

Implications of the
Great Urban Shift

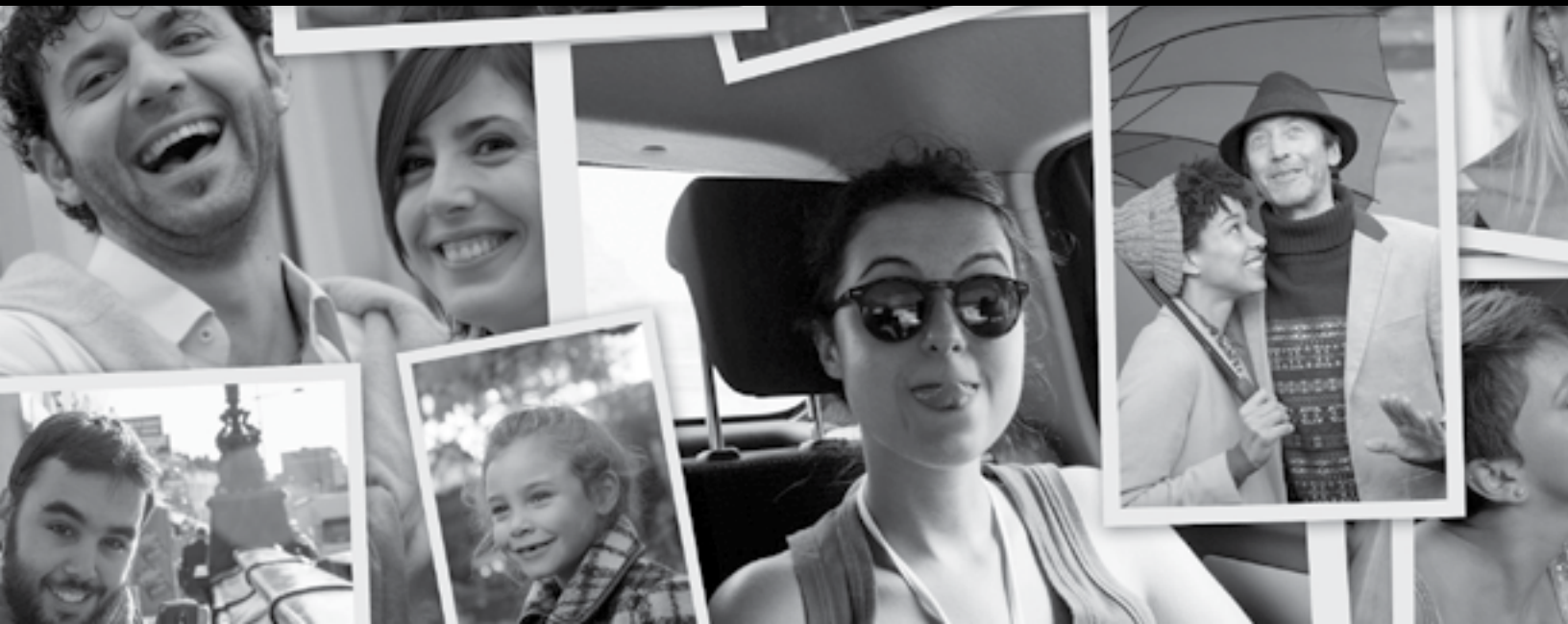
What Could Our Church
Look Like in 2030?

The Challenge of
Organizational Structure

FALL 2023 • VOL. 31 NO. 4

Adventist *Today*

THE ADVENTIST FUTURE PROJECT





features

4 Gifts of Perspective from Latin American Adventism

By *Rebecca Barceló*

8 What Could Our Church Look Like in 2030?

By *Reinder Bruinsma*

12 Translation, Adaptation, and Creativity: A Chinese Case for the Future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

By *Christie Chui-Shan Chow*

17 The Challenge of Church Organization: May We Find Solutions for the Future in the Past?

By *Edwin Torkelsen*

20 The Great Urban Shift: What Does It Mean for Adventist Outreach?

By *Lars Gustavsson*

22 The Future of Our Church from an African Perspective

By *Alvin Masarira*

26 Fixing the Representative Model in Latin America

By *Daniel A. Mora*

32 The Adventist Church Reimagined

By *Admiral Ncube*

36 Beyond Boundaries: Hope for the Future of Adventism

By *Matthew Burdette*

DEPARTMENTS

3 Editorial

The Adventist Future Project

By *Loren Seibold*

39 Contributors

Executive Editor

Loren Seibold

Executive Director

Björn Karlman

Copy Editor

Debra J. Hicks

Art Director

Chris Komisar

Contributing Editors

James Walters, John McLarty, Stephen Chavez, J. David Newman

Director of Operations

Annet Johnston

Digital Media

News Editor: Rebecca Barceló;
Editorial Associates: Heather Gutman, Mark Gutman, Carmen Seibold; Weekly Email Edition Editor: Lindsey Painter

Accountant

Mark Gutman

Governing Board

Bill Garber (chair), **Raj Attiken**, Marit Case, **Jan Cetti**, Chris Daley, **Jack Hoehn**, **Björn Karlman**, Mailen Kootsey, Alvin Masarira, Chuck Mitchell, J. David Newman, Lindsey Painter, Gary Raines, **Edward Reifsnnyder**, Elmar Sakala, **Julie Scott**, Carmen Seibold, **Loren Seibold**, David Van Patten, John Vogt, **Jim Walters**

Bolded names are Executive Committee members.

Adventist Today brings contemporary issues of importance to interested readers. Following basic principles of ethics and canons of journalism, this publication strives for fairness, candor, and good taste. Unsolicited submissions are encouraged. Payment is competitive. Send an email to atoday@atoday.org or mail to Adventist Today, PO Box 683, Milton Freewater, OR 97862. Call 800.236.3641 or 503.826.8600 (outside USA).

Website: www.atoday.org

As an independent press, *Adventist Today* relies on donations to meet its operating expenses. To support *Adventist Today* and continue receiving this magazine, go to www.atoday.org and click on Donate, or mail payments to the address above. All donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Adventist Today (ISSN: 1079-5499) is published quarterly by Adventist Today Foundation, 105 N. Main Street, Milton Freewater, OR 97862. Periodical postage is paid at Milton Freewater, OR, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Adventist Today, PO Box 683, Milton Freewater, OR 97862. Copyright (c) 2023 by Adventist Today Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community and beyond.



The Adventist Future Project

By Loren Seibold, *Adventist Today* executive editor

The magazine you're holding will look—and read—a bit different from our usual *Adventist Today* magazine. That's because it was designed with a special purpose in mind.

About a year ago, contributing editor Jim Walters felt inspired to ask this question: "What is the future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?" Living in what we generally call "the West" (Europe, English-speaking North America, Australia, and New Zealand), he felt he had good reasons to examine this question, given that today nearly 19 of every 20 Adventists now live in the Global South.

Walters wrote to progressive, visionary thinkers—both lay and clergy—around the world. He asked them to draw on their experience to diagnose Adventism and assess the church's challenges and potential, in their regions or in the church as a whole.

He asked questions such as these:

- What cultural and intellectual issues must be addressed to make the church strong in your region?
- What potential weaknesses and fault lines need to be healed?
- Where do you see the church in your part of the world several decades from now?
- What leadership initiatives would make the biggest difference?
- What does your Adventist culture have to offer the rest of the church, and what do you need to learn from the rest of the church?

You hold their answers in your hand.

A Diverse Church

Whereas our denomination's original membership had roots in the monolithic, religious, "Burned-Over District" of upstate New York, today only a few thousand Adventists live in this region.

Nevertheless, many of the old religio-cultural sensibilities persist. This aggravates an increasingly

large, diverse denominational membership. The largest proportion—nearly 50%—live in Africa, 30% in Latin America, and 15% in Asia.

Yet, the United States is Adventism's homeland, and it continues to be disproportionately influential in ideology and wealth. The challenge facing Seventh-day Adventism is how to apply the dynamism of its origins, as captured in the movement's emphasis on "present truth," to maturing national "Adventisms." Adventist *truth* can ring true only as it resonates with the deep heartbeat of diverse lived experiences.

The Minority West

The fact that you are reading this editorial introduction means that you're likely part of a minority within a minority in Adventism. That is, you live in the aforementioned "West" and, even there, you're a member of the progressive subset. From that viewpoint, the future of Adventism looks bleak: the still-dominant Caucasian membership in the North American Division is barely holding its own, and the fundamentalism of the General Conference is increasingly belligerent.

But there's good news: the significant growth of our church in the Global South continues, and Adventism is bringing great meaning and life to millions. Also, despite fundamentalist pushback, our denomination is well along in its maturation from sect to church.

It's Adventist progressives who have the spiritual bandwidth to appreciate the point of Stephen Asma's *Why We Need Religion*. Religion surely does have its intellectual challenges, but its essential contribution to our lives is more profound: it addresses our affective selves, where we primarily live!

P.S. Happily, this issue of *Adventist Today* represents a first. Just as we publish essays on the Adventist future, our more academic counterpart in Adventism, *Spectrum*, is simultaneously running its own set of essays on this topic. **AT**

**Adventist
truth can ring
true only as
it resonates
with the deep
heartbeat of
diverse lived
experiences.**



Gifts of Perspective from Latin American Adventism

BY REBECCA BARCELÓ

GLOBALIZATION HAS MADE THE WORLD FEEL SMALLER. AND whether we consider this a curse or a blessing, we can agree that it has opened our eyes to many ways of life, people, foods, and traditions that are completely different from what we've previously known.

Ironically, it is learning about the “other”—any person with a different religion, culture, sexuality, race, or ethnicity—that brings us to deeper realizations about ourselves. The process distills what is culturally *mine* from what is *yours*. As any traveler will attest, this culture class can be a jarring experience.

Reactions to the resulting uncertainty tend to vary, depending on a person's philosophical paradigm. Let's compare the reactions of a modernist, a postmodernist, and a metamodernist.

The modernist's need for homogeneity might lead to a proclamation that one culture is “right” and the other culture is “wrong,” thus ignoring all ambiguity. In this paradigm, tolerance for uncertainty is low and decisions about difference must be made swiftly and decisively.

The postmodernist may see the two cultures as realities so different from each other that to unite them would destroy their unique particularities. This well-intentioned respect for heterogeneity might lead one to view cultural diversity as unbridgeable.

Finally, the metamodernist might regard all that has been learned from postmodernism, taking lessons from the “priority of the particular,” while still hoping to create a collective way forward. Instead of forcing uniformity, the metamodernist would attempt a nuanced return to some of the grand societal narratives, working toward an ideal of “integrated pluralism”¹ (*Psychology Today's* phrase, not mine). The result could be a helpful “both/and” approach. Instead of arguing which culture is right and which is wrong, this philosophy would preserve the good and helpful from each.²

My Own “Integrated Pluralism”

My personal views when it comes to culture, which are firmly

staked in the metamodernist camp, originated from a practical need to integrate my own identity as a result of globalization. I come from a Mexican father and a Caucasian mother, whose Adventist convictions led our family to live in Puerto Rico as missionaries. My exposure to these competing cultural values and perspectives has formed me, informed my worldview, and ultimately enriched my faith.

The idea of “perspectivism” has proven exceedingly helpful to me, a person who wears multiple cultural lenses. Put simply, it is the idea that truth, while objectively real, must always be viewed through the subjective lens of the observer—that is, from a specific “perspective.” Being able to see the world through the lens of a Mexican, a Caucasian American, or a Puerto Rican has proven to be an effective tool as I navigate through life. Instead of separating the identities or judging one as superior to the others, I have found aspects of each identity that are useful.

Sometimes I apply a North American lens to my faith, sometimes a Latin American lens, sometimes a Caribbean one. Being able to “code switch” has provided a richer, more prismatic view of God and the Bible. While I have seen many recommendations (often legitimate) from North American Adventism to Latin American Adventism, I’d like to look for a moment through the Latin American lens to offer five specific cultural insights for the North American believer.

Embodied Spiritual Life

As a child I often traveled with my missionary family and friends, conducting ministry fairs among the Caribbean islands. Each church would greet us warmly and host long, lively services that included children’s activities and animated preaching. Most memorable for me were the action songs both for kids and adults, which involved swaying bodies, clapping hands, and arms raised in worship. During lengthy prayers, members would stand shoulder-to-shoulder in communal prayer, holding hands and sometimes crying with each other. Services would end with hugs, kisses, or pats on the shoulder.

Family worships in my own household, which included time for reading and discussion, typically ended with prayer, during which we were either kneeling, standing, or gathering in a circle with arms around each other. The beginning and end of each Sabbath would be marked by a hug or a kiss to each family member, along with the greeting “Happy Sabbath” or “Happy week.” Guests, neighbors, and church members were all welcomed into the family ritual.

As I got older and enrolled in Pathfinders, we earned honors and badges and trained for physical competitions against other

Pathfinder teams in swimming, track and field, and marching. The senior pastor and his family facilitated our nightly marching practice by playing bongo drums and other music. The involvement and dedication of ministry leaders, combined with a sense of family among the youth, ultimately led to my decision to get baptized and dedicate my life to creating spiritual community for others.

A rich cultural background has taught me to glean wisdom from every voice—not just the teachers with credentials and status—and to value education from actual spiritual experience as well as from books.

In all of these experiences, Latin American believers never disregarded the physical body or considered it inferior to the mind in a sort of unnatural spiritual hierarchy. Instead, the church encouraged me to bring the body along in partnership with the mind as part of my overall spiritual formation and worship of God.

Alignment of the mind with the body in worship is part of a holistic Adventist theology of human nature. Fundamental Belief No. 7, The Nature of Humanity, states that “each is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else.” If worship enhances the mind but neglects the body, how does such worship do justice to the valuable Adventist conviction of indivisible unity?

Admittedly, a North American introvert might cringe at the amount of social involvement and blatant disregard for personal space that was part of my everyday Adventist experience. We need not emulate these examples exactly; I only ask that we evaluate what role, if any, the body has within our worship. Is the physical body valued, included, and welcomed within our spaces of worship in a way that balances our culture and holistic Adventism?

People-First Ministry

In Latin America, community means being an integral part of one another’s lives. If an Adventist mother were sick, it would not be surprising for another to come into her home and help her cook,

clean, and take care of her children until she gets well again. She'd expect the same from her friend, if the roles were reversed.

If Adventists were moving or doing construction on their home, it would not be rare for the church members to spend an entire day helping—and even to make it a social event.

A person in spiritual crisis typically would not be rushed through a conversation because of the pastor's scheduled meeting or social engagement. A previously arranged task or appointment would wait until the conversation finished, honoring the relationship as a priority.

Adventists in Latin America have always shown a special reverence for the matriarchs—the abuelitas—who demonstrate a deep, experiential relationship with God, regardless of how humble their education might be.

Church programming is not subservient to the clock, but rather, it evolves as the members feel moved by the Spirit and ends whenever they feel that worship is complete.

This prioritization of relationship over task and time might be one of the most frustrating cultural differences for Adventists from North American cultures. However, the Latin American perspective is that the only reason for doing such tasks is to serve people, so if time is not subservient to worship or to relationship, it is serving the wrong priorities. These Adventists would say that time was made for humans, not humans for time.

Ecclesiastical Expectations

Adventists who trace their origins to Latin America have a vastly different expectation of “church experience” than do those who are native to North America. A Latino church member, for example, typically would not worry if special music went three minutes over the allotted time, or if the stage lighting was all wrong. If the pianist didn't show up, another church member might step in to play, and the congregation would figure out the hymns together. If lacking a screen or hymnal, the worship leader might call out each verse to the congregation, guiding them through the song in real

time. None of these logistical issues would cause a church member to email complaints to the pastor—or consider changing church membership.

Generally, the production value of a church service is not nearly as important to Latin American Adventists as the spiritual and relational opportunities within the service itself. The goal is not to sit back and be entertained, but to take an interactive role in the communal experience of worship. The church experience doesn't end with the worship service, but extends into an afternoon meal, conversation, programming for Adventist youth (AY), and evening games or sports.

While a North American church service might span a few hours (or maybe more, if it's a potluck day), families usually leave church promptly to spend time among themselves or with a curated community of their choice. The Latin American habit of spending a full day with an intergenerational mix of diverse church members might seem like a huge sacrifice to a North American. Getting to know strangers with different views or engaging in unnecessary conversation may even feel like a “waste of time,” with no perceivable “return on investment;” however, spending Sabbath days together tends to move Latin American believers from being mere pew acquaintances to becoming true community members and friends.

An Emotional God

Thomas Aquinas' portrayal of an impassible God who shows no emotion—or, worse, has none to show—has permeated North American Adventism. A God who never changes (Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17) is understood to be not “fickle” enough to have a mood. Caucasian Americans seem to prefer a God who fits the bill of consistency, stoicism, reliability, and predictability. However, the Latin perception is very similar to the Hebrew view of God: full of passion, struggle, paradoxical emotions, and the unpredictability of the Spirit. The Hebrew language allows for layers of deep emotion—expressions of poetry, innuendo, humor, sarcasm, and deep reverence—in a single situation.

It is no secret that emotions are felt deeply and quickly in Latin America. As an example, take a stereotypical sequence from the ubiquitous *telenovela* soap operas: “I love you...I hate you...but I love you!” In a typical home scene, intense family arguments will erupt over how to cook the rice, then dissolve the next minute into raucous laughter between siblings over how the rice turned out.

As a result of this familiarity with emotional range, Adventists in Latin America are comfortable with paradoxical emotions. A Latina mother scolds her child using a playful tone, ending

in affection. A salsa song speaks of deep loss and grief in the lyrics but encourages the listener to dance through the pain, because life is still beautiful. A prayer to “Papito Dios” (Daddy God—recall Mark 14:36, where Jesus calls out to God as “Abba”) expresses anger and gratitude, sadness and happiness, all in the same breath.

This emotional approach to God-human relationships mirrors the deep, intimate, tumultuous struggles that characterize the stories within the Bible. For example, God wrestles with Jacob until the morning, rendering him broken and then bonding with him in a way that most humans don’t get to experience. Look at Moses, who confronts God and argues with him as only a true friend could. Consider the heartbreak described by the prophet Hosea as he compares God’s emotional struggle over his wayward people to the jealousy and anger of a man betrothed to a cheating woman. And finally, recall the New Testament portrayal of Jesus’ deep grief as he looked over Jerusalem, wishing to protect the people of Israel as a hen would gather up her scattered chicks. If we are made in the image of God and experience deep, paradoxical emotions as parents, lovers, siblings, or friends, why would we believe that “Papito Dios” in heaven doesn’t likewise experience them?

Abuelita Faith

While there is a great respect for pastors and learned scholars, Adventists in Latin America have always shown a special reverence for the matriarchs—the *abuelitas*—who demonstrate a deep, experiential relationship with God, regardless of how humble their education might be. Although they are not often given official titles of ministry, these women set the example of faith for their children and extended families. They use observations about everyday objects from the kitchen, the laundry room, and the garden to explain how life works and what God is like.

Since these mothers and grandmothers are so influential when it comes to spirituality within families, author Kat Armas asks, “Why are their theological insights often overlooked, and why are they never invited to share their wisdom?”³ It may be true that most of these women lack doctoral degrees or conference credentials (not to mention the time or money necessary to enter the halls of academia) and would never call themselves theologians. Yet in her book *Abuelita Faith*, Armas argues that is exactly what they are, and she invites us “not only to celebrate these women, but to consider them genuine sources of theology.”

In my own journey, I was personally blessed to have a Caucasian American mother with a Ph.D. and experience in

academia, who spoke to me about my spiritual life and was formative in my spiritual journey. But I was just as blessed to have a Mexican aunt, without formal theological education, who taught me how to cry and pray to God about my relationships. Also, my Mexican grandmother showed me how to whisper my own prayers simultaneously within the prayers of others, making them more communal. I will never forget the elderly Puerto Rican church mother who asked me about my week each Sabbath when I was 9 years old and brought me little gifts that she had made. Or a Latina mentor of mine, who finally did make it into the world of theology yet was willing to skip important conference meetings to make time for a meal with me, a lost and confused undergraduate.

A rich cultural background has taught me to glean wisdom from every voice—not just the teachers with credentials and status—and to value education from actual spiritual experience as well as from books.

Adding the perspectives of others to our own may help us see a more holistic picture of who God is and to relate to him in ways we’ve never considered. Each new perspective can enhance the story of the human-God relationship and encourage a multifaceted, cooperative theology.

In Ed Young’s children’s book *Seven Blind Mice*, the mice try to ascertain a large “Something” by their pond. They take turns investigating parts of the “Something,” each coming home with a tale about a pillar, a fan, a snake, or a rope and arguing about whose description is right. Not until the last blind mouse takes the time to investigate the whole, putting together the research of all the other mice, does she realize that the “Something” is an elephant and that each mouse was seeing only one component of the large animal. Based on an ancient Indian fable, the “Mouse Moral” is that “knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole.”⁴

May we see those who are “other” than us, not as threats to our own truth, but as resources to help us broaden our understanding of a Truth greater than all of our perspectives combined! **AT**

¹ Gregg Henriques, “What Is Metamodernism?” *Psychology Today* (Apr. 17, 2020).

² Here I define “good and helpful” in a spiritual sense, as any cultural practice that might result in fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) or bring us closer to God and to love a neighbor (Matt. 22:37).

³ Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (2021), p. 10.

⁴ Ed Young, *Seven Blind Mice* (2002).

WHAT COULD OUR CHURCH LOOK LIKE IN 2030?

Fulfilling Our Mission With a Leaner, More Efficient Organization

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

MODIFYING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND MAKING MAJOR changes to the structure of an organization is always a colossal task. Usually, it requires help from specialists outside the business or association and involves replacing any key people who resent the changes.

Initiating and implementing organizational change in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is probably even more complex than in most other organizations. With the denomination's increasingly rapid growth, it has become difficult to alter established traditions regarding "how we as Adventists do things." We may be able to refine certain methods or to alter procedures slightly, but we tend to fear a radical overhaul of the structures that in the past have served the church quite well. Besides, Adventist leaders are normal human beings who want job security, and any desire for major change must compete with the reality of vested interests.

Perhaps most tricky of all, however, is that Adventism has a unique feature: it must consult Ellen G. White, even posthumously, whenever proposing something "new" and/or contemplating discontinuation of something "old."

A revision of the church's organizational structure is not the panacea for all problems the denomination faces, but it is vital as the church looks for new ways to strengthen its global presence, nurture its members, and more effectively communicate its message to the world of 2023.

Casting a Vision

What might the administrative structure of Adventism look like in 2030 and beyond? I realize it will take more than a short article

to sketch the possible outlines of a renewed Adventist system of governance, but perhaps my tentative suggestions can inspire others to also explore future possibilities. And maybe it can play a small role in encouraging a denomination-wide discussion.

My dream is that the church will facilitate the creation of a global think-tank of experts, hold national and international conferences where organizational ideas can be floated and discussed, and set up working groups at different administrative levels to iron out the details of a new structure. Is it too ambitious to think that this process could lead to the adoption of a new organization structure by 2030?

The Local Church as Basis

Making the local congregation the fundamental unit of church life and of our ecclesial system requires nothing less than a paradigm shift. In its official statements, the Seventh-day Adventist Church emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and refers to the local congregation as the foundational building block of the denomination. Its official documents invariably point to the authority of the members, who are said to form the basis of a representative organizational system.

In actual practice, however, the members in the pew do not steer or control what happens in the "higher" spheres of the organization. In recent years it has become a stark reality that the top leadership of the church directs, prescribes, and often micromanages what happens at the "lower" levels. This may be rooted in a sincere wish to keep the church on what its leaders consider to be the "right" spiritual track, but current practice allows for what is in essence an



abuse of organizational power and a highly defective application of the New Testament doctrine of the church.

Being a community of believers presupposes that people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic population segments will contribute toward setting the goals of the congregation and conducting the business of the church. It also presupposes that members and friends of the church will invest their talents in making the church a spiritual home where all can grow in their faith and reach greater spiritual maturity. The community must be a place where all who want to be part of it can truly belong, and where genuine inclusiveness is a *sine qua non*.

Local churches differ greatly not only in size, but also in social composition, cultural and ethnic background, availability of talent, and attachment to traditions. It is necessary, therefore, to give local churches more freedom to adapt the basic organizational pattern to the needs of the congregation.

Small churches (defined as having fewer than 80-100 members) must be allowed to opt for a simple governance structure, in which one person may fulfill several functions. Employing more part-time pastors, who work another job in addition to their pastoral ministry, could be an option to ensure that small churches receive good pastoral care. For persons engaged in this category of ministry, the educational requirements for full-time pastors could be modified or waived. Where no pastor is available, an elder—either male or female—could lead a small church in a part-time, salaried role.

Large churches, obviously, will need a more elaborate staff, consisting of one or more pastors and professional coordinators

of key ministries—together with a network of elders, deacons, and other volunteer leaders. Depending on the size of the church, its composition and geographic locality, and other relevant factors, the church board may choose to establish several committees or working groups (instead of department leaders) to coordinate the key activities of the church. These could include an interethnic working group to ensure good pastoral care for all segments of the church, as well as a council for evangelistic outreach to develop and implement projects for community involvement. In addition, a management team could care for practical matters, such as building maintenance and grounds upkeep.

Unions of Churches

Even before the General Conference (GC), world divisions, and union conferences existed, our church founders instituted local conferences as umbrella organizations for local churches. The first conference of Adventist churches was the Michigan Conference, which dates from 1861, and a few others soon followed. The General Conference was established in 1863. Several decades later, the first union conferences were organized as coordinating bodies for groups of local conferences, while the world divisions were added still later to the church's hierarchical model. The world divisions are "divisions of the General Conference" (with the division presidents doubling as vice presidents of the GC), but *de facto* they form a distinct layer in the church's organization.

Thus, we have five main levels in the church: congregation, conference, union, division, and General Conference. (To make

matters even more complicated, the world church also operates missions, union missions, and “attached fields.”) Members who insist that the structure is far too complex and far too costly, and that at least one layer should be eliminated, have become ever more vocal.

During the administration of Robert H. Pierson (1966-1979), a few small unions gained permission to do away with their conferences, without losing their union conference status. During the presidency of Jan Paulsen (1999-2010), a discussion with

At present our denomination includes 14 unions of churches, which shows that it is quite possible to function with four rather than five organizational levels.

worldwide representation resulted in organizational adjustments and adoption of a new policy regarding unions of churches. In summary, unions of churches would not have conferences and their status would differ somewhat from that of union conferences, but this would have few practical consequences. At present our denomination includes 14 unions of churches, which shows that it is quite possible to function with four rather than five organizational levels.

So, What If...

What would happen if the two layers of administration currently known as local conferences and union conferences were replaced by one simplified organizational level? Obviously, it would save a huge amount of money. According to some experts, the amount saved would run in the hundreds of millions of dollars! Furthermore, the gains are not just (or even primarily) financial.

This simplification of our administrative system would eliminate an enormous amount of bureaucracy and duplication of activities. Moreover, it would free up a considerable number of pastors to work in local churches. And perhaps most importantly, such a move would greatly strengthen the confidence of many members in how their church deals with donated financial resources.

Of course, these new-style unions would need to have a name. For want of a better term, I will use “federation” until a better label is found.

What could these federations look like, and how many would the church need?

Today, 835 administrative units (135 unions and just under 700 conferences) care for about 90,000 local congregations. It is tempting to simply suggest that we might need, on average, one such unit to serve every 250 local congregations, for a total of 360 administrative units. However, feasibility is not a matter of pure arithmetic, since we must also take into consideration national borders, ethnic divisions, and language barriers. For the moment, let’s estimate that approximately 500 of these federations spread across the globe would be adequate.

Restructuring would not be a matter of merely reducing the number of offices, computers, and administrative staff; rather, it would also imply a thorough rethinking of the mission statement. These federations would need a small executive leadership team governed by a board of church employees and lay-representatives, who together could bring a smörgåsbord of skills and expertise to the table.

The clearly defined tasks assigned to these new bodies would include organizing national/provincial/regional events, initiating projects for the professional development and spiritual enrichment of pastors and lay-leaders, and developing resources that are specifically relevant for that region.

Another key task of a federation of churches would be to coordinate the distribution of funds and the placement of paid personnel. In assignments of clergy, the church must give careful thought to fairness and solidarity while achieving a balance between (1) the overall needs as seen by the federation, (2) the preferences of individual churches, and (3) the career goals and needs of pastors.

In addition to these responsibilities, it would seem wise to assign to these federations the supervision and the coordination of schools up to college level, of publishing, and of other media institutions. Coordination of colleges, universities, and institutions for healthcare and production of health foods could be assigned to divisions and to the world office.

Regional Offices

The administrative level below the General Conference currently numbers 13 divisions, which differ significantly in territorial size and membership. The Trans-European Division is the smallest world division, with a total membership of less than 100,000, while

several divisions in South America, Inter-America (Latin America and the Caribbean), and Africa have a membership of several million. Besides overseeing work in the unions and missions in their territory, most divisions are currently also responsible for a number of institutions.

Duplication among the General Conference, the divisions, and the union conferences frequently causes many to wonder why we need the divisions at all. If we were to consolidate and reorder the work of the current 850 union conferences and local conferences into at most 500 federations of local churches, what role, if any, would there be for a series of regional entities between the federations of churches and the GC?

My personal thoughts about this, which are certainly influenced by the fact that I worked at one time in a division leadership role, are that perhaps eight to ten of these regional offices would suffice. A reordering of territorial responsibilities in today's world would not need to be based primarily on geographical proximity, but rather, on cultural and perhaps historical and linguistic factors. A new constellation would no longer need two separate divisions in Europe. In fact, if churches in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe were to unite under one new coordinating entity, its total membership would still be smaller than several other divisions. Such a reconfiguration could possibly inspire other divisions to seek a merger, as well.

Coordinating these regional bodies to avoid costly bureaucracy and unnecessary overlap would require careful thought. One of their key roles would undoubtedly be to facilitate opportunities for contact, interaction, and cooperation among the federations in their region.

Another role would be to provide leadership development, crisis management, and consultations. Regional offices could also coordinate the work of educational institutions at the college level and higher, with special care for academic institutions that offer ministerial training.

Symposiums and other events would play an important role in linking Adventist theology to specific issues that face the church in a particular region, and in providing guidance for the development of local Adventist theologies.

General Conference Needed?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I constantly heard Adventists ask, “Do we really need a General Conference?” For many members, church had become a purely local affair, and visits from administrators in the “higher” echelons of the church were

hardly missed. I sensed a general feeling that “the brethren” did not contribute very much to the ongoing services—digital or otherwise.

For many in the more progressive segment of the church, the General Conference increasingly symbolizes everything they dislike—from fundamentalist theology and the proposed global distribution of *The Great Controversy* to discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ individuals.

While I disagree with many of the recent words and actions of the GC leadership, I nonetheless would argue that we do still need a General Conference. If we were to dismantle the GC, before long we would hear voices pleading for some global coordinating body. However, a major streamlining and modification of the tasks of the General Conference seems highly desirable.

Any church body of the size of the Seventh-day Adventist Church must have some office that can interact with other organizations, religious or secular. There must be a think-tank with global representation, which develops worldwide strategies and coordinates the work of regional offices and federations without pushing one-size-fits-all solutions and slogans for worldwide adoption—and without efforts to interfere in the domain of local churches and the federations.

The foremost task of the head office of the church would be to organize and coordinate worldwide consultations and, together with the regional offices, implement general policies that concern the well-being of the church as a global movement. Organizing a quinquennial world congress may be a tradition that is worth continuing in some form.

I am acutely aware that many issues may be far more complicated than I have suggested. To redirect an organization that has thousands of organizational entities, employs approximately 20,000 ministers and over 300,000 other employees, and operates some 4,000 institutions is like changing the course of a huge oil tanker. Theological, financial, historical, and cultural aspects form a highly complex mix, and I realize that any major change is difficult and will be hard-fought.

But I repeat what I stated earlier: the world around us is changing, Christianity is changing, and Adventism is changing. Major organizational change is unavoidable if the church wants to remain serious about pursuing its mission in the years ahead. **AT**

TRANSLATION, ADAPTATION, AND CREATIVITY

A Chinese Case for the Future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

BY CHRISTIE CHUI-SHAN CHOW

God's great story of salvation is composed of individual micronarratives that celebrate amazement and awe about divine action in the world. The Seventh-day Adventist Church focuses on a particular aspect of the divine revelatory process in its proclamation of "present truth" as contained in the three angels' messages of Revelation 14. For the everlasting truth to be fully "present" to those who live on Earth—to every nation, tribe, language, and people (verse 6)—this continual revelatory process is always bounded by time, space, and people.



A kindergarten for Adventist children. Source: Shijiazhuang Church of Seventh-day Adventists

Such an understanding risks a narrow interpretation, viewing the Adventist faith as relevant only to a particular locality and culture. The globalization of Adventism, however, reveals multiple stories of cross-cultural religious interactions that have taken place outside Adventism's original North American context. For global Adventism to maintain a dynamic resilience, it must learn from the successes and challenges of local Adventist stories. The Chinese story, in particular, yields rich fruit for reflection.

Dale Irvin, church historian and former president of the New York Theological Seminary, is a leader in the academic discipline that looks at how Christian faith is translated and transplanted by crossing geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries in history.¹ The methodology of "translation" has inspired new scholarly reflections on Christian believers whose stories have long been overlooked in Western-centered mission studies. The most recent studies on world Christianity place the analytical lens on connectivity and localization, highlighting the "development of localized and culturally specific forms of religiosity and how these forms are connected to each other on a worldwide scale."²

My interest in Adventism in China aligns with this academic trend. I look at how Adventism, as an integral part of world Christianity, transitions from a North American faith to a Chinese Christian religion. After crossing the geographical boundary from the United States to China in the early 20th century, Adventism engaged with people there who adapted the faith to their own context. The key issue in this translation process is not about what is "original," what is "new," or what is "lost" in the Chinese expression of Adventism. Instead, it is concerned with the innovative ways in which Chinese believers express Adventism. Thus, local evangelistic agency mitigates the desire for a monolithic ecclesiastical identity, and this enduring agency of change holds promises for the future of Adventism.

Missionary Roots and Chinese Souls

Missionary-led Adventism in China ended not long after the Chinese Communist Party took over the country in 1949. Chinese Adventists quickly stepped up to fill the leadership vacuum left by departing missionaries, and an effort to stabilize doctrinal teachings gave rise to production of the Chinese version of the Conflict of the Ages books by Ellen G. White. From 1953 to 1955, Adventist pastors in Shanghai finished translating the books into Chinese. For the first time since the missionaries' arrival, Chinese believers could read the entire Conflict of the Ages series in their native tongue. More importantly, White's insights when she spoke of the suffering Christ and the cosmological battles between good and evil became meaningful to the Chinese. In the hostile

environment of an embattled church under an authoritarian regime, the major themes in the Conflict of Ages series suddenly made sense to them! As Adventists in China read about God's love embodied in the life of Jesus Christ, the challenges of the early church, and the great controversy between Christ and Satan, they recognized themselves as part of a "remnant." White's writings about the struggle of Christ's followers to remain loyal to God tapped into a universal theme that transcended history, locality, and culture.

Against all odds, Chinese believers survived decades of repression and learned to accommodate the atheist regime. From the 1980s onward, some Adventist churches there gave legitimacy to socialist authorities by joining the Protestant, state-supported Three-Self Patriotic Movement through church registration, which allows them to secure legal space for public worship. Led by first-day-observing Christian leaders, this patriotic association is the only national Protestant ecclesial platform recognized by the government. Some Adventists, who adhere to the theological idea of a "great controversy" as a calling for disengagement with first-day observance, refused to join the patriotic church and rejected any form of church registration. Subsequently, schism became a living reality in Chinese Adventism and remains so today.³

The registration debate, however, does not limit the denomination's evangelistic zeal. In other areas of public life, the Chinese strive to adapt and adjust the Adventist message in a fast-growing society. For example, political reality compels them to filter out North American Adventist advocacy for religious liberty to avoid suspicion from the regime. By contrast, fear of the mark of the beast in North American Sunday laws does not speak to the Chinese, whose government does not legislate a specific day of rest. Chinese labor laws state that employees are entitled to at least one rest day per calendar week, which can be any day of the week. Saturdays and Sundays are common rest days in China, and this practice does not inconvenience Adventists. While senior Chinese pastors and preachers still teach the narrative of the "great controversy," they frame it as the battle between the "apostatized" first-day-observing churches that form the majority and the seventh-day-observing Adventists, who represent a minority.

Chinese Adventist Education

As in other parts of the world, the Chinese promote Adventist education for evangelization and for training church workers. They also value it as an alternative to the socialist public education. To protect children from atheism, rural Adventist

leaders in North China established kindergartens as early as the 1990s. By the 2000s, the system grew to include elementary and junior high school students; in addition, some Adventist parents opened their homes as classrooms. These schools made the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy mandatory subjects but also taught the same standard curriculum as in public education, such as Chinese culture, history, science, mathematics, and geography. The church hired a non-Adventist Christian to teach biology, and a musician without any faith affiliation taught piano lessons. Today, many graduates are frontline preachers and teachers, and some have enrolled in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

In the 1970s, a mainland immigrant to the British colony of Hong Kong named Samuel Jianshen Young visited China. While there, he appealed to a senior Chinese official to reopen the former mission schools and hospitals. The official vehemently rejected Young's request, saying that Chinese Christianity was now post-denominational and did not need missionary-led global organizations to manage its education and healthcare.

Would Young be impressed by the homegrown Adventist church schools in North and Northeast China? Probably yes. What these Chinese Adventists have been doing aligns with the core commitment of global Adventism: using education to foster Christian faith and character.

In adult Christian education, the Chinese approach is both missional and localized. Some congregations use the Chinese version of the General Conference's *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, translated by the Chinese Union Mission in Hong Kong. A few Sabbath schools divide congregants into small groups to discuss the Bible study material, if they have sufficient teachers. But more often, Sabbath school teachers give lectures based on the quarterly material before the first worship service in the morning or before the second service in the afternoon. In the numerous Sabbath schools I participated in during my fieldwork, teachers seldom followed the material rigorously. Rather, they creatively supplemented the translated lesson's content with local news and Chinese faith stories, which infused it with the elements necessary to be relevant and meaningful to Chinese listeners.

Meanwhile, other Adventists have designed their own Sabbath school lessons. One rural church elder told me that his Sabbath school teacher and students found the General Conference's strictly homogenized materials too abstract and sophisticated. To cater to the needs of rural Adventists, the elder organized a team of authors to write their own Sabbath school lessons with the aid of Ellen White's books.

Chinese Adventist Arts

Beyond the textual approach to spiritual formation, which helps converts grasp the essence of the gospel by reading, Chinese Adventists also embrace the artistic forms of faith expression in music and painting.

A notable example of their ingenious use of hymn-singing to nurture Christian spirituality, doctrinal consciousness, and Chinese cultural values is a hymnal produced by the Ningbo Church in East China. The hymnal arranges 700 songs under the themes of "praise," "worship," "Jesus the Savior," "redemption," "basic doctrines," "Christian way of life," "church life," "family life," and "funeral." The "basic doctrine" section is characteristically Adventist, including songs about the Ten Commandments, seventh-day Sabbath, judgment, second coming, and eternal life. The "church life" section includes a song—likely to be sung on the Sabbath during the weeklong National Day holiday that begins October 1—that expresses a great deal of cultural and national pride. Songs about filial piety in the "family life" section reveal the Confucian value of respecting seniors.

Some Adventists even turn to non-Adventist Christian music for inspiration. During my fieldwork in Wenzhou in 2010, a music director of a congregation told me about an evangelistic band he and his wife organized in 2003, when the congregation's outreach was hit hard by the SARS pandemic. To attract young people, the band performed contemporary praise songs drawn from two non-Adventist sources. The first source contained folk hymns written by a well-known female evangelist, Xiaomin Lü. Born in Henan Province in Central China, Lü is famous for composing more than 1,000 hymns widely known as "Canaan Hymns." The plain and catchy lyrics in her hymns are sung to familiar Chinese folk tunes.

Another source was the popular praise songs produced by a Christian Asian American band, Stream of Praise Music Ministries. Founded in 1993, the California-based band quickly earned a following among Mandarin speakers worldwide for its contemporary worship music style. While singing with the Wenzhou evangelistic band on one occasion, I found both folk tunes and upbeat melodic songs on our list. The lyrics were direct and repetitive, and the message was simple gospel truth. Although widely embraced by the music director and congregants in Wenzhou, these genres have not been incorporated into official Chinese Adventist hymnals.

In the visual arts, both Weisan Li (1928-2019) and Dianlai Zhao (1925-2014) were prominent Adventist painters. Li and Zhao were schoolmates at the Chinese Adventist seminary before

1949. Despite many hardships, they upheld the faith and used their artistic talents to serve the church. During the 1990s and 2000s, they created four-color illustrations to teach the gospel to children and youth. Zhao recalled that when he preached to more than 3,000 villagers in 1967, he created a presentation of more than 50 slides that were based on the Synoptic Gospels and on Ellen White’s book *The Desire of Ages*. In the 1990s, Li turned Zhao’s colorful slides into an animated text titled *The Illustrated Salvation*. This text further advanced the spread of the gospel story within the growing church network ministered by Zhao. Both men continued to use art to teach the denomination’s eschatology to youth.

Unlike Zhao, who is an amateur artist, Li was trained in Chinese classical painting and calligraphy. His numerous paintings enmesh the gospel in natural Chinese landscape, Confucian symbolisms, and Chinese patriotism. Supported by Chinese Adventists in California, Li released his *Illustrated Biography of Jesus* in 1998 through the state-controlled Religious Culture Publishing House. This work contains 300 illustrations of the Jesus story. Circulation of this book through an official channel enabled Adventist art to reach the public across the country. Li’s cultural sensibility has earned him such a reputation that the state-sponsored Protestant monthly magazine eulogized him for his extraordinary contribution to Sinicizing Christian faith.⁴

Interestingly, a closer look at Li’s *Illustrated Biography of Jesus* shows that he strove to focus on the integrity of Jesus’ Jewish heritage and Greco-Roman context. The artist was attentive to the details of Middle Eastern landscape, Greco-Roman architectures, clothing, and faces. Li also drew from Ellen White’s commentary to give an Adventist treatment to the Jesus story, best exemplified in his portrayal of Judas the betrayer. Citing Matthew 27:5, which says that Judas hanged himself, Li drew a pig devouring the intestines of the dead disciple. The caption says, “In deep regret, Judas departed and hanged himself on a tree. Because he was fat, his weighty body broke the rope. The corpse fell on the ground and his intestines busted out from the dead body.”⁵ Li’s representation and caption are full of references inspired by chapter 76 in *The Desire of Ages*, in which White refers to the body of Judas as hanging “at the foot of a lifeless tree.” She also wrote: “His weight had broken the cord by which he had hanged himself to the tree. In falling, his body had been horribly mangled, and dogs were now devouring it.”⁶ Having Judas’ body consumed by a pig—rather than a dog, as suggested in White—is Li’s subtle way of referencing the biblically “unclean” diet, since pork is common in Chinese meals.



Chinese Adventist Healthcare

Our church in China acquired the Adventist culture of health reform from missionaries in the 20th century. Under socialism, the state monopolized healthcare. Integration of Adventist sanitariums into the official medical sector after 1949 ended the church’s official healing ministry. Yet, health consciousness runs deep among our Chinese church members. Because Ellen White’s writings promote the basic principles and practices of healthful living, they have created faith-based nursing homes, health retreats, and vegetarian supermarkets.

I visited several Adventist-managed nursing homes and health centers in 2017 and 2019. Initially designed for aging congregants, these facilities have expanded to serve individuals who are not church members. Vegetarian meals, daily exercise, morning and evening devotional meetings, and natural remedies characterize Adventist healthcare. Some Adventists in Northeast

China operate vegetarian businesses, including a supermarket adjacent to their church building. The store sells not only the five most popular Chinese staples (wheat, brown rice, millet, white rice, beans), but also a variety of fruit and nuts.

In Shijiazhuang, a three-hour drive from Beijing, a retired pastor used his medical knowledge and his own experience to write a manual teaching people how to adjust their diet to balance the vitamins in the human body. He had been diagnosed in 1983 with heart disease, hypertension, liver problems, diabetes, and early-stage cancer. After surviving the emergency room and being sent home without a proper cure, the retired pastor spent 30 years studying and making vitamin supplements for himself. Although he did not learn this from Ellen White, he was convinced that his health practice aligned with her health principles. He eventually recovered in 2015 and published *Life and Health* at the age of 90.

Adventist Present Truth

The Chinese Adventist story is a story of resilience. The Adventist faith can always be made “present” to communities outside the 19th-century North American setting. I do not intend to elevate this as a role model for global Adventism, because the church in China has its own challenges. Some of its ongoing problems include family domination in church governance, obsession with seniority and patriarchy in leadership, strict adherence to the law as an exclusivist ecclesiastical identity marker, misuse of Ellen White’s writings, and lack of social awareness in everyday church life. Nonetheless, the Chinese story is still relevant in reimagining the Adventist future. At the institutional level, the Adventist church in China survived and thrived after forceful separation from the denomination’s global hierarchy in 1949. Seven decades of organizational independence has turned out to be a blessing.

The autonomous space has motivated Chinese Adventists to become truly indigenous. Local congregations network with and support each other on an equal footing. They nurture a relatively diffused relationship for empowerment, and this interdependence is bound by fellowship and partnership rather than power and money. Individual congregations manage their own affairs independently, while church-run schools, music culture, religious publishing, and healthcare ministry reflect the unprecedented freedom and creativity of grassroots decision-making.

Closely connected to its organizational innovation is the future of Adventism’s theological formation. Biblical prophecy persists in the DNA of church members in China as a result of Ellen

White’s writings on the end-times. Good Chinese Adventists never shy away from teaching the second coming of Christ, the mark of the beast, or the investigative judgment, yet Chinese narratives also reveal a Christ-centric Adventism. If it had a say, the church in China would give out White’s book *The Desire of Ages* for evangelization instead of *The Great Controversy*. In today’s political climate, *The Great Controversy* carries anti-government connotations.

Underlying the vibrant Chinese spiritual life is the fact that church members are left to practice the Adventist faith on their own terms. In the constant call for unity and harmony in world Adventism, it is immensely important to acknowledge the balance between indigenous creativity and organizational uniformity.

I’ll close with a few remarks about Adventist women, who are indispensable among church leaders and laity in China. Many congregations in the Northeast were founded and are still led by women. This region, which owes much of its growing ministry to the commitment and sacrifices of women, also has the strongest support from male leaders for women’s ordination. In 2017, I obtained a list of 26 ordained women pastors in China. Seven women pastors were from the Northeast, one from the North, five from the East, four from Central China, seven from the Southwest, and two from the South.

Has the list expanded? Do Chinese congregations that ordained women pastors continue to nurture the next generation of women leaders? Are more congregations using their autonomy to decide what is best for them while partnering with the world Adventist Church for spiritual exchange? Only affirmative answers to these questions hold a promising future for Adventism. **AT**

¹ Dale Irvin, “World Christianity: A Genealogy,” keynote address at Princeton Theological Seminary World Christianity Conference (Jan. 18, 2018).

² Pedro Feitoza, “British Missions and the Making of a Brazilian Protestant Public,” in *Relocating World Christianity: Interdisciplinary Studies in Universal and Local Expressions of the Christian Faith*, ed. Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell and Emma Wild-Wood (2017), p. 70.

³ Christie Chui-Shan Chow, *Schism: Seventh-day Adventism in Post-Denominational China* (2021).

⁴ Jun Wang, “Exploring the Sinicization of Christianity in the Art of Painting: A Commemoration of the Classical Painter Brother Weisan Li,” *Tianfeng* (April 2019), p. 41.

⁵ Weisan Li, *Illustrated Biography of Jesus* (1998), p. 247.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 722.

The Challenge of Church Organization

May We Find Solutions for the Future in the Past?

By Edwin Torkelsen

CAN WE LEARN FROM HISTORY? ELLEN G. WHITE STATES emphatically that we *can*¹—but I am not sure that we *will*, because humans focus more on the present than the past. Indifferent ignorance and distorted historical narratives may deceive us into repeating prior mistakes.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has painted self-glorifying pictures of both past and present, casting institutional and numerical growth as success while skipping the less glorious aspects. General Conference (GC) Session reports more closely resemble polished entertainment shows than serious assessments of reality.

If we wish to be part of an organization that strives to grow and improve, then we need to honestly face our miscalculations and missteps, both past and present. Fortunately, recent SDA historians have learned to write honest and critical analysis of how challenging issues were handled in the past.²

Levels of Authority

I have noticed a growing number of voices calling for change in our denomination, looking for a less centralized organizational structure. They may have a point.

When administrators speak of “God’s last church” or the “remnant church,” they seem to have in mind the *organization*. However, the term *ekklēsia* originally meant “a group of people.” Only later did the word include organizations and buildings, as we today understand the English word “church.”³

Beginning in the fourth century AD, church leaders became bureaucrats who claimed to be on an elevated spiritual level compared to most people (“clergy” vs. “laity”) and sought positions of “higher” authority. Leadership was about *controlling* faith, people, lifestyle, and organization.⁴ Leaders used a ceremony called “ordination,” borrowed from secular Roman society, to elevate men to the clerical caste.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic Church expanded its administrative network to cover Western Europe. This church became a religious empire, an

Imperium Christianum or world church (“Catholic” comes from the Greek word for “universal”), claiming religious and secular authority over everyone.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has adopted several ideas from the Roman Church, including its hierarchic organization. Our ordination, reserved for males only, creates gender discrimination and separation between “clergy” and “laity,” challenging the New Testament’s priesthood of all believers. We present our denomination as one monolithic world church. Our authority structure is top-down. GC policies, Church Manual rules, and the 28 Fundamental Beliefs apply universally to all church entities, creating an “imperial” control profile.

Field pastors are subordinated to church bureaucrats, who claim *ex officio* authority over them. Hierarchy leaves the impression that some are more important and powerful than others. Some pastors-in-name-only have spent most of their careers in administrative offices. To leave an office to be a field pastor is viewed by many as status degradation.

An *Adventist Today* article by Raj Attiken, former Ohio Conference president, discusses the challenges that a bloated organization creates for allocation of resources.⁵ He writes that the number of people employed in management equals the number of pastors in the field and that some have met suggestions of reducing administration with theoretical approval—but not in “my” backyard. So far, nothing has changed.

Politics and Power

Church organizations naturally involve politics.⁶ Local politics usually remain local, while church politics at higher levels are less visible because they are more convoluted, exercised behind closed doors and through “inner circle” conversations. The higher up in the organization, the greater their impact on the wider church.

One mechanism for promoting political influence is the tradition to allow a president-elect to join the nominating committee, where he advises, suggests, promotes, and sometimes demands his own candidates for other positions.

Another is allowing presidents to appoint personal “assistants,” creating leadership teams of yes-men with a shared mindset. If these leaders chair nominating committees and boards where they may promote other candidates who agree with them, being likeminded and loyal to the current top administration can become more important even than professional qualifications. This is a recipe for unhealthy ideological uniformity that creates echo chambers and blocks diversity of thinking.

Lessons from Recent History

When Ted N.C. Wilson was elected president of the General Conference in 2010, I knew almost nothing about him. I noticed that some pastors and others who were better informed were concerned, but my initial thought was that we needed to give Ted Wilson the benefit of the doubt. I thought that he, like most of us, was sincerely convinced about the validity of his ideas. But human conviction is not the same as being right.

Little did I know that the next 10-plus years would provide a learning opportunity regarding SDA history and church politics, mostly thanks to observing the thinking, writings, sermons, and actions of the Wilson administration. Gradually I, too, became concerned regarding both church politics and the structure of our current church organization.

I realized that official narratives—designed to be “spiritually uplifting” by justifying church organization, doctrines, and self-image—differed from reality. From our historians I learned that Adventist history has been an ongoing struggle among strong personalities and their conflicting ideas. Propaganda commonly uses “logical fallacies,” or arguments that can sound convincing but are based on faulty logic and are, therefore, invalid. For a logical conclusion to be true, its *premise* must be true. Critical thinking helps to ensure that our conclusions are both logical and true. Critically testing our certainties is not easy, especially in a religious context where claims of divine confirmation are common.

Servant Leadership?

Many leaders subscribe to the ephemeral ideal of servant leadership, but do they understand what it means and how to apply it?

In religious organizations, the “servant” ideal is often eclipsed by the urge to exercise bureaucratic influence, control, power, and authority. The Roman and Adventist churches focus on bureaucratic authority in God’s name,⁷ from a law-and-order perspective. Both have thick rule books mandating how to do church and how to live a Christian life.

The GC Session in San Antonio in 2015 triggered my re-evaluation of the usefulness of the current structure of SDA organization. The way the women’s ordination issue was handled was an eye-opener. I wondered: *Does this hierarchy structure*

promote unity for mission? Does it empower local/regional servant leadership? Which does the top administration promote—mission or control?

What followed was lots of pious rhetoric, quotations from Ellen White, admonitions to submit to uniformity mandated by church authority, and defensive legal (policy) arguments. I never heard or read anything indicating doubt regarding the moral principles, presuppositions, and assumptions that formed the premises of rhetoric, documents, and actions.⁸ I wondered, *How does all of this align with biblical moral principles, conscience, and mission?*

With growing uneasiness, I witnessed how documents were presented to the Autumn Councils from 2016 to 2019 with an increasing level of polarizing animosity, threats, coercion, pressure, punishment, naming and shaming “rebels,” calls for loyalty declarations, curtailed freedom of speech, limits on voice and vote, and demands for submission and compliance.

When the GC in 2018 introduced a system of five compliance committees, its similarity to the Medieval inquisitions struck me in terms of structure, tasks, process, and purpose. When “leaks” revealed some of the behind-the-scenes processes used to bring these documents to the councils, I was increasingly amazed. In 2019, punishments were meted out to presidents of unions that ordained women, disregarding policy procedures of due process. Protests were simply brushed aside and ignored.⁹

From the other side, I have seen pleas for reconciliation dialogue that would respect conscience and true spiritual unity in diversity and would serve the needs and mission of the church beyond Silver Spring. But all invitations to dialogue have been turned down, and well-thought-out questions have remained unanswered. I wondered: *Is this the 13th or the 21st century? Is this really my church? Is this how “God’s remnant church” operates?*

Slowly it dawned on me that these unpleasant issues were only symptoms of the real problem.

An Illustration from 1901

It is not easy to analyze cause and consequence. Most problems are complex. Looking to history for guidance, we find that the year 1901 offers a precedent. The problem was that centralized church authority, represented by the General Conference office, had proven to be detrimental to mission efficiency.

Delegates to the General Conference Session were able to identify a solution: they voted to limit the authority of the GC office by transferring executive authority to new regional entities called unions. This *decentralizing systemic change* seemed to be a promising idea, placing executive authority where the real action is within the church.

Ellen White and her son W.C. White understood the connection between the systemic and human factors. W.C. White expressed his understanding during the GC Session of 1903: We “should bear in mind that the remedy ... for our confusion is to strengthen the union in every locality, strengthen it in my individual heart, strengthen it in my church, strengthen it in my conference, strengthen it in my Union Conference. ... the General Conference, by this system of organization, is forced to become a mission board; and our General Conference must leave institutional work alone.”

He quoted from a letter his mother had written in 1902: “The division of the General Conference into District Union Conferences was God’s arrangement. In the work of the Lord in these last days there should be no Jerusalem centers, no kingly power. And the work in the different countries is not to be tied up by contracts to the work centering in Battle Creek, for this is not God’s plan. Brethren are to counsel together; for we are just as much under the control of God in one part of His vineyard as in another.”¹⁰

In 1895 Ellen White had expressed her opinion regarding governance by policies: “Laws and rules are being made at the centers of the work that will soon be broken into atoms. ... If the cords are drawn much tighter, if the rules are made much finer, if men continue to bind their fellow-laborers closer and closer to the commandments of men, many will be stirred by the Spirit of God to break every shackle, and assert their liberty in Christ Jesus.”¹¹

Need for a Flexible Organization

As Adventist historian George Knight states, “An ongoing temptation of the General Conference throughout its history has been to *overstep the bounds of its authority*” (emphasis mine).¹² Over time, the GC offices gradually reinstalled centralized and hierarchical authority. In fact, our present top-heavy and hierarchic organization is much worse than the “kingly power” at work in the years leading up to 1901. The SDA Church today is no longer a tiny American sect, but a denomination of more than 20 million members that is present in most parts of a very diversified world.

The 2015 GC Session, primed by GC leadership,¹³ voted against allowing regional divisions to decide whom to ordain in their territory. Later the GC Secretariat interpreted the vote as a general prohibition against ordaining women. The vote was *transformed* to be in support of the GC’s *centralized* and *authoritarian* governance.¹⁴ By insisting on global uniformity, the GC turned a deaf ear to the mission needs of the different regions. It disregards the possibility that praxis that may work well in one region may be counterproductive in other regions. The idea of one-size-fits-all policy is the core problem of our present confusion.

While the Roman Catholic Church is proudly *semper eadem* (always the same), the SDA Church professes a commitment to *progressive* “present truth” instead of old traditions. Therefore, shouldn’t Adventism excel in being *flexible* and *adaptive*, especially in such matters as organization? After all, the organization is not the heart of the church, but only a service arrangement that strives to generate synergy as we together travel the road of faith.

Decentralized Organization

Many Adventists fear congregationalism. They may not recognize the difference between congregations that have little or no service apparatus outside themselves and congregations that voluntarily choose to work with other congregations to obtain synergy effects.

The alternative to pure congregationalism is not a monolithic centralized hierarchic church. Instead, we need to combine local/regional independence and coordinated cooperation. The ideas of W.C. White and his mother, quoted above, exemplify this solution.

Take the Lutheran churches, as one example. There are more than 40 self-governing Lutheran denominations, organized mainly on the national level. Approximately 77 million Lutherans in 149 regional churches all over the world have *voluntarily* joined the Lutheran World Federation. They share a common theology and work together without being subject to a Lutheran “pope” and a top-heavy administration. If 77 million Lutherans can work together, why can we not trust 22 million Adventists with a similar model to do the same?

The Role of a General Conference

W.C. White suggested that the GC staff should be reduced to a “mission board” and keep their hands off the rest. That is probably a good idea that needs to be explored.

While there may be a legitimate need to coordinate certain practical tasks of common interest, the details must be worked out regionally and locally, depending on place and situation. Large mission enterprises, such as health facilities and higher-learning institutions, may require integrated cooperative funding. But decisions should be made by their boards and leaders who take responsibility for their own work, without being under the thumb of distant ideology-driven ecclesiastical potentates. The church at large must firmly resist the GC’s overstepping urge to control.

Maybe a decentralized solution, such as a World Federation of Seventh-day Adventist Churches, which was launched in 1901 and supported by Ellen G. White and her son, is worth exploring again. One hundred and twenty-four years later, we ought to have learned

Continued on page 38

THE GREAT URBAN SHIFT

What Does It Mean for Adventist Outreach?

BY LARS GUSTAVSSON

THE 21ST CENTURY IS BEING labeled by many as the “urban century,” during which an additional 2 billion of the world’s 8 billion people are predicted to live in urban slums and shantytowns by 2050.¹

Many megatrends, taken together, can have huge impact—either positive or negative—on human and environmental well-being. Weather, wealth, and war go hand-in-hand. Religious fundamentalism, poverty, oppression, and conflict go together. Business, money, greed, power, and corruption are likewise “stacked.” In resource-rich low-income and middle-income countries, high child mortality, high maternal mortality, and inequality live together. All of these generally manifest themselves most severely in cross-border country clusters, fragile contexts, or cities.

As a futurist, I study megatrends that are the most likely to have profound effects on the world for the next 15 to 30 years. One of the top three most impactful megatrends is urbanization. Already, over half of the people on Earth have moved to the cities, a trend that is rapidly increasing almost everywhere. In Asia, nearly 7 out of 10 people live in the city. In Africa, the ratio is 6 out of 10. And in Central and Latin America, the fastest-urbanizing continent, 9 out of 10 people live in cities.

What does this mean to the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?



Jesus’ Inaugural Sermon

Jesus was reading from Isaiah 61 when he told his listeners: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, ... to preach good news to the poor ..., to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Then, breaking off at mid-sentence, Jesus sat down and commented: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21, RSV).

Jesus inextricably linked entrance into his kingdom with compassionate action: “For I

was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matt. 25:35-36, NIV).

Upon this admonition from Jesus, Adventism was founded, our missionary efforts were established, and a global church has emerged. We took our work seriously. Both the world church and its members have been richly blessed.

21st-Century Challenge

We took this gospel commission literally, establishing schools, clinics, hospitals, and churches in most countries throughout the globe. In the process, Adventists formed what is today the second-largest centrally organized church in the world.

Both my wife and I are second-generation missionaries. While traveling or living in more than 120 countries, I have seen firsthand much of this amazing work. Most of Adventism's efforts, infrastructure, staff, and members are based in the rural areas of nations; very little is positioned in the urban centers.

And herein lies our 21st-century challenge: as more and more people move to the cities, we must adapt. Only 3% of the world's population lived in urban areas in 1800, and although still small, this statistic had risen to 14% by 1900.² Today, it's closer to 57%.³

Lagging behind most of this change, we Adventists now find our relevance in question and need to re-examine which pivots to make to strategically recenter. For example, in numerous

By 2030, almost two-thirds of the world's population is projected to live in urban areas.

countries we have established universities and schools of higher education that are situated far from urban centers. Consequently, families don't have access to many work opportunities while students are going to school, supplies are expensive to transport from the city to the school, and access to medical attention may be far away. Our university in Eldoret, Kenya, is located several hundred kilometers away from Nairobi. By contrast, our university that was in Gisenyi, Rwanda, has been relocated to the center of Kigali, the capital. We need to speed up and scale up such efforts.

The Faces of Urbanization

According to the UN-Habitat *World Cities Report 2020*, real poverty is decreasing in cities, but fragility is increasing. Urban centers are characterized by a higher concentration of educated and skilled workers, as well as more jobs for youth. Deaths of children between the ages of 1 and 5 are decreasing, due to better access to immunization; however, fatalities are increasing for young people from 5 to 29 years old as a result of city-related public health issues such as car crashes, respiratory disease, drownings, violence, diseases, and tobacco-related illnesses. Urban hunger is economic, whereas rural hunger is typically linked to failure of crops. Religious polarization is increasing.

The number of cities with over 1 million occupants stands at more than 400. By 2030, almost two-thirds of the world's

population is projected to live in urban areas. The number of megacities—with populations over 10 million—rose from three in 1975 to 16 in 2000, and that number is expected to reach 27 by 2025.⁴ The 2023 population total for just a few megacities follows: Tokyo – 37 million; Mexico City – 22 million; Mumbai – 21 million; New York City – 19 million; Istanbul – 16 million; Paris – 11 million; Nairobi – 5 million.⁵

It can be said that city slums are the “new cities.” Latin America is home to 10 of the 15 most unequal countries in the world; roughly 111 of the region's 588 million inhabitants live in slums. Not surprisingly, urban dwellers single out insecurity as their overriding priority.⁶ In addition, since urban areas generate 70% of the world's carbon emissions and consume two-thirds of its energy, pollution remains a serious threat to global health.⁷

Our Future Focus

The future of Adventism is not so much in the “what,” but rather, in the “where,” “who,” and “how.” The “where” demands a pivot to the world's urban centers, where most of the world has already moved—or soon will. The “who” includes both the most vulnerable who need our help as well as the most privileged, who are invited to put their resources to good use and share the world wealth.

The “how” includes emphasizing life skills in our educational system; expanding our health work to include urban diseases and health threats; making appropriate shifts in our humanitarian work to include the marginalized, internally displaced, slum dwellers, and homeless; using our media work to address abuse, depression, suicide, and other behavioral/mental health issues; and staying focused on children, youth, and community service.

Furthering Jesus' Ministry

We know that God is using the Adventist Church and its people as one of the vehicles to accomplish his work on this planet. To optimize our efforts, we must make some bold pivots, take some risks, invest resources in new ways, and be willing to stop doing things that are no longer optimal or relevant. **AT**

¹ “Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” *The Sustainable Development Goals Report*, United Nations (2023).

² “A Brief History of Urbanization,” *Social Problems: Continuity and Change* (2010). Online at open.lib.umn.edu/socialproblems/chapter/14-1-a-brief-history-of-urbanization.

³ Online at www.statista.com/statistics/270860/urbanization-by-continent/.

⁴ “A Brief History of Urbanization,” op cit.

⁵ Online at www.macrotrends.net/cities/largest-cities-by-population.

⁶ Robert Muggah and Ilona Szabó de Carvalho, “Latin America's Cities: Unequal, Dangerous, and Fragile,” World Economic Forum (June 13, 2016).

⁷ Key Findings for Chapter 1, UN-Habitat *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization*.

THE FUTURE OF OUR CHURCH FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

By Alvin Masarira

AFRICA IS SO DIVERSE THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SPEAK OF ANY African homogeneity. The continent contains 54 countries covering 30 million square kilometers—about three times the area of the United States. Africa's 1.4 billion inhabitants, who speak an estimated 1,500 languages, account for 18% of the world's population.

If asked to mentally picture a group of Africans, many people will initially think of the dark-skinned speakers of Bantu languages who live in the southern, central, and southeastern parts of the continent. Yet, Africa is far more multicultural than that; most inhabitants of the northern parts are predominantly Arabic, related more closely in culture and genetics to the Middle East than to the rest of Africa.

Arrival of Christianity

Religion and politics are interwoven in African mission. The first Christian symbol on the continent may have been a limestone pillar and Christian cross erected by Portuguese navigator Bartholomew Diaz at the Cape of Good Hope in 1488.

Catholic missionaries arrived in sub-Saharan Africa around 1490 at the request of King Nzinga of Kongo. Their craftsmen assisted in rebuilding the nation's capital, and they also baptized the king. King Nzinga's grandson, Henrique, became the first black African bishop.

Later, Portuguese Capuchin missionaries made inroads with the Soyo people, though they clashed over thorny issues such as monogamous marriage, traditional religious practices, and the selling of baptized slaves.



At times, Christianity hitchhiked with European traders. In 1658, Dutch Reformed Church missionaries reported that Khoikhoi slaves in the region near the Cape of Good Hope attended their mission services—and were rewarded with a glass of brandy after the sermon.

For about a hundred years, missionary ventures lapsed. Christianity persisted, though; when 19th-century missionaries arrived expecting to convert the local population, they found people practicing an Africanized form of Christianity. All Souls Day had become mingled with the veneration of ancestors—a syncretism repeated in other parts of Africa—and the Virgin Mary was regarded as a fertility symbol.

Rulers in West Africa at the time were only mildly interested in Christianity. Missionary activity was more successful in the southern part of the continent; the Moravian Brethren established a

mission in 1737, followed by the London Missionary Society in 1799.

Dutch immigration shaped both Christianity and a segregated society. When religious reforms swept through the Netherlands in the early 17th century, the Calvinist Synod ruled in 1618 that any slave who was baptized should be freed. In the Cape Colony, Dutch farmers who depended on their slaves refused repeated appeals from the church authorities to free them. Instead, they chose to ban religious instruction so that slaves couldn't be baptized.

Other missions placed a high priority on literacy and biblical instruction. As the Industrial Revolution swept through Europe and the United States, evangelical messages increasingly emphasized the spiritual benefits of labor. Missionaries promoted

European values and occupations, as well as the possession of material goods unrelated to spiritual salvation: European clothing, houses, and tools.

Many Western missionaries mistakenly believed that Africans had no religion, because of differences in their faiths. Some Africans denied the existence of a single supreme being who could be influenced by prayer on behalf of humans. They appeared to confirm the missionaries' suspicions that they were "godless" by performing rituals to lesser spiritual beings and ancestors. The absence of a priest, minister, or any type of church was interpreted as further proof.

Early Adventists in Africa

The first believer known to bring the Adventist message to South Africa was William Hunt, a gold miner from Nevada. He arrived in 1871, when diamonds were discovered in Kimberley, and shared the Adventist message while working the mines, until his death in 1897.

Hunt had brought with him some English literature that two of the early Dutch converts, George J. van Druuten and Pieter Wessels, could not easily understand. They wrote a letter to the Adventist world headquarters, requesting a Dutch minister and including £50 to assist with expenses.

In 1887 the General Conference (GC) sent Dores A. Robinson and Charles L. Boyd and their wives, along with two literature evangelists and a Bible instructor. After three years of evangelism efforts that included tent meetings, literature distribution, and house-to-house Bible studies, the first Seventh-day Adventist church on the continent was established. This church, the Beaconsfield Church in Kimberley, remains a heritage site in South Africa to this day.

What of the indigenous peoples? In 1893 Pieter and John Wessels, delegates from South Africa to the General Conference Session, took with them a donation of £3,000 and a request for the GC to set up a mission station for the African people. When the world church did not act on that request, work among indigenous people began without the General Conference's help. A descendant of the Ama Xhosa chiefs, Richard Moko, and his wife were the first Black South Africans to accept Adventism. Moko wrote the first tract in the isiXhosa language. He was granted ministerial credentials in 1897, and several churches were planted as a result of his efforts.

In 1894, Adventist missionaries ventured north of South Africa, across the Limpopo River into what is now called Zimbabwe. That led to the establishment of Solusi University near Bulawayo. Solusi has been the epicentre of Adventist growth, especially in southern Africa, because so many pastors

and evangelists trained there and then went into the field. Solusi was the first of 12 mission stations the church had established in southern Africa by 1921.

In the Missionaries' Shadow

Over the past 130-plus years, the Adventist Church in Africa has grown significantly. Reports at the 2022 General Conference Session indicated that 44% of the church's 22 million baptized members live in Africa. Of the 13 regional divisions of the General Conference, three are in Africa, namely, the West-Central Africa Division (WAD), East Central Africa Division (ECD), and the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean (SID) Division. Among the fastest-growing regions in the world church, Africa is home to hundreds of Adventist schools, colleges/universities, and health centers.

Although Africa claims a large proportion of the global church membership, the three African divisions combined contribute only 6% of its world tithe returns. Some argue that this is why Africa hasn't made significant contributions in other aspects of the world church: it does not have the financial muscle to go with its numerical size. Of course, its financial weakness is a reflection of the continent's economic conditions. The GDP per capita in 2023 is about \$80,000 in the United States and \$50,000 in Germany. By contrast, Zambia has a GDP per capita of \$1,500 and Zimbabwe has only \$1,200.

One view holds that dominance of Adventists in the West left no room for the church in Africa to define itself in the context of its cultural and geographical location. Another view, however, says that these believers have "taken the easy route" of simply mimicking the larger church and have not done enough to create Africa's own brand, with a unique flavor that would contribute to the mission and identity of global Adventism.

Getting Started

To change past dynamics, it seems to me that the starting point should be for the church in Africa to assert itself as an equal player at the global Adventist table. Unity should not mean uniformity. Yet, for decades the African church has waited to take instruction from the West, even on matters that need no consultation.

For example, we often hear of the president of an African nation who invited all of the Christian pastors in his country to a meeting to appeal for help in addressing the nation's many social ills. Adventist church leaders were reluctant to participate, fearing that their attendance would be seen as violating the Adventist belief regarding separation of church and state. As a result, they didn't respond until they sought counsel from denominational headquarters in the United States.

Variations of that story are repeated here and there, but it remains true that in many parts of Africa, the church hasn't changed much since the initial arrival of missionaries. Adventists here seem to share a sense (dare I say a belief?) that Adventism is not authentic unless it mirrors what missionaries brought in the late 19th century.

We in Africa have not let Adventism become locally domesticated or move out of the shadows of Eurocentrism. This is reflected in a typical Adventist Sabbath service, which is easily comparable to most church services in the West. And surely, 130 years later, members no longer need adhere to a Western dress code or style of church music for Sabbath services. African Adventism needs liberation from the mindset that makes us think our church should be a replica of the church in the West.

African Relevance

Calls for liberation (or decolonization) have been getting louder and louder from the younger Adventist generation in Africa, which doesn't have a romantic relationship with the Adventist missionary "good old days" and is looking for relevance in the here and now.

Because the growth of the church will probably continue to come from the Global South, Africa needs to convert its numerical size to something more than just votes at General Conference Sessions. Historically, our church has paid the most attention to issues that are of concern to the West, since Adventism came from the West and continues to be run and funded from there. Consequently, teaching materials such as lessons for children, Pathfinders, youth, or evangelism have all been designed for Western audiences, not for Africans.

After identifying issues that it considers important, the church in Africa needs to develop relevant approaches and solutions. In many cases, the church here is equipped to draw the attention of the world church to major global challenges.

The Concept of Family

Adventist ministries typically address a narrow nuclear family—mom, dad, and two children, for example—with the extended family considered only marginally, if at all.

This is not the African understanding of family, nor is it the understanding conveyed in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. The Bible says, for example, that 70 individuals from the house of Jacob went to Egypt (Gen. 46:27). Extended family is important for family identity, to teach younger members the roots and branches of the family tree.

Polygamy is another issue on the African continent. The General Conference policy on those who embrace the Adventist message while in polygamous marriages shows a limited and shallow understanding of the complexity of polygamous family structures. It is bewildering to Africans that even though the Bible tells stories of revered polygamous patriarchs, the church can't find a pragmatic solution to this question. Instead, it has adopted a retributive approach. This policy requires review, which should be championed by the African church, not by European and American leaders who prefer a shortcut to handling a complex matter.

Social Action and Development

African Adventists could make significant contributions to solving problems unique to the Global South, such as how the church maximizes its efforts to deal with poverty and to promote sustainable development. The objective of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is to deliver relief and development assistance by partnering with communities, other organizations, and governments. But as with many aspects of the world church, the work of ADRA is guided by policies that often make implementation cumbersome, and we need a revised development strategy that is created by African Adventists on the ground.

Care for Creation

It is common knowledge that Western consumerism is not sustainable and has led to environmental catastrophe. Given the low levels of resilience Africa has for major global changes, it would be in the interest of the Adventist church on this continent to champion the five priorities of the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP 26) of 2021:

- Adaptation and resilience, which is helping people, economies, and the environment adapt and prepare for the impacts of climate change
- Nature, including safeguarding ecosystems, protecting natural habitats, and keeping carbon out the atmosphere
- Energy transition through seizing the massive opportunities for cheaper renewables and storage
- A move to zero-carbon road transport
- Equitable resource distributions in the world to ensure more sustainable development and economies

Since 70% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is below 30 years of age, engaging in these topics has the potential to mobilize this younger group. African Adventists should be part of this conversation, instead of merely standing on the sidelines and preaching about coming destruction.

Complex Challenges

Cosmology is the way we attempt to find answers when confronted with complex questions of human existence and why things are the way they are. How do we articulate the relationship between human beings, our physical and social environment, and other forms of existence? Cosmology is closely connected to a people's socioeconomic experiences, such as disease, sickness, and death. How did sickness and death begin, and how can these be brought to an end?

The scientific, Western worldview that has for so long dominated Adventism is limited in its ability to address the life questions of an African or to understand African spirituality. For example, the West views phenomena such as spiritism as simply psychiatric, or the result of mental illness. It doesn't know how to deal with challenges such as witchcraft, bad luck, or dark spells.

Adventist evangelism that comes from the United States or Europe often takes an intellectual or even adversarial approach to preaching the gospel, presenting a series of academic lectures night after night, followed by an invitation to make an intellectual decision. This is often ineffective in Africa. To make the gospel relevant here, Adventism needs to understand African cosmology.

A New Vision for Evangelism

The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in America has shaped the minds of almost all Adventist theologians and leaders in Africa, and as a result, the church here has often presented its understanding through Western lenses. Because African spirituality has had so little opportunity to shape Adventist theological understanding, interpretation, and position, the church here lacks a clear vision of the issues that are peculiar to Africa.

African theologians are positioned to deepen and broaden the church's understanding of humanity and to improve the theological basis for reaching people in spaces that matter to them. These scholars still have a significant amount of work to do, however, to fully understand the society in which they operate.

Autonomy and Policy

The current church administrative system is highly centralized. The GC Executive Committee—about 400 members, the overwhelming majority of whom are church employees—effectively has the same authority as a full General Conference Session. It is the gatekeeper for almost all top-level decisions, including the General Conference Session agenda. This body likes to maintain the status quo and is reluctant to allow changes.

But a relevant African identity may require changes to General Conference policy. If Africa is to develop its own identity, it needs the ability to make decisions without the shackles of the GC Executive Committee.

Divisions in Africa need greater autonomy, with constituencies to which they are accountable. More autonomy means they would no longer be merely divisions of the General Conference, but instead could make policies that resonate with their own unique political, cultural, social, and economic conditions. Right now, General Conference policies for education and healthcare institutions are the same all over the world, even though the situation here is very different from that of the United States.

Make a Real Change

I'd like to suggest several ways for the Adventist church in Africa to become more relevant to the community it seeks to serve.

First, we need more robust conversations driven by lay people. Conversations inside the organization among church workers and leaders often lack the necessary critical thinking, because the organization is rarely able to self-criticize. Such conversations took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they need to be intentional and ongoing if we are to come up with practical, implementable proposals relevant in Africa.

Second, Adventists need to challenge church leaders, both in Africa and the West, to acknowledge the many good ideas among lay members. We see the need to improve the organization and make it more relevant to the world and effective in its mission. When leaders lack the courage to make real change, perhaps they can be influenced by listening to the church.

Finally, let's realize that a new generation of young Adventists in Africa is no longer willing to accept things as they have always been. Young adults are raising questions about the interface between Adventist faith and their African identity and culture. The church needs to take these questions seriously. If we don't listen to them, and if they don't experience Adventism as reflecting who they are, will we keep their loyalty and participation?

The Adventist church in Africa has been living under the influence of a Eurocentric cultural cloud for way too long, and for change to take place, it must be championed by Africans themselves. 

FIXING THE REPRESENTATIVE MODEL IN LATIN AMERICA

By Daniel A. Mora



WHEN CHRISTIANS WHO WERE PART OF THE MILLERITE movement in the United States began to reconsolidate after the Great Disappointment of 1844, they were able to build community and consensus thanks to the connections they formed at camp meetings and through publications such as *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. As traveling pastors established congregations, believers actively participated in the process of creating the organizational structure of Adventism.

Early Seventh-day Adventists borrowed from the Methodists a representative democracy in a simple, three-tiered organizational structure: local churches, state conferences, and a General Conference (GC) that served as an umbrella for the conferences.

The “issue of legal ownership of property, churches, and the publishing office” is what finally prompted Adventists to adopt a formal organization.¹ Specifically, denomination co-founder James White anticipated the problem of having individual churches be legally owned by believers who had contributed to their construction, which in the case of apostasy or death could be claimed by the title holder, not by the church members.²

The organization established in 1861 became increasingly complex for the pioneers. After decades of presidentialism and monopolization of power, many realized that centralization of power was a serious problem. Zorislav Plantak, systems librarian at Andrews University’s James White Library, wrote: “The growth of the church was not followed by delegating power and the inclusion of more people in leadership roles. Church organizations in Battle Creek exercised too much power. The success and growth of institutions put more power in the hands of organizational leaders, and the struggle in the church was mainly the conflict between strong personalities in charge of church institutions.”³

In an official attempt to remedy this situation, the denominational reorganization of 1901-1903 created union conferences that were inserted between local conferences and the umbrella organization.

An Export of Power

At the same time that Seventh-day Adventists were decentralizing church power in America, a different dynamic was taking hold further south. Denominational authority—both conceptual and practical—was defined in Latin America and the Caribbean as originating in the “higher” levels of the organization and diminishing as it traveled to the “lower” levels, from the General Conference all the way down to local churches.

The main reasons why a top-down authoritative structure took hold in this region (and persists to this day) are that the

denomination assigned full control to American missionaries and that it replicated patterns of dominance used by local socio-political and religious leaders.

This article will explore the Latin American understanding of representation in the Adventist Church, the historic side effects of centralized power as its leadership standard, and the current need to democratize its structural models.

The Domino Effect

The first missionaries to Latin America received their commissions from the General Conference, which coordinated efforts to establish new churches through the Foreign Mission Board.⁴ The GC assigned full authority to the American missionaries—especially if they were ordained ministers—not only to establish churches, but also to serve as superintendents of the mission organizations.

Take, for example, the beginnings of Adventist organization in the Caribbean. Vladimir Polanco has written that “the first local fields were originally organizations attached directly to the General Conference, since they were not linked to any Union or Division.”⁵

Adventist missionaries, driven by factors favorable to them—such as proximity to the United States, climate, local language, familiarity with a Protestant religion, and a culture where whites were the ruling elite—began to enter British colonies in the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados. In 1887, the first Adventist congregation was established in Georgetown in the Cayman Islands.

Although Adventist missionaries didn’t necessarily impose segregation policies, neither did they oppose them. According to history professor Trevor O’Reggio at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Michigan: “Most of these White American Adventist leaders brought to Jamaica their views about race that essentially relegated Blacks to an inferior status. The Adventist Church in America at this time was practicing racism in all of its institutions, so it should not be surprising that these Adventist leaders would reflect this attitude. They admitted Margaret Harrison, a White Jamaican Adventist [of English ancestry], into Battle Creek Sanitarium while excluding their fellow African-American Adventist patients from the same institution.”⁶

Missionaries demonstrated the same patronizing, condescending attitudes toward the native residents of Latin America and the Caribbean that Western governments had displayed toward these countries. When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Puerto Rico became a U.S. colony and Cuba came under American tutelage. The church took this

opportunity to introduce the Adventist message in those fields, sending its first missionaries to Puerto Rico in 1901 and to Cuba in 1904.

The cultural ignorance of North American church leaders was illustrated in 1891 when the GC sent missionaries to Argentina who could not speak Spanish. Colporteurs Edwin W. Snyder, Albert B. Stauffer, and Clair A. Nowlen had no financing, and their first months were unsuccessful because “they did not speak Spanish and had no books in Spanish, only in English, German and French.”⁷ This scenario was repeated in 1894, when Frederick W. Bishop and Thomas H. Davis arrived in Chile. Sergio Becerra says: “It is striking that the church sent these two young men to a distant place with so few elements in their favor. They had very few economic resources ... no training in foreign languages, particularly that of the country where they were sent, and they were unfamiliar with the culture of the country where they were sent.”⁸

Adventists had more success in the German-Russian colonies in Argentina. Dr. Herold Weiss, a descendant of Geörg Riffel (1850-1917), one of the founders of these colonies, commented that his great-grandfather “took it upon himself to ask the General Conference to send a German-speaking pastor. That is how the first Adventist pastor, Frederick Westphal (1858-1944), arrived.”⁹

Adventist missionaries not only preached the Adventist message, but also transmitted their culture, models of worship, dress, and behavior, replacing local cultures and mores with Western ones. Pictures of Jesus showed him as Caucasian, and the saved of the New Earth were depicted as white-skinned and blonde-haired; no black, mixed-race, or aboriginal people were represented. In the Caribbean, missionaries copied the methods Adventists had used among black Africans and the former slaves of the southern United States.

Domination vs. Democracy

Although the missionaries taught the Adventist message and established congregations and offices, they retained absolute control of finances and decisions. At first this was because many native personnel were illiterate and had no academic preparation to carry out these functions. Some missionaries tried to solve this problem by establishing schools to train local workers; however, the process was slow, academic formation was quite elementary, and they rarely invested in sending native personnel to the United States for education.

Missionaries also restricted access to governance documents, such as the official church working policy, by not translating it into Spanish. A retired professor of religious studies who was

born in 1937 in Montevideo, Uruguay, observed: “In the North American Division, when you were an employee, you received a copy of the [General Conference] working policy. But in South America, the workers did not know the contents of the working policy or any administrative regulations, so the leaders could do as they pleased without anyone having a say. Decisions were made by a select few who belonged to the president’s select group, and nepotism and favoritism was obvious to those who had eyes to see.”¹⁰

When the South American Division (SAD) was established in 1916 with headquarters in Buenos Aires, an American named Oliver Montgomery became its first president, and American officers also controlled the three union conferences forming the territory. Ruben Dargã Holdorf’s historical review of South

Leaders in these fields have gotten away with an autocratic leadership style for a long time. Abuses have led to dishonesty and nepotism to an extent that gives laity the impression that corruption is almost endemic to these offices.

America in the online Adventist encyclopedia notes: “From 1916 to 1975, the South American Division was led by nine North Americans of British and Scandinavian descent, and for the last three administrations, it has continued under the presidency of descendants of German immigrants.”¹¹

When the Inter-American Division (IAD) was organized in 1922, with E.E. Andross as president, its headquarters was placed in the Panama Canal Zone, a colonial protectorate of the United States that was reserved for American citizens. Panamanians had no access, and only native servants with special permits could enter. Americans controlled the three union conferences that made up the Inter-American territory.

The IAD and the SAD were under the control of Americans until 1970 and 1980, respectively. Crises that erupted during this time ended with the departure of American missionaries from the Caribbean, as well as from the rest of Latin America. Subsequently, native administrators maintained barriers of secrecy around the General Conference working policy in order to keep full control, a tactic learned from the missionaries.

Domination by a privileged few is a familiar pattern that characterizes not only Adventist politics, but almost all religious institutions and societies and governments throughout the world. Of the 20 countries that make up Latin America, 18 are democracies with a presidential system, but most haven’t operated as true representative democracies. Social inequality, disinformation, interventionism of foreign powers, and *caudillismo* (rulership by a populist “strongman”) has resulted in both left-wing and right-wing dictatorships.

Additionally, most of the early native Adventists came from Catholic families, who were accustomed to a clear separation between clergy and laity. Missionaries held the same absolute authority as had the Catholic priests, and native leaders continued this model; the Adventist pastor merely adopted the authority of the priest. This same ideology forms the basis for current discussions on ordination in Latin America.

Missing Checks and Balances

While the GC working policy appears to follow the principle of representative government, it does not deepen the definition or provide mechanisms to avoid presidentialism. The following statement from the working policy shows how simplistically it defines representative government: “The fruitage of that concept is a representative and constituency-based system. Its authority is rooted in God and distributed to the whole people of God. It recognizes the committee system. It provides for shared administration (president, secretary, treasurer/chief financial officer) rather than a presidential system.”¹²

Just because a governing structure is said to be representative doesn’t mean that it is democratic, cautioned political scientist Bernard Manin. For example, when an electorate gives the bulk of its attention to presidential election processes, the power devolves to that leader. At its best, a representative government has several components that serve to check and balance the others.

The Methodist Church, which served as the original blueprint for Adventist organizational structure, has tried to imitate the balance between executive, legislative, and judicial functions in its General Conference, Council of Bishops, and Judicial Council. Such checks and balances are absent in Adventism. Although

everyone knows that a political component is present (and frequently employed) within the organization, church leaders deny it.

In Latin America, leaders have actively altered important representative principles, such as the active participation of constituents, a check on presidentialism, and the autonomy of local conferences and union conferences or missions.

Alteration of Policies

Deliberate alterations, especially to the working policies of Latin America, hinder the autonomy of constituents, local conferences, and union conferences or missions. These changes strengthen the authority of administrators and ordained ministers to overpower the influence of laity.

For example, the General Conference allows constituents to call a special constituency meeting if a sufficient number have concerns about how the conference is being run or find evidence of financial mismanagement or corruption. The GC model constitution says: “Section 2. Special Session: The Executive Committee of the Conference shall call a special session when ... requested by fifty percent (50%) of the churches of the Conference through their church boards.”

The IAD changed this passage in its model constitution and bylaws to: “Section 2. Special Session: The Executive Committee of the Conference shall call a special session when ... requested by seventy-five percent (75%) of the churches of the Conference through their church boards.”

In Latin America, 75% is a high bar to reach, especially since local churches rarely know that they have this option. As far as most members know, constituency meetings must be called by the administrators—even if a conference president is suspected to have been involved in financial embezzlement. (This eventuality is anticipated in the General Conference working policy, which says that such activity can lead to “removal from office, for cause, by the executive committee or a special constituency meeting.”)

A second example has to do with fair representation, a matter that is spelled out in the GC working policy. Article III on “Representation ... Delegates at-large” states that only 10% of the union conference/mission committee members may attend as delegates to the local conference constituency session.

The IAD has eliminated this threshold and states instead: “All members of the Executive Board of the Union ... , who are present at any session of this Association.”¹³

The third example of alteration regards the composition of the nominating committee that chooses candidates for offices and for the conference executive committee. The GC working

policy specifies that “the composition of the committee shall be balanced, as far as possible, between denominational and lay workers representing the various segments of the work and territories of the conference.”

By contrast, the IAD requires that the nominating committee “shall include up to 45 percent lay members”—thus giving the voting majority to those employed by the church.

The SAD interpretation states that the nominating committee “shall be composed of up to twenty-three (23) persons chosen from among the delegates present, being constituted by fifty percent (50%) of volunteer members of experience and fifty percent (50%) of missionaries, representing all sectors of the Work and the different regions of the territory of the Association, including the president of the Union or his representative.”¹⁴ The result of such a preponderance of employees is that delegates from the local churches may be easily handpicked by pastors, under instructions from their president.

The same is true of a conference’s executive committee, which makes decisions between constituency sessions. The General Conference working policy says in Article V on “Executive Committee” that after the ex officio members, “the remaining membership shall be balanced as nearly as possible between laypersons and pastors or other denominational employees.”

The IAD has changed the policy to say that the executive committee “shall include the president, secretary and treasurer of the association, the association’s departmental officers, the director of the association’s publishing ministry, an administrator of the conference’s institutions on an annual rotating basis, and one non-office employee. In addition, 25% of the above number shall be district pastors. In addition, 55% of the above number shall not be denominational employees.”¹⁵

Again, the conference’s constitution and bylaws are largely unknown to the laity, pastors, and delegates. Neither these governance documents nor financial reports are given to the delegates in a form they can study; usually they’re shared only in slide presentations.

Mission Status

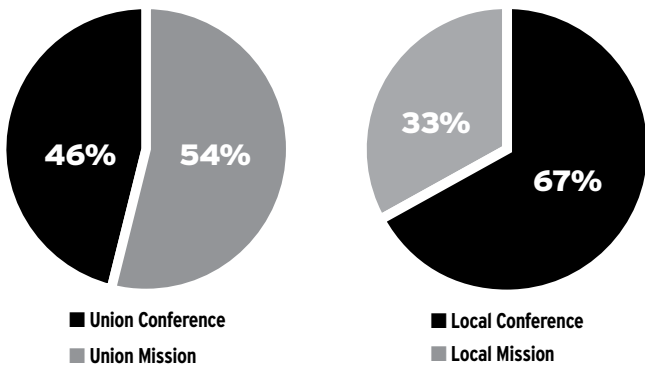
Historians agree that one of the factors that led to the creation of the union conferences in the reorganization of 1901-1903 was centralization of power in the hands of a few people.¹⁶

In Latin America, however, leaders of divisions—extensions of the GC that technically have no constituency—found a way to preserve control: by keeping their local conferences and union conferences in a “mission” status, which according to policy provides less local governance. A mission’s president, executive

secretary, and treasurer are appointed by the body above them; the union mission leaders are appointed by the division; and conference-level mission leaders are appointed by the union conference or union mission. This system has denied those fields full representative governance.¹⁷

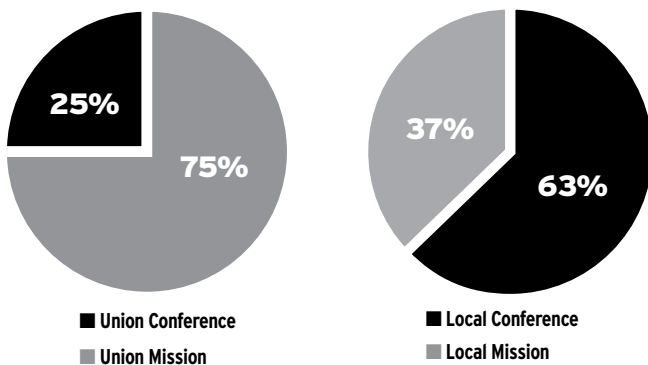
The IAD encompasses 24 unions—of which 13 are union missions and 11 are union conferences—and 156 local fields. Even though 67% of their local fields have conference-level status, it continues to keep more than half of its unions in the lower mission status, which means the IAD Executive Committee elects the president, executive secretary, and treasurer for those fields.

Inter-American Division



The SAD oversees 16 unions (including two “union of churches” missions, which carry a separate status) and 87 local fields. A subordinate union mission status has been carried by some regions, such as the North Brazil Union Mission, since 1915, but it was assigned to others (Bolivia Union Mission and Northeast Brazil Union Mission) as recently as 1996.

South American Division



Division leaders even split one union mission that was experiencing significant membership growth into two or three separate entities, without elevating any to union conference status. The result: centralization of power continues, and members in these fields have little idea of what it means to exercise self-governance.

Consequences of Centralized Power

It shouldn't be entirely surprising that some world fields use such schemes to maintain control; after all, the General Conference itself is inclined to centralize power where it can do so.¹⁸ Here's how it plays out in Latin America:

1. *Presidentialism.* A single strong executive has been the primary method of governance since the first missionaries came to the region, and this style of leadership has been adopted by native presidents.

Israel Leito, president of the IAD, served in that position longer than anyone else, retiring at 73. His statement reflects his attachment to power: “After serving the church for nearly 25 years [1993-2018], it's time to stop thinking that the Lord does not have other people to do the work.”¹⁹ Erton Köhler spent 18 years in the South American Division, 14 of them as division president (2007-2021), leaving only after he was elected executive secretary of the General Conference in 2021.

2. *Lack of Transparency.* Centralization of power allows information barriers that are created to avoid oversight and audits.

In the North American Division, anyone can watch live broadcasts of the division's annual meetings on YouTube that include discussions of budgets, operating expenses, bylaws, and problems; however, access to important IAD and SAD meetings is not available to all church workers and members. Divisions in Latin America publish vague and ambiguous reports. While you will hear plenty of triumphalist speeches, you won't learn how much the IAD spends in its headquarters in Miami, the liquidity of operations, or the actual state of the church's institutions. The same is true of local fields in these divisions.

Adventist Today reporting brought public attention to recent cases of embezzlement that were covered up within the Chiapas Union Conference and Panama Union Mission.²⁰ General Conference Auditing Service (GCAS) auditors don't audit all Adventist institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean and instead make only superficial evaluations, such as bank statement reconciliations. Even when the GCAS does report corruption, its reports are shelved by the committee that has appointed the people involved in the embezzlement cases.

3. *Nepotism and Power Abuse*. It surprises no one in the Latin American church to learn that a conference or union president has hired his wife, his children, his nieces and nephews, and his brother-in-law (or the relatives of his boss) to work for the church, even if those individuals have no appropriate qualifications.

If you're in a position of power there, it's relatively easy to "do deals" with the conference. Favoritism routinely directs the award of preferred contracts for building or maintenance. *Adventist Today* reported on a situation where a conference committee bought overpriced land from a conference officer with no questions asked, giving him a massive profit.²¹ It is also not difficult for church leaders to pad an expense report; in a system where top leaders can't be questioned, flexing one's power for gain is not only easy, but unsurprising.

On the other hand, a pastor or other worker who disagrees with a church officer must understand that employment protections are largely absent in this region of the world. Many Adventist employees in Latin America can tell stories of being fired for merely pointing out an action they didn't like.

A Crippling Crisis

Adventism in Latin America and the Caribbean is operating under a crippled model of representative government, with most of the authority vested in a handful of people. The crisis can be addressed in four ways:

- First, break the information barrier. Make mandatory deep and thorough public reporting to the laity on finances and executive decisions.
- Second, teach the Latin American laity how to use the representative tools of church governance by offering pew-level seminars and initiating conversations.
- Third, enforce the GC working policy. The General Conference needs to act quickly and decisively to identify and root out financial corruption and nepotism, and GCAS audits that show financial mismanagement should constitute an immediate cause for dismissal for those involved.
- Finally, information outlets such as *Adventist Today* and *Spectrum* are necessary to provide transparency.

Leaders in these fields have gotten away with an autocratic leadership style for a long time. Abuses have led to dishonesty and nepotism to an extent that gives laity the impression that corruption is almost endemic to these offices.

The world is shrinking, and parishioners won't remain silent forever. Eventually, they will vote with their money and their feet.

It is in the best interest of the entire world church for Adventist leaders to ensure good, honest, fair representative governance in this field. **AT**

¹ Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Portadores de luz: Historia de la Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día* (2012), p. 89.

² James White, "Borrowed Money," *Advent Review and Herald* (Feb. 23, 1860), p. 108.

³ Zorislav Plantak, "Ethical Analysis of Abuses of Power in Christian Leadership: A Case Study of 'Kingly Power' in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Dissertation, Andrew University (2017), p. 101.

⁴ Lester Merklin, "Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Foreign Mission Board Era: 1889-1903," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2019), pp. 98-106.

⁵ J. Vladimir Polanco, *Celebrating His Providence: Milestones of Our History* (2022), p. 31.

⁶ Trevor O'Reggio, "Exploring the Factors That Shaped the Early Adventist Mission to Jamaica," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1-2 (2008), p. 255.

⁷ Daniel Plenc, *Misioneros en Sudamérica: Pioneros del Adventismo en Latinoamérica* (2013), p. 18.

⁸ Daniel Plenc, Silvia Scholtus, Eugenio Di Dionisio, and Sergio Becerra, *Misioneros Fundacionales del Adventismo Sudamericano* (2014), p. 97.

⁹ Daniel Mora, "Dr. Herold Weiss, Conectando el Pasado y el Presente," *AdventistToday.org* (June 24, 2022).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ruben Dargã Holdorf, "South American Division," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (Nov. 23, 2021). Online at encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=IIFC.

¹² *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists* (2019), p. 163.

¹³ *Reglamento Operativo: División Interamericana de la Asociación General de los Adventistas del Séptimo Día* (2018), p. 243.

¹⁴ *Reglamentos Eclesiástico-Administrativo de la División Sudamericana de la Asociación General de los Adventistas del Séptimo Día* (2023), p. 268.

¹⁵ *Reglamento Operativo de la División Interamericana*, pp. 245-246.

¹⁶ Barry Oliver, "Reorganization of Church Structure, 1901-03: Some Observations," *SpectrumMagazine.org* (Sept. 25, 2017).

¹⁷ General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research, *2022 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2022), pp. 110-189, 270-324.

¹⁸ Bonnie Dwyer, "Massive Oversight Committee System Set Up at The General Conference," *SpectrumMagazine.org* (Aug. 23, 2018).

¹⁹ Libna Stevens, "Adventist Church Votes President and Secretary Elect for Inter-America; Leito's Leadership Honored," *Inter-America.org* (Apr. 16, 2018).

²⁰ Find the news articles online using search terms "Adventist Today" plus "Panama" or "Chiapas."

²¹ "Allegations of Misuse of Church Funds in the Mexican Union of Chiapas," *AdventistToday.org* (Aug. 29, 2022).

THE ADVENTIST CHURCH REIMAGINED

BY ADMIRAL NCUBE

The Adventist Church has emerged from COVID-19 fractured, if not fragmented. This is not to imply that the church is imploding, but to admit that things are not the same. Attendance in some churches has either plummeted or is unpredictable. Lockdowns and closures made many appreciate the fact that church buildings are dispensable. Rather than confronting this issue, we have assumed that those who are absent are active on online platforms.

The situation is further compounded by stagnation in mission. In most parts of the world, we are still dependent on the conventional “tent and tract” method of evangelism, characterized by a mass distribution of printed materials and by public evangelistic meetings. In the case of the latter, these often suffer from poor attendance. Even our own members are not likely to attend.

Many Adventists are more vocal in questioning the church—everything from aspects of our theology to liturgy to church governance. Others construe any critique of the church as an attack on God himself. We seem to be spending a lot of energy arguing about who is more Adventist than the other. This attitude permeates all levels of the church.

Despite all of this, Adventism has a compelling story to tell the world. Our challenge is to be responsive and relevant at a time when people are asking a different set of questions. Attitudes toward the church have changed in recent years, and we risk operating under outdated methods. How can Adventism be refreshingly agile, ruthlessly relevant, and relentlessly responsive?

From Redundancy to Resourcefulness

Perhaps the first place to start is with leadership. Adventism suffers from a leadership problem that is not about individuals, but about a system configured to resist change, perpetuate self-interest, and stifle creativity. At a corporate level, we still run an organizational structure developed in 1901. Our forebearers attempted to configure a system that would respond to the world around them, but 120

years later, we still cling to the original model as if it were inspired. Our stubborn reluctance to change is often rooted in thinking that consistency represents faithfulness, which makes us maintain the status quo regardless of its redundancy. We continue to duplicate and pile up functions at all levels of our already bloated church governance and administrative structures. We add more functions without bothering to shut down, merge, or adapt existing ones.

Consequently, some leaders play a gatekeeping role to justify their existence. Rather than equipping churches and frontline workers with resources for mission, they add processes and structures that choke and stifle. When will leaders realize that their calls for stewardship must begin at home? How about prioritizing, consolidating, and streamlining the church to be sharper, slimmer, and more agile in terms of processes? We cannot intensify calls for faithful stewardship on already burdened saints without making the necessary changes to get the best and most efficient value for our money. The denomination needs to prioritize organizational development. This will require conversations at all levels, especially as we approach another General Conference Session. Adventists must not be held hostage by a 1901 setup that serves the interests of church politicians and makes administrative structures rewarding career objectives.

From Execution to Efficiency

In response to the call for more accountability and transparency, the denomination needs a change in business practices and processes that goes beyond mere financial accounting. A robust reporting system will measure the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of church initiatives and projects. It will ask, Are we getting the best value for our money and efforts?

We should be able to ascertain how much we have spent on the “I Will Go” initiative relative to its return or impact. Over the past decade, we have seen leaders spearhead various initiatives and experiments, but never do we see an objective post-implementation

review of those projects. Rather than evaluating the efficacy of such initiatives and holding leaders accountable, constituency meetings at local conference, union conference, and division levels end up becoming platforms for politics.

It's time to reconfigure the system for a real election of church leaders. In the current nominating committee process, the president gets to influence who is elected to other offices, which robs us of the opportunity to explore and consider a full range of options. If we assume that the Holy Spirit has led in the election of a president, why do we not trust the same Spirit to lead the election of the other officers?

The problem of insular thinking is worsened when local conference or union conference presidents get to chair or oversee committees that evaluate the performance of their teams. Basic corporate governance dictates that to chair a committee that is meant to hold one accountable not only fuels an abuse of office, but also exposes the presence of politics and a lack of transparency.

With 22 million members, we need leadership election processes to be as open and representative as possible. We need church initiatives that are borne out of a collective vision set by delegates at constituency meetings. We need delegates to lay out their strategic vision and priorities for the global church so that elected leaders can guide the church to achieve its agreed-upon strategic vision and goals. We need to measure our leaders' performance on the basis of corporately agreed priorities, not their own experiments. Running a church through presidential initiatives or directives robs members of the opportunity to envision the church they want and to set priorities, for which elected leaders will be held accountable.

From Uniformity to Inclusiveness

As we dismantle the tyranny of homogeneity, we will free local churches in non-Western nations from being treated as franchises of the General Conference (GC). In the name of uniformity and institutional conformity, we have allowed the GC to amass power over local churches in some parts of the world and, in the process, crowd out local conferences and union conferences. The General Conference acts as if local churches exist to demonstrate compliance with central determined priorities rather than to respond to the needs of their communities. GC leaders treat union conferences and local conferences in some areas of the world as if they exist to play a policy role, compiling reports and overseeing constituency meetings.

We need union conferences and local conferences to play a more visible role in equipping churches to be responsive and relevant to their local communities. They should be

resourced to adapt global priorities to their local context and to develop contextualized materials, study guides, and missional publications. This will dismantle the current dominance of Western theologians and scholars that has seen other regions reduced to mere consumers and implementers of other's thoughts and plans. The church needs to harness its diversity so that those in the Global North can learn from those in the Global South.

Inclusiveness also means dismantling processes and attitudes that lead to the exclusion of women and young people. How is it that those who form a majority in our churches remain marginalized and not included? More women and young people should take leading roles during big events and meetings.

We need a candid conversation about what Adventists *must* believe and what they *can* believe.

Tokenism and cosmetic changes need to be exposed. Women and youth cannot be used to validate and enforce male dominance. We need a church in which everyone—regardless of age, gender, and marital or parental status—can equally contribute to the growth and development of the church. To be relevant and responsive, the church needs both youth and experience, males as well as females.

From Correctness to Relevancy

Adventist scholarship often seems to validate what is already known. There is little growth in theological scholarship in the church when theologians are muzzled and the parameters of their scholarship fixed. This is a big issue. A relevant starting point would be to have a candid conversation about how we relate to Ellen White's writings. As much as theologians and scholars want to contribute toward the development of Adventist theology, Ellen White's writings represent a barrier that ensures any scholarship is contained within certain parameters.

According to Hanz Gutierrez: "The problem with Ellen White is that she is called a prophet but actually functions in Adventism today as a priest, preserving an identity that must be protected

and kept pure. White, in her priestly role, no longer pushes forward but backward. She does not create but hinders, does not allow experimentation but stigmatizes it. She is no longer an avant-garde but a rear-guard figure. And this does not depend on White herself but rather on an institution and a community that uses and manipulates her as an alibi to stay where it is. Adventism is a typical community that has not learned to dialogue with its prophet, but only suffers from it.”¹

Ellen White is often used to close the Bible rather than open it. Just as the canonization process gave us the 66 books we call the Bible, a similar exercise might be needed to sift through her

As we dismantle the tyranny of homogeneity, we will free local churches in non-Western nations from being treated as franchises of the General Conference (GC).

writings and pick out what is relevant to our times. Contentious as it may be, we must avoid deifying Ellen White as an infallible prophet, thus robbing her of her humanity as a wife, mother, and grandmother. While we collectively accept Ellen White as authoritative, to prioritize what is relevant is a process that should not be seen as rejection. We need to apply the same rules to her as to biblical prophets, searching for underlying principles that are applicable to contemporary strategies and actions.

From Prescriptions to Descriptions

A bad habit in missional Adventism that we need to overcome is answering questions that no one is asking. We tend to treat Bible studies as a rigid school curriculum that cannot be disrupted, instead of a conversation that arises naturally in response to the world around us. While it is useful to help members become

well-grounded doctrinally, the challenge arises when members are not allowed to ask their own questions or have a say in forming the answers. In the current curriculum, mass-produced lesson guides deliver both questions and answers as finished products that Adventists are supposed to memorize as the official position.

In practicality, according to Ellen White, we need to boldly “lay at the door of investigation your preconceived opinions and your hereditary and cultivated ideas” as we dismantle human boundaries that often militate against true Bible study.²

This means that our Fundamental Beliefs would be most effective if *descriptive* (stating what most Adventists believe), not *prescriptive* (stating what every Adventist must believe.) Proclaiming that our statements represent the only valid interpretations of the Bible makes them codified human statements that fix in place particular interpretations of Scripture, proscribing all others.

We need a candid conversation about what Adventists *must* believe and what they *can* believe. Our Bible studies need to steer away from fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions about Adventist beliefs and instead focus on a verse-by-verse unfolding of Scripture. To claim that our beliefs are derived from the Bible demands a move away from emphasizing our beliefs, via carefully crafted and voted lists, toward teaching members how to study Scripture verse by verse.

From Prediction to Protest

The tragedy of traditional Adventist evangelism is not its focus on prophecy or end-time events, but how it explores these themes without a social conscience. The traditional Adventist interpretation of prophecy is narrowed to focus on accentuating our corporate ego. Because we have made our identity override the main message of apocalyptic texts, we have inevitably diluted the protest inherent in the visions. We have forgotten that Seventh-day Adventist pioneers fought against oppression through their faith and actions when only a relatively few Americans protested against racism. As Marcos Torres aptly puts it, our challenge is to pursue a way of preaching prophecy that “declares unequivocally that prophecy is protest and that you cannot be a part of this movement or God’s kingdom if you are unwilling to abandon the way of empire and its constructs of oppression.”

We also need to abandon our warped apocalypticism, which confines the fulfilment of prophecy to events in the United States or Europe. We are quick to regard any tragedy that hits the West as an ominous sign of the end, while we normalize tragedy in the Global South. Despite the fact that conditions have drastically changed since Adventist apocalyptic understanding

developed during the 19th century, we continue to speak of a world in which prophecy is fulfilled only in the Global North. Why can't we contextualize our reading of apocalyptic texts and be open to multiple applications? This would help us reconfigure our Sabbath message in a way that protests commodification, exploitation of the earth, racism, and xenophobia. The Sabbath is the great equalizer of humanity and nature. We could preach the fall of Babylon as the collapse of all systems, institutions, religions, nations, and social constructs that undergird the environmental, capitalistic, and commercial crimes that have disenfranchised innocent communities for too long.

From Performance to Participation

Over time we have become program-centric, content-driven, and building-based. Thus, many see church as an event they attend to consume a product or buy an experience. Like viewers in a cinema, many sit passively every week waiting for the guy onstage to entertain them. Consequently, church becomes a contest of pulpit celebrities in which performance overrides participation. Can we go back to church as a gathering where believers fellowship, pray, read Scripture, and participate in communion? The ideal would be a church that is less industrial, more intimate, less hurried, more intentional, and more organic. Services would be characterized by:

- Fewer big-name speakers but more everyday speakers who connect with people using real-life stories
- Less fire and brimstone preaching but more storytelling and conversation
- Fewer performances that depend on pulpit celebrities but more communal participation, conversations, and co-creation
- Less of a theater or cinema vibe and more of a living room vibe that is people-centered and participatory

By pulling the center of gravity away from the sermon, we could focus on making people feel acknowledged, seen, and heard instead of making them feel lost in a crowd. Church would be a place where people find meaningful transformation, where they meet people who face the same demons and struggles. They could interact with the speakers and each other in authentic ways to feel loved in and through their failures.


From Behavior to Belonging

In many places, what is regarded as true Adventism often betrays some sort of perfectionism that breeds superficial compliance and pretense, even though we often fail to meet the standard. The emphasis on certain behaviors means that it is difficult for people to openly confess their distress or spiritual failures. Hidden behind

our polished Sabbath look, dignified demeanor, and empty Sabbath smiles is real wrestling over bad habits, relationships, peer pressure. Because trials are not seen as a sign of life, we regard those who openly struggle as candidates for church discipline rather than corporate encouragement or affirmation.

How about linking the reputation of the church to how people are loved in and through their failures? As in the story of Lazarus (John 11), the church exists to roll away the stone, which means removing every obstacle, barrier, and human hindrance between sinners and Jesus. Barriers are often religious (dogma, creeds, trivial rules, human standards, etc.). Though seemingly necessary, they need to be rolled away. From judgmental attitudes to bigotry disguised as faithfulness to spiritual pride, all need to be rolled away. Church, of all places, is where it must be easy for sinners to meet and experience Christ. We need to help people *belong* before we help them *behave*. They should not be expected to conform to certain prescribed behaviors as a precondition to belonging.

Let's face it; our way of doing church, evangelism, and outreach is designed to reach middle-class people who don't have many vices, are biblically literate, and are comfortable with our worldview. We talk about outreach, evangelism, and the Great Commission, but too often missing in our churches is the inconvenience of love, which calls us to adapt, learn, grow, think, devise, and become students of the culture around us. How about moving from relying on models such as evangelistic series and literature distribution toward investing more efforts in building relationships with communities around our local churches? This, of course, would require a deeper understanding of the communities in which our churches are located and designing programs around them. People want dialogues rather than monologues; they want to belong before they are corrected. They run on busy schedules that constrain their availability. All of these factors make it imperative for us to candidly take stock, adapt, and explore ways in which we can reach out to people who are often no longer listening.

Change is needed. Conditions dictate that we relook at ourselves and make tough decisions. What I have proposed is not perfect, but it opens us up to reimagining Adventism for the 21st century. A collective conversation would see the church become more agile, relevant, and responsive. Behind the crises are immense opportunities to reframe the church. As aptly put in an African proverb, "Opportunity does not wake those who are asleep." 

¹ Hanz Guitierrez, "The Embarrassment of Having a Prophet: On Steve Daily's 'Ellen G. White: A Psychobiography,'" *Spectrum Magazine* (June 10, 2021).

² Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, p. 260.

Beyond Boundaries

Hope for the Future of Adventism

BY MATTHEW BURDETTE

I WAS 23 YEARS OLD WHEN I FIRST BELIEVED THAT ONE DAY I would die.

By accident, or maybe by Providence, I found a copy of Michel Houellebecq's 1998 novel *The Elementary Particles* while wandering the fiction section of a local bookstore. Both its title and cover artwork—human skin—roused my curiosity. I knew as I reached the end of the first page that I was about to begin a new chapter of my life, my “Houellebecq phase,” having had many other authorial phases. I would soon learn that this man is both celebrated and reviled, regularly charged with racism, islamophobia, misogyny, and a handful of other vices.

In this harrowing and sexually obscene novel, I met two half-brothers, Bruno and Michel, with whom I reluctantly identified. They each in their own way exhibited every major symptom of life in Western society since the sexual revolution: individualism and social atomization, failed intimacy, involuntary celibacy, sex addiction, the commodification of human persons, and the quest for transhumanist technological interventions. Born into the limitations of their particular place and time, they were already victims of history by the time they saw that their experiences and attitudes were socially conditioned. They never stood a chance. As I reached the end of the book, I saw that I, too, had experiences, beliefs, and attitudes that were socially conditioned in ways I'd not yet understood. The story I thought I'd been living was not the real story at all. That was when I saw what lay at the end of my own story.

I mourned, but I didn't fully understand what I had lost and what I was grieving. That summer I visited my parents in New Jersey, and they, unable to ignore my mysterious sorrow, pled with me to share what was wrong. Before I could stop myself, I was sobbing. All I could say was, “I'm going to die.”

My response confused them because, of course, my mortality was not news to me. But I had lost confidence in something that I was too ashamed to admit that I'd actually believed: Advent hope, the uniquely Adventist hope that the Lord would return before my natural death. I felt silly. Who really believes that Jesus will appear in their lifetime? Well, apparently I did. And I wasn't conscious of this hope until I'd lost it. The irony was overwhelming: I was grieving this loss of hope after I'd already broken with Adventism.

This late coming-of-age experience is what I remember when I hear Adventism's future questioned. Adventists rightly celebrate that Seventh-day Adventism has successfully grown and taken root around the globe. And because the denomination can reasonably expect to make a positive impact on people's lives for years to come, I wonder if those Adventists who ask about the future of the denomination have also had a disorienting experience like my own. I wonder if they have come to see Adventism's situation in history differently enough to interpret its story anew—specifically, in a way that makes spiritual and theological sense of the delay of the Eschaton.

While Adventism was born out of a painful reminder that no one knows the day nor the hour of the Lord's appearance, it nevertheless remains that Adventism is—dare I say the obvious?—an apocalyptic interpretation of the Christian faith, whose historical center of gravity is the Second Advent. An Adventism that wonders about its future is an Adventism that has already endured a second and more prolonged Great Disappointment.

Perhaps, like the first Great Disappointment, the promise of and for Adventism today lies after this second Great Disappointment—that God is evidently more patient than we'd like. Unsurprisingly, the promise of Adventism for the world and for Adventism in the years to come both have to do with its commitment to the Advent hope.

The Promise of Adventism

But first, I owe you a word about where I'm coming from. I left Adventism for the Episcopal Church, and my years in Anglicanism have taught me to appreciate Adventism more fully. Without being a theological relativist, I acknowledge that there is never an ecclesiastical ideal. Whenever we have choices, we always choose the problems we can tolerate. Even when there is a correct choice, that right choice will involve problems. My move to Anglicanism is no exception. The problems in both churches are real, many, undeniable, and irresolvable without God's help.

The most significant problem I've observed in the Episcopal Church, which I am especially sensitive to because of my Adventist background, is the general inability of Episcopalians to differentiate themselves from the surrounding culture. A defining feature of liberal Protestantism is a porous boundary

between itself and the society in which the church exists. At its best, liberalism instills in Christians the sensibility of the church's responsibility for the world around it. The liberal church may think of itself as a collective court prophet, like a community of Nathans for the King Davids of its time, or as a sanctifying presence, as the Black church has been for the Black community in America.

But when liberal Protestantism is not at its best—and churches are rarely at their best—thinking of oneself as H. Richard Niebuhr's "transformer of culture" easily becomes a self-deceptive avoidance of the fact that the church's message is little more than an echo of the general culture's ethical values with some added religious language. Liberal Protestantism has shown itself unable to maintain a clear church/world distinction. We're well past the verdict and have moved onto sentencing; churches such as mine have given themselves the death penalty by communicating clearly, especially to children, that being a member is optional and demands little more than what *The New York Times* demands.

Why did the Episcopal Church, whose principal theological and liturgical document, The Book of Common Prayer—one of the most beautiful and robust articulations of the Christian faith that a church produced in the twentieth century and one of the same century's most significant ecumenical achievements—betray itself so fatally?

While surely there are multiple causes, I suggest that one cause is closer to the root than the others. Like liberal society in general, liberal Protestants have been prone to replace the promise that one day God will establish his reign with the belief that human society can make moral progress, that by our good actions and smart policy we can "build" the kingdom of God. Observe: the shift from God's activity to human activity is necessarily the shift from worship to works. And while I think it's obvious that the church should do good works in the world, the worship of God remains its primary reason for existence.

But that orientation toward God demands the humility of waiting for God to act and of acknowledging the woeful limitations of what humanity can achieve. In turn, this humility and waiting make sense only if we believe that God will act, if we trust the promise that "he will come again to judge the living and the dead," as the Apostle's Creed says. Only a robust eschatological faith, which teaches that God will not simply meet me when I die, but personally will bring to completion this history that he alone has made, can sustain the church's identity. Only an eschatological faith that God will judge can uphold the conviction to stand when the world says to kneel—and to suffer the furnace, because death is better than life if death means being in the company of the Son of God. This eschatological dimension

of the Christian faith is precisely what my church has lost. But this dimension of the faith is what I received from Adventism.

Adventists, like all Christians, are prone to beating themselves up and feeling ashamed of the more peculiar habits of their community. Thoughtful Adventists often try to distance themselves from the hyper-apocalyptic wing of their church, and that's understandable. But resisting the abuse of eschatology should never mean eliminating eschatology. The whole Christian faith stands or falls on the veracity of the promise that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6, RSV). Christianity without eschatology is merely an ethical system with religious language and the hope that we'll tithes. When those of us within my denomination have tried to sell it to our children, they have rightly said—let the reader understand—"No thanks."

One of the challenges, therefore, that Adventism will face in the years ahead (should the Lord tarry, as they used to say) is how to sustain and nurture this eschatological dimension of the faith without handing over the denomination to what Jurgen Moltmann called "apocalyptic arm-twisters," that is, those who keep promising that the Eschaton will be in our lifetimes, that this pope is the antichrist, and so on. Adventism must grow up without losing hope.

If Adventists can speak plainly and credibly about the hope that we all have because of the gospel's promises, then Adventism has much to promise this world. Our world is desperate for hope, and it has never been easier to preach the gospel than it is today. The state of our culture has reminded everyone of the limitations of what humanity can achieve. All Adventists have to do is pick up where the brutal realism of experience has left off: "Yes, we have failed to save ourselves, but our labor is not in vain! Jesus lives, and he will bring perfection to our miserable efforts."

The world, including both Christians and Christian churches outside Adventism, needs the courage that only God's promise imparts.

The Promise for Adventism

Just as God began in us a good work that he will bring to completion, we have the hope that the God who made this world has not abandoned it and will bring to completion this whole creation. In other words, the eschatological promise of the gospel is not only for those of us who believe, but it is a promise for all. Adventists have historically understood the universality of the gospel with regard to individuals but have tended not to think about what the promise of the gospel means for entire communities.

When I was attempting to find my place in Adventism, one of the stumbling blocks for me was precisely this problem: that

Adventism tended not to have much interest in other Christians. I suspect that the Adventist aversion to ecumenism has to do with the particulars of its inherited apocalyptic eschatology, seeing the prospect of unity with other Christians as a threat of compromise. But perhaps after a second Great Disappointment, plus coming to terms with the reality that God is continuing to exercise patience for this world, Adventists may revisit the question of their relationship with other churches.

I once wrote for the online edition of *Spectrum Magazine* that the besetting sin of Adventism is that it sees its own distinctiveness as an end for its own sake, rather than a consequence of its own faithfulness. I confess that I regret the tone I used in that piece years ago—after I’d left the denomination for the Episcopal Church—and made an uncharitable judgment of motives that are far beyond what I could possibly know. Yet, the fact remains that Adventism has isolated itself institutionally in practice, to its own detriment. The commitment to faithfulness and to a realistic eschatology that motivated Adventists to remain set apart ought to be the same commitment that empowers Adventists to take meaningful relationships, personally and institutionally, with other Christians. As a person who left Adventism on good terms and who hangs around Adventists and still pokes and prods at the church (as I am doing at this moment), I say plainly: an ongoing relationship with Adventism has made me a better Episcopalian and a better Christian. More forcefully: in my relationships with Adventist Christians, I feel the pain of our separation, which I experience as a judgment of God against the division of Christ’s church. I invite you to feel this pain with me, trusting that only in this place of pain can we discover all that God has to offer us.

Adventists should trust that they have something to offer other Christians. And by this I do not mean an unreflective confidence that other Christians, with enough time, will abandon their denominations and become Adventists—although I expect that some will. Rather, I mean that a relationship with Adventism can prove to be the thing that revitalizes dead and dying churches, and that being introduced anew to the gospel’s eschatology will transform people whose faith is anemic because of its absence. Likewise, meaningful contact with other Christians will clarify for Adventists who they are and what their church is about, helping them to get past internal wars and learn to master the difference between what is central and what is peripheral to a living faith. That is the promise of Adventism: that its own Advent hope can lead it into unknown places, where God surely will not disappoint. **AT**

Torkelsen *continued from page 19*

the perils of “kingly power” and “Jerusalem centers.” Maybe we need to further explore the idea that “we are just as much under the control of God in one part of His vineyard as in another.”

If a centralized global church organization, such as the one we have today, was “not God’s plan” in 1901, maybe it is still not so. Maybe soon we will come to the point of revolutionary action that Ellen White described when she wrote that “if men continue to bind their fellow-laborers closer and closer to the commandments of men, many will be stirred by the Spirit of God to break every shackle, and assert their liberty in Christ Jesus.”¹⁵

It may well be that those we brand as “rebels” are the ones who are “stirred by the Spirit of God” to call for change. Human voting does not shackle God’s will. **AT**

¹ “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history,” White wrote in *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9, p. 10.

² George Knight, Gilbert Valentine, and Michael Campbell have critically explored issues of conflict in early SDA history, as well as in the post-Ellen White period. Articles in *Adventist Today* by Denis Fortin (Winter 2018 and Winter 2019) and others are also very useful.

³ Peter Heather, *Christendom: The Triumph of a Religion, AD 300-1300* (2023).

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (English translation, 1986).

⁵ Raj Attiken, “Redundancy, Relevance & Resources,” *AdventistToday.org* (Apr. 20, 2023).

⁶ “Politics” in this context is any attempt to influence decisions in a manipulative, convoluted, or secret manner, or exercise authority that oversteps its limits through explicit or implicit threats.

⁷ Popes use the title *Servus servorum Dei*, “the servant of God’s servants.”

⁸ See my articles in *Spectrum Magazine*: “Comments on Ted Wilson’s 2018 Autumn Council Sermon” (Oct. 13, 2018) and “Observations on the Compliance Discussion” (Oct. 14, 2018). At the 2022 GC Session, Ted Wilson’s Sabbath sermon recast his 2018 Autumn Council sermon.

⁹ See my online article “The Ministry of Missed Possibilities,” *Adventist Today.org*, (Oct. 19, 2019).

¹⁰ *General Conference Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 10 (Apr. 10, 1903), p. 158.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, “The Great Need of the Holy Spirit,” *Review and Herald* (July 23, 1895).

¹² George R. Knight, *Adventist Authority Wars, Ordination, and the Roman Catholic Temptation* (2017), p. 89.

¹³ See Jared Wright, “The Year of the General Conference Session,” *Spectrum Magazine* (Dec. 31, 2015).

¹⁴ According to GC policy, it is union conferences that have authority to decide who will be ordained. In cases of “rebellion,” the division boards, not the GC, has the authority to investigate. Therefore, it was not the union conferences, but rather, the GC that did not comply with GC policy when it took steps to punish unions that ordain women. This legal point was in 2016 discussed by former GC Counsel Mitchel Tyner, “Analysis: The Use of General Conference Working Policy in the Case of Unions that Ordain Women,” *Spectrum Magazine* (Oct. 10, 2016).

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*

Contributors



REBECCA BARCELÓ works in Denver, Colorado, for The Conflict Center, a nonprofit organization that provides community

workshops and training in practical social/emotional skills. She graduated from La Sierra University with a degree in communication, public relations, and advertising, and currently she is completing an M.A. in Theological Studies at Andrews University.



REINDER BRUINSMA lives in the Netherlands with his wife, Aafje. He has served the Adventist Church in publishing, education,

and church administration on three continents, his last post as president of the Netherlands Union. His latest books are *In All Humility: Saying “No” to Last Generation Theology* and *I Have a Future: Christ’s Resurrection and Mine*.



MATTHEW BURDETTE is an editor for Convergent Books, a Christian imprint of Penguin Random House. He holds undergraduate

and graduate degrees in religion from La Sierra University and earned his Ph.D. in theology from the University of Aberdeen. He lives with his wife and daughter in Iowa City.



CHRISTIE CHUI-SHAN CHOW has taught at the SDA seminary in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and North America. She is the

author of *Schism: Seventh-day Adventism in Post-Denominational China* (2021) and co-edits *The Oxford Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventism* (2024).



LARS GUSTAVSSON is the leading partner for The 4th Sector Futures Group, based in Walla Walla, Washington. An innovator and futurist,

he has worked in administration at World Vision International and ADRA International.



ALVIN MASARIRA is a civil/structural engineering consultant based in Johannesburg, South Africa, who also serves

as an adjunct professor at the University of Cape Town. He is married to Dr. Limakatso Lebina-Masarira, and they have three children.



DANIEL A. MORA is from Venezuela. He is an editor and writer trained in theology who writes about issues such as

feminism, immigration, racism, and social justice.



ADMIRAL NCUBE, PH.D., is from Zimbabwe. A development analyst based in Botswana, he is a father of three and husband to Margret.



LOREN SEIBOLD is executive editor of *Adventist Today* and teacher/pastor of the popular *Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar*.



EDWIN TORKELSEN is a retired historian who worked for the National Archives in Norway and taught medieval history at the

University of Oslo and the University of Trondheim.

BIBLE CREDITS

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved.

Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Good News for Everyone



We love our church.

That's why we at *Adventist Today* do what we do.

Yes, we tell the truth about our church—historical and current. But our purpose isn't to show off how much we know. What we really want to do is to hold the Seventh-day Adventist Church accountable to giving what the Bible calls “good news” of salvation—for everyone, not just a few who believe certain approved things.

Denominations, when they get self-important, operate in ways that aren't necessarily about good news. They want to

stay in control. And if that means repeating the same old partial truths over and over again, that's what they'll do. If it means using guilt and fear to manipulate people, they'll do that, too. If they must spend the money we give them on self-promotion and hiding things we should know, well, that's all part of the game.

They may not do it with bad intentions, but they do it just the same. It's a side effect of institutionalism.

We at *Adventist Today* are aspirational for Seventh-day Adventism. We want our church to be the most generous spreader of the good news of salvation that it can possibly be.

That's why, first, we try to find new ways of telling the Adventist truths as good news. What is it that made this denomination grow to more than 20 million people, and how do we make the most of our historical legacy as a truth-telling church? And second, we challenge those with influence in the church to meet that same standard.

Read through this magazine, and you'll see in every piece our passion that even in an era when interest in religion is fading, Seventh-day Adventist Christianity won't just survive, but will thrive as good news to a struggling and broken world.

We do all of this because we love our church. And we hope you do, too. Thank you for your support, your responses, and your gifts.

Loren Seibold
Executive Editor

All it takes is a monthly gift that fits your budget to keep this magazine and our other 7 communication channels coming to you:

- \$5/month is a wonderful place to start your support
- \$25/month assures us that you believe in our mission and ministry
- \$100/month lets us know you want us here for years to come

Of course, we also accept one-time gifts of any size. Here's where to donate:

atoday.org/donate/

Other Ways to Give

If you'd prefer to donate stock, or give distributions from your IRA, or include us in your estate plans, we'd be more than happy to schedule a confidential conversation with you. Please call us at the phone number below. These types of gifts will sustain *Adventist Today* in a meaningful way.

Adventist Today accepts all credit cards, checks, or PayPal donations. It's quick and easy, safe and secure to donate today. If signing up on your smartphone or computer seems daunting, give us a call. We'll be happy to take your donation over the phone.

Thanks for supporting *Adventist Today*. We value our readers/viewers.

Adventist^{Today}

atoday.org

Phone: 800.236.3641

 **www.facebook.com/AToday.org/**

 **[@AdventistToday](https://twitter.com/AdventistToday)**

 **[Instagram.com/adventisttoday](https://www.instagram.com/adventisttoday)**