

Is the General Conference
the Voice of God on Earth?

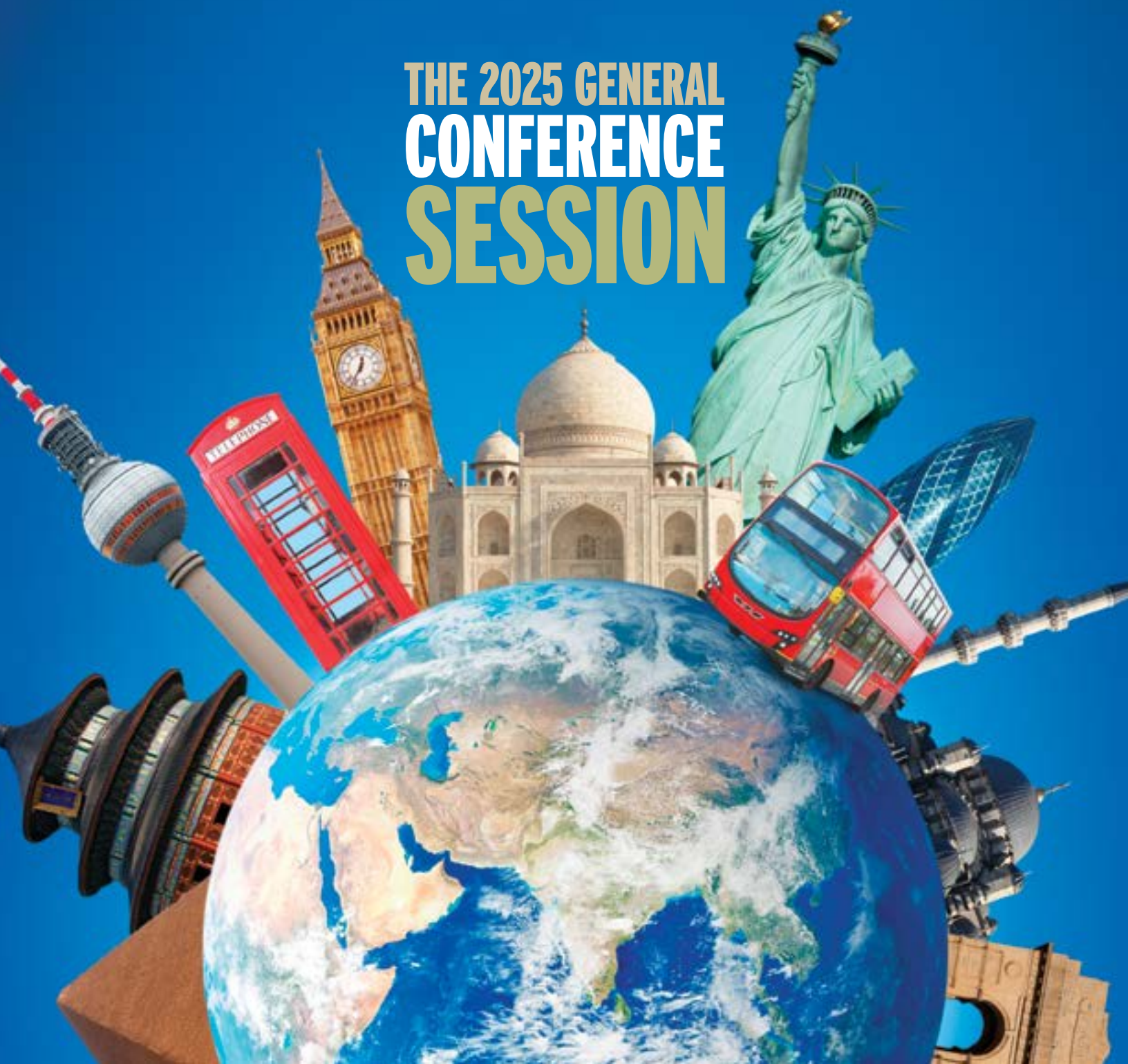
Unpacking Last
Generation Theology

How Spiritual Are Church
Governance Meetings?

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Adventist *Today*

THE 2025 GENERAL
CONFERENCE
SESSION





features

6 Why Voting Is Spiritually Important

Business Sessions Require Both Prayer and Critical Thinking
By Edwin Torkelsen

9 A Supplement of Absurdities: Examining Proposed Changes to the Church Manual

By Admiral Ncube

12 Challenge and Opportunity at a General Conference Session

By Lowell C. Cooper

16 Is the General Conference in Session the Voice of God?

By Alvin Masarira

18 Is the Apocrypha Scripture for Adventists?

The Changing Definition of *Sola Scriptura*
By Matthew J. Korpman

DEPARTMENTS

3 Editorial

Is the General Conference God’s Highest Authority on Earth?
By Loren Seibold

22 Adventist Theology

The Past, Present, and Future of Last Generation Theology
By David Hamstra

25 “Well, There’s That...”

By Nate Hellman

26 Technology

Our Church in a Digital World: Do We Still Need to Worship Together in Person?
By Reinder Bruinsma

29 Barely Adventist

News Briefs

31 Contributors

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Is the General Conference God’s Highest Authority on Earth?

By Loren Seibold

IN THE GENERAL CONFERENCE (GC) GOVERNANCE meetings I have attended, I’ve noticed a hovering expectation that everything decided there is inevitably God’s will. Perhaps it’s because that claim is made from the pulpit at nearly every GC meeting, usually in a statement like this: “Remember, folks, Ellen White has told us that the General Conference is the highest authority God has on the earth.”

White did indeed say something like that in 1875. She wrote: “I have been shown that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is *the highest authority that God has upon the earth*, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but surrendered” (italics added).¹

The president of the General Conference at that time was James Springer White, Ellen White’s husband. The target of the statement appears to have been George Ide Butler, a somewhat reluctant former (and future) holder of the same office.

Context

The late 1860s and the 1870s were a tempestuous time in Adventist history—and much of the controversy revolved around the authority of James and Ellen White. (I’m drawing here on research by two professors of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. See the two articles about the controversies of this period by Kevin M. Burton,² who is also director of the Center for Adventist Research, along with the recent biography of G. I. Butler by Denis Fortin,³ who is also teaching pastor of One Place Fellowship at Andrews University.)

Between potential church schisms out West, managing the military draft for Adventists during the Civil War, and building a sanitarium in Battle Creek, church leaders came under tremendous pressure in the 1860s. In August of 1865, at age 44, James White suffered the first of several strokes.

The Whites were both criticized by and critical of others. Some of the Advent believers felt the husband and wife were high-handed, and they questioned whether their dominant roles—Ellen’s accusatory visions and James’ bossy management—were helpful to the movement. What began in late 1869 as an effort by the Battle Creek congregation to vindicate both Whites turned into a purge when the meetings concluded with a series of resolutions embracing perfectionism. It included this statement: “That the salvation of this church depends upon immediate and decisive action, to the end that each of its members give good evidence of conversion, or be promptly disfellowshipped.”⁴

The result was a church trial overseen by Adventist pioneers J. H. Waggoner and J. N. Andrews, during which all but 12 members of the nearly 400-member congregation were disfellowshipped. Those expelled, says Burton, were gradually readmitted over the course of the next few years, though doubtless some never returned.

The Presidency

I have wondered how often those who were working with the Whites felt trapped in a no-win situation. While asserting their right to speak authoritatively about every church matter, the Whites were equally insistent that others should step up and lead—but with the Whites always looking over their shoulders and correcting them.

Rarely does a decision arise as the result of an open and balanced discussion of the issues.

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The problem is not that the General Conference has plans or opinions, but that it takes too much upon itself. It aspires to legislate policy and doctrine for every Seventh-day Adventist in the world.

In December of 1871, the General Conference voted to ask Butler to replace James White as GC president. Butler declined the appointment for two months. Yes, James White was infirm, but Butler, too, was sick at his home in Iowa, unable even to attend the session.

Over the next several years, James was in almost continual conflict with fellow leaders J. N. Andrews, J. H. Waggoner, Uriah Smith, and Butler—and Ellen’s inspired messages always took James’ side.

James suffered another stroke in April of 1873, yet President Butler insisted that only James White was qualified to lead the church. Writes Burton: “The 12th Annual GC Session was called on Friday, November 14, 1873. On Saturday evening (the 15th), G. I. Butler presented his *Leadership* essay. The primary purpose of this essay was to exonerate the work of James White and centralize authority within the office of the General Conference President. However, even though Butler was GC President at this time, he was not trying to grab more power for himself. In fact, Butler believed that James White was the only man fit to lead the church.”⁵

Butler based his belief that James White should lead the church on Ellen White’s testimonies, and even a vote of the General Conference couldn’t undo what she had said.⁶ James White again moved into the office, just months after his debilitating stroke.

It was in the context of Ellen’s resentment that James had been railroaded into leading the church when he was in poor health, and that Butler should have stepped up rather than pushing James to the fore, that she wrote in 1875—almost two years after Butler was out of office—that “when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but surrendered.”

Butler would retake the GC presidency in 1880—and again be battered relentlessly by Ellen’s often-public criticism.

Later Pronouncements

This statement, as it is wielded in General Conference meetings, is not merely bad Protestant ecclesiology; used out of context, it also fails to express Ellen

White’s view of the authority that General Conference officers should be allowed to exercise. Never again did she attribute to the General Conference such all-encompassing authority. It is clear from her statements made from 1895 onward that she didn’t mean the 1875 statement to apply to all General Conference decisions for all time.

■ “The voice of the General Conference has been represented as an authority to be heeded as the voice of the Holy Spirit. But when the members of the General Conference Committee become entangled in business affairs and financial perplexities, the sacred, elevated character of their work is in a great degree lost” (Manuscript 33, 1895).

■ “As for the voice of the General Conference, there is no voice from God through that body that is reliable” (Manuscript 57, 1895).

■ “The voice from Battle Creek, which has been regarded as authority in counseling how the work should be done, is no longer the voice of God” (Manuscript Releases No. 1268, 1896).

■ “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God” (Letter 77, 1898).

■ “That these men [church leaders] should stand in a sacred place, to be as the voice of God to the people, as we once believed the General Conference to be—that is past” (*The General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1901, paragraph 25).

■ “The Lord declares that His church is not to be governed by human rules or precedents. Men are not capable of ruling the church. God is our Ruler. I am oppressed with the thought of the objectionable human management seen in our work. God says, Hands off. Rule yourselves before you attempt to rule others. Strange things have been done, things that God abhors. For men to claim that the voice of their councils in their past management is the voice of God seems to me to be almost blasphemy” (Manuscript 35, 1901).

Respect, Not Infallibility

Ellen White’s last statement on the matter is from 1909, six years before her death. She wrote: “At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general

management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.”⁷

The collective wisdom and input of diverse believers who assemble for the General Conference in session has the ability and authority to determine God’s will for his work. But White denies that even this body is “the voice of God.” She notes particularly her concern about giving a single person or group of leaders within that gathering “the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church.”

Too Much Authority?


In the current General Conference, a small group of men again has an outsize influence. The agenda for both General Conference Executive Committee meetings and the quinquennial session originates in the president’s office, and it is finalized by the leaders who surround him. Those same people take the chair in the meetings, present their views, and effectively convey what the floor should vote. Rarely does a decision arise as the result of an open and balanced discussion of the issues.

Church leaders and church employees are in the majority, by policy, in any General Conference Executive Committee, as well as at the full session every five years. Not infrequently the lay delegates from other parts of the world are the spouses of church employees. It is hard to make the argument that this group is making decisions disinterestedly.

It is heresy to say that a person, or even a group of people, speaks for God. We would recognize that if we heard a pope say it, but for years we have registered little surprise when we hear a General Conference officer say it.

In theory, members could vote down a recommendation—but that rarely happens. The thumb on the scale, it seems to me, is the belief that God has invested the officeholders with heavenly authority.

Clearly, a meeting as large as the General Conference in session—some 2,800 delegates—can’t be unstructured. The problem is not that the General Conference has plans or opinions, but that it takes too much upon itself. It aspires to legislate policy and doctrine for every Seventh-day Adventist in the world.

Between 1901 and 1903, the church reorganized, creating the union conferences. GC President A. G. Daniells said that “the guiding principle [of reorganization] had been the decentralization of authority by the distribution of responsibility.”⁸ Yet, the union conferences have never been given much responsibility; they are just another set of offices in an already over-officed church. It seems to me we need to go back to the intention of that early 20th-century model and return authority to those closer to the work. 

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (1885), p. 492.
² Kevin M. Burton, “Cracking the Whip to Make a Perfect Church: The Purge of the Battle Creek Church on April 6, 1870,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1-2 (2018), pp. 73-104; also Kevin M. Burton, “The Adventist Leadership Controversy of the 1870s: A Brief Historical Overview,” *Adventism and Adventist History: Sesquicentennial Reflections* (Jan. 6, 2014).
³ Denis Fortin, *G.I. Butler: An Honest but Misunderstood Church Leader* (2023).
⁴ J. N. Andrews, G. H. Bell, and Uriah Smith, *Defense of Eld. James White and Wife: The Battle Creek Church to the Churches and Brethren Scattered Abroad* (1870), p. 112.
⁵ Burton, “The Adventist Leadership Controversy of the 1870s,” p. 3.
⁶ See White, “An Appeal for Burden Bearers” (Chapter 1) and “The Work at Battle Creek” (Chapter 9), *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (1885).
⁷ White, Manuscript 38a, *The General Conference Bulletin* (May 31, 1909).
⁸ General Conference Committee Minutes, Record Group 1, General Conference Archives (Nov. 13, 1902, 2:30 p.m.).

WHY VOTING IS SPIRITUALLY IMPORTANT

Business Sessions Require Both Prayer and Critical Thinking

By Edwin Torkelsen

KARL MARX WROTE IN 1843 THAT RELIGION IS “THE OPIATE OF the masses.”¹ In context, the statement is part of his analysis that organized religion acts as a balm that goes beyond the purely physical to soothe real suffering in society. Marx seemed to use this metaphor to mean that religion focuses people’s minds on the rewards of the *next* world, while leaving them passive and pliable in the face of the powers of *this* world—that religion is a feel-good intoxication that helps people merely endure the misery of their lives, rather than challenging the causes of their misery.

Was Marx right? His statement is complicated, but so is the misery of human lives. The role of religion comes in many varieties and expressions. It is not merely a question of the myriad of beliefs, their orthodoxies and heresies, but also the basic assumptions, praxis, traditions, and mentality that fuel religions.

Very Different Phenomena

Religion and spirituality are not the same. Religion is *external*, something we *do*. Religion usually presents a more-or-less organized system of ideas and behavior that includes traditions, norms, structures, and processes that define (and sometimes interfere with) our lives through an expected participation in ceremonies, events, and programs. Religious *external behavior* creates a social and mental glue, but also a powerful dose of *social control*. It defines the borderline between being inside or outside, and it identifies those who belong and those who don’t.

Persons who are religious tend to focus on the community rules of conduct and traditions, written or expected. Their conversations may be largely limited to religious topics, vocabulary, and themes that constitute the community’s frame of reference.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is an *internal, individual*, and *unique* close friendship and love between a person and God.

This human-divine relationship does not necessarily depend upon fellowship with others. It is an autonomous experience of something we *are*. It is a result of what *God* has done to reach humankind, not what *we* have done to gain God’s favor.

Religion Without Spirituality

It is possible to be religious without being spiritual. Religiosity lacking spirituality will often display a self-focused legalism: *I* must follow the religious rules and rituals to obtain *my* religious success. Sometimes a self-centered emotional excitement is perceived as spirituality, but it has distanced itself from reality. The focus is mainly on one’s own amazing, emotional faith experiences.

Real spirituality will always display the fruits of the Spirit in a Christ-centered life that reflects Christ’s empathy. It will see and care for the needs of the other, no matter what or who is that other.

External religiosity often descends into a passive escape from reality. If our heads are in the clouds, our feet will lose contact with the earth. At that point, our feel-good religiosity may turn out to be that opium Marx had in mind. We become addicted to an anesthetic dose of religiosity that numbs our empathy and blinds us to the needs of neighbors, strangers, immigrants, and everyone else who exists in the fringe areas of our society and our churches.

The hungry need food, the sick need medicines and care, the homeless need a home, the abused need comfort and security, the unemployed need work, and refugees need practically everything. All people need to see genuine love in a truly down-to-earth and hands-on Christlike spiritual person—one who sees, visits, and helps them without a hidden propaganda agenda. Lectures on pet church doctrines make no sense to the destitute and provide no help for their immediate needs.

Religiosity swells in a pool filled with egotism, while true spirituality is oblivious to itself, because it springs from God as we see him in Christ.

What God-speak Reveals

Christians who try to put their piety on display often mention God and religion in almost every sentence. After meeting some religious people, I have wondered, “Why can’t you speak normally, without sprinkling in all of those irrelevant (and, frankly, blasphemous when overused) religious phrases?”

Some expressions can sound pious yet hardly reveal common sense. It is a shame when believers use tribal language without thinking about the implications of their words. Examples include statements such as, “Let’s put this problem in God’s hands” or “Don’t worry; God is in control” or “We can leave that to God, who will take care of it” or “If many of us pray about it [with many words, and many times], God will make it happen.”

Such God-speak doesn’t reveal an active, healthy, and trusting faith in God. On the contrary, we debase our religion, revealing it to be a fatalist opium that numbs us into passivity. We disavow our responsibility and justify our lack of empathy when we pass by the needy person on our way to Sabbath School, perhaps hoping that a compassionate Samaritan will show up later. We absolve ourselves from caring for a wounded person by claiming that “God is in control” and by believing that suffering is heaven’s business, not ours.

This type of speech and thinking appears tainted by Calvinist predestination. Is it really up to God to decide what happens, good or bad? By loading the control and responsibility onto God’s shoulders, what happens in the world and my church is not my responsibility. I may close my eyes, lean back, and relax until Jesus returns.

“Witnessing” is often reduced to many words. But real, active hands-on witnessing is actions without many words. No sermon will beat it.

Religiosity on Autopilot

Some claim that if we just pray enough, God will automatically lead us to conclusions that reflect God’s will. Some even see God’s finger in deadly accidents, and they double the survivors’ grief by telling the bereaved that this death is part of God’s plan. “God is in control!” In essence, they absolve the devil and blame God for bad and evil things that happen in our sin-filled world.

Have you ever been on a church committee that did *not* open its deliberations with prayer? Neither have I. But my observation has been that in some cases—surely not all—the outcome has

already been decided in the back chambers. What is expected from the committee is to rubber-stamp any decisions, which are disguised as proposals. Even though the meeting opened with prayer for God’s guidance, the chair seems to already know God’s will.

Are our prayers a *do ut des* (Latin for “I give so that you may give”) deal with God, patterned after the Romans’ ritualized system of prayer and sacrifice that in turn brought blessings from the gods? Are our prayers transactional, such that God’s blessings will always align with our wishes?

Maybe we think that God in heaven will “remote control” our decisions? Maybe we believe there’s no need for critical thinking and an exchange of thoughts and ideas to test the validity and wisdom of the proposals presented by the committee chair? Maybe we assume it’s OK to just pray and trust the chair?

What kind of image does that paint of God, our faith, and our church? Perhaps we have forgotten that God needs *our* brains and hands to solve problems in this world?

Resisting Manipulative Leadership

How do we react when confronting leaders who are manipulative or unethical? When leaders demand loyalty to themselves and make it clear that challenging their opinions is tantamount to asking for dismissal, it is risky and potentially dangerous for the entire church. A leader who weeds out colleagues who question his ideas and replaces them with loyal yes-men and yes-women can be assured that his leadership style will someday be challenged—by God.

I understand how Karl Marx found similarities between opium and religiosity that avoids personal responsibility and engagement. It is vastly more comfortable to sit still in the boat, not make waves, keep your mouth shut, close your eyes, fold your hands, and “let God take care of this church” and world and its many miserable people and dysfunctional leaders.

We find a marked difference between the religious Pharisee’s boastful prayer and the deeply spiritual tax collector’s simple petition: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13, NRSV). Maybe we ought to join the tax collector in this prayer: Dear God! I am a sinner, but I know you love sinners. Here are my hands. Help me to help some who are miserable and in need!

Obligations of GC Session Delegates

God has no other hands than ours. Does that matter? If so, in what ways? What about us personally—are our hands and minds needed in church council business meetings?

This summer, approximately 2,800 delegates will be asked to vote on many proposals at another General Conference (GC)

Session. They will vote with their hands, either by raising them or pushing a button on a voting device. Most will probably push the “yes” button. Some will push the “no” button.

If you are a GC Session delegate, will it matter which button you push? Will you think before you push it, or will you just trust that all proposals are OK and, therefore, push the “yes” button without much thinking? Is your spirituality engaged in these voting decisions?

If you are a GC Session delegate, will it matter which button you push? Will you think before you push it, or will you just trust that all proposals are OK?

Our Seventh-day Adventist Church organization has only one purpose: to serve the needs of its many members. However, sometimes we wonder who is supposed to serve whom. Since our denomination is a religious entity, members expect our leaders to be servant leaders who reflect the ethics, love, attitudes, behavior, and mindset of Jesus Christ. In short, we expect them to be *spiritual* in all they do—not boasting of their own ideas and actions, but ministering in an integrated way.

Don’t fool yourself. Our leaders reveal the quality and level of their Jesus-like spirituality, not in their fiery, long sermons or with an impressive number of quotations from Ellen White, but in how they conduct the business of the meeting and the content of their agenda items. Attitudes and actions speak much louder than religious talk.

The 2,800 delegates are not on a paid vacation to St. Louis. They have a serious and important job to do—with their voting minds and hands. We expect delegates to read all of the agenda papers and to *evaluate* every agenda item before the session. If they don’t, they fail to do the job they are called to do on behalf of me and about 22 million other Adventist members.

Delegates are not voting cattle, asked to vote “yes” to all items on the agenda. In exercising this duty, they are obliged to vote according to their own knowledge, understanding, and conscience.

If leaders try to tell you how to vote, please ask them kindly to leave you alone. If you are a pastor or employee and feel that your

position is in danger if you do not vote as told by your boss, then ask God for courage, strength, and wisdom to disregard such “advice.”

Before you raise your voting hand or press that button on the voting device, ask yourself if the process and proposals reflect the spirit of Jesus, in accordance with the commandment to love God and your neighbor as yourself. If in doubt, vote “no”!


When called to vote for proposed candidates to fill positions of leadership, don’t rely on long lists of prepared praise. Instead, do your own research about each person’s reputation. What are his or her previous merits as a servant leader? If possible, consider the candidate’s character and attitudes. Listen not only to those who praise the candidate but also to those who have different inside information. Are fruits of the Spirit present in this person’s life? Take it as a red flag if you discover evidence of attitudes that do not reflect Jesus, or if that leader has revealed preferences for personal ambitions and tough treatment of other employees and colleagues, or if the candidate seems to wish for personal authority and power and claims of loyalty from all associates. We want no such leaders to rule over God’s community.

Critical Evaluation Over Magical Thinking

The call to participate in a GC Session requires delegates to think critically and to ask relevant, probing questions. They must evaluate leaders by their fruits, not by their pious-sounding sermons. Delegates need to consider the way leaders treat people who challenge their pet ideas. Voting “no” is just as spiritually important as voting “yes.”

The core of democratic-based leadership lies in the democratic mindset of both the voter and the candidate, as well as in actual assessment of each person’s capability and fitness for the job. The formal voting process, in itself, is no guarantee of a positive outcome. Neither the majority nor the minority can claim that their vote represents God’s will. It is the spiritual quality of the candidates and delegates that is the crucial test of validity.

The long-term results of the vote will indicate whether delegates have earnestly sought divine guidance during the voting process. To believe that prayer can secure God’s will automatically, without serious and critical evaluation, is an indication not of sound faith but of magical thinking. God does not reward our passive, fatalistic attitudes by performing a miracle.

To assure that God will truly lead us, we need to open our minds and our hands, then stretch them up to clasp his hand. 

¹ This statement was translated from the German original, “Die Religion [...] ist das Opium des Volkes,” which appeared in the introduction to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, published posthumously in 1844.

A Supplement of Absurdities

Examining Proposed Changes to the Church Manual

By Admiral Ncube

LONGTIME ZIMBABWEAN POLITICAL LEADER EDDISON ZVOBGO once said: “When there is a relay race, the expectation is that one runner hands over the baton to the next runner until the race is finished. However, the problem comes when the baton is given to the madman of Ngomahuru [Zimbabwe’s well-known mental hospital] who, instead of handing it over to the next man in the race, continues running all the way into the forests and mountains.”

The latest General Conference (GC) Annual Council, held October 10-16 of 2024, was the immediate precursor to the 62nd GC Session, which will convene in St. Louis in July. The Annual Council agenda included robust discussions and decisions on reports, including church membership, finances, the performance of critical departments and church institutions, celebrations of success in the mission, and proposed changes to the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual. Each of these items must be presented to the delegates in St. Louis, and many will likely be approved.

The heartbeat of Seventh-day Adventism, with a significant global footprint and the diversity of its 23 million members, is its commitment to reach the world with a unique last-day message. Accordingly, church leaders will in St. Louis present the I Will Go strategic plan for 2025-2030 and recommend allocating \$75 million for special mission endeavors to the 10/40 region, in addition to post-Christian and urban contexts. Of course, delegates may question this no-longer-new I Will Go strategy—requesting evaluation of the previous strategic plan through performance indicators, if any exist—but the intention is commendable.

This Annual Council meeting might have been routine, but its proposals have far-reaching implications that must be addressed, which left me with many questions—and a few fears.

Church Manual Changes

With the denomination’s increasing institutionalization, the Church Manual has come to play a pivotal role in equipping local leaders to coordinate and manage congregational affairs. This has made proposed revisions to the Church Manual a standing feature in GC Sessions and Annual Council meetings. About 22 revisions will be proposed this time.

Of particular interest is the addition of four supplementary sections specifically for North America, South Pacific, Inter-America, and South America. These additions, unique to each region, cover asset and property management, wills and legacies, communion, theology, marriage and weddings, liturgy, ordination of women as elders, theological pillars, Sabbath observance, use of digital technology, ethnic and political tensions, gambling, poverty, and more.

The Ted Wilson administration has prioritized homogeneity and administrative centralization, but global Adventism is extraordinarily diverse, and it is becoming clearer that one size does not fit all. Back in 2010 and 2015, when the debate about women’s ordination was raging, church leaders resisted a contextualized rule that would allow North American and European judicatories to ordain women.

Do these regional Church Manual additions show that leaders now see the futility of trying to keep the whole world church on the same page? Perhaps we are entering an era where leadership, in trying to navigate the complexities of the 21st century, is acceding to the pressures of contextual adaptation. The needs of each region are unique, and this must be respected. Adventism has multiple faces and diverse expressions—yet our church leaders have always resisted admitting this.

The irony here is that Adventist leaders appear to be decentralizing and contextualizing not to facilitate the work in local fields, but to entrench their own power. They seem to be saying that the rules in the Church Manual are not strict enough in some regions, so we must tighten them to maintain General Conference control over local fields.

But where do we draw the line? Should everything we do now be legislated by the Church Manual, rather than grow as a response to local discipleship efforts? Does the contextualization for various regional divisions extend to theological priorities in the church? For example, do we all need to simultaneously study the same doctrines and teachings, no matter how irrelevant they are? Will conferences now have their own section in union conference policy, and union conferences their own section in division policy, in order to give the overseeing office more control locally?

Instead of dismantling processes and attitudes that discriminate against women, we have a regional division proposing to make it almost impossible for them to serve as ministry leaders, even in a volunteer capacity.

If Adventism is serious about its mission, then it must deliberately keep decentralization fundamental, embrace diversity, and abandon the addiction to homogeneity. The idea is not to have more rules to exercise control, but more provisions to facilitate flexibility, adaptation, and creativity.

Obsession with Trivia

The Inter-American Division, in its proposed Church Manual addendum, included a recipe and baking instructions for communion bread. It specifies that “the following recipe has been VOTED to be used for the Lord’s Supper.” If that sentence is voted in St. Louis, the Church Manual would seem to say that it would be against Adventist beliefs to use any other recipe!

For a recipe to get a place in the Church Manual is unprecedented. At this rate, inserting a clause on the temperature of the water used for baptism would not be surprising.

Where do these contextualized rules end, and what parameters exist to define what makes it into the Church Manual? We are becoming a church obsessed with regulations and requiring what God has not required. There’s an inherent fear that Adventism is under attack and that enacting more rules will give us a semblance of control and commitment.

It is well known that we are, on average, losing four out of every 10 members. (This number would likely be worse if all congregations did membership audits.) Conventional wisdom is that our rate of attrition is not due to doctrine or theological issues but, rather, due to church conflict, to a lack of community, or even to abusive treatment.

This is a substantive issue related to mission and membership. How the ingredients in communion bread address these issues is unclear.

Could it be that our becoming more ritualistic, legalistic, and mechanical is symptomatic of a failure to cultivate intimacy with God? Sometimes it seems we are obsessed with creating laws of such particularity that it is actually harder to be a Christian. The tendency to multiply outward forms, and to develop hypersensitive religious scruples, exposes a lack of depth in our walk with God.

It seems we are trying to protect not God’s honor, but human ego and love for control. Legislating petty rules over inconsequential issues merely entrenches kingly power in the name of order. In the end, the preservation of Adventism does not lie in gatekeeping—through more regulations to protect the brand—but in administrative and spiritual maturity that embraces multicultural and polycentric Adventism.

New Restrictions for Women

Among the changes to the Inter-American Division section is a proposal concerning the ordination of women as church elders. The way this section is set up, women serving as elders at a local church are treated as an exception—an anomaly that is potentially divisive and requires approval of the conference committee after consultations with the union leadership.

The proposal paints this process as a negotiated outcome, with each case requiring clear consensus on the need for the ministry of a woman elder and its contribution to the spiritual well-being of the local church family. The local church must *prove* that there are dimensions of spiritual service and counsel that a male elder cannot adequately fulfill! Election of a female would require most local churches to take the action to a specially called church business meeting, where every church member is present.

This proposal deserves outright rejection. Despite the 1984 decision that women can be ordained as elders, we are still

trying 40 years later to protect God from the women created in God’s image. The volunteer service of women elders is portrayed as a threat, and they will be required to go through many hoops to exercise their God-given gifts in the church. Instead of dismantling processes and attitudes that discriminate against women, we have a regional division proposing to make it almost impossible for them to serve as ministry leaders, even in a volunteer capacity. Rather than challenging unbiblical views on ordination, we are using Church Manual provisions to entrench misogyny.

Those privileged to be delegates need to ask difficult questions, demand uncomfortable answers, and prayerfully help redirect the church out of the cul-de-sac.

Are we serious about the mission? The General Conference successfully dissuaded the world church from ordaining women as pastors, and now, in the Inter-American Division, it is doing the same for their serving as elders. In a church where, I remind you, the most well-known of our pioneers was a woman—and women have long constituted most of the membership—what is our fear?

An Out-of-Balance Session

The Seventh-day Adventist Church continues to run on a structure inherited in 1901—characterized by duplicated offices and roles at local church, conference, union, division, and GC levels.

Sections of the proposed supplements suggest that the conference and union would increasingly serve as gatekeepers to ensure local church compliance with the mandates of church administrators. In this process, we are treating congregations as franchises, locally detached but globally aligned, existing to demonstrate compliance more than mission. The proposed revisions, when analyzed holistically and added to existing rules, would only stifle the local church.

All of this puts a massive burden on the GC Session. In addition to the voluminous Church Manual revisions that

already consume three days, the addition of division-specific supplements will require delegates to endure the torture of voting further revisions (and edits on revisions). Future sessions will be collective editing sessions of trivial rules. Is this the best use of time and resources for these expensive meetings?

All of this could be simplified if we’d take a holistic look at the entire governance process and organizational structure. It seems to me that this is an issue that church leaders do not want to confront.

Most all Adventists by now are aware that each GC Session involves more church employees than lay members. This could explain the penchant for instituting more rules, since they make administrative structures stronger and more necessary. In recent years, the General Conference has multiplied rules that extend its tentacles into the local congregation, reducing unions and conferences to mere enforcers. The more Church Manual provisions are added, the more enforcement is required.

Push Back

The time has come for local churches and laity to push back. We can:

- Push back attempts to entrench kingly power perpetuated through centralization and excessive homogeneity.
- Push back processes and attitudes that discriminate against women and keep them from effectively serving the church.
- Push back institutionalized inefficiencies that are camouflaged as calls to mission and stewardship.
- Push back against governance meetings whose agenda is carefully curated to divert attention from holding those in leadership accountable.
- Push back business meetings and sessions that give more power to denominational workers than to church members.
- Push back Church Manual supplements that contain more absurdities than answers to facilitate the mission.

Adventism has entered a cul-de-sac. But instead of stopping to identify the way out, we are circling around in it. The road to St. Louis is open, but business cannot be as usual. Those privileged to be delegates need to ask difficult questions, demand uncomfortable answers, and prayerfully help redirect the church out of the cul-de-sac.

Silence is not an option. Renewal is necessary. It is time to snatch back the baton from the madman of Ngomahuru and carry it through to the finish line. 🏁



The most significant period of major organizational reform in Adventist history began at the 1901 General Conference Session. The General Conference Committee expanded to include members from beyond the church headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan. Also, creation of union conferences gave greater autonomy to other regions of the world church.

CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY AT A GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION

BY LOWELL C. COOPER

THE FIRST GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION IN 1863 DREW 20 delegates. When the 62nd session convenes in St. Louis, Missouri, beginning July 3, 2025, the roll will surpass 2,800, with as many as 100,000 visitors on weekends. From a time and resources standpoint, effectiveness and efficiency are paramount.

According to the General Conference (GC) working policy, this meeting represents the “highest authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church under God.”¹ Accordingly, the session has unique responsibilities found nowhere else in denominational structure:

- election of General Conference and North American Division leadership²
- approval of the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs
- amendments to the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws
- amendments to the Church Manual
- admission/dismissal of member entities in the General Conference

■ other items that may have been referred for Session action

Session business is accompanied by daily devotional meetings, video reports from the 13 divisions, plus program promotions and reports. It makes for a very intense 10 days.

Logistics

A successful GC Session owes a lot to the people behind the scenes: notably, the Session Management Committee. An international gathering of this magnitude requires adequacy of location, facilities, hotel accommodation, and meals, which is why this group begins to work up to 10 years in advance.

The delegate total for the year 2000 (1,844 in attendance) was reduced from the delegate total in 1995 (2,321 in attendance), but since that time, delegate counts have grown again. It may seem logical to expect that a growing world membership requires a growing delegation. I believe, though, that a *reduction* in numbers of delegates need

not be a detriment to good decision-making. Few other religious organizations conduct their denominational business with such a large delegate count over the course of 10 days.

An experiment to reduce the number of days of a GC Session—to six for the session held in 2022—was deemed unsatisfactory, since it required business sessions to extend into evening hours. Shortening a session’s duration, without giving careful thought to the work that needs to be accomplished, cannot prove beneficial.

Nominating Committee

At the top of the agenda is election of leaders for the General Conference and its divisions. The GC Session begins with selection of a nominating committee, which over the course of three or four days will bring recommendations for more than 100 leadership positions—leaving its members no time to participate in other business.

The nominating committee is under serious time pressure. It has little time for extended research or evaluation of candidates, because a nomination for president is expected within a matter of hours. An unintended consequence is that incumbents, because of their familiarity, generally have an advantage.

Following his election, the General Conference president meets with the nominating committee as an advisor. The committee receives, but is not obligated to endorse, his recommendations for the leadership team. If the president is new to the role, he must very quickly prepare a roster of recommendations. Some have suggested that the nominating committee might sense fewer constraints if the GC president were to present his recommendations and rationale, then leave the room.

Other denominational entities have addressed these challenges by having the nominating committee meet *in advance* of a constituency session, which allows for a more deliberative selection process and gives the nominated president more time to compose a leadership team.

Since a globally represented nominating committee meeting in advance of a General Conference Session could be easily arranged, thanks to modern technology, surely there is merit in considering alternatives to the present system.

Agenda Documentation and Discussion

It goes without saying that GC Session delegates, who receive agenda information well in advance, should familiarize

themselves with it. The question we face is how to conduct business session discussion productively and efficiently. Open discussion is an important feature of democracy in practice, and we must protect the opportunity to challenge assumptions and to suggest alternatives—all of which contribute to respect and trust in the organization itself. It is in discussion, however, that things can get bogged down.

Amendments to Fundamental Beliefs go through a years-long process that involves extensive communication, inviting contributions from around the world. Usually, after such an extensive process, recommendations are readily adopted.

The picture is different, however, with the Constitution and Bylaws and the Church Manual. Any proposals for amendment to these documents have been considered in advance by the General Conference Executive Committee and communicated to division executive committees. Yet, the delegates get to discuss these only at the GC Session. This creates a queue of people asking for clarification, expressing dissent, or offering alternatives. Sometimes

My experiences while attending nine GC Sessions have convinced me that many opportunities remain unexplored for more efficiently conducting the business of a General Conference Session.

extended floor discussion prompts motions to close debate, which wouldn’t be necessary if delegates had an opportunity to address questions directly with the committee concerned.

Members of the standing Constitution and Bylaws Committee, as well as the standing Church Manual Committee, have been available during each GC Session to address matters that may be referred to them during discussion. It would be more efficient, though, if these committees met on the first or second day of the session and encouraged delegates with concerns or questions to attend; addressing questions with the committee could reduce the time needed for discussion on the floor.

For better or for worse, virtually all of the Executive Committee recommendations brought to the session are adopted with wide (80%-95%) majorities.



This summer the GC Session returns to St. Louis, Missouri, which last served as the host city for this 10-day business meeting in 2005. A planning team has worked closely with city officials for nine years to coordinate logistics.



Early General Conference Sessions were held outside small churches, but today they require large football stadiums to accommodate the growing number of delegates and visitors.



GC Session delegates now represent a much more diverse church. One-third of Adventists today reside in Africa, and another third of our church members live in Central America and South America.

The Church Manual

A significant portion of time at a GC Session is devoted to amendments to the Church Manual.

For almost 70 years following formal organization, the General Conference was reluctant to codify the operation of each local church. Over the course of time, however, there was growing recognition that local congregations would appreciate some guidance. The first edition of the Church Manual was published in 1932, with an introduction stating

congregations in terms of size, language, cultural context, and organizational experience makes it difficult to create a single pattern for how to operate. Elements of Church Manual authority are vigorously adhered to in some congregations, while somewhat ignored or adapted in others.

For global use, the Church Manual needs to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Its role in the world church might be significantly enhanced if it were to enunciate the *essential principles* of local church structure and operations and provide application examples, then leave it at that.

Open discussion is an important feature of democracy in practice, and we must protect the opportunity to challenge assumptions and to suggest alternatives.

that “it has become increasingly evident that a manual on church government is needed to set forth and preserve our denominational practices and polity.”³

The 1946 General Conference Session voted that “all changes or revisions of policy that are to be made in the Manual shall be authorized by the General Conference Session.”⁴

One of the challenges with such a document is the tendency for it to become, over time, more *prescriptive* than *descriptive* of local church life. The vast diversity of

Beyond the Business Agenda

I had agreed to meet my wife, a member of the GC Session Music Committee, at the main exit following the Sabbath worship service near the conclusion of the 2005 General Conference Session in St. Louis. The international crowd was streaming from exits. Not far from where I stood were two persons from Africa, attired in stunning national costumes. A delegate, obviously from India, also noticed the African Adventists and immediately desired to have his picture taken with them. (This was before “selfies” had become common.) Motioning wordlessly to a person nearby (obviously from East Asia), he offered his camera and by gesture requested that a picture be taken of himself with the two Africans. Once the camera was returned to its owner, smiles acknowledged mutual acceptance of the momentary incident.

What fascinated me was that no words were expressed. This had all happened silently—perhaps in expectation

that while different languages were a barrier to communication, gestures would suffice. Just when the group of four was about to disperse, the Indian man looked directly to the other three and, with index finger spearing the air, exclaimed, “One God, one church!”

The whole scene transpired in hardly more than a minute. I had been heavily involved in the business sessions and felt eager for it all to be over. But here, in these brief seconds, I got caught up in a reality that surpassed a focus on church business. People

Since a globally represented nominating committee meeting in advance of a General Conference Session could be easily arranged, thanks to modern technology, surely there is merit in considering alternatives to the present system.


who had never met before experienced a collective identity that overwhelmed distinctives such as race, culture, gender, nationality, age, and political convictions. They had bonded on the platform of shared faith in the one God of the universe.

After reflecting on this picture moment from 20 years ago, I am not sure we can devise any better way to create a shared identity, despite all of the pressures and influences that arouse thoughts of otherness in human communities.

What Keeps the Church Together?

A General Conference Session is remarkable. It requires years of planning and considerable expense in finance and in time. It provides for global membership engagement through the selection of representatives. Delegates who attend are generally favorably impressed with what they see and learn about the global church. Upon departure from a session, delegates know by experience that the church is held together by values more than by votes. This value cluster includes:

- our submission to Jesus, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit
- a collective commitment to partnership in worldwide mission
- respect for the church as the body of Christ, despite its imperfections
- a willingness to keep striving for togetherness while respecting differences
- the merit, amid struggles, of group decision-making processes throughout the global structure

Perhaps the most significant underlying message that comes from attendance at a GC Session is that the church is organized for mission. God does not have a mission for the church so much as he has a church for his mission. May we be that church! 

¹ General Conference Working Policy (2023-2024), B 10 22.

² See General Conference Bylaws, Article VI, Section 1 and Article XIII, Section 1. c.

³ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 20th edition (revised 2022), p. 17.

⁴ Op. cit. p. 17.

IS THE GENERAL CONFERENCE IN SESSION THE VOICE OF GOD?

By Alvin Masarira

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IS A HIGHLY REGIMENTED organization. It guards, with disciplinary action if necessary, against attempts to challenge what is termed “properly constituted church authority.” It has crafted a comprehensive set of rules, guidelines, and policies that are reviewed every year by the General Conference (GC) Executive Committee, with more continually being added.

All big global organizations have policies, of course. Yet, the overwhelming majority of us are not well-versed in the policies that govern our church. Policy is regarded as the domain of elected leaders. Although church policy documents are generally available and in the public domain, rarely do pastors or other church leaders take time to explain the details of organizational structure to members, as those details are thought to be of no salvific benefit.

It sometimes happens, though, that a church member disagrees with or wishes to challenge “properly constituted church authority.” Since an Adventist could be banned from serving in church positions—or even removed from membership—on the basis of one or more of these policies, it would be useful for us to know more than we do about how our church works.

One area that is of current interest is the operation of the GC in its international quinquennial session, coming up in July.

How Representative Are Our Processes?

Adventist church authority is backed by statements such as this: “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.”¹ This is generally understood to mean that any decision made by these representatives should be considered “the voice of God” once a vote is taken in the session.

What seems to be lacking, though, is a clear understanding of how representative these representatives should be. If, for example, the leaders tasked with convening the gathering actually influence the selection of delegates by choosing predominantly “like-minded” people, whom they feel would vote for the issues they support, would these people still be considered representative of the church, or merely of the leaders’ ideal? If the representatives do not reflect the full spectrum of demographic, theological, and cultural diversity of the church members they represent, can they still be expected to exercise God’s authority?

Back in 1863, the Seventh-day Adventist Church comprised about 3,000 predominantly monocultural members, mostly in New England and the Upper Midwest of the United States. Organizational authority was centralized at the General Conference headquarters, which served the purpose at that time. By 1875, about 8,000 members had formed roughly 340 congregations.

But by 2020, over 20 million members belonged to more than 95,000 churches and 73,000 companies, in 200-plus countries. This sprawling membership poses some serious governance challenges, especially to an organization that insists on uniformity and conformity to a single set of rules.

By insisting on a unified policy and practice, the General Conference allows leeway to accommodate contextual and cultural differences, where they exist, only in regard to minor issues. The resulting system is insufficient, in my view, to accommodate the broad cultural spectrum of worldwide Adventism.

Actually, It’s the Voice of Church Employees

As the 62nd GC Session approaches, we are faced with the question of whether the delegates in session can make decisions that have the stamp of heaven. One allegation is that the processes are deliberately set up to achieve intended outcomes, which are then pronounced to be “the voice of God.”

Let us take a look at how the decisions made at this meeting are planned in advance.

Items that appear on the GC Session agenda begin in very small committees at the church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland: namely, the President’s Council, the President’s Executive Administrative Council, and the committee of the General Conference and division officers. From there, agenda items go to the General Conference Executive Committee of about 350 members.

Close-knit groups of denominational employees make up virtually all of these committees, with the majority of the members owing their positions to senior General Conference leadership. There is, to my knowledge, no formal process to solicit agenda items from local fields; most are birthed at the church’s world headquarters.

Although GC Session delegates have the opportunity *in theory* to oppose these recommendations, remember that most

of the delegates were also preselected by their division or union executive committees because their views align with those of leadership. One could conclude, then, that the delegates represent less “the voice of God” and more the voice of church leaders. As evidence, I would submit that it is very rare for a significant number of voices at the session to oppose any item on the approved agenda.

Another major item at the GC Session is election of the officers of the organization, as well as division officers and the leaders of some institutions. A nominating committee is chosen, based on a formula that is meant to ensure fair representation of the world church and its institutions.

The first task of the nominating committee is to nominate and bring to the session floor a recommendation for one man (only males are eligible) to serve as the General Conference president. The nominating committee, like most of the other GC committees and GC Session delegates, is less representative of the church than it is of church employees, who doubtless already have fellow employees in mind for these jobs.

Unlike a company that wants to select a chief executive officer, the General Conference conducts no formal executive search in the year preceding the election; it collects no résumés, schedules no interviews, discusses no competing candidates. We can debate whether this is an effective process, but the fact remains that the GC Session delegates always vote for the individuals who are nominated.

The next thing that happens is, in my view, the most bizarre: the newly elected General Conference president joins the nominating committee to direct the hiring of the rest of the leaders who will work at the church headquarters—people who will have significant influence on the direction of the world church in the coming five years. His participation in the process has never been fully justified, but the general view is that he plays an advisory role. Yet, when the newly selected GC president expresses an opinion, who would dare to speak or vote against those he requests?

Why should a president guide the nomination of the rest of the leaders, instead of trusting God to lead the very committee that produced his own nomination? People I’ve spoken to have offered examples of situations when the new president has expressed opposition to candidates that most members knew (or

could have known) was based on personal conflicts he’d had with those particular candidates—not their job performance—and replaced those individuals with his friends.


This nomination process is another example of how the GC Session is promoted as the voice of God guiding the church when, in fact, it appears to engender a selection of leaders by powerful organization insiders.

A Manipulated Process?

While the average church member might see the GC Session (and possibly even their local or union conference sessions) operating as a modern equivalent of the Urim and Thummim on the breastplate of the Old Testament high priest, the leaders who set the agenda for these sessions clearly approach it as a series of business decisions to ensure predetermined outcomes.

Before you protest that everyone spends lots of time in prayer in preparation for these meetings, or that God is sovereign and cannot be manipulated by humans, let me hasten to point out that religious history is full of examples of leaders who felt justified using manipulative techniques to guide a group in the direction they wanted it to go. Jesus spoke at length to the religious leaders of his day about their manipulative tendencies—qualities they obviously didn’t recognize in themselves.

Of course, ultimately God will achieve divine goals in spite of what humans want to do. God can draw straight lines using crooked sticks. But I am convinced that if the sticks were not crooked, the straight lines would be drawn in less time. The journey from Egypt to Canaan would have taken fewer than 40 years if Israel had been faithful and obedient to God.

I believe we need to take an honest look at the large role that human influence plays in how the business of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is currently conducted. It seems to me that we could get closer to hearing “the voice of God” in these meetings if the process were redesigned to listen more to the entire church and less to the voices of a few top leaders. We could start by giving decision-makers at every level—from the members in the private committees in the General Conference to the delegates in the session itself—permission to be loyal opposers, not just yes-women and yes-men. 

¹ Ellen G. White, “The General Conference,” *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9 (1909), p. 260.

Is the Apocrypha Scripture for Adventists?

The Changing Definition of *Sola Scriptura*

By Matthew J. Korpman

FOR MOST CHRISTIANS, THE WORD “BIBLE” INVOKES A SPECIFIC conception: a certain number of books, a particular look and appearance, and maybe some additional study aids. Yet, this is mostly an illusion. In truth, there is no such thing as “the Bible”—only many Bibles (plural). If you go to an American bookstore and pull Bibles from the sales rack, you will find differences not only in translation but in content, as well. While one Bible may contain only 66 books (Protestant), another may contain 73 books (Roman Catholic¹), or even 76 (Eastern Orthodox²). In another part of the world, you might find Bibles that contain 77 books (Russian Orthodox³) or even 80-plus (Ethiopian Orthodox⁴). Since Protestant communities make up only one-third of the world’s Christians, the *majority* of Christians worldwide use a Bible with more than 66 books.

These extra books (plus additional chapters for Daniel and Esther) from the Old Testament are referred to as “deuterocanonical” by their respective churches but are now called “apocryphal” by Protestants. The King James Version included these works when it was published in 1611, and the majority of Bibles among Protestants contained a section between the Old and New Testament titled The Apocrypha that held a number of these works, ranging from 1 Maccabees to 2 Esdras. These books were part of most Protestant Bibles until the mid-1800s, when publishers decided to stop including them (primarily for monetary reasons).⁵ The result is that today, most Protestants are unaware that Christians don’t agree on what constitutes the “Bible.”

As a case in point, Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, issued a stern warning to the world church in October 2021 during his closing sermon for Annual Council. He said, “I have even heard of an attempt

to question the reliability of the 66 books of the Bible canon, suggesting we need to look at non-canonical apocryphal books to perhaps broaden our view on truth.”⁶ He urged every Adventist, including scholars, to “reject this.” He also encouraged church members to hold strong to the testimony of Ellen White and the Adventist tradition, apparently unaware of the contradiction in such an admonition. He seemed to believe that church traditions and the spirit of prophecy would guide the church away from the Apocrypha, not toward it. In fact, the previous Adventist position on this topic was quite the opposite of Wilson’s assumptions. Most Protestants in the mid-1800s not only owned a King James Version that included the Apocrypha as part of the Bible but also believed that some of those books were inspired.

This article will focus on how the Seventh-day Adventist Church has understood these works and their role within the life and thought of the church. The importance of this has been magnified because we are now also aware that Ellen White, in a vision she experienced in 1849, proclaimed the Apocrypha to be part of the Word of God. Her endorsement of the collection while in vision, coupled with her claim in the same vision that Satan was attempting to remove the works, implores the church to examine this issue with a balanced sensitivity.

Although many likely assume that the question of what constitutes the Old Testament is a foundational, settled issue within Seventh-day Adventism, the world church has not made an official and binding declaration on the topic.

Pre-Church Formation

Before the Seventh-day Adventist Church was formally named and constituted, Sabbatarian Adventists largely embraced the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras as Scripture, due to its widespread

reception during the Millerite movement as an authentic prophecy confirming William Miller’s prediction for 1844.⁷ It appears that with the rise in popularity of 2 Esdras, the other books of the Apocrypha likewise garnered more attention. This can be seen by the fact that between 1846 and 1863, in addition to a near-universal acceptance of 2 Esdras, the books of 1 Maccabees and the Wisdom of Solomon from the collection were likewise cited by Adventist writers. Ellen White’s earliest vision references not only 2 Esdras, but also the Wisdom of Solomon, both of which James White called “scripture” in the reprinting of the vision in the pamphlet known as *Word to the Little Flock* (1847).⁸

Prior to 1863, Adventists referenced almost no other apocryphal works aside from those three, with the exception of Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, which James White quoted from almost authoritatively in 1851 and 1852⁹ and then used as the basis for a short, unsigned homily published in 1858.¹⁰ While these instances indicate a growing interest in the Apocrypha, they also demonstrate that many early Adventists were looking at the merits of each book rather than viewing them as a collection. When editors of the *Review and Herald* provided a public declaration in 1858, they acknowledged that portions of the Apocrypha were instructive—and even recommended by the early Christian fathers. However, the conclusion of this statement, which is the earliest public summary of the issue published before 1863, is both confusing and misleading. It states, “The question of the inspiration of these books—the reasons that might be adduced in favor of such an opinion, and the objections that might lie against it, we have never made a subject of particular study, and are not therefore prepared to discuss.”¹¹

In truth, almost all of the early *Review and Herald* editors (including J. N. Andrews, James White, J. H. Waggoner, and Raymond Cottrell), with the exception of Uriah Smith and Stephen Pierce, are known to have believed at this time in the inspiration of 2 Esdras as Scripture. And while Uriah Smith would later quote from 2 Esdras in *Daniel and the Revelation* (1882) without any note on its apocryphal status, his earlier views toward it are unknown. Given this, it seems odd that individual church leaders who would regularly affirm the inspired status of 2 Esdras throughout this period chose, as a group, to publish a statement that did not closely align with their personal convictions. In context, then, we can surmise that while James White and many of the others may have believed in the inspiration of 2 Esdras, they were not prepared to defend it as a formal position to others (even if they had already done so for themselves, insofar as they were personally concerned).

From *Review and Herald* (1858)

“Concerning the Apocrypha, we regard portions of it as containing much light and instruction. If we were asked to specify, we should mention 2 Esdras, Wisdom of Solomon, and 1 Maccabees. Concerning the Wisdom of Solomon, Sears’ History of the Bible thus speaks: ‘Although the fathers of the church, and particularly Jerome, uniformly considered this book as apocryphal, yet they recommended the perusal of it, in consideration of the excellence of its style. The third Council of Carthage, held in the year 397, pronounced it to be canonical book under the name of “The Fourth Book of Solomon,” and the Council of Trent confirmed this decision.’ Concerning the first book of Maccabees, it also says, ‘The first book of Maccabees is a very valuable historical monument, written with great accuracy and fidelity, on which even more reliance may be placed on the writings of Josephus.’ The question of the inspiration of these books—the reasons that might be adduced in favor of such an opinion, and the objections that might lie against it, we have never made a subject of particular study, and are not therefore prepared to discuss.”

D. G. Needham, “To Correspondents: Old Style and New,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 12, No. 12 (Aug. 5, 1858), p. 96.

Since one would imagine that such a question would be quite deserving of study, the declaration is puzzling, particularly since it does not harmonize with an even earlier statement about the Apocrypha made by Ellen White. In two visions near the end of 1849 and beginning of 1850, the young White proclaimed that the *entire collection* of the Apocrypha (not merely a specific portion) was inspired and part of the Word of God. Because the 1849 document is a transcription of her comments, written as she gave them, it contains several minor spelling errors (see box on page 21). I have included my own corrections or clarifications in brackets (alongside those already made by the Ellen G. White Estate).

This visionary statement gives a blanket acceptance of the Apocrypha as an entire collection, describing it as part of “thy Word” (i.e., “the Word of God”). It treats the removal of these books from the Bible as an act of Satanic deception and, furthermore, implores Sabbatarian Adventists to cling to the Apocrypha, binding it to their hearts. To date, we know of no stronger endorsement of the Apocrypha from any other Adventist. No other early Adventist comes close to embracing

the Apocrypha with the language and religious fervor she does here. To top it all off, she did so while in vision, giving her endorsement a spiritual authority unrivaled by others. In a subsequent vision four months later, in January of 1850, she remarked again: “I saw that the Apocrypha was the hidden book, and that the wise of these last days should understand it.”¹²

The fact that Mrs. White’s statement was not championed by the *Review and Herald* nearly 10 years later demonstrates the personal freedom and independence that Adventists exercised early on regarding her prophetic role in the church. While proclaiming something from vision as authoritatively true, the church accepted her counsel only as a *potential* reality, not a *binding* one.

As William White, her son, wrote in a letter regarding these documents, “she speaks of the Apocrypha and says that portions of it were inspired.”¹³ While the idea of “portions” does not accurately reflect White’s own comments, it does summarize how most Adventists appear to have approached the issue. Prior to the denomination’s official beginning, Adventists were in large agreement regarding both inspiration and the Apocrypha; nevertheless, the *Review and Herald* declined to make any official declarations on the topic to the Adventist community as a whole.

Early Denominational Beginnings

The early history of the canon post-1863 is fairly ambiguous, since the Seventh-day Adventist Church did not offer an official consensus or statement on the scope of Scripture and its limits. The canon was, for all intents and purposes, if not open, undelineated.

An early version of our fundamental beliefs, published in 1872, was intended to summarize what Adventists held in common as belief, without serving as a creed or binding statement. As the introduction states, “We do not put forth this as having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them.”¹⁴ The third doctrine, which covers Scripture, refers only to the Old and New Testaments and gives no more specific description of their content.

1872 Declaration of Fundamental Principles

– III –

“That the Holy Scriptures, of the Old and New Testaments, were given by inspiration of God, contain a full revelation of his will to man, and are the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”

Uriah Smith, *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (1872), p. 5.

This statement does not explain what constitutes the Old Testament, a surprising omission given the ongoing debates about 2 Esdras and other apocryphal works at this time. Perhaps this was intentional, indicating a desire to allow differences of opinion among the believers on a fairly debatable topic. Given that the list was intended to express unanimous agreement, it is important to note that while early Adventists agreed on the Bible as their rule of faith, they did not hold a uniform belief of exactly what constituted the Bible. Furthermore, this third statement about the Holy Scriptures was reprinted in a revised document in 1889 without any changes or additions.¹⁵

1931 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination

“Seventh-day Adventists hold certain fundamental beliefs, the principal features of which, together with a portion of the scriptural references upon which they are based, may be summarized as follows:

1. That the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, contain *an all-sufficient revelation* of His will to men, and are the only *unerring* rule of faith and practice.
- 2 Timothy 3:15-17.”

Editors, *1931 Year Book of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination* (1931). Italics added.


In 1931, Adventists released another document that lists 22 fundamental beliefs. It presents inspiration of the Bible as the first doctrine instead of the third and largely repeats the earlier formulation, with some minor changes, such as the idea that it is “the only unerring rule of faith.”

Overall, the 1931 statement demonstrates a move toward inerrancy, due to its involvement with the rising evangelicalism movement, and a continued silence regarding the Apocrypha. Unlike in previous statements, the church’s silence was due not to a lack of agreement over this issue, but to a lack of perceived relevance. By the 1930s, most Adventists had forgotten about the books, which were by then missing from Bibles that had been purchased in their lifetime. White’s statements had been locked away by this point within the archives of the Ellen G. White Estate, and nearly all documents indicate that differences in opinion over inspiration of the Apocrypha had fallen from memory in the general Adventist consciousness. As Edgar Goodspeed observed in 1939: “The Apocrypha have long been almost forgotten by the Christian public.”¹⁶ He mused, “Most Americans know the Apocrypha, if they know them at all,

only as some mysterious books which they used to see in their grandfather’s old Family Bible, but which for some unexplained reason they do not find in theirs.”¹⁷ Regardless, the 1931 statement of Adventist fundamental beliefs does not draw any conclusion regarding the Apocrypha, leaving the church with no official position on the topic for nearly 100 years after the first Millerite preachers took up the topic.

Room for the Apocrypha

Clearly, it was left up to each individual Adventist to make a decision as to what books constituted the Old Testament. While many could agree about books such as 2 Esdras, works such as Baruch were either rejected or simply left to a resigned agnosticism. This research establishes that although Adventism was formed around the conviction that Scripture is the rule of faith, it was also understood that *sola scriptura* was a complex proposition—more multifaceted than many within the church recognize in our own time.

One can thus describe the canon of Adventism as fluid, on both individual and communal levels. The first part of our history reveals that the biblical canon had room for the Apocrypha (either parts or the whole) in the minds of most Adventists, both laity and leaders alike. While this viewpoint fell into obscurity among Adventists in the following years of the 19th century, the foundational policies of Adventism gave no priority to one view or the other. 

“Remarks in Vision,” Manuscript 5, 1849

[Taking the large Bible containing the Apocrypha, Ellen White said while in vision:] “Pure and undefiled, a part of it [the Bible] is consumed, holy, holy, walk carefully, tempted. The Word of God, take it..., bind it long upon thine heart, pure and unadulterated. How lovely, how lovely, how lovely. ... Thy word, thy word, thy word, a part of it is burned unadulterated, a part of the hidden book, a part of it is burned (the apocrypha). Those that shall spitefully trea[t]”¹⁸ that remnant [the Apocrypha] would think that they are doing God service. Why? because they are led captive by Satan at his will. Hidden book, it is cast out. Bind it to the heart. Bind it to the heart. Bind it to the heart. Bind it to the heart. Bind it, bind it, bind it ... let not its pages be closed, read it carefully. Snares will beset on every side, take the strait truth[,] bind it to the heart, bind it to the heart, bind it to the heart, le[s]t everything be cast out.”

Ellen G. White, “Remarks in Vision,” Manuscript 5, 1849.

¹ Roman Catholic Bibles include within the Old Testament: 1 Macabees, 2 Macabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, and Epistle of Jeremiah. They also include additional chapters for Esther and Daniel.

² Eastern Orthodox Bibles include within the Old Testament, in addition to all the books in Roman Catholic Bibles: 3 Maccabees and 1 Esdras (3 Ezra). Many also include 4 Maccabees, and others consider the Psalms of Solomon as deuterocanonical, given its presence in some copies of the Septuagint. Eastern Orthodox Bibles also include an additional chapter for 2 Chronicles.

³ Both Russian and Georgian Orthodox churches include 2 Esdras (4 Ezra) as part of the Old Testament, in addition to the other books contained in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles.

⁴ There is no strict limit to the Ethiopian Orthodox canon, which differs from the other Orthodox Bibles mentioned in that it rejects the books of Maccabees, instead containing 1 Meqabyan, 2 Meqabyan, and 3 Meqabyan. It also includes in the Old Testament: 1 Enoch, Jubilees, 4 Baruch, and other works.

⁵ For a full review of this history and early Protestant attitudes toward this collection, see Matthew J. Korpman, “The Protestant Reception of the Apocrypha,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha*, ed. Gerbern Oegema (2021), pp. 74-93.

⁶ Ted Wilson, “Trust God’s Prophetic Word in the Coming Conflict,” Annual Council Sabbath Sermon online at adventist.news (Oct. 9, 2021). For a response to Wilson’s comments, see Matthew Korpman, “The Apocrypha & Adventism: A Response to Ted Wilson,” AdventistToday.org (Oct. 14, 2021).

⁷ Matthew Korpman, “Adventism’s Hidden Book: A Brief History of the Apocrypha,” *Spectrum*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2018), pp. 56-65; Ronald Graybill, “Under the Triple Eagle: Early Adventist Use of the Apocrypha,” *Adventist Heritage*, Vol. 12 (Winter 1987), pp. 25-32.

⁸ It is also possible to detect allusions to themes from 1 Maccabees in her first vision, albeit uncited by James White.

⁹ James White, “Dreams,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Apr. 21, 1851), p. 71; G. W. Holt and James White, “Dreams,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (Jan. 13, 1852), p. 80.

¹⁰ Editors, “That Lost Day,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 12, No. 15 (Aug. 26, 1858), p. 120.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Ellen G. White, “A Copy of E. G. White’s Vision, Which She Had at Oswego,” Manuscript 4, 1850.

¹³ William White to Guy Dail, letter dated May 21, 1911. For more on this recently discovered letter, see Matthew Korpman, “Is the Apocrypha Inspired? An Enlightening Letter from Ellen White’s Son,” AdventistToday.org (July 24, 2024).

¹⁴ Uriah Smith, *A Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (1872), p. 3.

¹⁵ Anonymous, *A Revised Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists* (1889).

¹⁶ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Story of the Apocrypha* (1939), p. vii.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ The original statement lacks some of the emendations indicated by brackets. For a defense for why I and the White Estate have each added some of these, please see my forthcoming journal article, which offers the first in-depth textual analysis of this vision: Matthew J. Korpman, “Satan’s Captives Are Burning the Bible: Did Ellen White Endorse the Apocrypha in 1849?” *Spes Christiana*, Vol. 36 (2025).

The Past, Present, and Future of Last Generation Theology

By David Hamstra

Last Generation Theology implies that humanity has another “mediator” in the end-time atonement after Christ’s advocacy for us in the pre-Advent investigative judgment is finished: the end-time remnant.

The story of Adventism’s Last Generation Theology (LGT) begins way back with John Wesley and Methodism. Wesley taught that after initial conversion, the Holy Spirit can perform a “second work of grace,” sometimes labeled as “entire sanctification.” The result was a sort of character perfection—“purity of intention” or “love excluding sin”—after which one would cease *intentional* sin, even though mistakes would still be possible.

American Methodists pursued this experience through revivals, with emotionally expressive preaching and response. This worship style also characterized early Adventism; the “shouting Methodist” experience wasn’t unknown to them.

The Past

During the decades of Adventism’s denominational formation, the Methodist current was likewise developing in new directions. The Higher Life movement was influenced by Oberlin College in Ohio, which incubated a theology of utopian perfectionism. New York Methodist perfectionist Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) encouraged the “shorter way” to “higher life” via entire surrender. The Keswick Conventions, which taught a similar perfecting of the self, was founded in 1875 in England; eventually, the Higher Life view of perfection became the default among American low-church Protestants through the teachings of Dwight L. Moody, who addressed Keswick from 1872 to 1874.

The movement’s quietist slogan, “Let go and let God,” remains a watchword for many today. It describes the decisive act of will by which they believed that Christians could receive immediate, entire sanctification and, thus, assurance that they could not be lost.

Seventh-day Adventist Church co-founder Ellen G. White appears to have stuck close to Wesley’s understanding throughout these developments, and we still consider her writings a theological source for the Adventist community. In a recent master’s degree thesis at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan, Esther Louw substantiates this view of Wesley and White, which is part of the story of our past that we need to tell.¹

As White matured in her ministry, she generally opposed ecstatic revivalism and immediate entire sanctification, choosing instead to interpret character perfection as a corporate, end-time experience. She believed that the end-time remnant will experience Christian perfection but can never claim sinlessness.²

Ellen White’s twilight years and the early 20th century saw the rise of the Fundamentalist-Modernist conflict, an ecclesiastical divorce in the household of American Protestantism. The fundamentalists took revelation seriously when it spoke of the miraculous, individual transformation of the person, and reward in the hereafter. Modernists looked to science and the universities, social transformation, and the good life in the here-and-now.

Since the Higher Life movement was opposed to anything worldly, it sought to eliminate ambiguity in the conflict with modernists by reducing sinlessness to obedience of rules and regulations. Adventist historian Michael W. Campbell has found that Adventists in this period who were influenced by Higher Life/Victorious Life literature began to interpret sinless perfection—never breaking God’s rules—as a condition we must meet for the end times to commence.³

By the 1930s, evangelicals began to emerge from the fundamentalist movement. Evangelicals wanted to engage with the world, and they taught grace over works. We see a parallel development in fundamentalist Adventism, which had leveraged end-times anxiety to produce performance; after World War 2, this view slowly collapsed under the weight of its expectations. The phases made popular by former Adventist preacher Robert Brinsmead—perfectionist (1960s), evangelical (1970s), and secular humanist (1980s to present)—probably represent this trend better than any other single case. An emphasis on righteousness by faith by Desmond Ford, another Australian minister who was Brinsmead’s former classmate, tapped into the same well of dissatisfaction, which was fed by a spring of spiritual anxiety within the denomination.

For the latter half of the 20th century, fundamentalist Adventism in America adopted a stance of fighting retreat, but it did not die. Those who viewed Adventism as the best program for keeping the rules spread their vision of perfection throughout the developing world, where it was well received by people facing narrow existential margins. Anglo/European Adventist reactionaries fought for control of the General Conference. Parachurch ministries increasingly advanced fundamentalist critiques of mainstream North American Adventism, within the framework of Last Generation Theology, believing that a return to rigorous rule-following was necessary for Jesus to return.

The Present

I’ve found that a failure to arrive at a common definition frustrates most current debates over Last Generation Theology. As far as I can tell, LGT was first defined by its most eminent critic, George R. Knight.⁴ He drew the term from a chapter on “The Last Generation” in theologian M. L. Andreasen’s magnum opus, *The Sanctuary Service* (1937), in which Andreasen synthesized the early-20th-century Adventist view: that sinless perfection of the end-time remnant would make the second coming of Jesus possible, because it would finally vindicate God’s character by demonstrating that human beings born into sin can stop breaking God’s law.

This is the novel idea of LGT, and it addresses two big Adventist questions: “Why hasn’t Jesus come back yet?” and “Why does the last generation need to be perfectly holy?” It gives one simple answer: we have a climactic part to play in the end-time great controversy by vindicating God’s character. We do this by following God’s rules down to the smallest detail so that humanity’s probation can close and Jesus can come back.

The central problem with LGT is that it implies a heresy. Protestantism broke with Catholicism because we should not put the church in a place that only Christ can occupy. Andreasen, who considered the vindication of God’s character by the end-time remnant to be a stage of atonement, wrote that the “cleansing of the sanctuary in heaven is dependent upon the cleansing of God’s people on earth.”⁵ This construes the end-time remnant as



M. L. Andreasen

standing between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity, making it possible for God to save all humanity because of the sinless perfection divinely accomplished in their sinful human nature.

Therefore, Last Generation Theology implies that humanity has another “mediator” in the end-time atonement after Christ’s advocacy for us in the pre-Advent investigative judgment is finished: the end-time remnant. The Bible says, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5, NIV). The LGT idea that perfection of the end-time remnant at the close of probation is necessary for all humanity to be saved makes the remnant a sort of “co-redemptrix.” This is unnecessary within the system of Adventist theology.

The cross was the sufficient demonstration that vindicated God's character before the onlooking universe. As Ellen White saw it, "The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan."⁶

Following a system of rules that becomes increasingly minute the farther one goes is considered a Pharisaical approach to character formation.

God does not need a second such demonstration in order to close the great controversy (Rom. 3:26; John 12:30-31). And the pre-Advent investigative judgment settles any questions heaven's residents might have about the fitness of the saved to join them there.⁷

The Future


In my discussions with proponents of LGT, their responses to the above assessment tend to redirect the discussion toward the suggestion that *any* critique of their theology is a critique of future Christian perfection altogether—a rhetorical strategy that makes sense, because the possibility of perfection is what many critics of LGT attack.

A few people suggested that I am on a slippery slope because I do not deny Christian perfection—or, more precisely, I locate it entirely in the past of a Christian's experience—meaning that Christians should consider themselves already perfect in Christ and, therefore, need not concern themselves with ongoing or future completion of perfection in this life.

As an apocalyptic religion in the Wesleyan tradition, Adventism will always demand an account of ongoing and future Christian perfection tied to the end times. But the descendants of those who developed and spread LGT will no longer tolerate an anxiety-producing interpretation of these things, and I suspect that sooner rather than later, global Adventism will generally feel the same way. Opponents of LGT would have more credibility with their co-religionists if they focused their energies on helping to develop a healthy and hopeful view of Christian perfection rather than trying to overturn it altogether.

Proponents of LGT, for their part, need to appreciate that despite their rightful insistence that keeping God's law is accomplished by the power of Christ alone, their prevailing conception of progressive sanctification—following a system of rules that becomes increasingly minute the farther one goes—is considered a Pharisaical approach to character formation. They could also reconsider the wisdom of fighting to secure the future of a term that is highly questionable, given the mediatorial heresy LGT connotes, and ironically was coined by its

foremost critic, George Knight.

I regard character perfection as an already-accomplished (1 John 4:17), ongoing (Phil. 3:14-15), and future reality for believers. The maturity of God's end-time harvest will not depend on a completed checklist, but rather, on the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13; Rev. 14:15). It will be a state of Christian maturity where love is our only motive, but growth is still possible (John 13:35; 1 John 1:8). More important than a good theory of perfection is experiencing it—not as a burden to live up to, but as a promise to live *in* to. 

¹ Esther Louw, "Pardoned and Perfect: A Comparative Study of the Soteriology of John Wesley and Ellen White," Master of Arts degree thesis, Andrews University (2024).

² See, for example, Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times* (March 23, 1888); *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900), pp. 62-69; and *Selected Messages Book 2* (1958), pp. 32-33.

³ Michael W. Campbell, "Holiness Adventism: The Victorious Life Movement, Seventh-day Adventism, and Last Generation Theology," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society national meeting (2022).

⁴ George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (2000), p. 144.

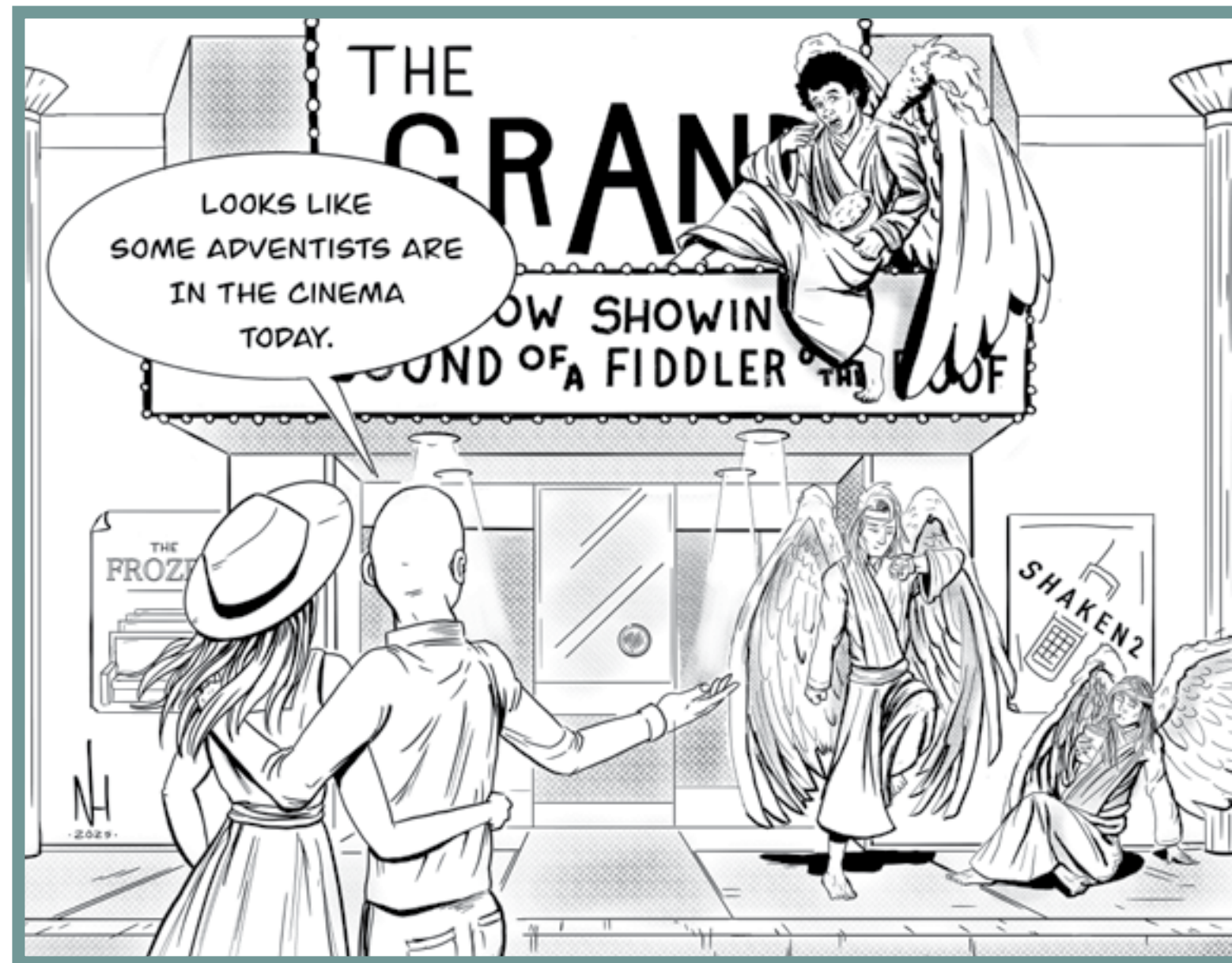
⁵ M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service* (1937, revised 1947), p. 321.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), p. 68.

⁷ Compare Zechariah 3, especially verse 7, with Ellen White's application of "Zechariah's vision of Joshua and the Angel ... to the experience of God's people in the closing scenes of the great day of atonement" on pages 587-592 of *Prophets and Kings*.

"Well, there's that..."

By Nate Hellman



Our Church in a Digital World:
Do We Still Need to Worship Together in Person?

By Reinder Bruinsma

This essay is part of a lecture delivered at the European Theology Teachers Convention in Sagunto, Spain, March 19–23, 2025.

From its inception, the Adventist Church has utilized new media with enthusiasm and professionalism. Whenever it entered a new territory, leaders made starting a journal and establishing a publishing house a high priority.¹ It was among the first religious organizations to evangelize via radio, and when television became available, our evangelists were early adopters. Today, Adventist television is dominated by two organizations with a range of international branches: the independent, conservative Three Angels Broadcasting Network (3ABN) and the denominationally owned Hope Channel.

During the presidency of Robert Folkenberg (1990–1999), the church headquarters promoted use of the internet, starting with an Adventist Forum on CompuServe. Pastors and teachers also replaced their overhead projection sheets with PowerPoint presentations. Adventist entities shared information by means of DVDs and YouTube videos. Online or streaming sermons could provide the worship service in some small churches when the pastor wasn’t there. And, of course, the interactive website has become a primary information tool for its organizations, from the local church to the General Conference. Blogging, which developed from a hobby of a small group into a worldwide phenomenon, was later followed by podcasts.

Adventist organizations (official and independent) and individuals joined their fellow citizens in an embrace of



various social networks, and Facebook is now home to nearly 60% of social media users: 3.07 billion people, or about 38% of all people on our planet, are active on the platform.² Recently, a new player has entered the arena: artificial intelligence, or AI. To a large degree, we have yet to see how it will shape communication in years to come.

COVID Changed Everything

From 2020 to 2022, the risks of infection through physical contact forced us to find new ways of communicating, holding meetings, and doing church business. Even for young children, education shifted from a face-to-face exchange to learning through an online platform. Zoom soon became the primary tool for holding small informal meetings, as well as major congresses and everything in between.³ Even the postponed General Conference Session of the Adventist Church in 2022 was converted from a large in-person convention into a digital event, with most delegates connected (and voting) via their computer.

In the early days of the pandemic, most denominations made the almost-universal transition to online church services—the weekly worship service, as well as other gatherings. Those who already had some experience with streaming their services had a head start, but the rest caught on quickly. Many church members discovered that they liked the ability to “attend” these streamed services at their convenience—perhaps even in their pajamas, while sipping a cup of coffee. Geography became unimportant, since church members could watch services anywhere in the world. Starting times weren’t important, since “views” could be registered at other times than on Saturday or Sunday morning. They could leave the service at any time, too.

Most Christian denominations have seen a steady drop in church attendance over the last few decades.⁴ Attendance fell during the pandemic, then rebounded a little afterward, but a sizable number of churches have continued online services either exclusively or in combination with physical

attendance.⁵ According to recent reports, only about 40% of our official membership attends Sabbath services in person.⁶

Online Sabbath Schools have become popular post-COVID. Some, such as the Faith and Reason Sabbath School of Sligo Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland, are connected to the largest Adventist congregations. Others are linked with supporting ministries, such as Amazing Facts, It Is Written, 3ABN, or Voice of Prophecy, which are privately run nonprofit organizations. Some of these communities follow the Sabbath School quarterly, while others invite speakers from around the world and attract members from many different geographical locations. A unique but successful model is the *Adventist Today* Sabbath Seminar, which is not directly connected to any congregation.

Specialization

Unsurprisingly, these online classes have begun to specialize, usually in terms of liberalism vs. orthodoxy. Participants are drawn to certain classes because of the choice of topics, their theological leanings, or affinity with the presenters.

The split is even more clearly seen on the websites of independent Adventist ministries. Some websites and Facebook pages, such as Fulcrum7 and Advent Messenger, strongly defend traditional church teachings and are extremely critical of progressive ideas and trends—even if they come from the General Conference.

The best-known progressive Adventist journals, which reach the majority of their readers through their associated websites, are *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today*. It is difficult to obtain a full picture of the number of participants on these sites, but they do have a wide readership. Fulcrum7 reported that over the past four years, it saw well over 1 million visitors

on its website,⁷ while Advent Messenger reported 134,000 visitors over the last quarter of 2024.⁸ *Spectrum* revealed in its annual report that in one year it had almost 2 million views on its website, with about three-fourths coming from outside the United States. *Spectrum* also reported 47,500 followers on *Facebook*.⁹

Interestingly, visits to the *Spectrum* site exceed the number reported by the *Adventist Review* website, which is only 1.2 million in 12 months. *Adventist Today* falls slightly below the numbers of *Spectrum*. Amazing Facts, the ministry led by Doug Batchelor, sees about the same amount of traffic on its site as the Adventist Church headquarters office—between 5 and 6 million annually.¹⁰

The digital revolution has changed not only how we write and rewrite and the accompanying editorial and prepress processes, but also publishing—notably the emergence of e-books and printing on demand. Adventist individuals and organizations can easily self-publish books that support traditional Adventist views or else promote their own—occasionally alarming—ideas.

What some would regard as an exciting new element, others see as a danger: personalized spiritual guidance through AI algorithms. Samson Ohda, an author who explores the intersection of technology, nature, and mindful usage in the digital age, envisages the creation of apps for “neurotech-assisted spiritual practices.” He is thinking of “mindfulness apps that use brain-computer interfaces for enhanced spiritual growth. These apps,” he supposes, “could guide users in meditative practices tailored to their cognitive responses.” Thus, we may soon be able to benefit from “voice-activated AI spiritual assistants” or “neurotech wearables” that may “provide biofeedback during prayer and meditation, helping users achieve deeper states of

spiritual focus.”¹¹ Many Seventh-day Adventists would undoubtedly be wary of such practices.

Community

The most crucial question is this: What does it mean to be a community now? Can the experience of participating in online activities replace the spiritual benefits of in-person worship with other believers?

Online communities were a blessing during the pandemic, and this opportunity to interact with fellow Adventists remains a useful channel in spiritual care for the elderly, those who are homebound with physical limitations, and church members who live far away from a congregation. Online communities also can provide a safe haven for those at the fringes of the church who have no interest in traditional weekly fellowship.

Again, it is important to note that online communities demonstrate varying levels of affiliation and commitment, and participants appear drawn by their particular theological orientation.¹² This is certainly true in the Adventist context, where they are—perhaps roughly, but nonetheless with a basis in reality—on the continuum of “left” and “right” or “progressive” and “conservative,” with most of them near one end of the continuum and relatively few in between.¹³ While most online Sabbath School classes intend to be courteous to anyone who attends, it seems to me that this theological sorting doesn’t promote open dialogue between people with differing opinions but, rather, can lead to considering others as the opposition (or even enemies).

Some feel that attending church by switching on their laptop while still dressed in a housecoat does not provide the seriousness and context



NEWS BRIEFS

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

Hidden Coffee Maker Sign of Health Mutiny

SILVER SPRING, Md. — One of the biggest scandals in recent Adventist history erupted this week when a coffee maker was discovered on the third floor of the General Conference building. The Mr. Coffee machine was found in a break room behind a wall of tightly stacked boxes of Wheat Thins in the corner of a small supply cabinet. Security was immediately notified, and all frequent users of the break room were apprehended for questioning. “No one has claimed formal responsibility for the coffee maker so far, but a full investigation into the matter is under way,” said Chuck Branson, head of security. “We will leave no stone unturned.” “The presence of this coffee maker explains the erratic behavior of some of the people working on this

floor,” said Health Ministries Director Glenn Crusoe. “Half of these people are hopped up on something.” Branson said that his security team was more than up to the task of bringing “any and every user” of the Mr. Coffee machine to justice. “The last GC impropriety involved illegal betting on a fantasy capture the Flag tournament, and we got to the bottom of that in no time,” he said. “Sooner or later, someone talks.” **Dance Step to Debut at GC Session 2025** COLUMBIA, Md. — “There is absolutely no reason to freak out,” declared newly appointed Sacred Music Director Liz Samuels as she opened a press briefing this morning outside her office at the North American Division. She then briefly looked over her shoulder before announcing a “simple two-step addition”


to corporate singing of the Adventist classic “We Have This Hope” at the GC Session in 2025. “Think of it as praise chorus actions, except with your feet,” said Samuels, who has been tasked with planning nightly song services for the upcoming session. She is planning to use the stadium screens to teach the basic two-step move to an international crowd in St. Louis in July. Samuels and her team have billed the decision as “a giant leap forward for the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” and they insist that the two-step is “entirely consistent with the very literal dancing that King David performed before the Lord.” “How can we sing about a hope that ‘burns within our hearts’ while standing motionless?” Samuels asked stunned church reporters at the briefing. She stressed that the two-step will not only get the circulation flowing for the tens of thousands of GC attendees but will also “help reinforce the message of the most beloved of Adventist anthems.” Immediately after the briefing, senior General Conference leaders released a statement saying that they had absolutely refused to accept the idea of the two-step until Samuels likened it to “a simple Pathfinder marching step to the left and then another one back to the right.” After much debate, the innovation was

tentatively accepted for testing at the GC Session, providing “hands are not raised and zero clapping is involved.” **GC Employee Sneaks Unsanctioned News** SILVER SPRING, Md. — A General Conference (GC) employee was caught red-handed using a virtual private network (VPN) to access independent Adventist websites during work hours. The incident has sent shockwaves through the hallowed halls of the world church headquarters. Sources close to the matter report that the employee, whose identity remains confidential, was discovered when IT staff noticed suspicious activity on the office network. Upon further investigation, they found that the employee had been secretly accessing websites to read *Adventist Today*, *Spectrum*, and even the notorious “Adventist Memes for Tweens & Teens.” “We’ve always known that dissenting voices were out there,” said Elder Rulesalot Strickman, head of the newly formed Department of Theological Purity and Internet Censorship. “But to think that one of our own would risk eternal damnation—or, worse, his job—to read unauthorized interpretations of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs—it’s unfathomable!”

of real worship. I tend to agree with this, especially for individuals whose experience has been fully reduced to this one way of “doing church.” But are there valid theological objections? It seems to me that the Holy Spirit can be fully present and active in cyberspace. According to some, the biblical *ekklesia* means that people must be “called out” in person, to physically gather in a particular location to worship together and to experience the blessing of the sacraments as a sacred community.¹⁴ This may be a more crucial issue for Roman Catholics, who differ from Protestants in their view of what happens at the Eucharist via the bread and wine. I wonder, though, if something gets lost for us, too, when in-person fellowship is replaced by a digital ritual, without the physical presence of the brothers and sisters of the local church. Even though a lot of worship music can be downloaded or viewed on YouTube, and one can enjoy superb sermons and attend online prayer meetings, being a Christian seems to imply spending time with fellow believers, singing and praying and engaging together in activities on behalf of people in need. **Control** Much in the operation of online groups depends upon the skills of the moderators and the group’s rules of engagement. Often the leaders of these groups aren’t religious professionals. That needn’t be a problem, but it raises the issues of authority and ownership. Who are the gatekeepers? Who controls the narrative within a group? What level of control do pastors or denominational leaders have? This represents a dilemma for denominational leaders. Their grip on disseminating information, which used to be quite firm in the heyday of

print publications, has weakened. The leadership can still control *part* of the online presence of Adventism through the denominational websites, as well as some YouTube productions and church-owned television ministries, but a major part (both on the left and on the right) is beyond their control—and probably will remain that way. **Age** When I was invited to do a presentation recently for an online Sabbath School, people connected via Zoom from just over 100 locations. After I made a positive comment about this level of participation, the moderator toned down my enthusiasm by stating that he saw no one on his screen who was below the age of 65! “What does this say about the future of our church?” he asked. Just as there appears to be a digital dichotomy between progressives and conservatives, a wide gap also exists between age groups. Intuitively we might assume that youth and young adults would play a main—perhaps dominant—role in the digital Adventist world. Young people within local churches are usually involved in tasks related to computers, audio, video, and online activities. But as far as I can tell, few successful Adventist online communities or evangelistic initiatives attract many young people. An exception in the Western world might be the semi-official Generation Youth for Christ (GYC) organization, which is quite successful in attracting a large number of Adventist young people and also has an extensive online presence. One of the questions we should try to answer is how we can not only stimulate dialogue between progressive and conservative segments of the church, in both in-person church activities and online communities, but also create a more intergenerational climate.

Not a Replacement

Based on my reading and experience, I believe that digital religious practices should not replace the in-person praxis of our faith. Except for very special circumstances, such as prevailed during the coronavirus pandemic, online worship services and other church activities should *augment* rather than *replace* in-person worship. Ideally, the activities of these virtual communities should guide their audience back to the local churches. Still, let’s be thankful that online communities minister to and provide a spiritual home for many “on the margins” of Adventism who, in fact, consider this to be their church. 

¹ Richard W. Schwartz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Pacific Press, 2000 ed.), pp. 204-224.
² See www.demandsage.com/facebook-statistics.
³ Zoom has 55 percent of the video-conferencing market, with 300 million daily users, according to www.demandsage.com/zoom-statistics.
⁴ See Jeffrey M. Jones, “Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups,” news.gallup.com (March 25, 2024); “Being Christian in Western Europe,” online report by Pew Research Center (May 29, 2018).
⁵ Ryan Foley, “Church Attendance, Volunteering Rebounds but Remains Below Pre-pandemic Levels,” *The Christian Post* (Sept. 9, 2023).
⁶ Daniel Mora and Loren Seibold, “2023 Statistics Show Growth, but Also Heavy Losses, Weak Attendance,” AdventistToday.org (June 16, 2024).
⁷ See www.fulcrum7.com/about.
⁸ These data were collected via www.pro-similar.com.
⁹ “Website,” *Spectrum*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Nov. 20, 2024), p. 9.
¹⁰ These data were collected via www.pro-similar.com.
¹¹ Samson Ohda, *Christianity and Digital Discipleship* (March 21, 2024), pp. 163, 165, 168.
¹² Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (2016), pp. 66, 68.
¹³ Further research is needed to either confirm or reject this assumption, which is mostly based on personal observation.
¹⁴ Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (2009), pp. 55, 56, 93.

In an exclusive interview conducted via carrier pigeon, the anonymous employee defended these actions, saying: “I just wanted to know what other Adventists were thinking without having to file a request in triplicate and wait for the Committee on Potentially Subversive Literature to approve it. Did you know there are Adventists out there who don’t think the GC is right about everything? My mind is blown!”

In response to this breach of protocol, the General Conference has announced a series of measures to prevent future incidents:

- mandatory loyalty oaths to be recited before logging onto any computer
- installation of CarobNet, a closed intranet system featuring only Ellen White quotes and grainy photos of people wearing suits from the 1950s
- a new seminar titled “The Internet: Satan’s Worldwide Web of Deception”

Strictman concluded the press conference with this stern warning: “Remember, brothers and sisters, curiosity killed the cat. And by ‘cat,’ I mean your chances of ever being invited to another Annual Council.”

Adventists Sue Vatican in New Trademark War

SILVER SPRING, Md. — In breaking news, the General Conference of over-traveled

executives brings landmark legal action against its longstanding rival, the Vatican, for trademark infringement and unfair competition. This complaint makes several significant allegations, as the following summary illustrates.

I. The Parties

The Plaintiff is the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which is practically a kingdom organized under the laws of its own making, with its principal place of business located in a cavernous, underlit office building in Silver Spring, Md.

The Defendant is the Vatican, an independent city state with its principal place of business located in its own actual country.

II. Background

Plaintiff has been in the business of designing, manufacturing, and selling sweeping decisions under the trademark Highest Authority on Earth for well over a century. Plaintiff’s status has become somewhat recognized (among persons seeking GC employment) and is frequently used to put lower divisions, unions, and conferences in their proper place on contentious issues.

Defendant, which claims ultimate global authority in religious matters, has persisted in holding onto this self-asserted status, despite valiant Adventist efforts in the form of PowerPoint presentations

featuring colorful beasts and timelines.

III. The Claim

Defendant’s claim to ultimate spiritual authority and infallibility, which is confusingly similar to Plaintiff’s trademark, is likely to cause adherent confusion, mistake, or deception as to the source or origin of Defendant’s claims. This use constitutes trademark infringement and is, quite frankly, super annoying.

IV. Prayer for Relief

Plaintiff respectfully requests the following relief:

- An order enjoining Defendant, its agents, servants, employees, and all persons in active concert or participation with it, from using any mark or design that attempts to prevent or compete with Plaintiff’s claim to being the “highest authority on Earth”
- An order requiring Defendant to deliver up for destruction or other disposition all infringing articles, labels, tags, signs, prints, packages, molds, matrices, and other means of making such articles
- An award of damages, including all cool points and other benefits derived by Defendant from its infringing conduct, together with any damages sustained by Plaintiff as a result of Defendant’s wrongful conduct
- An award of Plaintiff’s missed potlucks due to the time-consuming nature of this legal affair
- Such other relief as the Court deems just and proper

DATED: IMMEDIATELY
GC Global Defenders/Coffee Pot Detectors
(123) 666-1844
gcnotbackingdown@gc4eva.org

Panicked SDA Leaders Applying at 7-Elevens

SILVER SPRING, Md. — 7-Eleven stores in the Silver Spring area have run out of application forms after being flooded by employment requests from General Conference (GC) officials assessing their re-election prospects.

With GC Session 2025 just around the corner, some of the convenience store applicants even offered to jump ship to 7-Eleven before this summer, since the chain offers a much greater sense of job security than the cavernous denominational headquarters.

“We are running into a logistical nightmare, because all of our recent job applicants are requesting Friday nights and Saturdays off,” said a local store manager. “Many candidates are also asking about whether they have to sign any compliance documents ahead of their hire dates.”

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EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

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

MOST SUCCESSFUL ONLINE CLASS FOR ADVENTISTS



When we started the *Adventist Today* Sabbath Seminar in 2020, we thought that the COVID-19 pandemic would quickly pass and that soon we'd all be back in our regular congregations. We didn't envision that it would become the most successful online class for Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar has proven to have a larger and longer-

lasting purpose than we first thought. It gathers people who enjoy the chance to talk honestly and openly about our church and our own relationship with God.

Now in its fifth year, *Adventist Today* Sabbath Seminar continues to grow. It has become a sort of online congregation. Week after week pastors, teachers, lay persons, and church leaders help us look at our faith in new and creative ways. It is a courteous, supportive gathering of people from all over the world.

I invite you to be part of the *Adventist Today* Sabbath Seminar, which begins every Saturday at 1:30 p.m. Eastern time! Everyone is welcome; no special invitation is necessary. Links and password are on the website (AdventistToday.org), on Facebook, and in our weekly *AT Update* newsletter.

—Loren Seibold, *Adventist Today* Executive Editor

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