission in this era. For many reasons, the place to start is at the personal and local level, rather than corporately. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> See “Creeds” in *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, encyclopedia.adventist.org.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (2006), pp. 77-81.

<sup>3</sup> George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (2000), pp. 90-127.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Campbell’s *1919: The Untold Story of Adventism’s Struggle With Fundamentalism* provides a historical context for the position Adventism took in its confrontation with modernity.

<sup>5</sup> “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, Oct. 5-6, 1861,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Lazare S. Rukundwa, “Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading,” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 2009).

# All Faith Is Local:

## THE GENERAL CONFERENCE ISN'T THE CHURCH. WE ARE.

By Loren Seibold

Tip O'Neill, a former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, was famous for repeating the maxim, "All politics is local." He meant that in the final analysis, it's what happens at home, where the voters are, that matters.

This principle is even more true for faith than it is for politics. It is what happens in our local faith communities that matter most to our spiritual lives.

Yet, many of us have been led to believe that we take our marching orders from the pronouncements of those in higher church offices (and their related legislative gatherings). It makes me sad when friends leave the church because of what they hear the General Conference president say.

Do we really need to give these denominational leaders and their offices such authority?

### Local Authority

Indeed, I understand how discouraging it is to contend with denominational rigidity. How long have we been waiting for women's ordination, for example, or for the world church to reduce the heavy burden of too many church offices and administrators?

Still, here's something you may not know: those who speak from the church's top offices, as opinionated as they are, haven't the slightest influence on your church membership! None!

There is a true story from relatively recent years (I shan't give the details—though many know them) of a

General Conference president who was determined to expel from church membership a well-known theologian he considered heretical. He met personally with the congregation that held this man's membership, and with the full voice of his authority insisted upon their disfellowshipping this Adventist scholar.

The congregation said no: they would keep their "heretic," thank you very much! And that was the end of it. Not even the General Conference president could expel the man from the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

It is time to reclaim the authority of the local congregation. It is time for congregations to declare what they stand for, rather than attending to the opinions of men who know little about the congregations they were meant to serve.

Many years ago, longtime educator and theologian Fritz Guy said to me: "No one gets to tell me I'm not a Seventh-day Adventist. Only God and I can make that decision." At the time I wondered if he was right. But upon further reflection, what other way is there to look at it? There was no General Conference in the early Christian church. People encountered Jesus, then gathered to talk about Jesus, and that's what gave them spiritual peace.

The church isn't a set of rigid beliefs. The church isn't an authority speaking *ex cathedra*. The church is people who love and care for one another. People who, as our first statement of belief in 1861 said, "associate ourselves together ... covenanting to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ."

The General Conference was organized to serve the church, but like

its prophetic *bête noire*, the Vatican, it has in recent years taken upon itself far more authority than it can biblically lay claim to. Its leadership can be helpful and encouraging—when it encourages you and brings you closer to Christ. If all it does is make you feel guilty or offend your sense of justice by its rigid pronouncements, it should be ignored.

### Refocusing Our Faith

Adventist Today will continue to report on what our top church officials do and say. But we want to be very clear about this: they don't determine who is a Seventh-day Adventist. We are part of this community, not by their sufferance but because we're surrounded by lovers of Jesus who share some appreciation of Adventist community, history, and beliefs.

Let us refocus our faith from the top to the bottom. From the rulers of the Sanhedrin to the ordinary people who need us and whom we need. From the official creed to personal faith. From heeding authority to showing love for one another. What matters most to your personal spiritual experience is not what happens "on high," but what happens among friends who worship together.

If you don't have a loving local community of faith, then find one somewhere else, with my blessing. But don't throw away your relationship to this denomination because someone in a distant office tells you that you shouldn't be there.

The General Conference isn't the church. We are the church. **AT**

# WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE

BY ELLE BERRY

THE FIRST TIME I WENT TO ANTELOPE ISLAND WAS IN 2011, WHEN I moved cross-country. Finding myself in a painful season of hope deferred, it felt important to me to make the drive. So, with the company of a dear childhood friend, I headed west. Somewhere I had read about Antelope Island, and the author told of its peaceful beauty and its off-the-beaten-path charm. It was just off the eastern shore of the Great Salt Lake, only a slight detour off my westward migration, and I was determined to visit.

My friend and I arrived in Ogden, but not without incident. When turning around in a steep driveway, my weighted-down trunk met the pavement, gouging a wound in my muffler. I had to dip into my already meager savings to make the necessary repairs, but then we followed the afternoon sun over the causeway. As we left the busy suburbs behind, the landscape shifted rapidly; pastel blues and tans merged together, melting the earth into a Monet masterpiece.

Past the marina, the faint but not altogether unpleasant scent of sulfur met us. We parked near a shelter and made our short walk to the shoreline, where white sand, pressed into ripple lines, echoed the recent memory of water. Our shoes were soon off and our toes wiggling in the warm saline waters. The stress of the day started to evaporate, and it felt as though peace had hedged us into a hug. All that had been hard suddenly began to feel bearable.

## The Task of Affirmation

As an introvert, I often struggle to articulate what makes church good. After all, I've always resisted the starchy uniformity so prevalent in institutionalized religion.

But it's not simply my natural inclinations that make the task of affirmation so perplexing. It's easy to find a piece of mold

on rotten produce; it requires much more nuance to explain "what a peach does right." After all, taste and pleasure are often individual, not universal.

So, while criticizing the church is like picking low-hanging (and rotten) fruit, quantifying goodness is an entirely different task.

It seems nothing necessitates simile and metaphor faster. Even Jesus resorted to this tactic. He'd say, "The kingdom of God is like..." and then would tell story after story about what it's like without ever directly saying what the kingdom of God is. The closest we come to understanding is immersion in story.

So, the best of church is like a close-knit family, or like a beautiful symphony, or like standing in a pastel landscape knee-deep in salty water, with peace hedging us in like a hug. In John 7:38, Jesus tells us that everyone who believes in him will have rivers of living water flowing within them. If Jesus followers are rivers of living water, then perhaps a good church is like a reservoir of living water. Every mile of land that surrounds the lake is lush with life, lush with food, quenched of thirst. The church is like ... a lake.

## A Fresh Urgency

My phone seemed to already know that I would be traveling through Salt Lake City again. Maybe it was an algorithm, or maybe it was just a coincidence. But there on my screen, the headline from *The New York Times* article on June 7, 2022, read, "As the Great Lake Dries Up, Utah Faces an Environmental Nuclear Bomb."

I quickly skimmed the article, only to discover that not only was the Great Salt Lake drying up, but the lakebed apparently contains high levels of arsenic. As more lakebed becomes exposed, there is greater risk that wind storms could stir it up and carry toxic dust into the surrounding city. I'd been thinking about





# EVAPORATING CHURCH?

Antelope Island and wanting to make a return, but after reading the article, I felt a fresh urgency. If I didn't go this summer, would there be another opportunity?

And that was how, a mere two weeks later, I found myself on the wide-open playa of the former Antelope Island, which was now a peninsula.

I can see the bobbing silhouette of my brother-in-law as he walks either toward or away from what might be the edge of the lake—or might just be more white sand. The combination of heat, sand, and water has eradicated my perception of reality, as well as my ability to gauge distance.

It's my fault that I am in this situation; my memory has led us to this "magical place." And while hints of the magic remain, this place is not what I remember. Now only stubborn and persistent hope pushes me forward, so I continue my journey through the maze of sagebrush and thistle-dotted sand, pausing only a moment to glance behind and reaffirm that I have dragged into this ludicrous shenanigan not only myself, but also my family. The absurdity of this island-turned-peninsula could be comical, if it weren't quite so dystopian.

Catching up with my brother-in-law, I can see that he has reached the lake and has one shoe off. It takes me a moment to realize that the disappearance of his other shoe is not by choice. The playa of the Great Salt Lake stretches for miles in every direction, but when one finally reaches the water's edge, a deceptive salty crust makes the water and murky mud somewhat indistinguishable. His shoe is off because the crust just gave way and sucked his shoe right into a gritty, sulfur-lined puddle of sludge.

Hot, thirsty, sunburnt, and underprepared for the walk I've just made, I survey the dissipating lake and arrive rapidly at a

conclusion: the magic I remember is evaporating. It is not clear if the shoe or the lake can be reclaimed.

## Setting Record Lows

According to *The New York Times* article, the Great Salt Lake has already shrunk by two-thirds, and it's been in steady decline since 2003. The lake is not only the namesake of the city, but also an important migratory stop for 10 million birds who annually visit these waters. It also contributes to lake-effect snowfall: snow melts into rivers, which then feed back into the lake, thereby completing a water cycle. And while the lake has risen and fallen many times before, according to a study published in *Nature Geoscience*, the water level is currently 11 to 14 feet lower than its natural average and continuing to set new record lows each year. Climate change is, of course, part of this dismal pageant, with record high temperatures fueling extended droughts throughout the western United States.

Yet, precipitation levels have remained more or less constant over the last few hundred years, which means the diminishing lake isn't simply about drought and heat, but also about the way people are using the water. Water rights in the West are a hot topic, because it's not just this one lake that has shrunk. Water reservoirs across the Southwest are setting record lows, with Lake Mead and Lake Powell making recent headlines. Of course, Mead and Powell are both manmade reservoirs off the Colorado River, whereas the Great Salt Lake is the largest natural lake west of the Mississippi. Whether natural or manmade, similar concerns persist, with low water levels forcing people throughout these regions to rethink the way they're relating to water. It's tempting to ascribe blame with overly simplified explanations, but while criticism is warranted, prudent action is required if we want to nurture ecological systems back into equilibrium.

Not unlike these shrinking lakes, long-established churches across the Western world are also setting record lows. In Adventist and many other Protestant churches, congregations are becoming little more than a constellation of dwindling gray heads. Most of us are familiar with the reports indicating a stark increase in “nones” (the word used by researchers for the religiously unaffiliated).

These losses are particularly noticeable among Millennials and members of Gen Z, both of which are far less likely than their elders to focus on personal responsibility when systemic dysfunction is so readily apparent. A litany of legitimate traumas, ranging from gender inequity to the rise of Christian nationalism, is behind this hemorrhaging of people out of the pews.

## LIKE WESTERN WATERSHEDS, THE CHURCH IN THE WEST HAS ENDURED MASSIVE RESOURCE ABUSE AND HUMAN MISMANAGEMENT, OFTEN DUE TO NOTHING OTHER THAN GREED AND SELFISHNESS.

And the thing is, with a testimony of trauma, not everyone wants to save what is threatened. In response to the Great Salt Lake demise, a commenter on the *Deseret News* website wrote: “We do not need birds or wildlife. ... We need more room for people. Let the lake go. We will have more room to build houses for our increasing population.”

While this opinion is ludicrous and extreme, and probably coming from someone who never liked the lake to begin with, one wouldn’t need to sift through many online comment sections to find equally dismissive words about the church. The truth is that both lake and church seem equally equipped to generate arsenic-infused dust storms as their life-yielding waters evaporate.

### Playing the Long Game

Another August arrives, and because I possess a certain type of persistence, I’ve dragged yet another person in my life to the lake. It’s a different lake this time, this one in the Pacific Northwest.

But after making her drive down 30 minutes of rugged washboard gravel, it’s fair to question if the payoff will be worth the effort. It’s been only a few months since I watched another saltier lake turn “shoe-ivore” on my brother-in-law, and the imprint of disappointment lurks like flies.

Much to my relief, we arrive at the lake with the weather near perfect and a parking spot waiting. A short, well-worn path encircles this popular manmade lake, so we leave the parking lot behind us, stopping about halfway around to spread out our towels and our snacks, then hunker down with a perfect shoreline vista.

It’s Sabbath, but as we’re both religious refugees at the moment, neither one of us is regularly attending church. At least, not in the proper way. But gathered together, the conversation naturally turns toward God as we find respite from our spiritual injuries. Perhaps the fact that we’re sitting here in fellowship is because this is exactly what the church does right.

Bill Gifford wrote of the Great Salt Lake: “One thing I learned during my explorations is that nature is playing the long game.... the lake may dwindle away for now, but it will rise again. Eventually. Maybe inevitably. Will we?”<sup>1</sup>

And if there’s one thing I’ve learned about God, it’s that God is playing the long game, too.

Of course, that doesn’t absolve any church. Like western watersheds, the church in the West has endured massive resource abuse and human mismanagement, often due to nothing other than greed and selfishness. Tending to the places where we’ve ecologically failed is still necessary, and holding truth to power is righteous.

Yet, perhaps even in the midst of loss there is hope; we grieve evaporation because we are immersed in the stories of a beautiful potential. The church is like a lake; rivers full of life-giving water gather into the valley, and all of the seeds planted in that soil are nourished and prosperous, and everyone who comes to that valley is filled with its bounty. Gathering water together was never a risk-free operation. But we persist in tending to its shoreline, because even when we’re not sure what the church is, we know what the church is like. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Bill Gifford, “The Great Salt Lake Is Desolate; It’s Also Divine,” *Outside* (Nov. 8, 2021).

# Being Our Best Means Learning and Unlearning

By Bill Garber

Ellen G. White in *The Great Controversy* sees human religious history as being progressive, because to be progressive is to simply experience life as changing. The future of the Seventh-day Adventist faith should be organic, ever adapting to life itself. And what enlivens such a religion is also what binds us together: namely, our continuing shared spiritual experience.

So, being our “best self” as the Seventh-day Adventist Church will involve embracing change. In particular, it requires perpetually seeking and sharing a fresh sense of the divine.

A generation ago, in 1993, church historian George R. Knight noted in *Ministry* magazine that the Seventh-day Adventist religion had already changed so much since its founding (130 years prior) that many founders wouldn’t have been able to join the denomination based on its current fundamental beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Knight’s finding shouldn’t have surprised us. In 1892, Ellen White wrote: “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. ... When our schemes and our plans have been broken; when men who have depended upon our judgment conclude the Lord would lead them to act and judge for themselves, we should not feel like censuring, and like exercising arbitrary authority to compel them to receive our ideas. ... We must learn that others have rights as well as we have, and when any of our brethren receive new light upon the Scriptures, he should frankly explain his position, and every minister should search the Scriptures with the spirit

of candor to see if the points presented on a new subject can be substantiated by the inspired word.”<sup>2</sup>

After all, the Bereans were described as “noble” for this very approach to spiritual life (Acts 17:11).

Here is a perpetual lesson for us as Seventh-day Adventists: we have lessons to both learn and unlearn, and the lessons to unlearn outnumber the lessons to learn. It is worth noting that Ellen White appears to be including herself in her use of “we.”

**Here is a perpetual lesson for us as Seventh-day Adventists: we have lessons to both learn and unlearn, and the lessons to unlearn outnumber the lessons to learn.**

And if the return of Jesus be long enough in the future, what amazing lessons might we yet experience? A Chinese Seventh-day Adventist pastor, who was studying for a Ph.D. in New Testament at Andrews University, told me over Sabbath dinner not many years ago that when Chinese Adventists ask her how to apply a Bible passage to their own lives, she always tells them, “You will know.”

In a very real way, we all come to know individually what is the best aspect of our experience as Seventh-day Adventists.

## Publishing and Change

In the mid-1970s, Kenneth H. Wood, Jr., then editor-in-chief of the *Adventist Review*, told me in a personal interview that he saw the General Conference (GC) leadership as priestly, because they sensed it was their role to preserve the historical practice of the denomination. By contrast, Wood sensed his role as editor to be parallel to the prophetic role, in that he was focused on the future and change—both what was changing and what needed to change.

Despite Wood’s sense of the GC leadership as priestly and the *Adventist Review* team as prophetic, by the time Wood retired in 1982, the church paper had become a house organ for the General Conference, having lost its financial independence and thus its independent voice. Sadly, subscription revenue had simply dwindled away.

I’m grateful to our readers, who make *Adventist Today* free to report about change in the church, about lessons learned and unlearned, as Ellen White advocated. Thanks to you, readers, we are indeed free to talk and write about these lessons—not to make them normative, but rather, to inspire us all to sense for ourselves what can be best about our own experience as Seventh-day Adventists. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> George R. Knight, “Adventists and Change,” *Ministry* magazine (October 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (July 26, 1892).

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview as part of an unpublished co-orientation study of U.S. Seventh-day Adventist members, General Conference officers, and *Review* and *Herald* editors (1975).

# Our Apocalyptic Potential

BY MATTHEW J. LUCIO

ADVENTISTS LOVE TO HAGGLE OVER THE PARTICULARS OF OUR apocalyptic narrative.

I was reminded of this years ago while preaching an evangelistic series in a small town in Georgia. As I pontificated on some unmemorable date to my glassy-eyed guests, a church member stage-whispered to me from a door behind me that I had the date wrong!

What was on display for the guests that evening was a raw slice of Adventism: an internecine squabble over a date that I'm sure no one but the most benighted medievalist cared about.

Now, who wants to be baptized?

By “our apocalyptic narrative,” I mean the traditional story that Adventists have woven out of our study of apocalyptic scriptures and Ellen White’s writings. It’s our story of the time of the end, of a band of Christians given a special restorationist message, delivered by three angels in Revelation 14, to take to the world in anticipation of the soon return of Jesus.

This is the framing story by which Adventists see the world. Although even Adventists admit that some of the details have always been debatable, we still love to haggle over the particulars.

## The Apocalyptic Problem

The consensus around our apocalyptic narrative has eroded in step with a larger deconstruction of Adventism. This is due to an increasing distrust in the historicist method, a greater proficiency in biblical exegesis, a commitment to ecumenical fellowship, the failed millennial expectations of other Christian groups, our us-vs-them way of building identity at others’ expense, and the rise of secularism.

What’s in danger here is not the apocalyptic narrative itself, which I’m sure a great majority of Adventists still believe, but the consensus around it. Without that consensus, Adventists must confront thorny questions about their beliefs, because the meaning and mission of Adventism were built and sustained by this apocalyptic narrative.

Plenty of postmortem essays could be written on the demise of Adventist consensus and the many reasons for it, but it is unfair to characterize the demise as a mere unwillingness to believe on

the part of some “liberal” Adventists. This is reductionistic, in that it lets some Adventists pretend that we are one revival away from getting back on track.

## The Apocalyptic Promise

Even with challenges to the apocalyptic narrative, there are reasons to maintain it as part of our identity.

First, apocalyptic thinking is a bulwark against the dangers of dogmatism and institutionalization. Some criticize the apocalyptic worldview as morally reductionistic and even naïve, but the early Christian church was, at its core, apocalyptic. This meant that so long as Jesus was expected to come in the lifetime of the apostles, they resisted setting up creeds and institutional hierarchies.

Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart wrote: “Apocalyptic expectation ... and not dogmatic purity was the very essence of faithfulness to the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Apocalyptic thinking urges us to stay spiritually mobile, to not root ourselves too deeply in the here and now. While apocalyptic thinking itself can become institutionalized and stagnant, it is restless and will resist being domesticated for too long.

Second, our apocalyptic narrative has led us to develop a prophetic consciousness toward the issues of social justice and religious liberty. Adventist pioneer John Nevins Andrews identified America as the beast of Revelation 13 on the basis of its commitment to slavery. I think this has only barely begun to be understood. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* (1978): “The prophetic purpose is much more radical than social change” because “Moses was also concerned not with societal betterment through the repentance of the regime but rather with totally dismantling it in order to permit a new reality to appear.”

Apocalyptic thinking enables us to see ideas such as Christian nationalism and immoral democracy as baby “beasts.” The apocalyptic mindset encourages Adventists to speak to the world with a prophetic voice and to avoid being seduced by what Brueggemann calls the totalizing power of the “royal consciousness.”

Third, our apocalyptic narrative should give us the emotional resources to handle the trauma of living amid catastrophes. “At the Adventist university where I now teach,” writes Lisa Clark Diller, chair of the History Department at Southern Adventist University, “I explain to my students that we all encounter times of trouble, and we need the resources and expressions of joy provided by the apocalyptic texts of the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> While Revelation can be misused to scare or even hurt people, it was written during a time of persecution in order to give Christians hope for the future.

Fourth, our apocalyptic narrative gives us a horizon in a world in vertigo. It does this by liberating us from the need to take the remaking of the world upon our own shoulders. That is God’s doing, and our work in proclaiming the “everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6) is simply to announce what he has done, is doing, and will do.

As our world becomes more deeply secular, our apocalyptic narrative can help us resist the secularist bias toward immanence. What we see around us is neither all that there is, nor all that is important. The best is yet to come.

Finally, apocalyptic thinking frees us from mere religiosity. The prophet Daniel lived through a mini-apocalypse when he was forcibly removed from the certainty of his religious rituals and fellow believers. His temple at home had been destroyed. Stripped of the comfort of his religious cocoon, Daniel quickly understood that unwavering faith in God is what ultimately matters. This story we are living is not about us. It is about God and his character and his kingdom.

## The Apocalyptic Potential

Adventists have never lived up to these promises. How could we? I see this as an indication that we have stopped thinking apocalyptically and have become more interested in preserving the tradition of the apocalyptic narrative. Still, I do not believe that we have done all we could with this view of the world.

Interpretation is often seen as a solo enterprise by scholars. We talk of Uriah Smith’s views versus, say, C. Mervyn Maxwell’s views, but I’m intrigued by the idea of interpretation being a congregational effort. Different congregations face different contexts, as did our pioneers. As I said, Andrews identified America as the beast in the context of slavery. Later, Uriah Smith would make the same connection on the basis on Sunday laws. How might these texts speak today to a local church in urban Detroit or rural Texas? Even more, what could apocalyptic texts tell believers in northern Nigeria or India, or in other places where Christians are looked down upon? While scholars can provide crucial insights, I’m personally more interested in what diverse congregations can learn as they study together.


## Two Notes of Caution

First, most of the world views this Adventist focus on the apocalyptic portions of Scripture as (to put it charitably) “weird.” So be it. It is precisely because apocalyptic literature is so unseemly in society that it is worthy of our attention, lest our faith become entirely too comfortable, too acceptable, and too convenient. I’m not arguing for establishing arbitrary and peculiar boundaries between us and others so that we can feel special, but we should accept some weirdness in our camp vis-a-vis the world around us.

Second, we shouldn’t study the apocalyptic portions of Scripture to the exclusion of the other parts. While Adventists derive great meaning from Daniel and Revelation, there was always a danger of neglecting “the weightier matters of the law,” as found in the Gospels and epistles.

We are in a proverbial pickle. The problems facing our apocalyptic narrative are not going to go away and should be faced head-on, yet attempts to place aspects of the apocalyptic narrative (e.g., Sabbath, religious liberty, etc.) on a nonapocalyptic foundation are risky. Adventists learned to care about religious liberty because of their apocalyptic beliefs, not in spite of them. While other groups may have arrived at an appreciation for liberty without our trip through the apocalyptic forest, Adventists didn’t. To place our beliefs on other foundations is to change them—in ways great or small and with consequences difficult to anticipate. While we can have multiple reasons (eschatological, ecological, etc.) for believing in something, I worry that a migration away from our apocalyptic foundations will betray our Adventist heritage.

Interest in apocalyptic portions of the Bible has made Adventists who we are. To neglect that study now would be to risk dropping out of conversation with our forebears and orphaning ourselves in the stream of history. We may or may not agree with all of their conclusions; we may modify and subtract, reword or preserve, but I do not believe we should give up. That we arrived at some of the same ideas as other Christians through an apocalyptic path is a strength, not a weakness. It means that we’re going to look at something like the Sabbath with a different perspective than, say, Seventh Day Baptists, and so we have something to offer in any conversation about sabbath.

What we should do is pivot to a new, fresh study of these apocalyptic texts that have raised us and given the world such a beautiful, frustrating, and weird group of Christians as Seventh-day Adventists. 

<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, “Tradition and Disruption,” *Plough* (June 3, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Clark Diller, “Hopeful Apocalypse,” *Anxious Bench* blog (Aug. 5, 2022). Online at [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).



# 6 Things the Adventist Church Can Learn From *Star Trek*

BY LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER

THE FIRST EPISODE OF *STAR TREK* AIRED MORE THAN 56 YEARS ago, on September 8, 1966. Since then, it has inspired 10 separate television series, 13 films, millions of fans, two actual languages (you can learn Klingon on DuoLingo!), and the first sci-fi conventions. As I write, no fewer than five *Star Trek* TV shows are filming (or animating) episodes.

How has a campy, overacted, low-budget TV series that ran for only three seasons in the 1960s managed not only to last for nearly six decades, but also to garner new fans?

Can the church learn something from this much-beloved series?

The hemorrhaging of members, both young and old, is evidence that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has struggled in recent decades to stay relevant. I propose that the church intentionally reinvent itself, with the goal of becoming both fresh and essential to old and new members alike.

The secrets to the success of this iconic series can be readily understood and replicated. I'll share here some reasons why I think *Star Trek* continues to appeal to audiences over the generations.

## 1. It periodically reinvents itself.

Once the original cast (think Kirk, Spock, etc.) had finished making its multiple movies, a new cast took over and brought us *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with Jean-Luc Picard in charge. The Enterprise was bigger, with more alien species in the main cast, families and children on board, stricter Starfleet regulations, and a captain who was radically different from the brash, impulsive, passionate James Tiberius Kirk.

If Kirk famously didn't believe in no-win scenarios, Picard countered with: "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose.

That is not a weakness. That is life." It must have been tempting for writers of the new show to recreate the original series as closely as possible, so as to appeal to its established fans. Instead, they reinvented it. They took something old and made it new.

In its 159 years, has the Seventh-day Adventist Church reinvented itself in order to reach its full potential? Or has it spent so much time trying to recreate what worked in the past that it can't move forward?

## 2. The reinvention must preserve the essentials while changing only the things that are less important (or would alienate a majority of the people).

I call this the "soul" of *Star Trek*. What is the thing that makes Trek such a legend and constitutes the essence that will never change? People have many opinions about that subject, but most agree that the thing that sets Trek apart from other stories of its type is a continued exploration of the world's "big questions," set in a context that believes in the best of humanity.

So then, what characteristics make Adventism unique from all other Protestant religions? Is it our vegetarianism? Our stance against jewelry and dancing? Worshiping on a day other than Sunday? When (and if) we do reinvent ourselves, we need to figure out the "soul" of Adventism. Only then will we be ready to take something old and make it new again!

## 3. The reinvention needs to focus on the things people care about.

The 1960s version of *Star Trek* focused on issues related to the Cold War. It famously (or infamously) put a Russian on the bridge of the starship, which made a lot of people uncomfortable. It explored issues of racism, power, pleasure, and logic versus emotion.

The 1990s versions of *Trek* explored some old issues, some new. We got episodes about poverty, class, religion, masculinity and femininity, maintaining values in a state of war, and understanding cultures different from our own. Modern versions explore empathy versus authority, corruption in large organizational structures, trauma, sexuality, and gender.

Each version of *Trek* explores big, complicated, and often controversial ideas. But the focus of those ideas depends on the context of the time in which it was written.

As we reinvent our church, we need to ask ourselves: What does a relationship with God, and with the church, mean to modern people? This may seem a heretical question. Isn't God the same yesterday, today, and forever? Perhaps, but people aren't. Each generation has its reasons for choosing to be part of a religious community such as ours.

For example, a generation or two before mine was very concerned about the rightness of its prophecy. Revelation Seminars, which explained prophecies and doctrines in detail, were very effective for evangelism. Those who attended showed a thirst for knowledge and a zeal for understanding God. Those are admirable qualities.

But my generation, and the generations after mine, simply don't care that much about prophecy. We care that the church is doing effective good in the world. We want to see the church ease suffering, stand for justice, and fight for the vulnerable. We want to see the church use its enormous resources to help people.

As the church reinvents itself, it should listen to those voices, or it will slowly fade into irrelevance.

#### **4. The new should offer enough nostalgia to appeal to veterans while creating enough novelty to be fresh and exciting.**

The 1990s versions of *Star Trek* created something new, but veteran viewers were able to recognize features from the older series. Some of the "technology" is the same. The weapons look different, but "phasers" still exist. The uniforms look slightly different, yet they have the same color blocks and insignia. Even with entirely new casts, the commitment to high ideals for humanity remains the same.

As our church looks to reinvent itself, we can retain enough of its familiar traditions to appeal to veteran Adventists, yet incorporate fresh perspectives to appeal to younger, newer ones.

I'm not advocating we throw out doctrines in favor of social justice. That would be too much new, not enough old. But until we reinvent ourselves, we face a crisis of too much old, not enough new. Young members are making a mass exodus, which is why this proposed reinvention is already overdue.

#### **5. A contingent of established fans *always* resists the new.**

However, using the same old approaches won't attract new fans.

Join any *Star Trek* Facebook group and you will immediately find some very loud, very angry fans complaining about the new *Trek* shows. They don't like the fact that new shows feature such a diverse cast. They don't like gay and trans characters. They think the show is too action-packed, or too emotional, or too...whatever.

They represent a loud but small minority. Most *Trek* fans, including myself, love the new shows.

Guess what was happening in the early 1990s, just after release of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*? That's right. Very loud, very angry fans complained about the new *Trek* show. You can't please everyone.

Just because they're loud and they've been around for a long time doesn't make the complainers right. We can't be deterred from taking risks in reinventing ourselves just because it upsets some.

Any talk of change in the church is usually met with, "But Elder so-and-so won't like it!" Or even worse, "Our donors won't like it." Just because the complainers have been around for a long time or because they're loud doesn't mean we shouldn't move forward. If we have no choice but to lose a few unhappy members, would we rather lose a small, loud group of elders or the young people who are currently leaving in droves?

Any reinvention of the Seventh-day Adventist Church will be immediately, forcefully, and loudly resisted by some Adventists. Change is hard and scary. But it's necessary! Pleasing everyone cannot, and should not, be the goal.

#### **6. New versions try new things. They take risks.**

One of the new versions of *Trek* is an animated adult comedy. Another abandoned the episodic structure in favor of season-long story arcs. One changed the ensemble cast in favor of one main character. Another is a prequel that casts new actors to play old, familiar characters.

These all represent risks on the part of the producers, but change doesn't happen without risk! Not all risks pay off. Some of them don't work, but that's part of the change process.

Our church must take risks as it reinvents itself. Some of them will be popular and welcome, while others will not. Regardless, we will never be able to move forward without them.

Our church is not dead. But it doesn't take a Starfleet engineer to see that we are headed for big trouble if we continue on our current trajectory. Reinvention is our best—no, our only option—if we want to remain relevant, appeal to new and veteran members, and continue to effect positive change in the world. **AT**

# THE CHURCH AT ITS BEST

## *Knows That Ministry Is Not About Itself*

BY STEPHEN CHAVEZ

FOR THE LAST DOZEN YEARS, I'VE CHAIRED THE ADMINISTRATIVE board of Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland. I begin each meeting with a group activity designed to encourage broad participation, usually an open-ended question to which everyone is invited to respond, such as, "What is your go-to Bible promise to get through a tough time?" or "With which Bible character do you most closely identify?"

At one meeting I wrote on the whiteboard: "Sligo Church is not a welcoming church." Then I asked, "Is this statement true or false?"

"False," came the overwhelming response.

"What would make this statement true?" I asked.

"Erase the word 'not.'"

After making the suggested adjustment, I invited members to take a marker, come to the board, and answer the question, "Who, exactly, is welcome at Sligo Church?"

One genius took a marker and wrote: "Everyone."

"Not so fast," I said. "Who, specifically, is welcome at Sligo Church?" One by one, people came to the board and wrote "single parents," "college/university students," "people who are homeless," "people who are divorced," "people who are professionals," "immigrants," "widows," etc.

Finally, the senior pastor, marker in hand, walked to the board and wrote: "LGBTQ+ people."

That was a bold statement. Because even though we know that Jesus in his ministry was a champion of those who were marginalized and condemned by the religious establishment, we still have a hard time welcoming and affirming those whose sexual identity and orientation is different from our own. And while we may agree in principle that all are welcome, we often mean that they're welcome as long as we don't have to greet them or as long as they don't sit in our pew. The true measure of acceptance is not only what happens within the four walls of the church, but how we interact with those who are marginalized in our communities—those whose problems aren't solved by a dollar or two and a pat on the back.

Indeed, many Adventists consider it a badge of honor that they will never knowingly accept those who live a homosexual or transgender "lifestyle."

### **Orthodoxy vs. Orthopraxy**

Doctrinal and lifestyle purity have been hallmarks of church life for as long as most of us can remember. Remember when divorce was considered an "unpardonable sin"? When church business meetings were dedicated to identifying the "guilty" party, as well as those who had biblical grounds for remarriage? To the tragedy of a broken home, we added the additional burden of being disfellowshipped!

As a young pastor, I well remember whispered conversations about members who had been seen smoking or working on the Sabbath. Such people faced exposure or expulsion if they didn't demonstrate adequate repentance and remorse. The sentiment that the church is "a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints" was often intoned, but always in the back of our minds lurked the notion that preserving the church's reputation for strict morality was more important than serving as a place where sinners could find sanctuary.

That began to change when children of high-profile pastors and administrators got divorced. Those leaders began to realize that a church so interested in assigning blame was inconsistent with the forgiveness and redemption offered by the gospel.

Others began to realize that sin is sin; just because the sins of jealousy, hatred, greed, and selfishness are less visible than divorce, smoking, drinking alcohol, or working on Sabbath, they are no less significant in God's eyes.

### **Righteousness by Faith**

The church's rediscovery in the 1980s of righteousness by faith (that we are declared righteous by faith, not that faith helps us live up to God's standards) brought home the reality that we're all just sinners saved by grace and that righteous behavior is a byproduct of a relationship with Christ, not the reason God accepts us and gives us salvation.



A renewed emphasis on righteousness by faith began the process of helping us understand that essential Adventism is not about enhancing our reputation as the healthiest, most morally pure, best educated people on the planet. Rather, it's about reflecting the grace, mercy, and justice of Christ. Jesus' ministry was a ministry of inclusion. Jesus was doctrinally correct, but his ministry was not as much about correcting people's faulty theology as it was about touching people's lives and bringing them into his orbit.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of John 1:14 says: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish" (MSG). A quick survey of the Gospel of John shows that Jesus was more interested in touching lives than in talking about himself.

Jesus brought wine to a wedding to save the party's host from embarrassment (John 2). He met with a ruler of the Jews, whose main stipulation was to see Jesus after dark (John 3). He spoke to a Samaritan woman and elevated her status in the sight of her neighbors (John 4). He healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years, then defended him when the religious rulers accused the man of breaking the Sabbath (John 5). He fed a crowd of more than 5,000 (John 6). He defended a woman taken in adultery (John 8). He healed a man born blind (John 9). He raised a man from the dead (John 11). He showed that true greatness consists in serving, not in being served (John 13).

In all of these interactions, Jesus demonstrated that a Christian's true calling is not to be self-centered and self-absorbed, but to be service-minded and centered on others. The church at its best knows that.

When I moved to Maryland to work at the General Conference, I began looking for a Rotary Club to join. At the meetings I recognized Adventists from the General Conference and Columbia Union College and what was then Washington Adventist Hospital, but I made it a point to sit at tables where there weren't many Adventists. I made lasting friends. I was invited to weddings and funerals. We shared Christmas dinners at Sligo Church. We participated in community outreach programs together. I learned that God's family includes people of all backgrounds and faith traditions. I learned as much from others as I hope they learned from me. It was an enriching and expansive experience.

## Extending the Ministry of Jesus

In the 1980s, Miguel (not his real name) attended a large Adventist church in a major metropolitan area. A wide smile

always creased his face, and because of his outgoing personality, everyone knew Miguel.

The church pastor instituted a prayer meeting on Wednesday mornings at 10 o'clock for people who didn't like to be out after dark. This weekly gathering was attended mostly by old women—and Miguel. Miguel had a secret: he was gay. He discovered that he had AIDS at a time when being diagnosed with AIDS amounted to a death sentence. Because so much about AIDS was unknown at the time, a number of false, prejudicial rumors circulated.

One week at prayer meeting, Miguel felt safe sharing his secret with the women in his Bible study group: he was gay and he had AIDS. If he wondered how the women in the group would respond, he didn't have to wait long to find out. One woman stood, walked over to where he sat, grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him to his feet, and wrapped him in a hug. Soon Miguel had been hugged by all of the women in the group.

A little later Miguel confided to the pastor: "I know I'm going to die, but I don't want to die alone."

"You will not die alone," the pastor responded.

As the disease progressed, Miguel ended up in the hospital. Every day members of that church went to his room and sat with him. They didn't go to sing, to pray, or to give him Bible studies; they went just to sit with him and provide whatever comfort and support was necessary. One day one of the unit nurses saw the pastor leave Miguel's room. "Who are you people?" she wanted to know. She pointed to a room down the hall and said, "This patient hasn't had a visitor in two weeks." She pointed to another room. "No one has been to see this patient in eight days."

The pastor replied: "We are Seventh-day Adventists. We are agents of God's love, mercy, and grace to everyone who needs it."

That was the beginning of a ministry to LBGTQ+ individuals and their families in that church that continues to this day. It's a ministry that has been duplicated by congregations throughout North America, Northern Europe, and the South Pacific. It's a ministry that takes seriously Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17, NIV).

The church at its best knows that its ministry is not about itself. It's about unconditional welcome, inclusion, and affirmation to all who need to experience God's infinite love and never-ending grace. It reflects Christ's invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28, NIV). **AT**

# ADVENTISM HAS a Future—/f

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

I REMEMBER HOW EXCITED I WAS WHEN I HEARD THAT OUR church had reached the 1 million member mark. I was a teenager in the late 1950s. The church was rising above the level of a small North American sect.

This was confirmed by public relations statements from the church about the presence of the Adventist Church in nearly 200 countries. As the decades passed, the church continued to grow—not only in membership, but also in geographical area, in organizational and financial strength, in academic prestige, and in institutional power.

I look back on my own professional past in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination with a sense of satisfaction that I was privileged to play a small role in this phenomenal development. According to the latest *Annual Statistical Report* of the General Conference, the worldwide church now has 21.7 million members in more than 95,000 individual congregations. Global tithe income amounts to a staggering US \$2.4 billion. The church operates an ever-expanding educational and health/medical network. The number of active denominational employees exceeds 322,000, of whom some 16,000 are ordained pastors.

The history of Adventism has been a success story in many ways, but some worrying trends are emerging. The growth rate of the church has significantly flattened. In many parts of the world, traditional evangelistic methods no longer work. And where they still seem to draw converts, a large percentage of newly baptized members do not stay in the church. More than 40 percent of new members leave after a relatively short period.

In the Western world, the exodus from Adventism is particularly significant among more educated segments of members. The coronavirus pandemic has, no doubt, affected the church's growth pattern, but in recent years other factors have also contributed to a significant decline in accessions. The expectation that the world church would have at least 50 million members within a few decades now seems quite unrealistic.

### **A Message That Finds an Echo**

Whether or not the Adventist Church has a positive future does not primarily depend on its continued institutional strength, financial health, or solid membership gains. One fundamental question is whether the denomination, with all of its ethnic and cultural diversity, can stay together theologically. Or, alternatively,

will the pervasive polarization ultimately cause a schism between those who want to protect a traditional, historic Adventism and a community that searches for new meaning in what past generations of Adventists have delivered to us? Will the regional divisions of the world church demand greater autonomy, so that they have the freedom to find a more satisfying connection between their faith and their cultures?

Religious communities have a future only when they continue to deliver what their adherents expect from them. History is replete with examples of movements and organizations that gradually fizzled out and disappeared. In the Western world, we

## **A denomination as diverse as ours, with believers from so many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, must be expected to be diverse in its theology and practices.**

seem to be observing the demise of many denominations. Could it be that, if the world still exists a century from now, Adventism will have disappeared from Europe, Australia, and the United States, because it no longer delivered a product that makes a difference in the lives of believers? This might happen, unless we make sure that the Adventist message remains (or, rather, will once more become) relevant for the postmodern generations of the 21st century.

### **Relevance**

At the very least, a religion must enable people to find answers to humanity's most crucial questions. What is the meaning of our present life? Will there be a continuation of our existence beyond death? How do religious convictions connect with the challenges and duties of daily life? What role does religion play in the life of the community?

These general questions apply to all religious entities, including the Adventist Church. Therefore, we should make the question more specific: Is Adventism able to adequately respond to the religious and social needs of those who are growing up in its environment? Does it have any appeal to those who are looking for a spiritual home? The church has a future only if these questions can be answered with a clear “yes.”

Unfortunately, many Adventists prioritize other concerns. They feel that the future of the denomination depends on unconditional loyalty to its traditional doctrinal heritage, defined by these criteria:

- We continue to underline the importance of Adventist “truth” as expressed in the 28 fundamental beliefs.
- We self-identify as the “remnant” church that must correct the views of “apostate” Christianity.
- We maintain all lifestyle choices of traditional Adventism.

It may be a future that brings many challenges, and “God’s special people” may be reduced in numbers, but it is the only kind of future that true Seventh-day Adventists should be interested in.

I do not believe that this line of thinking has much merit. If such a church were to survive, it would resemble a museum that informs people about the past without providing any vision for the future.

### **The Future for Adventist Doctrine?**

If the Adventist Church is to respond to the real needs of today’s people, it must answer the questions that people have in the here and now, not merely rehash answers to the questions of our forebears in the 19th and 20th centuries. An unprejudiced study of Adventist history reveals that, over time, Adventist theology and denominational practices have undergone many changes. To remain relevant, Adventism requires further development of thought. “Present” truth of 1900 is no longer “present” truth in 2022.

Many church members are afraid of change. They wonder what will happen if we exchange the “plain reading” of the Bible for an approach that does not take everything in the Bible literally. What will happen if we overhaul our end-time scenario? How can we connect faith and reason in a way that is in accord with the underlying message of the biblical record, while taking scientific discoveries seriously? What will happen if we decide to take a new and thorough look at the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary? Can we admit that certain aspects of our traditional understanding do not add up? Does allowing for certain

doctrinal and ethical changes put us on a slippery slope that will eventually leave us with very little that we can genuinely call Adventist? Many ask: If something were “truth” 50 years ago, how can it no longer be truth today?

The reality is that Adventist truth has changed significantly over the years. Church historian George R. Knight has suggested that if James White and Uriah Smith were alive today, they might have second thoughts about joining our church, since our present beliefs differ in so many ways from what was considered authentic Adventist teaching in their day and age.

Another reality is that, secretly or not so secretly, many Adventist theologians have serious doubts about aspects of doctrines they are expected to teach. The time has come to admit that some doctrinal changes may be needed. That is no reason for panic. A denomination as diverse as ours, with believers from so many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, must be expected to be diverse in its theology and practices. Developments in theological thought may not proceed everywhere at the same speed.

Perhaps a much more important question than “What is correct doctrine?” is “What do our doctrines do for us?” In 1998 I wrote a small book that caused an unusual number of reader responses. The publisher gave it a rather long title: *It’s Time to Stop Rehearsing What We Believe and Start Looking at What Difference It Makes.* I took a look at each of the (then 27) fundamental beliefs. I did not ask whether the biblical support for all of our doctrines is fully adequate, but rather: What does belief in these statements do for me? How does believing these doctrines make me a better Christian? How does it make me a happier, more balanced person? How do these doctrines help me to be a better husband, a more loving father, a more trustworthy colleague, etc.? Did Christ not say that the truth will “set us free”? In other words, the Christian faith is not primarily a collection of Bible-based propositions, but a dynamic force that does something of fundamental importance for us. The exercise of analyzing the church’s doctrines this way proved to be very beneficial. I recommend it.

### **Truth That Does Something**

I am convinced that the Seventh-day Adventist Church can face the future with confidence only if it succeeds in making its message relevant. It must show people how our beliefs do something for them, how they meet their basic needs.

The Sabbath doctrine has great untapped potential. It remains important to remind people that God stipulated we keep holy the seventh day (rather than the first day) of the week. Unfortunately, we do not put a similar amount of energy into telling people how God's Sabbath can be an oasis of healing and rest in a society that suffers from a pandemic of burnout and work addiction. In fact, several non-Adventist authors do a better job of making the Sabbath relevant for today's busy people than do most Adventist writers on this topic.

The doctrine of the second coming has often been a source of fear and despair for Adventist believers: Who will be able to persevere during the time of trouble, when Christ supposedly ceases to function as our Mediator? How can Christ's return, which is the climax of the plan of salvation, become a source of hope, and how can we live in loving service as we expectantly wait for his coming? What can faith in Christ's second coming do for us? How can we successfully share this "blessed hope" with others?

### Expanding Our Sense of Stewardship

Perhaps the area in which we can make our faith especially relevant is that of stewardship. Seventh-day Adventists talk a lot about this topic, but unfortunately, it is often rather narrowly defined. Most publications and sermons about stewardship focus on the use of our time (with special attention on the hours of the Sabbath) and the use of our money. Care for our bodies is regarded as an important aspect of stewardship, as is a proper use of our talents. But care for the environment and responsibility for our planet does not get the priority it deserves. As pioneers of Christian stewardship, Adventists ought to take the lead in campaigning for a safe environment and for a sustainable economy, not only for those of us who live in privileged parts of the world, but also for the hundreds of millions of people elsewhere whose lives are at greater risk. This is an area in which Adventist faith could become truly relevant.

Being stewards of gospel truth is intimately connected with the concepts of justice and peace. Many Adventists support the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and are convinced that the claims of Christianity demand that we assist people in need and do our utmost to provide adequate healthcare and enhance the standard of living of millions of people in the developing world. But this is not enough.


Being Adventist Christians in the 21st century should also compel us to turn against poverty, injustice, and corruption in

our own countries and elsewhere. It demands that we protest consistently against discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Many of us could become active in organizations such as the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and other agencies that help to make the world a better, safer place.

It would also be wonderful if we could more clearly remember our noncombatant past and take an active role in peace movements. This type of change in our communal engagement would make our Christian life so much more dynamic and relevant. When the church embarks more intently on this path, and on a much broader scale, many who now see little relevance in the Adventist faith might feel more attracted to the church and play a role in safeguarding its future.

### The Church Is "Community"

Our postmodern society is, among many other things, characterized by a deep-seated skepticism regarding institutionalized religion. In Adventism, we also notice an increased focus on the local church and a growing disinterest in the higher echelons of denominational structure. The church of the future will undoubtedly need an administrative framework but will find its real strength in communities where people of all ages and backgrounds feel welcome and accepted. The fact that members of these communities share in a number of "fundamental" beliefs will give these groups social cohesion and a common commitment. Richard Rice, retired systematic theologian at the School of Religion at Loma Linda University, has rightly stressed that now, very often, *belonging* actually precedes *believing*.

The church of the future will not be a well-oiled global organization in which all entities march to the same tune and interpret every Bible text in the same way. Rather, the Seventh-day Adventist Church of the future will be a network of communities that—in the locations where they happen to be, and each in their specific cultural context—do all they can to translate the basics of Christianity into a philosophy and a way of life that is biblically responsible and relevant. 

# Transcendent Spaces in Immanent Places:

## Designing Churches for Ministry

By Rebecca Barceló

**If we are called to be good stewards of the space God has provided for us, are we using that space to create optimal opportunities to foster spiritual community in the 21st century?**

IN THE ERA OF CROSSFIT CHURCHES AND coffee-shop Sunday schools, we are seeing the growth of spaces where the immanent and transcendent can meet. You can find Bible study groups that provide free oil changes for single parents, church wellness centers that provide healthcare services to the community, and kids worship programs that double as weekday childcare.

The idea of bringing together the immanent and the transcendent is not new. Jesus exemplified it when becoming Emmanuel—“God with us.” Nor should the idea of caring for Maslow’s hierarchy of needs within a spiritual context be shocking. Adventist theology prides itself on a holistic spirituality, thanks in part to the writings of Ellen G. White. Combined with the evangelistic mission of being “the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13) and making “disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), ministry ideas such as these shouldn’t be strange to Adventist practice.

### Adventist Spaces

So, why are so many Adventist churches sitting empty Sunday through Friday? Why are our sanctuaries separated from our community centers? And how is it that many of our worship spaces have not been reimagined for decades? If we are called to be good stewards of the space God has provided for us, are we using that space to create optimal opportunities to foster spiritual community in the 21st century?

In the interest of doing less criticizing and more vision-casting, I would challenge us to be more creative in envisioning what our worship spaces could become, how they could be

designed, and whom they could serve. Bolted-down pews are helpful to a theater-style worship service, with consumers all listening to one voice. What would happen if the peak of Sabbath attendance involved interactive services with other members, at round tables with many voices? Stained-glass windows depict gorgeous stories from the Bible and communicate church history, but what if transparent windows invited those outside to witness what was happening inside as they walked by? What if our windows opened, so that Sabbath music could attract nearby neighbors?

The design of our Adventist worship spaces should not stand apart from the mission and vision of what our ministries are aiming to accomplish.

Imagine a Worship and Wellness Center where rooms are designed to foster different types of worship each Sabbath. It could include a quiet space for introverts who like to spend their day reading or journaling in a theological library. A music auditorium for hosting Christian jam sessions throughout the day. A theater for documentaries and discussion on Christianity and culture. A kinesthetic worship area for dance, sign language, or health sessions. A food court for lunch and fellowship between sessions. A community garden that supplies weekly cooking classes. Child-care and programming for different age groups, with opportunities to integrate into various adult rooms. A spa room that offers prayer, hymns, and quiet meditation.

These are only a few of the ideas that we might try if we set aside our fear of syncretism, experimentation, and the secular in order to lead our community into more creative ideas of communal Sabbath blessing.

How would we sustain such an operation? Perhaps through renting the church building out to daycare providers,

schools, or summer camp programs interested in using the facility throughout the week? Through employing the grant writers and business professionals in our congregations as consultants, instead of relying solely on the pastor's business acumen? Or by tapping the expertise within the congregation to create and staff the types of programs they are experienced in and passionate about?

### Where It Works

Fortunately, a few Adventist churches are already pioneering these ideas. The Really Living Centre in Ontario, Canada, has a space that, according to *Adventist World*, serves "as both a worship space for Really Living Seventh-day Adventist Church and a community center open to the public several days a week. The newly established center allows for the expansion of existing local church programs, like a plant-based-cooking school; free oil changes for single parents; boot camp, summer camps, and drop-in sports nights for youth; and new programs, such as sewing classes, a smoothie bar, and indoor rock climbing."<sup>1</sup>

According to the Columbia Union Conference website, a church called Walk of Faith Fellowship in Cleveland, Ohio, found that traditional church hours "were not convenient for the community they were trying to reach,"<sup>2</sup> so they moved their worship service to start at 11 a.m., followed by a community meal and then a 2 p.m. Bible study. They find that many more people from the community are participating in their services, simply as a result of adjusting the start time.

This church is open every morning and serves a hot breakfast for the many homeless who walk up and down Lorain Avenue in Cleveland. Its members also operate a food pantry, give out clothing, and provide a washer and dryer for the homeless to clean their clothes. This group is so focused on impacting the community

that it hired one of the church members, who is a social worker, to serve on its staff.

To help minister to the youth at risk in their community, Walk of Faith Fellowship also operates a teen center as a safe place where community youth can come in off the streets and find mentors. Young people gather to play foosball, ping pong, or pool.

A third congregation, the First SDA Church in Montclair, New Jersey, implemented a popular program called Life Skills Academy under the direction of its former pastor, Paula Olivier. She had initially experimented with the program in 2007 when she was associate pastor of the Church of the Oranges, where it was an outstanding success.

A program that equips teens with practical life skills and teaches leadership, Life Skills Academy meets for four-and-a-half weeks each summer, Monday through Thursday, 6-9 p.m. The evening sessions follow the nationally acclaimed Survival Skills for Youth curriculum, which covers vital topics such as managing money, dealing with conflict, and developing study skills, communication skills, and job interviewing skills. Pastor Olivier helped to secure over \$30,000 in grants for the administration of the academy.<sup>3</sup> She also enlisted local community leaders in the program by bringing in real estate agents to teach the students how to look for an apartment and how to read a lease, bankers who give instruction on developing a personal budget and managing a checkbook, and a mechanic who teaches youth the basics of auto maintenance.<sup>4</sup>

### Prioritizing Community Needs

While many churches that are prioritizing traditional and congregational needs are complaining of poor attendance and

funding, churches that are prioritizing community needs are growing exponentially while garnering attention from donors and volunteers who believe in their mission. These practical models are not only inclusive of the congregation's spiritual gifts and useful as evangelical tools, but they are closer to the heart of what an Adventist ecclesiology is supposed to represent: a proleptic enactment of the heavenly community on Earth.

What if a small church community doesn't have the means to start any large operations? At minimum, its members could consider starting a church focus group to evaluate whether or not available space is serving their needs. Maybe the storage spaces in the church that aren't being used could be cleaned out to create podcast recording studios to rent for income. Perhaps a young person from the congregation could help with the audiovisual ministry. What if someone could donate basketball hoops to enable the youth to play Saturday night games in the parking lot?

While time and finances are legitimate challenges, limited imagination can be an even greater obstacle to creative ministry solutions. What might be possible if the mission of each church became the only protected interest in managing the stewardship of our ministry spaces? **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Online at [www.adventistworld.org/we-are-not-saved-to-be-hermits-in-a-cave/](http://www.adventistworld.org/we-are-not-saved-to-be-hermits-in-a-cave/).

<sup>2</sup> Online at [columbiaunion.org/building-bridges-your-community](http://columbiaunion.org/building-bridges-your-community).

<sup>3</sup> Online at <https://gracepointesda.org/our-history/#our-pastors>.

<sup>4</sup> Online at [columbiaunion.org/building-bridges-your-community](http://columbiaunion.org/building-bridges-your-community).

# In Search of an Effective Adventist Witness

BY LOREN SEIBOLD

A MONTH OR SO AGO, I WAS DRIVING TO MY HOUSE IN THE suburbs when I saw, in a yard adjoining the street, a young man waving a sign that said only “Jn 3:16.”

Now, this isn’t a commercial area with streams of traffic. It is an artery into our nice suburb, in one of the most prosperous school districts in our state. This man was waving his sign not to a wide public, but to his neighbors, most of whom are educated professional people who probably already have a church—assuming they want one.

I’ve seen such things in city centers, once even by the Oxford Street station in London. (That sign-waving was accompanied by a small musical ensemble, which wasn’t very good but was mildly entertaining.) But never before on a street in my neighborhood.

When I see such methods (let’s include here street preaching and door knocking), I have conflicting feelings. On one hand,

I admire the person’s courage and drive.

Though I suspect that some churches put heavy pressure on their members to go out and do uncomfortable forms of witnessing (Jehovah’s Witnesses, I’m looking at you!), I want to give the witnesses the benefit of the doubt.

But my other reaction is to wonder, *Why*

## Is bringing people to Jesus really the goal of most evangelistic activity?

*are you using this particular method?* Has anyone come to Jesus through a poster that says “Jn 3:16”? How many people gladly receive a duo of Jehovah’s Witnesses at their door? How many pick up a Jack Chick pamphlet strategically dropped in a public place? How many regard a street preacher as anything but a novelty to rush past?

This leads me to wonder: *Is bringing people to Jesus really the goal of most evangelistic activity?* I’m going to surmise that at least for some people—whether they know it or not—it isn’t.



## Identity Witnessing

Take the guy who goes to the expense of buying a ticket on the front row of a tier in Yankee Stadium, then smuggles in a canvas sign large enough so that when he unrolls it, the cameras will pick it up and all over the world people can see “Jn 3:16.”

I’m quite certain he would tell you that he does it because he is witnessing for Jesus. But if the expectation is for conversion or growing a church, note that no actual argument is being made, nor any emotion evoked, nor any discipling relationship nurtured, nor a decision requested. The only thing that is conveyed is a reference that you must already know for it to mean anything. In short, it is unlikely that anyone anywhere is going to come to Jesus by seeing “Jn 3:16” on a sign at a ball game.

So, it seems to me that what he’s really doing is proclaiming an identity. He’s saying, “I’m a fan of the Jesus team,” just as many people in the stadium are fans of the Yankees. He’s saying: “I don’t really care that much about what you think. I don’t care if my sign annoys you or confuses you. I only want you to know what I think.”

## Persecution Identity

That people might be annoyed by our witnessing may be precisely the feature that some Christians value, suggests my friend Lindsey Abston Painter. After all, Jesus said: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt. 5:10-11, ESV).

In our lifetimes, at least in North America and Europe, there’s been little to impede spreading the gospel, and certainly no persecution for it. But there is a way to feel persecuted: bother people.

Painter noted: “When we grow up Adventist, educated at Adventist schools and surrounded by Adventist friends, we are taught that inside the church is safe, and outside the church is hostile and dangerous. When we approach a stranger to witness to them, the response is not infrequently rejection or hostility. People do not like to be preached at, especially by strangers. So when you put yourself in a situation where you will likely be rejected, it confirms that all you face ‘out there’ is hostility and rejection. So stay inside where it is safe and welcoming!

“In short, we can create our own persecution and blame the world for it. Might that be why so many of us have only other Adventists as friends?”

## Removing Excuses

When I was a pastor, I went to church early one Sabbath morning and saw on every driveway in about a three-block vicinity of our church a copy of Jan Marcusson’s booklet *The National Sunday Law*.

There is nothing in this booklet that would make any healthy-minded person say, “Now, that makes me want to be like Jesus!” or even, “This makes me want to be a Seventh-day Adventist.” In fact, there is nothing more likely to mark Adventists as a cult than Marcusson’s interpretation of the Great Controversy teaching, unless it is *The Great Controversy* book itself.

Unlike a “Jn 3:16” bumper sticker, this booklet contains a great deal of information—but not information that is understandable, much less winning, to a stranger. (Fortunately, a church member arrived early enough to rush through the neighborhood gathering them up, and only a handful actually made it into any homes.)

I doubt this witnesser expected the books to convert anyone. I suspect his thinking went something like this: “I don’t know these people, and I don’t need to know them. I only need to warn them. If they throw this booklet away without looking at it, well, too bad for them. In the judgment God can say, ‘Remember that booklet on your driveway? If you had picked it up and read it, I could have saved you. But you didn’t even give me a chance.’”

I once heard an international evangelist explain this strategy with some precision. “There are roughly 300 million people in the United States,” he said, which was accurate at that time. “If 100 million of them see something—anything—about the church, whether they accept it or reject it, we are still left with 200 million who need to be warned.”

For the purpose of such a warning, exposure to our church doesn’t need to be in any way attractive. The merest exposure—such as finding a copy of *The National Sunday Law* on your driveway, or catching a snippet of an Adventist radio program—is enough. Witnesses using this method have no obligation to introduce people to Jesus. They only need to distribute something about the church in general terms—even a beastly brochure for a

meeting—to take away any excuse the unreached might have in the judgment.

It will be immediately obvious, then, that in these situations the goal isn't building up the church—whether Adventist or universal—but merely doing our duty so that we can brush off our hands and say: “Well, my part is done. Now it's up to you, God.”

### God Will Make It Work

This might be why Adventists are mailing millions (if some have their way, a billion) copies of *The Great Controversy* to unsuspecting households. Also, I've heard people say: “I'm doing it because the Spirit of Prophecy, over a century ago, told us to. So, if I go ahead and mail these books, God is going to bless our efforts.”

## It seems to me that if we want our church to grow, we need something real and living to offer, rather than recycled fears.

This reflects the theory that anything that I do with good intention, no matter how annoying it is to others, God will bless.

Don't we love a story about a guy who found *Steps to Christ* in a trash bin, while high on drugs and sleeping in a culvert, and is now an evangelist? God used rubbish to bring him to the true church, so it makes sense for us to spread lots of religious rubbish!

Press articles tell about people being disgusted by stacks and stacks of unasked-for paperbacks in their apartment lobbies. No one considered that a lot of people who otherwise might have liked Adventists were turned off by this method.

Can God use anything that we do with good intentions? I wonder. I'd love to know how many baptisms can be traced to *The Great Controversy* mailings. I've not heard of a single one, though I'd be happy to be corrected. But there's plenty of evidence (just google “Great Controversy mail”) that we have inoculated against us people who now will go nowhere near a Seventh-day Adventist.

Recently I saw a TikTok about some young Christians who, in a packed airplane on a long international flight, pulled out their

guitars, stood in the aisle, and announced, “Jesus is taking over this flight.” While there were probably some who didn't mind the impromptu sing-along, I saw some rather annoyed faces in the crowd.

Is that a good way of bringing people to Jesus—to force them to listen to you worship in a metal cylinder from which they can't escape? It may be courageous, but even I, a Christian who likes singing Christian choruses, would find it irritating.

One commenter wrote: “If they were singing to Allah at 30,000 feet, the pilot would probably land the plane and they'd be taken off in handcuffs. Or at least they'd be placed on the no-fly list. But Jesus? I guess that's okay.”

### Denominational Success

The church (by which I mean the whole enterprise of organized Christianity, but noting ours in particular) has its own motives for witnessing, and those, too, should be examined. Not long ago the conference where I used to work announced it was imposing a goal of 2,023 new baptisms for 2023.

It is always helpful, when analyzing a denomination's plans and activities, to first think of it as a business. And as a business, a valid consideration is that in so many parts of the global West, the church is enervated and the money for pastors and schools is drying up. Can you blame these leaders for trying? I don't. They've got a business to run, and they need more customers. This isn't a silly whim on the conference's part. Pushing for more members is a reasonable and practical consideration.

But let's just admit right up front that baptisms are pursued as an investment in the business, not as souls for the kingdom. Proof: can you imagine any Adventist evangelist who would consider it a success if he spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and baptized into Christ a thousand people, who all then went to join the Methodist church?

When I heard of the 2023 goal, I couldn't help thinking of the frail little congregations I've pastored and how difficult it would be to add even a small number of new people to these fragile gatherings. While everyone likes the *idea* of growing the church, most small churches find it terribly difficult to accept new people who show up.

### Meretricious Methodology

If the goal is to get enough members to increase tithe so the business doesn't go under, how do you go about it? How do you build congregations with integrity?

Almost always, an evangelistic meeting is the first tool that comes to mind. Yet the concept of advertising lectures that people should attend in order to be instructed about your church is, by any measure, superannuated. I have advertised seminars to the whole community but had not a single soul show up.

Those of us who follow Shawn Boonstra's weekend programs know that they contain decent historical content. I wonder if even the Voice of Prophecy might be willing to admit that the slick, dark advertising of Boonstra's Serpentine Prophecy seminar was meretricious—not entirely unlike bikini-clad girls advertising vacuum cleaners, or those “documentaries” on the History Channel where spooky voices and blurry video vignettes stretch a dull one-point story out to an hour of rather pedestrian interest.

In short, it promises something titillating that doesn't end up being very different from what we've said before.

## **A Conclusion to the Matter**

The saddest part for me is that I don't have an answer to how we can sell our church right now. (Make no mistake: it is at least partially a sales task, and in evangelism field schools it is taught as such.) I wish I had the authority to convene a multidisciplinary group to do an intense study into how we can build up our congregations with biblical and ethical integrity.

Our church has some lovely features. We hit the ground with “the blessed hope” of being with Jesus and added a lovely set of worship, lifestyle, and life-planning features that blessed all of us. The community that resulted from these unique teachings did my life the most good.

But our recent General Conference (GC) Session proved that our community has evolved an unchristlike level of organizational and theological haughtiness, more concerned with who should be left out than who is allowed in. (It is noteworthy that the loudest crowd affirmation at GC President Ted Wilson's GC 2022 Sabbath sermon was his assertion that there would be no homosexuals in heaven.)

Right now our evangelism leads with the worst of what Adventism could offer: a frightening end-time; a demanding God who won't secure our salvation until we straighten up and become perfect; a salvation that is won not by being like Jesus, but by being part of a church; insistence that Ellen White interpret (and therefore effectively dominate) the Bible.

Many of us who love our church find no peace in this kind of faith. Why would we invite anyone else to be part of it?

I offer three (possibly constructive) observations:

First, it occurs to me that we might be helped by making a distinction between witnessing and evangelism.

To a man who had been demon-possessed, Jesus said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19, ESV). And when he did, “all the people were amazed” (verse 20, NIV).

A fairly standard definition of witnessing, familiar even in a courtroom, is to experience something important and tell others truthfully about it.

But what if your experience isn't personal? That is, what if nothing is happening to you that is worth telling? What if your spiritual life is nothing more than membership in a church community, or a collection of prejudices and opinions, or some recycled stories?

That's why the standard definition has evolved among us into something easier to organize than personal experience: programs. Nowadays, witnessing in most churches means not a personal outpouring of the heart, but a program, an expectation. The goal is not to enhance our neighbors' peace and joy in Jesus, but to get them to join our church.

If we are to reach beyond our borders, it seems to me we need to go back to the biblical definition of witnessing, which means recounting our encounters with God, not explaining our outdated eschatology.

As for evangelism, while I don't expect churches to quit programming it, it would be good for us Adventists to remember that by definition, evangelism has as its result the embedding in human hearts of good news, not fear and guilt and tithe and attendance.

Second, and closely related: The witness of Jesus' expected return that jumpstarted Adventism is now almost two centuries in the past. The experience was life-changing to our founders and pioneers, but it is not our experience. What if what we have to say is simply no longer relevant?

One of my friends has suggested that the part of Revelation 14:12 most relevant to Adventists hasn't to do with the commandments of God or the Spirit of Prophecy, but that ignored first clause: “Here is the patience of the saints.” We Adventists are practiced in waiting. What we have now is an old story updated with new fearful signs, but our contemporary predictions haven't worked any better than the first failed prediction.

Our experience is what social psychologist Leon Festinger called “disconfirmed expectancy.” We are, to say it clearly, still disappointed.

So, I ask these questions: What do we have now that is living and vital and meaningful to this world? What “present truth” in your life is so compelling that it is worth telling? What is our church doing that works in this world to proclaim (in Isaiah’s words, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4) freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, and the time of the Lord’s favor?

For my part, I would aver that warning people about nonexistent Roman Catholic persecution doesn’t do that.

## **Let’s just admit right up front that baptisms are pursued as an investment in the business, not as souls in the kingdom.**

It seems to me that if we want our church to grow, we need something real and living to offer, rather than recycled fears.

Third, in the early church the result of believing in Jesus was the spontaneous gathering of communities. These were churches in the spiritual sense, but they were not what we’d call a church today. There were no purpose-built buildings, no clergy, no administrative offices. In fact, when the post-apostolic church added those things, it very quickly turned corrupt and became the church Adventists now revile.

Accepting Jesus should mean strong, happy *congregations*—in the broadest sense of that word. But ever since Roman Catholicism took the fatal step of patterning Christ’s church after the empire, churches have been organizations rather than gatherings. Denominations can’t operate without control, and that means all of the sclerosis and myopia of corporatism, as opposed to the “where it listeth” movements of the Spirit (John 3:8) in the apostolic church.

### **Church vs. Denomination**

Somehow, it seems to me, we must recapture the meaning of church: “where two or three are gathered together in My name” (Matt. 18:20, NKJV).

We do entirely too much counting of numbers: bodies, bucks, and buildings. As a young pastor I was shocked (and that’s not too strong a word) by the pressure to count baptisms with no concern about the health of congregations. I think our leaders need to be reminded that at one point in biblical history, God was rather displeased with King David for too much counting (2 Sam. 24:1-17), apparently because it indicated David’s lust for empire.

We, too, should rethink the empire aspirations that now define us, though I’m not sure that many of us would like the result. It would mean less bragging about growth and resources. It might also mean that people like me, who lived off of serving the church, would probably not have the kind of security that we have now. It might mean closing our redundant “headquarters,” of which we are so proud. Or discontinuing the world travels of our GC president—if we need a “president” at all. (The closest they got to “president” in the New Testament was a mere “overseer.”) It might even mean setting free some of our hospitals and universities.

If the last GC Session is any indication, corporatism—as inspiring as it appears to the empire builders—isn’t enough to make a church spiritual. Corporate religion is good at producing more corporatism but not that good at creating Christian harmony and kindness. I don’t see the Holy Spirit in corporatism. We must recapture the notion that the Spirit speaks to all kinds of people, not just those in Silver Spring or Vatican City.

The other question we need to gather the experts to talk about is this: Where is all of this overbearing church organization taking us? And is it where we want to go? **AT**

# Contributors



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After 22 years of teaching in Africa and Europe, God called **PILIRA ZAPITA** to study theology at Newbold College. She is pursuing

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## NEWS BRIEFS

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

### Donor Demands New Fundamental Beliefs

SILVER SPRING, Md. — Major donors to the General Conference have let their appointees know it's high time they came up with new material for the Adventist creed collection. "It's been a while since we added the 28th fundamental," said megadonor and faithful ASI backer Rich Krispie. "A couple of compliance-related fundamentals could get us to 30 by Christmas."

Krispie said he didn't have anything particular in mind, but he hinted that the size of his next donation would be directly tied to the severity of the next fundamental.

### Spouses of SDA Pastors Pledge to Unionize

VALLEJO, Calif. — In the latest round of scary news for conference HR departments, the spouses of pastors around the world have announced their intention to unionize.

The group is calling themselves Pastors' Spouses Against Free Labor. The union vows to protect its members against congregants who pressure them to do things on the spur of the moment, for no pay, on any given day of the week.

To all of its members, the group is already distributing T-shirts that proclaim: The Answer is "NO." It has also designed dressier, Sabbath-appropriate blouses and shirts with the message emblazoned on sleeves, to make sure more tunnel-visioned members don't miss it.

### Ongoing Vigil Prompts a Desperate Prayer

HARD LUCK, Mich. — Half-asleep, Joe Cansadisimo is sending up a desperate prayer for deliverance as his local congregation's prayer meeting continues to hold strong at 11:34 p.m. The long, cruel affair was cheerily suggested last Sabbath by a retired prayer warrior who doesn't need to clock in to work at 8:30 a.m. the next morning.

The main goal for the prayer meeting is to petition heaven for "unmistakable clarity" on the color of the new church carpet and, for the last several hours, members have been sneaking color preferences into their prayers, asking that the rest of the congregation be "brought to see the light."

Face-down in his pew, Cansadisimo begs for liberation from the bonds of his captivity, even if all it translates to is a 45-minute power nap in his car before the saints discover he is missing.

### **Church Activists Solve Drumbeat Dilemma**

HOUSTON — Anti-drum activists in the Adventist Church have finally decided to lay down their arms and solve the percussion problem that has driven them crazy since the start of the 1990s music wars. Rather than try to convince everyone of the evils of a beat, the no-drums warriors are simply removing their hearing aids.

“My hearing was a lot better when I first started writing to the church board about that horrible drum defiling the sanctuary,” said Grouch Oh, part-time elder at Turbulence SDA Church.

“I now simply remove my hearing aid the minute praise and worship begins,” he added. “It works way better.”

Oh said that his fellow anti-drum campaigners across the denomination have come to similar conclusions and have decided to “raise hell more discerningly going forward.”

### **99% Perfect Score Frustrates Theologian**

BUTTONED UP, Tenn. — Solo Opera, a Last Generation theologian, set aside his prophetic timeline charts this afternoon to take a 30-minute standardized holiness test.

Opera was hugely dismayed at the end to find out that although he'd scored perfectly in Spirit of Prophecy compilation, doomsday articulation, orienteering theory, fundamental belief generation, and soap carving, he'd answered a Glacier View trivia question incorrectly, resulting in a 99% score.

So close yet so far away from victory, Opera resolved to do better next time and win faith's fight squarely on his own merits.

### **Adventist Crosschecks Bible with Red Books**

TEAR FALLS, Ark. — Head deaconess Liga List has lately been very concerned about a number of biblical shortcomings. In an email to her entire church board (copied to conference officials, of course), List pointed out countless cases in which Scripture did not provide the level of narrative detail Ellen G. White offers in her writings.

In her lengthy message, an exasperated List despaired at the way certain biblical authors appear not to have consulted with Sister White before penning their scrolls. Vowing to wrestle with the problem until she had more light to share, List warned her readers always to crosscheck truth with a red book.

# Taking a Stand



If you call for change in the Adventist Church, you may be accused of focusing on the negative. But if you want things to improve, you must point out the bottlenecks and problems of the status quo.

Here at *Adventist Today*, we often publish news and commentary pieces that highlight areas in dire need of change and improvement in our faith community. But what I love about *Adventist Today* is that we don't stop there. We don't want to be defined by what we are against. We want to be known for the positive ideals of accessible, independent journalism. We want

to encourage the world church to be the best it can be, and that requires taking a stand for the vital journalistic ideals of transparency and generosity in what we publish.

We are very excited that the bold journalism of *Adventist Today* is making new inroads in the Global South, thanks to the dedicated work of Daniel Mora, our Latin America director. Through Daniel's work, we are sharing both news and commentary in Adventist Latin America that would not see the light of day in official denominational media. We feel called to promote an inclusive, open-minded, and inviting approach to faith rather than the top-down approach that has for so long defined the Adventist Church around the world.

As we publish and feature diverse Adventist voices from across the globe, we are showing that it is possible to be both an Adventist and a careful, independent thinker. We don't all have to toe the line of church bureaucrats to be faithful believers.

Whenever you read *Adventist Today*, share our content, pray for us, or send us a kind donation, you are voting for a better, more accepting Adventist community. Thank you for standing with us as we urge the Adventist Church to be the best that it can be. We can keep growing because of your faithful financial generosity.

Thank you for all you do!

Your grateful *Adventist Today* executive director,  
Björn Karlman

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