

A Young Adult  
Perspective PAGE 7

Experiences of Adventist  
Women Pastors PAGE 30

After the Darkness,  
What? PAGE 36

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# Adventist *Today*

THE 2015 GC SESSION AND THE  
**FUTURE DIRECTION**  
OF THE ADVENTIST FAITH



## COVER STORY

### The 2015 GC Session and the Future Direction of the Adventist Faith

#### 7 Do All Things in Love: A Young Adult Perspective

by Stefani Leeper

#### 10 Observations of a First-time Attendee

by Jeff Boyd

#### 16 A Tale of Two GC Presidents

by Dennis Hokama

#### 20 The Women's Ordination Vote Reveals an Increasingly Fragmented Church

by Caleb Rosado

#### 22 Does the General Conference Have Authority?

by Gary Patterson

#### 30 Experiences of Adventist Women Pastors Identify Ways to Support Women Clergy

by Leslie H. Bumgardner

#### 32 Does 21<sup>st</sup>-Century First-World Adventism Need the General Conference?

by Ervin Taylor

#### 36 How Forbidding Incest Ruined the Church Manual

by Tom de Bruin

## FEATURES

#### 4 Waiting for Ubuntu

by Smuts van Rooyen

#### 36 Post Tenebras Luxis

by Jack Hoehn

## DEPARTMENTS

#### 3 Editorial

What's Next for the Adventist Faith  
and This Journal?

By Monte Sahlin

#### 42 Alden Thompson

Now Is the Time

#### 47 Adventist Man

What I Was Doing at San Antonio

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## What's Next for the Adventist Faith and This Journal?

By Monte Sahlin

What do the decisions made during the General Conference (GC) Session this past summer mean for the future of the Adventist faith? We asked a number of writers, including the journalists who covered the event in San Antonio for *Adventist Today*, to address this theme. Our cover series includes a variety of Adventist perspectives: both male and female, young and old.

The vote on the question of extending clergy ordination to women pastors has been met with widespread affirmation as well as great disappointment. It has not served to unify Adventists in any way or to settle the issue. In fact, the debate at the Annual Council of the GC Executive Committee in October may bring more disunity, and even schism, if leadership does not find some way to accommodate the very different views and values related to this issue.

The revisions made in the Fundamental Beliefs document also leave some division, although the differences are less clear-cut and the feelings perhaps not as intense. During the 2015 GC Session, it was announced that further study will be given to principles for interpreting Scripture, disclosing a deeper split among Adventists that is rooted in two basic values for our faith: (1) the Protestant ideal of each believer rooting his or her faith in the Bible alone, based on personal study, and (2) the Adventist commitment to education, which introduces the capacity to read the Bible in its original languages and to fully understand the context from archaeology and history.

### Change in Editor

Dr. J. David Newman has served as editor of *Adventist Today* since 2009, but due to health issues he has stepped down. He has been a strong voice for

evangelical Adventist faith and worked to extend a contemporary ministry that has made a difference in the lives of many young adults, including my own children. "The only thing that matters is Jesus and our relationship with Him," David often asserted, as he did in a 1995 editorial in *Ministry* magazine. "The cross stands as a mighty beacon radiating through time, declaring that God is love."

He was born to British missionary parents in Africa and spent the first 12 years of his life in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, then attended secondary school in England and Scotland. He went to college at La Sierra University in Southern California and completed seminary at Andrews University, later earning the Doctor of Ministry degree at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. He served the Seventh-day Adventist denomination as a pastor, church administrator, and college professor. He was an officer of the Ohio Conference when he was called to the GC Ministerial Association in 1984, and for 11 years he was editor of the official professional journal for Adventist ministers around the world.

At the 1995 GC Session, Newman was asked to step aside, and he did what few Adventist administrators do; he returned to the role of a congregational pastor. For more than a decade, he was senior pastor at New Hope Church in the suburbs between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. It became a large, growing, innovative, multicultural congregation with significant numbers of young adults. He retired as pastor in 2012 but continued to play a key role at *Adventist Today*.

David convinced me to take on the role of chief executive officer of the Adventist Today Foundation. His heart remains with this publication, and he will

*Continued on page 45*



**Due to health issues, J. David Newman has stepped down as editor of *Adventist Today*. But his heart remains with this publication, and he will continue to be a contributing editor.**

# WAITING FOR UBUNTU

*By Smuts Van Rooyen*

RECENTLY A FRIEND, WHO DOES NOT HESITATE TO REFER TO ME as an apostate and who likes me only a little, wrote to me claiming that Jesus said, “A house divided cannot stand.” He was upset with me because I am an advocate of pluralism within Adventism, and he felt that I am somehow dividing our church.

I confess that he gets under my skin, as I know I do his, but this under-the-skin thing is a part of church life that has to be tolerated, or even embraced. It is, I think, part of being mature. (Woody Allen complained that his wife was immature because she confiscated his rubber ducky when he played with it in the bathtub.) At any rate, being irked by another Christian cannot be allowed to stand in the way of a fruitful exchange. So I replied that he had misquoted the words of Jesus and asked him to reread Mark 3:25 or Matthew 12:25 or maybe even both, if he were so inclined.

What Jesus actually said was, “If a house is divided *against itself*, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:25, NIV, emphasis added). In other words, it is not division that is the problem, but something else. We understand and accept that every family is divided *de facto* between children and parents, brothers and sisters, mom and dad, grandparents and grandchildren, cats and canaries, etc. We know that this country, the United States of America, is legally divided by its constitution into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, and they generally coexist in an adversarial relationship that works for the good of all. In addition, although no less than 50 independent states are in this union, the nation nevertheless bumbles along just fine, thanks. Division and/or diversity is not a problem unless it is against itself; then it is downright dangerous!

So when is a house divided against itself? The easiest way to explain it, I believe, is by means of the body’s autoimmune system. When this system, which is meant to defend the body from foreign invasion, misidentifies what is its own as being alien and then attacks its own, the body is divided against itself. Thus the very entity meant to promote life eventually brings death.

Such misidentification, in my opinion, occurred at the General Conference (GC) Session this summer. There we saw friends as foes and nullified them. In San Antonio, the tragedy of “friendly fire” occurred. Neither the women pastors nor the North American Division (NAD) is a foe of the church, but they were treated as such. We denied the calling of the Spirit in the lives of our women and diminished the legitimate authority of the NAD within its own cultural context.

What was deeply frustrating to me was that the majority rejected a clear win-win option, where all cultures could have had their way in terms of ordaining women. Instead, they chose to dominate the West.

Perhaps the most devastating neutralization of ourselves was to squander the opportunity to become relevant to our society once more. My grown children, without understanding the nuances of the vote, labeled it as “just plain stupid.” Said my daughter: “What a sad thing it is to actually promote your own irrelevance and think you’ll thrive. What an opportunity was lost to declare, ‘We understand the 21<sup>st</sup> century!’” She is absolutely right.

A parable tells of an old gardener who owned a magnificent sundial, a true work of art. It was made of bronze and had, over the years, developed a beautiful green patina. The gnomon (yes, that is what it is called) faithfully cast a shadow on the dial plate whenever the sun shone. The gardener could read the time to within 16 minutes by way of the hour lines marked on the plate, and he could even make astronomical observations by the equinox line, the declination curves etched on it. The sundial to him was not simply a timepiece but an opening to the sky, a connection with the heavens. However, one sad day all that changed. A hailstorm rained stones as big as golf balls on his precious structure. The storm did not dent the dial plate nor harm its beautiful patina, but it filled the man with fear. “I will protect my sundial from the elements; it will never be threatened again,” he declared, and proceeded to build a shelter over it. The story concludes that the shelter was well-constructed and pleasing to the eye, and it gave full protection—but at an awful price.

I do not expect the denomination to split over the happenings at the GC Session. The great amount of anger required to fuel a schism does not exist now. The boiler will not explode. Moderation tempers us. Our academicians are especially adept at seeing all points of view, and most church administrators will simply wring their hands. We will hold together. Although the denomination is not likely to split, it is, in my view, likely to keep hemorrhaging from a now-deeper wound in its side. I anticipate that the flow will increase, and the Adventist church in the West will become more anemic. I have seen much of my own family, three great young adults, bleed out. They did not leave in anger but left calmly and bravely with their eyes open. The church simply could not hold them. Many thinking members, I believe, are doing the same. Let us weep our ongoing loss. These are our friends, and our children, and our children’s children; these are our wives and our husbands; these are the real people who belong to us. Let us weep the loss of our topsoil blown away and our dried-up well.

“Cry for the broken tribe,  
for the law and the custom that is gone.  
Aye, and cry aloud for the man who is dead,  
for the children and women bereaved.

Cry, the beloved country,  
these things are not yet at an end.”<sup>1</sup>

As Alan Paton cried for his homeland, so I cry for my church.

When the results of the vote came, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to relieve my disappointment. It was my own fault. Perhaps I had overinvested my heart in an impossible issue. I had a filly in this race, and although she ran well, she lost by a nose. I suddenly stopped cheering in the stands. Before the GC Session, I had written a hopeful article for this magazine on how to transform diversity into pluralism, on how to get cultures to walk together when they feel they have moral differences. I

## In San Antonio, the tragedy of “friendly fire” occurred. Neither the women pastors nor the North American Division is a foe of the church, but they were treated as such.

argued from Romans chapter 14, which is a masterful treatise by the apostle Paul on protecting the conscience of those with whom you disagree without giving up your own. It’s also on allowing fellow believers room to think for themselves, on belonging to each other, and on committing ourselves to the kingdom of God above our own culture. Paul is powerful here, and I was convinced that if the delegates heard him, Scripture would carry the day. But it did not.

When my wife saw my distress over this matter, she suggested, “Why not revisit Romans 14.” I replied that I had squeezed the juice from that orange, and although there must be some good pulp left in it, I could muster no further commentary.

“No,” she said, “what I mean is: Do you still believe the chapter to be true? Do you think its principles still hold? Do you think pluralism is worth striving for even if it’s hard?” Such a soft rebuke brought me out of my negative self and demonstrated to me how much my paternalistic church needs the nurturing touch of women.

What happened at this historic GC Session? How shall we understand it? What did we learn about ourselves?

One matter stands out for me. We are all caught up in a situation we do not fully grasp. Adventists from the developed world and those from less-developed parts of the world simply do not understand each other, nor what has hit us. We found, I think, that we have different philosophies of history. On the one hand, emergent nations believe history is determined by strong leadership and that great individuals alone shape our future by their decisive action. On the other, many in developed nations see history as also shaped by the spirit of the time, namely, the zeitgeist. For them a truth whose time has come finally filters up to the surface of the spring of history. My frustrated son explained the notion of zeitgeist to his father this way: “Dad,” he said with emphasis, “time has a way of testing our ideas and practices by hard experience and mounting evidence; time reveals what is chaff and what is wheat. Some things hold up and some things

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just disintegrate when hammered on the anvil of time. We’ve discovered that monarchies, and slavery, do us no good despite what the Bible says. A new, constructive reality rises to the top through an age and demands attention. Pay attention, Dad!”

Indeed, great ideas whose time have come arrive uninvited at our front door. They are beautiful things to embrace. The time for the full equality of all women has arrived.


Despite the divide at the General Conference, cultural diversity remains an immense treasure for all of us to learn from and revel in. In the recent past, I stopped for gas just outside the Kruger Game Park in Limpopo. The petrol attendant was a young African man. Desiring to engage him in conversation, I teased him with these questions: “Do I give you five rand, or do I give you ten rand for your tip? What do you think I should do?” (The rand is the South African unit of currency).

He said, “I will think on it.” After filling my vehicle, he left to get change, and upon his return, he gave me his answer: “Because I want to be a good man,” he said, “I will say ‘Give me five rand.’ But because you want to be a good man, you will say, ‘I will give you ten rand.’” Then we spontaneously belly laughed together. Solomon would have been proud of his wisdom, and Jesus, I know, was proud of our laughter.

We were sharing an ubuntu moment, and we knew it. Ubuntu is a Zulu expression conveying something like “I feel your humanity and do so with compassion.” It is a deeply satisfying experience.

But within the church, culture can turn against culture. When North Americans threaten by saying, “We have the money, and therefore we will run the church,” the Africans and South Americans respond with “Yes, you have the money, but we have the vote and we will run the church.” This sets us up a dangerous, high-noon shootout on Main Street. It threatens to divide us against ourselves. We simply cannot use the wealth the Lord has given us for a power play and expect to remain within the will of God. Others cannot use the vote as a power play and expect to remain within the will of God. We are, after all, a church and not a business with shareholders. Are we not merely stewards of our money and of the vote? All is of grace.

Is there any solution to the problem of cultures bossing each other about, telling each other what to do? (Here I do not speak merely about ethnic culture, but of conservative culture, academic culture, medical culture, youth culture, etc.). For the church, there is an answer to this problem of dominating each other, if we would but accept it. I quote from Jeremiah 31:33-34 (NIV): “‘This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.’”

We wait and long for such a time, when we trust the Holy Spirit’s work in another person’s life and give up our need to control. We wait and long for a time when we apply the law with compassion to others because it is written not on rock, but on our flesh. We wait and long for the freedom to do God’s will as we see it. We wait and long for ubuntu. 

*Smuts van Rooyen is a retired minister who taught in the undergraduate religion department at Andrews University, where he also earned a PhD in counseling psychology.*

<sup>1</sup> Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (New York: Scribner, 1987), pp. 104-105.

**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**

# DO ALL THINGS IN LOVE

## A YOUNG ADULT PERSPECTIVE

BY STEFANI LEEPER

FOR MY PUBLIC SPEAKING FINAL LAST fall, I spoke about how the women's ordination vote at the 2015 General Conference Session (GC) would affect Seventh-day Adventists across the globe. I set out to encourage my fellow classmates to support the movement to allow the divisions to make their own decisions in this regard. I had no idea that a mere eight months later I would attend the 2015 General Conference as a freelance reporter for the Adventist Today Foundation, or that I would be transcribing the pro "arguments" during the women's ordination debate.

As a 22-year-old journalism and emerging media student, I was the youngest member of the *Adventist Today* team on-site for the GC Session; consequently, I was assigned to write a number of stories from a young adult perspective. This piece not only represents my reaction, but also voices the sentiments of friends and acquaintances I spoke with after the GC Session.

Adventist leaders, we hope you're reading.

### Decisions at the 2015 GC Session

**Politics and elections.** Although GC President Ted Wilson is widely known by name and face throughout the denomination, most of the individuals nominated as leaders for all other departments enjoyed no widespread name recognition; they were just names.

After speaking with other attendees and delegates, I realized that I was not the only one blanking on names and faces. In reality, quite a few delegates didn't recognize nominees and yet voted in support of said candidates. Their rationale was something like: "The nominating committee selected those names, so they must be qualified. I guess they'll do."

So I guess it shouldn't be surprising that Elder Wilson was re-elected as the General Conference president. A lack of secret ballot helped, too. Despite its many flaws, the political structure ensures stability—even if it does resemble a monarchy.

While the political structure produced many arching, quizzical brows, the GC Session decisions on doctrine stirred even more hair-raising issues.

**A literal and recent six-day creation.** Most of the proposed amendments to Adventist doctrine and fundamental beliefs dealt with clarification of language: hermeneutics. The issue dictating most of the rewording was inclusiveness. But the amendment to the sixth fundamental belief, creation, was a slightly different story.

A majority of delegates voted that Adventists believe in a *recent* and *literal* six-day creation. This rewording indicates that church members are to believe that the Earth is approximately 6,000 years of age and that our world was created in six consecutive days.

Unfortunately, a problem with this wording arises: What is a day? A day is typically viewed as a 24-hour period. In the Bible, each day was marked as the time that elapsed from one sundown to the next. This method of time-keeping makes sense; it's a method used by Jesus, so it's therefore logical to apply it to creation—except that the sun was created on the fourth day. So there were no sunsets or sunrises to mark the transitions of the first three days.

In the Bible we find passages in which days represent years, yet the Seventh-day Adventist denomination has declared that the Earth was created in six literal days, without the marker of the sun or the assistance of a calendar. We are left with a major inconsistency.

**Women's ordination.** The inconsistencies that accumulated throughout the business sessions produced a snowball effect that culminated on July 10, the Friday concluding the 2015 GC Session. An appeal was made to table the decision on women's ordination, and some delegates went to the microphone and chided the business session chair for a lack of professionalism in handling the controversial issues related to it.

Most likely, women's ordination was the best-debated topic at the conference, with advocates of both positions using strong biblical texts and evidence to support their stances. The most climatic moment of the



debate, aside from the tally of the vote, was when former General Conference President Jan Paulsen addressed the delegates. To the surprise (and angst) of many, instead of offering a neutral position, Jan Paulsen gave a three-minute speech in favor of women's ordination.

The tension lingering in the Alamodome was sliced clean through

leadership on both men and women. This truth has been evidenced throughout the Bible, in powerful female leaders such as Ruth, judge Deborah, proclaimer Mary Magdalene, Ana, and deaconess Phoebe.

In fact, the Adventist movement was co-founded by Ellen White, a woman who received credentials as an ordained minister and who was ordained by

This use of faulty causation escalates quickly, and it is representative of a double standard.

Opponents have said: *Women can't handle the pressure of leadership.*

This is what one gentleman told me, as he courteously stopped by the *Adventist Today* booth during the GC Session, after glancing at our booklets and buttons promoting women's ordination. He proceeded to fill me in on Seventh-day Adventist history, citing times when the denomination had fallen into turmoil under weak leadership. Somehow, the church had always pulled through and managed to survive. "Would you want a woman in *that* position?" he asked me. I fought back the desire to pop his bubble by reminding him that every instance he used as an example only demonstrated the failings of *men* in power.

Perhaps the most ironic point of all is that the Seventh-day Adventist faith was never intended to be a denomination; it was intended to be a movement founded on the Bible, not an institution anchored to a rigid set of fundamental beliefs.

### General Conference Session Bloopers

**Proper planning.** As described by one delegate, the layout of the General Conference was "unfriendly" to the elderly and disabled. Under the unrelenting heat of the Texan sun, attendees had to endure lengthy, steep, and winding walks from the Alamodome, where the General Conference was taking place, to the local hotels and to the Henry B. Gonzalez Conference Center, where many of the delegates also served as presenters.

In addition, the pertinent text presented on the Alamodome's overhead screens, which was designed to assist delegates in making their decisions, was displayed in a miniscule font; consequently, in numerous instances delegates had to request that the

**I don't want to voice my ideas and opinions only to other youth and young adults who have the same thoughts and passions as myself; that's preaching to the choir. I want to make an actual impact in my wider church. I want to challenge our leaders and get them thinking in an open-minded manner.**

when President Wilson took the stand and requested that, no matter what the outcome of the vote, the denomination find unity and a clear focus on the mission of the faith: spreading the gospel to all the world.

In the end, with five delegates abstaining, 41 percent voted for each of the 13 divisions to make their own decisions on ordaining women, and 58 percent voted against the proposal.

Most of those advocating that women be ordained represented the North American Division (NAD), based in a continent where women have broken the glass ceiling perhaps more than in any other region, Scandinavian nations aside. A handful of proponents claimed that culture calls for female leaders who can reach target audiences.

The truth is that ordination is not a cultural issue. True ordination is the calling of God through the Holy Spirit, who pours out the gift of prophecy and

God (although allegedly she was never ordained by the laying on of hands). Yet, those in opposition to the ordination of women have tried to use Ellen White's writings to support their stance. Oh, the irony. Does the decision to deny divisions the choice of women's ordination imply that human choice triumphs over God's anointing?

Opponents have said: *Women's ordination equates to feminism.*

Feminism, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes." Unfortunately, feminism has often taken on a radical connotation associated with empowering women to overcome and conquer their male counterparts. Definition aside, opponents to the ordaining of women assert that allowing a woman to lead a church will lead said woman to reject male headship in the household and possibly even develop asexual or lesbian tendencies.



text be magnified.

Speaking of technology, the GC Session kicked off with delegates voting via electronic devices. While this makes voting a breeze for Westerners and Millennials, technology can prove to be a foreign language to many. Session planners must remember that many of the delegates are from nations that are much less technologically advanced than Western nations. I couldn't help but offer a dismayed chuckle when one delegate asked where to find a specific segment in the delegate's handbook and was advised by the presiding chair to access the document online using Adobe Reader viewing software.

And let's not get started on the topic of the not-so-secret paper ballots, which session organizers implemented due to clicker-device test failures.

**Include rather than exclude.** In terms of inclusiveness, language does not translate well across cultures. For example, in English the noun "writers" without a gender attached is automatically inclusive. However, in many other languages, this word does not translate to a gender-inclusive form. For example, in Spanish any group of people that includes males, even if it be one male in a crowd of 99 females, automatically is referred to in male gender. Translation often becomes problematic, then, especially when trying to interpret inclusive fundamental beliefs.

Only 2 percent of the nominating committee was age 35 or younger, yet the leaders of our denomination vehemently preach that this generation of youth is the generation that is to take the gospel to the rest of the world. How are we supposed to fully develop as Christian leaders when we are not being given the ability to voice our opinions in the church?

Judging by the atmosphere of our church politics, I sensed that church leaders are willing to work with everyone

else as long as there is no need for compromise; but the moment frustration sets in, the oligarchy takes total control. I came away from the 2015 GC Session feeling that I am only led to believe that I have a voice in the church; if I took the stand, my words would never be heard.

"Youth have a voice!" leaders protest. "The outlet is the Generation of Youth for Christ (GYC). That's why there are youth conferences!"

I don't want to voice my ideas and opinions only to other youth and young adults who have the same thoughts and passions as myself; that's preaching to the choir. I want to make an actual impact in my wider church. I want to challenge our leaders and get them thinking in an open-minded manner. This doesn't mean we must always agree.

In order for young people to be able to make a positive difference in the world church and help it move forward, they must be enabled to challenge their leaders—just as teachers encourage students to challenge them. Solving puzzles together is when teamwork, relationships, and new solutions blossom and become viable.

### Questions for Denominational Leaders

All decisions made at the 2015 GC Session were to be biblically based. With this in mind, I feel that the following questions need to be answered:

1. Why has the Seventh-day Adventist church selected 28 cherry-picked "fundamental beliefs" from an entire book and labeled those as core essentials to a Christian lifestyle? Where does the Bible specify 28 fundamental beliefs (or seven sacraments)? With God as the ultimate Judge, why do we feel a need to select the guidelines we like best and set those as our standards, then send away other

believers who don't meet all of the chosen requirements? Doesn't this transmit a message that we believe God finds them unworthy?

2. Why does our faith administer power through "headship" (manmade ordination) so similarly to Catholicism—a faith we seem to relentlessly rebuke—if the one true Power and Head of our church is Jesus Christ?

3. Why do we excommunicate a member of the faith for consuming alcohol when the Bible warns only against drunkenness? Have we made Ellen White's health message the authority of the Bible, instead of a supplement for those seeking a healthy Christian lifestyle?

### Testimony From Young Adults

The General Conference Session left me with more questions than answers, and while looking into solving those, I found only more problematic inconsistencies. Please trust me; I'm not the only young adult in the faith who feels this way. I've heard the testimonies of fellow students and friends. I've heard the opinions of my colleagues.

"[Organized] religion is difficult," shared Finess R., a Christian who is a college freshman studying criminology in Maine. "It makes me question so many things."

For example, she said in a phone interview, "The Bible says to 'love thy neighbor,' and there are so many scriptures about the power of love, but people only focus on hatred nowadays. [They say,] 'If you're a homosexual, you're a sinner and we hate you. If you're an alcoholic, you're a sinner and we hate you. If you've committed adultery or divorce, well, that's fine. Who cares?'" As Finess voiced sentiments she has heard in her Christian community, she could not mask her

*Continued on page 46*

**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**

# OBSERVATIONS OF A FIRST-TIME ATTENDEE

BY JEFF BOYD

The General Conference (GC) Session held July 2-11, 2015, in San Antonio was my first. My parents were academy teachers, and one line in my family has been Adventist for five generations, but I had not attended a GC Session until I had passed my 40th birthday. Between business meetings, the exhibit halls, and worship services, there was a lot to take in. As I tried to process what I was observing, the following themes stood out to my “beginner’s mind.” I believe that how we wrestle with these areas of tension will contribute greatly to the future shape of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

## Insight and Authority

As I listened to speakers on the GC Session floor and in less formal venues, I noticed that people tended to be quite confident in their truths—I mean, beliefs. Apparently, when some people see that Jesus spoke with authority, the lesson they draw is that they themselves should do the same. WWJD, right? Unfortunately, in San Antonio I heard some Adventists with Pharisee-level insights, in my opinion, speaking as if they had Jesus-level authority. “The Bible *clearly* says X.” “Ellen White *clearly* says A.”

In general, I believe that people who include “clearly” in their statements either do not understand the complexity of the issue at hand or are attempting to dumb down the debate. Do they not realize the Bible also says Y and that Ellen White also says B? Assertions made about “the obvious meaning” of contested Bible verses are convincing only to people who are unaware of the rest of the data, and such people are not likely to continue unaware for long, unless they choose to be (which I think is why my former pastor here in Michigan encouraged members to read only Adventist literature). Our community needs the courage to embrace both the often-complicated nature of biblical interpretation and the limits of our intellect and present data set.

How can we be humble and still assert what we believe? What is the relationship between listening and humility?

## Inerrancy and Interpretation

It is quite possible that both this category and the previous one are impacted by modern and postmodern worldviews (and likely also meta-modern, but I’m not qualified to make that pronouncement).



Modernism, to oversimplify a great deal, is marked by a significant amount of confidence in our ability to discover and know truth. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is not so sure. As an Adventist influenced by postmodernism, I believe there is truth, but I'm not overly cavalier about my ability to discern this truth absolutely.<sup>1</sup> With the brain God has given me and with the Spirit as a guide, I will hopefully grasp some morsels of truth during my few days under the sun.

But won't the Holy Spirit guide Christians into "all truth"? I don't know many Adventists who see everything the same. Whatever Jesus meant by this phrase, it does not appear that every person will know all spiritual truth and be in full agreement with all others. At least not by dinner time this evening.

Maybe Jesus meant that as individuals and as a community, we'll edge toward it over time. However, the fragmentation of the church through the centuries due to theological conflicts tells me that Jesus might have had something else in mind. But then, he was routinely misunderstood in his own day as well. Ellen White says we'll be studying salvation throughout eternity, so I have little reason to believe Jesus meant we'd nail down everything perfectly here and now.

GC President Ted Wilson's final sermon at the session sounded fully modern. "This precious Book, the Bible, is true and reliable. You can read it in the plain language of your choice and it rings true!"<sup>2</sup>

I believe the Bible has deep value when read devotionally or with a plain and simple reading. That is great. I support that. But also, if we're also going to study the book, we need to be ready to face some uncomfortable questions. That does not make either

devotional or critical reading bad; it just means we need a mature awareness of what we're doing and what we're dealing with.

Our views on inspiration and inerrancy are related to this. It seems to me that those who attempt to speak authoritatively—who believe truth can be fully known (and they already know it)—also believe that the Bible and Ellen White provide entirely accurate data to process. There are no errors or contradictions to be addressed; simply read it and believe it and do it.

I believe we are setting people up for a great disappointment when we teach that the inspired word cannot contain any degree of error.<sup>3</sup> They are likely two or three solid books away from losing their faith entirely if it depends on inerrancy. For example, while at the *Adventist Today* booth in the convention center, I spoke with a man who studied himself out of faith while pursuing a Master of Divinity degree along with archaeological studies. While researching archaeology in Israel, he found what to him were irreconcilable differences between the physical evidence and the Bible, so he walked away from the Bible and Christianity.

I know he's not alone. I know of others who had a similar experience but in other disciplines. And yet, I also know individuals who have found ways to hold the Bible description a little less tightly in order to retain their faith in God.

I experienced this myself when studying at an Anabaptist seminary. Every student had to take the introductory class Reading the Bible. As I studied the Bible critically for the first time, my faith was significantly shaken. However, over time I was able to work through the questions and find a new center. Later I became the teaching assistant for the course.



That new center for me is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and my beliefs now expand in all directions from there. I won't here go into the reasons I believe in the resurrection, but even though it is now central for me, I realize that others cannot accept this singular event and thus have no reason other than culture to hold onto Christianity.

My faith in Jesus' resurrection allows me to hold other more minor issues a little less tightly. To use Chris Blake's model, Jesus' resurrection is central to me, and the absolute literalness of Genesis 1 and 2 is a bit more peripheral. There are all kinds of possible reasons for why those chapters were written the way they were, and there are all kinds of ways to understand what is written. I don't have to nail that down. No one I know was there, so the viewpoints of my contemporaries are a bit suspect, in my opinion. Someday I believe God will make it plain to us, but I don't think anyone will be kept from eternity in the kingdom of heaven due to failing to understand those two chapters perfectly.

I believe we'd be better off helping our members learn to deal with the Bible we've received, not the one we wish we'd been given. It's risky to teach inerrancy and simply hope others will take our word for it and not look into the matter for themselves. I believe this theme will be important as the Adventist denomination focuses on hermeneutics over the coming years.

Why are we sometimes tempted to throw out all of the Bible when we begin to see errors or contradictions? What beliefs about God and the Bible set us up for this?

### Unity and Uniformity

Unity was a major theme at this year's GC Session—"We must be united." Dan Jackson, the newly re-elected president of the North American Division (NAD), said in a press conference: "We keep talking about unity, but we really mean uniformity."

I observed this call to unity/uniformity at play in areas of both thought and action. By *thoughts*, I refer to the debate regarding the denomination's fundamental beliefs. Our working thesis appears to be: "The closer we approach theological uniformity, the closer we'll approach unity." The corollary is: "If we have any different interpretations, we can't be unified."

I don't mean to say that common theological understanding is irrelevant. But when *uniformity* supercedes *unity in diversity*, then we begin to feel compelled to undertake the continual and impossible task of delineating and defending ever greater levels of theological minutiae. Sometimes it might even lead us to add extra-biblical wording such as "recent."

What might be the effect of allowing people to have their own opinions without trying to codify and enforce our own views? How comfortable am I with having a theological conversation

with no simple or unanimously supported conclusion? Do I think Paul was being irresponsible to tell people to be convinced in their own minds on a certain topic rather than giving them a "Thus saith the Lord" for every issue?

Turning to *action*, consider the debate about the vote on women's ordination. I saw the vote against ordaining women to mean: We don't want to ordain women in our area, and we don't want you to do it in yours either.

We want to codify who can do what and where and when. The dividing lines seem arbitrary and baffling to some of us. The difference between a commissioned and an ordained pastor appears more policy-based than biblically based, regardless of the gender question, which is fine from an institutional perspective. And when a delegate asked why deacons could baptize in the Bible but not in the Adventist denomination, the response was that this is how we do things. Just what does *sola scriptura* mean to Adventists?

### Movements and Institutions

Alex Bryant, executive secretary for the NAD, described the tension between being a movement and being an institution. Our early Adventist leaders, Bryant said in a press conference, "really resisted organizational structure. They did not want it because they wanted to stay nimble as a movement. And I think it's very difficult for us to balance the two—how do we stay mission-focused and nimble as a movement, and yet we need to some degree the organizational structures and institution to facilitate the mission?"

Two locations at the GC Session exemplified this tension: the Alamodome and the Gonzalez Convention Center. The enormous expanse of the Alamodome could not contain the deluge of points of order, motions, amendments, and called questions. This was true not only during the discussion of women's ordination, but also for votes on personnel nominations, fundamental beliefs, and the Church Manual.

The exhibits in the convention center contrasted with this sharply. Instead of the confrontational nature of the daily business sessions, which are required to fuel the institution, the center was full of creative displays, demonstrating a thriving entrepreneurial mission focus. This mix of official and para-church organizations—yes, I admit, institutions—seemed to me the very definition of a movement. The official church body operates in conjunction with untold hundreds of lay people who are finding and creating innovative outlets for their passion for Jesus, people, and the Adventist message.

It is possible that the nightly sermons in the Alamodome served as the glue between the bureaucracy of the business meetings and the mission zeal of the exhibits.



As the denomination continues to grow, how can we balance the energy of a movement with the structure provided by the institution? How do we continually reassess and realign this balance?

### **Inclusion and Exclusion**

Who is in? Who is out? How do we make this distinction as clear as possible? These concerns seemed to be high at this GC Session. Even in the one area where inclusiveness was intended—efforts to make the language of the fundamental beliefs more gender-neutral—speakers pushed back, at times attempting to place the revised language in the context of women's ordination. Other than this language, all proceedings appeared to draw the borders tighter and closer, a trend we seem eager to embrace (judged by the clapping after certain votes).

language that specified marriage partners as a man and a woman, I wondered if they realized what an exclusive emotional message they were sending. There was the vote, and then there was the clapping.

Our votes spread wide ripples. For example, the ordination vote sent a message even to women who do not feel called to pastoral ministry. For many, the vote was seen as a referendum on the place of women in Adventism: still no equality. One good friend who is not in ministry shared on social media: "I am genuinely at a loss for words. I have never felt so small and unwelcome by the church family I grew up in."

Do the messages we send with our debates and votes seem characterized by love and grace or by marginalization and exclusion? Do we even care what messages we are giving people? If the way we articulate "present truth" is a barrier to people



**After the vote against division choice (as the women's ordination vote in San Antonio could be called), I heard some people say this is why young people, specifically Millennials, need to stay engaged with the church.**

This is why people started the hashtag #MyChurchToo on Twitter and other social media platforms. They were saying, "You're trying to draw the line so close that you're cutting me out, but this is my church too. I have a say, because this isn't your church alone." As noted in the unity-uniformity discussion above, uniformity naturally works to exclude anyone beyond the bounds of prescribed thought and action.

The votes on marriage and creation taken in San Antonio, which hardly seemed necessary given the conservative nature of Adventism, made it clear that the denomination is not a very welcoming place for at least three groups of people: those who think life on Earth started more than 10,000 years ago, who identify themselves as any orientation other than heterosexual, or who feel that women are called to ministry. Does the denomination view such people as second-class Adventists?

I'm not saying what I think church policy should be but am merely pointing out that our votes—even on minor wording changes—send strong messages to people affected by those votes. And the words we use when debating these topics also speak loudly to those affected. When delegates and attendees of the business session enthusiastically applauded the passing of

seeing and experiencing Jesus, then it is problematic regardless of how accurate the underlying theological points may be. We don't need to minimize truth in order for people to encounter Jesus, but we need to be very sensitive about how our attitudes come out in our theological formulations and how people are affected by those attitudes.

### **Acceptance and Protest**

Given the voting system used for settling everything from doctrinal questions to church policy, winning and losing are central features of GC business sessions. A simple majority (51 percent) is required, not true consensus. This is true even for "fundamental beliefs," the basic truths central to all of Adventism—I mean, to 51 percent of Adventists.

Because there are losers with every vote taken, how we respond—whether with acceptance or protest—is a significant feature of the GC experience. The ordination vote is a notable example. Nine hundred seventy-seven people voted for divisions to have the freedom to choose; they lost. Everyone supporting that position lost. Whichever side would have lost the ordination vote would have felt significant frustration and disappointment.

We don't have a system that can work toward consensus, and I'm not sure there is a system that can achieve this for 18 million people, even with the upcoming study of hermeneutics.

So what to do? Those who say to simply accept the vote seem to be the ones posting<sup>4</sup> this quote from Ellen White: "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."<sup>5</sup>

Those who have no intention of giving up their conscientious position of gender equality in ministry seem to put more stock in later statements by White, such as these:

"As for the voice of the General Conference, there is no voice from God through that body that is reliable."<sup>6</sup>

"That these men [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."<sup>7</sup>

Quiet protests were issued almost immediately after the ordination vote, even though President Wilson seemed to indicate it was settled. Facebook profile pictures were quickly changed to a black background with a simple #977 in white font, and some worship leaders and attendees at Impact, the young adult gathering, wore black clothes in solidarity with female pastors denied equality with their male counterparts. Blog posts, Facebook comments, and Twitter statements erupted; social media was the one place at the GC Session where young people had a voice.

For those (like me—there, I showed my cards) who wish to continue pressing this issue, who take an all-hands-on-deck approach to ministry, how can we respectfully and effectively work for positive change, as we see it? If the vote had gone the other way, how would we want those opposed to women's ordination to be protesting right now?

Talking with two pastors after the vote, I suggested that Christians are to take on the mind of Christ, which moves toward those with less power (Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus was humble and moved in our direction, while Lucifer attempted to move into God's place. Therefore, it seems honorable to me for male pastors, as an act of solidarity with their female colleagues, to forgo ordination and instead accept commissioning alone.

I also admitted this was easy for me to say, because I'm not in pastoral ministry; I don't have any skin in the game. Pastor David Hamstra, who left a major Twitter footprint during the GC Session, responded that he had previously argued the same thing in his writings. I know that some male pastors in Europe took

this approach leading up to the GC vote, though I don't know what they have done since then. In a private Facebook group for Adventist pastors, one notable Adventist evangelist recently discussed the possibility of giving up his ordination for this reason. Who else has the courage to do the same?

Given our voting system that produces winners and losers (from the local church board all the way to the GC), how can winners limit potential fractures, and how can losers communicate their conscientious views in ways that are respectful to all involved?

## Urban and Rural

As an officer in the Adventist Peace Fellowship, I spent a few hours one afternoon at the organization's booth in Exhibit Hall B. An older gentleman stopped by to chat. He supported the idea of peace. "Every day I look for trouble. And when I find it, I try to help," he said with a smile.

However, it didn't take the man long to assess that I do not have any common sense, that I am "dumb as dirt." He knew this because I did not have a ready answer for how to secure clean drinking water in a marshy area or why owning silver will be preferable to gold in the time of trouble. He wanted to know the size of my garden, and he shook his head in disbelief that I live in an apartment. "Are we heeding advice to return to country living or not?" he asked.

"We need to reach our cities for Jesus," I heard others say. "Evangelize the cities." "Use comprehensive health ministries to reach people in the cities." This push to share the Adventist message in the metropolis will not be accomplished successfully by people who think urban dwellers are dumb as dirt. It will be done, I believe, by people like Pastor Tara VinCross and REACH Philadelphia, who have a physical presence that signifies their identification with the city.

Country living is great—I'm all for it—but if we want to also reach the cities, we're going to need a spirit of respect, not condescension. Is it possible to hold these two classic Adventist ideals—country living and city mission—in tension, or must we give up one for the other?

## Changing the Church and the World

After the vote against division choice (as the women's ordination vote in San Antonio could be called), I heard some people say this is why young people, specifically Millennials, need to stay engaged with the church. Their voice and vote is needed more than ever in order to effect positive change within the denomination.

Even before delegates had clogged the San Antonio airport

in their attempts to return home, activists were online agitating for change. Kevin Wilson shared five things Millennials can do in response to the GC Session: speak up, get connected to your local church, be informed, find a Christ-centered mentor who has your best interest at heart, and dig deeper into Scripture.<sup>8</sup> Also, a Change.org campaign began, calling for ordination without a consideration of gender, and a community formed around @our\_Wednesday on both Instagram and Twitter.

Time will tell whether or not young adults will sustain this level of interest in the machinations of the church. If it does endure, and I suspect it will, it's because the ordination question has at its core a concern for social and spiritual values of equality and justice. I doubt there will be a serious campaign to allow deacons to baptize (a worthy topic raised on the GC Session floor), because it seems that for many Millennials and Gen-Xers, values are more energizing than theological dogma or religious hair-splitting.

Erika St. Louis, digital strategy associate for ADRA International, raised this point on Twitter. I believe she hopes that young people will get involved with the church but sees that their natural inclination is to engage elsewhere. It's "not a fight many Millennials care to fight," she tweeted. "People want to fight poverty, homelessness, etc., not church politics." I generally agree. I hope that for the benefit of the church and the world, people will engage both.

How can young people play an active role in their local congregation as well as in higher levels of organization? Does the church have room for young people to get involved, or are nonreligious entities the only ones welcoming them? How can we work through the church to benefit the world, to be externally focused?

## Local and Global

Since the GC gathering is a world event, I thought I would gain a deeper appreciation for the global church body. In a sense I did; I greatly valued reconnecting with people I have met around the world through past educational and vocational pursuits. However, I did not feel the level of connection to the global institution that I had expected. Maybe this is because I tend to have very limited organizational loyalty or pride in general; it's just not my personality.


What I did experience was a renewed appreciation for the local congregation. This is where community develops. This is where we find the people we take care of and who take care of us. We participate in each other's weddings, births, adoptions, funerals, graduations, lay-offs, promotions, doubts, and divorces.

I saw people taking pictures with Adventist-celebrity preachers and administrators, and I realized they must value the leaders and the organizations they represent in some way that I don't readily understand. I'm glad their institutions, budgets, and programs are doing positive work in the world, but I am personally more interested in taking pictures at my local church game night than with Adventist leaders in San Antonio.

Local congregations would be able to thrive without the General Conference, but the General Conference couldn't exist without local churches. The same goes for all of the independent ministries. Similarly, local congregations proliferated long before we had our first list of fundamental beliefs in 1980, and they would continue to grow and spread even if we stopped printing the book *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*. But without congregations, the book would have no purpose.

Long live the local congregation!

## Conclusion

Shortly before attending the GC Session, my wife and I adopted a baby boy—Adventist generation number six. Will the Adventist Church that he grows up in be one he wants to remain a part of? Will it be a nurturing faith community that engages his heart and mind throughout his development into adulthood? As a new dad, these are new questions for me to ponder. It's not just about me and my desires now; I want to help foster an Adventism that will be relevant to him and to his world. I hope we confront these areas of tension with honesty and courage, doing our best to promote a healthy, mature and vibrant Adventism for my son's generation. 

*Jeff Boyd is managing editor of Adventist Today Online. He is also the director of Adventist Peace Fellowship and research coordinator for Tiny Hands International, a nonprofit that fights human trafficking in Nepal.*

<sup>1</sup> I admit there are times when my "modern" side comes out and I do sound pretty self-assured.

<sup>2</sup> (See <http://news.adventist.org/all-news/news/go/2015-07-11/full-text-cross-the-jordandont-retreat/>)

<sup>3</sup> For a series of simple examples, see Richard W. Coffin, "How Does the Hierarchy Decide When It's OK to Ignore the Bible?" *Adventist Today*, Summer 2015, pp. 53-55.

<sup>4</sup> (See <https://session.adventistfaith.org/god-s-highest-authority>)

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1875), p. 492.

<sup>6</sup> White, Manuscript 57, 1895, published in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 17 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> "Address by E.G. White," *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1901, paragraph 25.

<sup>8</sup> (See <http://crossculturechristian.com/2015/07/12/post-gcsa15-5-things-adventist-millennials-can-do-after-the-general-conference/>)

**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**



Jan Paulsen

*The contrast between the way the comments of these two General Conference presidents were received tells the whole story of the 2015 GC Session. It also indicates the passing of an era in Adventism.*

# A TALE OF TWO

By Dennis Hokama

THE TALE OF THE 2015 GENERAL Conference (GC) Session in San Antonio, and all I have written about it, can be summed up in one sentence:

It was the best of times and the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, the time of trouble and the Apocalypse was even at the door, we were to continue occupying indefinitely, til He comes.<sup>1</sup>

## The Delegates' Rousing Reception of Ted Wilson

After listening to Ted Wilson's masterful *tour de force* President's Report on Thursday night, July 2 (only the second day of the GC Session, and before he was even nominated for president), I predicted in my piece "Heading for Another Great Disappointment?"<sup>2</sup> that for all practical purposes, the session was over. That is, based on the enthusiastic response of the third-world-dominated delegates to this speech, I concluded that Ted Wilson owned the 60<sup>th</sup> GC Session and would get whatever he wanted, including passage of the revision of Fundamental Belief No. 6 and defeat of the women's ordination proposal.

Included in Wilson's speech was an assertion that he would use repeatedly throughout the week, like a mantra: "The Bible can be believed just as it reads." Those were the code words for saying that Genesis 1 and 1 Timothy 3:2 were to be

interpreted literally and absolutely. The piece was published Friday, before the GC president's nomination was announced. The rest of the session was merely a footnote to this piece.

I flagged down Clifford Goldstein, editor of the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guides*, in the lobby of the Grand Hyatt on Sabbath morning to ask him about another matter. As soon as he recognized me, he went ballistic about how bad, prejudiced, and unfair *Adventist Today* was—much worse even than *Spectrum*. (The ultimate insult!) "I know you guys don't like Wilson," he said, "but that was ridiculous!" He promised that he was going to hunt down Ervin Taylor at the Adventist Today Foundation booth and really tell him off. Although he was really animated, to his credit, he did not make it personal, and I did not take it personally.

## The Delegates' Reception of Jan Paulsen

Before the discussion of women's ordination began on July 8, GC business session chairman Michael L. Ryan, a retiring GC vice president, emphasized the importance of NOT applauding and not making comments personal (or directed at someone else's opinion). He said, "You should know that as comments ... become personal, pointed at someone else, comments made about someone else's opinion, I will interrupt you and remind you that you need to address the chair, and make your comments about your opinion, not the opinion of someone else."<sup>3</sup>

The first and only time former GC President Jan Paulsen (Wilson's immediate



# GC PRESIDENTS

predecessor) made an appearance at the 2015 GC Session was in the middle of the heated debate over women's ordination on Wednesday afternoon, July 8. His appearance was announced in the morning session, but his precise placement in the discussion was left up to the discretion of chairman Ryan.<sup>4</sup> By the evening services on Friday, July 10, when Paulsen's name was mentioned along with other retired GC officers being honored, we were told he had already flown home to help his wife, who was taking care of a relative. It appears that he flew in to make this special appeal and left soon after making it.

Paulsen's passionate words are worth serious attention: "I appeal to my brothers and sisters to vote 'Yes' on the motion before us. A 'No' vote will cause rupture and serious damage to our global church.

"Let me say this: I have served our church in ministry for 55 years. Most of these years have been in senior leadership roles. I've lived and served the church from Africa, in Europe, and the global church for our world headquarters here in North America. And just for the record, let me say that the Spirit that guided me during the years I provided leadership for the church did not leave me when I left office.

"I believe that I know this church, this global church, well. I know what it is that holds us together. I know also many of the tension points when cultures meet that cause difficulties for us. But we as a church can overcome these things.

"I'll be clear about it. It has been stressed by several speakers what we are really voting on today. It is not the

question of who has won the argument for ordination or not ordination. This is a question of trust.

"We have leadership established around the world in every one of the 13 divisions. They work in counsel together. They also work in close counsel with General Conference leadership. They pray, they search the scriptures, they seek the Spirit's guidance, and the Spirit is guiding them. Do we trust them enough, under the guidance of the Spirit, to know what is good for the church in their particular part of the world?

"Let me say to you, my brothers and sisters from Africa: Do you trust your leaders, elected leaders, from Africa to give the best leadership for the life and mission of the church in Africa? If you do, vote 'Yes.'

"I say to you, my brothers and sisters from South America: Do you trust your elected leaders to provide reliable, good, Spirit-driven, Spirit-inspired leadership to the life and witness of our church in South America? Then vote 'Yes.'

"The same applies to North America and to Europe. We need to trust each other to get together and to vote 'Yes' on this motion.

"Voting 'No' will do damage to our church. I am fearful of what will happen if we do not allow the church to go forward on this. So I say to you, please do not let delegates from major segments of our church return to their fields bruised and bleeding and confused and disenfranchised because they are being driven by this community to live a life somehow judged by this community not to be worthy of the responsibility that they have.



Ted Wilson

*Seventh-day Adventists seem doomed to be schizophrenically divided between two irreconcilable worldviews: (1) expecting an imminent, world-ending apocalypse or (2) planning for a future on the expectation of historical continuity. These two worldviews require radically different priorities and courses of action.*

“It is important, I think, that we empower our delegates, allow them to go back home and know that they have the right and the empowerment of this body to respond under the Spirit’s guidance to God as to how they can best lead the church.

“We are struggling in some parts of the world. We are struggling badly to try to hold the church together, to engage young and old, men and women, in the mission and ministry of the church. We need everybody’s involvement.

“We are bleeding in many ways. We’ve got to stop this. We are losing so many of our youth and young professionals. They have problems with the moral integrity of the church, and they say, ‘Why is the church having problems with this matter? The public does not. It’s not a problem to the public. Why should it be to the church?’

“And there is no biblical injunction that stops us. We have to fix this one.

“Please, brothers and sisters, I believe that it is the will of God that we should enable the church in every part of the world to make the decisions that are best applicable in the part where they live without being a violation of the will of God. Thank you.”<sup>5</sup>

What followed was a stream of angry third-world delegates, each claiming “point of order” and criticizing Paulsen for daring to recommend a positive vote on women’s ordination. Loud applause and cheers from other delegates accompanied these condemnations of Paulsen. Although the *Adventist Review’s* official minutes in *GC Session Bulletin 7* deleted the contentious comments, an observant reader can easily detect allusions to tension and disorder on the session floor.<sup>6</sup>

The contrast between the way the comments of these two General Conference presidents were received tells the whole story of the 2015 GC Session.

It also indicates the passing of an era in Adventism. Jan Paulsen represented North American Adventism and a bygone era that Adventist historians may eventually call “Before Ted Wilson” (BTW). Going forward, we now live in the “After Ted Wilson” (ATW) era.

### Trapped by Irreconcilable Worldviews

Seventh-day Adventists seem doomed to be schizophrenically divided between two irreconcilable worldviews: (1) expecting an imminent, world-ending apocalypse or (2) planning for a future on the expectation of historical continuity. These two worldviews require radically different priorities and courses of action.

The former view implies that there is no time left to plan a career requiring advanced degrees or to start a family. If followed to its logical conclusion, then we should disregard material possessions and drop everything else we may be doing to warn the world of how to be saved, in view of the coming apocalypse and unspeakable horrors of “the time of trouble such as there never was” that must precede it.

I know this worldview firsthand, because I was indoctrinated into it in the mid-1960s during my years at Auburn Academy. I specifically remember speculation that 1964 would be the year of the apocalypse, because it would be exactly 120 years since the Great Disappointment of 1844, and the elapsed time would correspond to the 120 years Noah preached until the end of the ancient world.

By contrast, the latter worldview implies that we will *not* be bailed out by such an apocalypse, but that we must plan our lives so that we can make the most of our abilities and thus have a useful occupation and retirement plan. In this view, the cycle of life, including future GC Sessions, will continue as they have in the past, with the

understanding that occasional reminders to the flock regarding the imminent second coming of Jesus may be fortifying. The key text for this position is “Occupy till I come” of Luke 19:13 (KJV).

While it is theoretically possible that one could believe in the former while practicing the latter, the degree of mental compartmentalization required would be heroic and, therefore, rarely achievable, at least in my opinion. A famous quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi was perhaps invented to address this seeming paradox in Christian theology. St. Francis was supposedly hoeing in his garden one day when someone asked him what he would do if he knew the world would end after that day. Allegedly, his calm reply was “Hoe my garden.”

I have read many versions of the quote as well as many interpretations of Assisi’s supposed meaning. Some apologists argue that since Assisi had already made his peace with God, there was nothing constructive left for him to do but hoe his garden. Yet surely this leaves him lacking in the evangelism department, since he should have been concerned for the salvation of others beside himself.

Other apologists argue that Assisi had deep faith that God would never let any good deed go to waste, even in the earth made new, and that hoeing one’s garden was a good deed. But this implies an equation between the goodness of hoeing a garden and the goodness of winning another soul for God’s kingdom in the little time remaining, an equation I find hard to defend.

### A Symbiotic Relationship Now Under Threat

The irony is that, in the church’s tithe-based economy, a symbiotic relationship exists between Adventists who fervently believe in an imminent second coming and those who expect historical continuity

and are skeptical of an impending apocalypse. On one hand, the first (pro-apocalypse) camp depends upon the financial and strategic support of those from the theologically opposing camp. On the other hand, the second (anti-apocalypse) camp relies on the first camp for growth in overall membership.

Adventists in the second camp cannot muster the same enthusiasm for preaching a stark apocalyptic message as do church members in the first camp, nor are they likely to find within the developed nations of the first world many eager recipients of such a message. Consequently, Adventists in the second camp find both satisfaction and consolation in the fact that conversions are still possible in the third world.

However, the 60<sup>th</sup> GC Session has threatened this symbiotic relationship. The growing voting strength of Adventists in the third world (73 percent of total membership) has now been unleashed on members in the first world (only 8 percent of total membership),<sup>7</sup> enabling the former to impose on the world church both theology and practice that may have negative pragmatic consequences.

For example, as I mentioned in my piece on how Loma Linda University (LLU) would be affected by proposed changes to the fundamental belief on creation,<sup>8</sup> LLU now awards PhD degrees with an emphasis in evolutionary biology, and its students routinely learn to use methodologically naturalistic reasoning in their research. With the passage of the amended Fundamental Belief No. 6, it is absolutely critical for the church to understand the major difference between methodological and philosophical naturalism.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, in my piece on the North American Division (NAD) meeting held after the vote against women's ordination,<sup>10</sup> I reported that the NAD

has many ordained female pastors, and apparently its leaders stand ready to defend and continue the practice on principle, rather than to throw them under the bus as a result of this vote.

### Canaries in the Mine Shaft?

During the GC Session, a walk through the miles of exhibits led me to the Washington Conference booth at C1834. There I was surprised and saddened to discover that Auburn Academy (AA), my *alma mater*, had graduated only 50 students this past school year and might not be able to continue as a boarding academy. By contrast, in 1964-1965, the year I graduated and when the world was supposed to end, my graduating class had numbered 150. Curious, I decided to call Mile High Academy (MHA), from which my wife graduated in 1965. Its number of graduates this past year was only 14, as compared to 30 in 1965.


These discoveries brought to mind the words of Jan Paulsen: "We are struggling in some parts of the world. We are struggling badly to try to hold the church together, to engage young and old, men and women, in the mission and ministry of the church. We need everybody's involvement."

"We are bleeding in many ways. We've got to stop this. We are losing so many of our youth and young professionals."

I interpreted his phrase "some parts of the world" as including North America as well as Europe and Australia. Although I have not done a systematic survey of all Adventist academies, my intuition is that the plight of AA and MHA are proverbial canaries in the mine shaft, indicative of a general and serious downtrend in North America over the past 50 years.

Near my home, I know that both San Gabriel Academy and Glendale Academy are now financially dependent upon cash-paying Chinese students who are being

sent here for purely economic reasons by ambitious parents. While this in itself is a good thing, it probably conceals a more drastic drop in enrollment by children of Adventist parents in North America. Will Wilson's renewed proclamation of an impending apocalypse reverse this descending trajectory? Or will it be a case of having proclaimed that same warning cry too many times, so that the response is too small to reverse the trajectory in North America?

All in all, it was the best of times and it was the worst of times.... 

*Dennis Hokama has represented Adventist Today as a reporter at the last four General Conference Sessions and previously served as our news editor. He is bilingual in English and Japanese as a result of spending his youth in Japan, where he was the eldest of five children of American SDA missionary parents of Okinawan ancestry. Now a retired teacher living in California, his special interests are science as methodological naturalism, probability theory, early Adventist history, and historical Jesus studies.*

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens

<sup>2</sup> (See <http://atoday.org/heading-for-another-great-disappointment.html>)

<sup>3</sup> *GC Session Bulletin* 7, July 10, 2015, p. 43. (See <http://www.adventistreview.org/%E2%80%8BBeleventh-business-meeting>)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50. (See <http://www.adventistreview.org/%E2%80%8Btwelfth-business-meeting>)

<sup>6</sup> (See <http://atoday.org/how-accurate-a-record-are-the-official-minutes-of-the-gc-session.html>)

<sup>7</sup> (See <http://atoday.org/the-treasurers-report-i-sda-world-membership-and-tithing-per-capita.html>)

<sup>8</sup> (See <http://atoday.org/would-the-passage-of-the-fb6-amendment-be-a-problem-for-llu.html>)

<sup>9</sup> Ervin Taylor accomplishes this in his insightful review of Des Ford's recent book, *Genesis versus Darwinism: The Demise of Darwin's Theory of Evolution*. (See <http://atoday.org/non-fundamentalist-evangelical-christian-objection-darwinism-not-evolution.html>)

<sup>10</sup> (See <http://atoday.org/north-american-delegates-meet-after-womens-ordination-fails.html>)

**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**

# THE WOMEN'S ORDINATION VOTE REVEALS AN INCREASINGLY FRAGMENTED CHURCH

BY CALEB ROSADO

THE DECISION ON THE ORDINATION OF women voted July 8, 2015, at the 60<sup>th</sup> General Conference (GC) Session at San Antonio, made it very clear that there is no “one” Seventh-day Adventist Church, but rather, several. The church in North America is very different from the church in Latin America, which is different from the church in Europe, and it in turn differs from the church in Africa, which also differs from the one in Australia. These various churches visibly manifested their differences when it came to the vote on the ordination issue.

The decision was not based on theology, nor the leading of the Spirit, nor the will of God—no matter how many “amens” were shouted—because God is not that confused, emotional, irrational, divisive, or anthropomorphic. The decision was based solely on *culture* and societal influences, pure and simple. By culture, I mean the socially organized way of life of a people. And what hold any given culture together are the operational value systems of that society. Thus, the operational values of North America, Europe, and Australia are far different from the operational value systems of Latin America and Africa. And while we praise God for the exponential growth in Africa and in Latin America, we must also recognize that many in these areas of the world adhere to a more traditional and patriarchal form of societal structure.

These cultural and social structures impact their reading and interpretation of Scripture, just as the more egalitarian expression of society and culture in North America, Europe, and Australia influences many in their reading and application of Scripture.

In order to better understand these differences, it is important to note that the church is a divine entity as well as a human one. It is divine in the sense that God is the ultimate foundation and originator of the church—a broad body of believers comprising God’s followers from all faiths, not just Adventism. But it is also a human institution in the sense that its membership is composed exclusively of human beings, with all of their national, ethnic, social, and cultural influences. Like other institutions in society, the church is in large measure a product of that wider society, constantly shaped and influenced by the cultural values and structural forms of the same. In many instances, this human institutional dimension often takes precedence over the divine. When decisions are made in either secular or spiritual matters, these influences (or an operational system of values) come into play, always. Thus, the basic principle: *Context determines content*. The social, cultural, and spiritual environment from which we operate (“context”) influences the way we relate to each other as human beings, view God as well as life, and interpret the Word (“content”).

Even Jesus was subject to the influence of these social forces. God sent his Son to planet Earth as a Jew, not as a Roman or a Greek. And as a human being, he was socialized by Jewish parents within a society that was primarily Jewish, not Roman or Greek. However, as God in human flesh, Jesus sought to bring divine culture and its operational system of values into human daily life: “You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ...” (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44, NKJV). These operational divine values, which transcended and even opposed the Jewish religious and cultural way of life, were greatly resisted by the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, who could not see beyond their cherished self-interests.

This process of decision-making is still with us, even to this day. We are social beings, and recognizing this fact will go a long way in lubricating human relations and in helping us to understand one another and how decisions are made, even after praying for divine guidance. Self-interests can be a major stumbling block, and when these interests are given spiritual support, it becomes true that “a self-justified positionality is the real enemy of peace.”<sup>1</sup>

None of us come to the Word with a “clean slate,” or *tabula rasa* mindset. If that were the case, then the four Gospels would be identical; but they are not. Ellen G. White made that very clear: “The Bible





is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers."<sup>2</sup> What she is saying here is that culture and social dynamics played an influential part in the writing of Scripture, and thus, by extension, its interpretation. Cultural anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits explains the basic principle of cultural influence on human thinking: "Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his/her own enculturation."<sup>3</sup>

What all of this means relative to the GC Session actions taken this summer is that delegates voted largely in a manner consistent with their cultural socialization and operational values. The following question was put before the 2,363 delegates voting by secret ballot: "After your prayerful study on ordination from the Bible, the writings of Ellen G. White, and the reports of the study commissions, and after your careful consideration of what is best for the church and the fulfillment of its mission, is it acceptable for division executive committees, as they may deem it appropriate in their territories, to make provision for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry? Yes or No." When the votes were counted, 1,381 delegates voted No, 977 voted Yes, and 5 abstained, producing a

return of 58 percent against and 41 percent in favor.<sup>4</sup>

Since the selection of GC Session delegates is based on the membership size of the divisions, it was not surprising that the divisions with the largest number of delegates (and the largest body of members), with their traditional and patriarchal system of values, determined the outcome of the vote. People merely voted their way of life, since their way of life influenced their view of God and interpretation of Scripture.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that with 41 percent of the delegates voting by secret ballot in favor of the motion to allow the divisions to decide the question of the ordination of women, not everyone representing Africa and Latin America voted against it. Likewise, not all of the delegates from North America, Europe, and Australia voted in favor. There were dissenters in all sectors, for patriarchal versus egalitarian expressions of culture and readings of God's Word are not exclusive to these respective fields. And as long as this delegational voting method is used, the outcome will always be the same, whether the vote was taken in 1995 at Utrecht<sup>5</sup> or 20 years later in San Antonio or 20 years from now in who-knows-where.

In a year when the Supreme Court of the United States finally approved what the American people had already accepted (same-sex marriage in all 50 states), when the Confederate flag—a symbol of racism and slavery—has finally come down from state capitols, and when a woman finally becoming president of the United States may be a distinct possibility, the church is the last bastion of sexism in the world. And it has been for millennia, across all religions. To focus on evangelism now as a solution to all of the problems facing the church comes across as a cruel joke. Who wants to join a sexist church? If the issue had been whether or not only white males could be ordained to the gospel ministry, the outcry would have echoed all the way from Paducah to Timbuktu (or, to use a common biblical expression, "from Dan to Beersheba"), since the church is now more sensitive to racism than to sexism.

In the days following San Antonio, I predict that the church will experience

*Continued on page 45*

**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**



THE OBVIOUS ANSWER TO THE QUESTION IS YES. BUT unfortunately, this answer does not address the real issues generally being raised when the question is asked. What is at stake in the context of this question is, in reality, “What authority does the General Conference rightly and properly possess?”

### Proper Authority

In order to place the question in perspective, consider for a moment a telling comparison. Hard by the west side of the Alamodome in San Antonio, where the meetings of the recent General Conference (GC) Session were held, runs Interstate 35. A steady stream of vehicles rushes past at the 60-miles-per-hour speed limit posted on that highway.

If the session delegates had voted to change that speed limit

As the 1901 General Conference Session drew near, she said, “The voice of the conference ought to be the voice of God, but it is not, because some in connection with it are not men of faith and prayer; they are not men of elevated principle.”<sup>4</sup> And even after the 1901 reorganization of the General Conference and the establishment of union conferences, her concern continued to the 1903 session as well.

Ellen White’s resistance to centralization was expressed in her opposition to what she called “kingly authority.” “It has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences. The power vested in the [General] Conference is not to be centered in one man, or two men, or six men; there is to be a council of men over the separate divisions. ... In the work of

# DOES THE GENERAL CONFERENCE HAVE AUTHORITY?

By Gary Patterson

to 45 miles per hour, their decision would have had little or no effect on the traffic, because such an action is not within the jurisdiction of the General Conference. That decision resides with the City of San Antonio and the State of Texas. For all its seemingly foolishness, this comparison gets at the heart of the issue by asking what really is within the jurisdiction of the General Conference.

In an attempt to give authority to the application of actions voted by the General Conference, church leaders frequently quote a statement made by Ellen G. White in 1875, in which she observed in a private letter, “When the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered.”<sup>1</sup>

While this concept has merit, other observations she makes are rarely placed in context with it. In a letter written in 1896, some 20 years later, she stated: “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.”<sup>2</sup> Two years later she wrote, “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God.”<sup>3</sup>

God no kingly authority is to be exercised by any human being, or by two or three. The representatives of the Conference, as it has been carried with authority for the last twenty years, shall be no longer justified in saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we.’ The men in positions of trust have not been carrying the work wisely.”<sup>5</sup>

Does this mean the General Conference has no authority? Certainly not. But the statement regarding it being the highest authority on Earth, used as it often is to impose control over the church, is at best disingenuous and, perhaps, misleading. Even if at times it may be true, this on-again, off-again coverage raises the question of when and how we determine it to be such an authority.

### Authority and Inerrancy

Being an authority does not convey inerrancy. That the General Conference in session can and does err in its judgement and actions is demonstrated by the issues of the 1888 session, which are still debated today, over a century later. In addition, some actions taken since that time are certainly not above question. To assume that everything voted by the session is the will of God is

a mammoth leap of reason, to say nothing of theology. Perhaps, rather than a ringing endorsement of its authority, the comment should be taken as an apology, an acknowledgement that this institution, with all of its human foibles, is the best that we have to work with at any given time.

If we were to assume that every action taken at the GC Session is the will of God for the world church, what would such a stance say about those who voted against each action? Were those who in good conscience voted in opposition thus voting against the will of God? In addition, many things voted at the session would not fall into the category of the revealed will of God. Such matters as voting to close discussion, or setting times of meetings, or signaling adjournment would not generally be considered will-of-God issues.

All of this being the obvious case, it must then be determined which things are in the jurisdiction of the General Conference and which are not. Although the list is much longer than given here, a few examples will serve to illustrate the point, as delineated in GC Working Policy B 05, point 6:

“Different elements of organizational authority and responsibility are distributed among the various levels of denominational organization. For example, the decision as to who may/may not be a member of a local Seventh-day Adventist Church is entrusted to the members of the local church concerned; decision as to employment of local church pastors is entrusted to the local conference/mission; decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference/mission; and the definition of denominational beliefs is entrusted to the General Conference in session. Thus each level of organization exercises a realm of final authority and responsibility that may have implications for other levels of organization.”

Authority belongs to each of the four distinct levels of church structure, which, as the policy states, is “a realm of final authority.” Thus the General Conference may not act upon issues relating to individual membership. While in the Roman Catholic system the pope may excommunicate individual members, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church neither the General Conference in session nor any level of church governance, other than the local congregation, may do so. Membership, as well as election of church officers, belongs exclusively to the local congregation. And though the congregation as a constituency does not operate under a constitution and bylaws, as the other constituent levels do, the Church Manual serves as its template for action.

Likewise, the staffing of pastoral as well as conference-level positions is within the authority of the local conference and

may not be countered by other levels of the denominational organization. Further, the structure of the church established in the 1901 and 1903 General Conference Sessions, as clearly stated in policy B 05.6, places the authority for the ordination of ministers at the union conference level of church structure. While it is true that the general level does establish the criteria for both membership and ordination, it does not have authority as to who may be accepted as members or who may be employed or ordained, so long as candidates meet the criteria established.

So firmly are these authorities established as “a realm of final authority and responsibility” that it was deemed necessary to provide an exception in GC Working Policy L 45.4 in order to allow committees at the division and General Conference levels to authorize their own candidates for ordination through their respective executive committees, sparing them from the requirement to do so through union conference committees to which ordination is assigned. As we often observe, “it is the exception that proves the rule.”

Illustrative of the issues that arise when cross-constituency meddling occurs is the vote of the General Conference several decades ago “authorizing” the ordination of women as local church elders. While it may have been a good idea to encourage churches to do so, there was no cause to “authorize” the practice, since such authority for selecting elders rests with the local congregation and there was no prohibition for electing women to such a post. How incongruous would it have been to vote to “authorize” the election of women as church clerks, or church treasurers, or Sabbath School Superintendents when, likewise, no such prohibition existed for staffing these offices?

Furthermore, the argument for the need to keep the world church together regarding the ordination of women is shown to be without merit, given that GC Working Policy BA 60 10 states in a footnote to point 2 that “\*The exception clause, and any other statement above, shall not be used to reinterpret the action already taken by the world Church authorizing the ordination of women as local church elders in divisions where executive committees have given their approval.”

All of this forces the question: “Why is it acceptable for the divisions to go their separate ways regarding the ordination of women as local elders, but not acceptable for them to do so regarding the ordination of ministers?” To say that “one splits the church and the other does not” makes no sense. An additional argument frequently advanced is that ordination to ministry is for the world church. But so is membership and ordination as an elder. Any person who has been accepted into membership is free to join any church worldwide by transfer, and anyone who has



been ordained as an elder is eligible to hold such position in any church. This argument likewise makes no sense.

## Fundamental Beliefs

The development of a statement of fundamental beliefs for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, though seemingly necessary, is fraught with difficulties—so much so that the founders of the church resisted the idea with strong statements of the perceived risks inherent in creedalism. The preamble to the approved fundamental beliefs seeks to allay these fears and risks by saying: “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. These beliefs, as set forth here, constitute the church’s understanding and expression of the teaching of Scripture. Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference Session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet even beyond these caveats is the underlying problem of language itself. Though we are fond of the notion that words have exact meaning and are capable of conveying precise clarity on a given topic or idea, the reality is that people do not share exactly the same meaning of the words they employ to express themselves. Differences in culture, education, and personal perceptual skills gives credence to the idea that words do not have meaning. Rather, people impose meaning on the words they use and hear.

To complicate matters further, the world church is made up of people from multiple nations and languages. Thus, any statement of beliefs must be both presented and understood in multiple settings, where people not only think different things, but also think the same things differently. Turning fundamental beliefs into a creed violates this principle of perception.

In addition to the language and perception problem is the authoritarian drift that such statements inherently possess. Vested in the General Conference level, as the policy indicates, is “the definition of denominational beliefs.”<sup>7</sup> Yet even here we need to ask, Are the 28 fundamental beliefs tests of membership, tests of fellowship, tests of leadership, or tests of employment? Must one accept all 28 statements (or whatever number of them there are at a given point) in their entirety to join the church? Can a person be disfellowshipped for failure to accept them all?

Is an individual required to agree to all 28 in order to hold office in the church? Or to maintain denominational employment? Are these fundamental beliefs a requirement for ministers and teachers, but not necessarily for janitors or

cafeteria employees? Can the church employ someone as an attorney, financial advisor, or musician who does not accept all 28 statements? Or, for that matter, someone who may not even be a church member? Furthermore, given that membership issues belong to the local church, who exactly will enforce these matters, and how will it be done in a consistent manner?

The 28 beliefs as currently expressed would not have been accepted by many of the early leaders of the church. A prime example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. Many early Adventists held Arian beliefs regarding the life and ministry of

THE ACTIONS OF THE  
1990, 1995, AND 2015 GC  
SESSIONS ARE NOT BASED  
ON POLICY; SO WHAT  
WERE THEY BASED ON?  
PRACTICE? PRECEDENT?  
PERCEPTION? OR PERHAPS  
PREJUDICE?

Jesus. This notion persisted well into the middle of the 1900s, as demonstrated in the church hymnal that was printed and used during that era.

The well-known hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy,” which in its original Protestant form contained the verse “God in three persons, blessed Trinity,” was changed to fit the Arian perspective and was sung as “God over all, who rules eternity.” In the current hymnal, it is returned to its original wording, reflecting the Trinitarian view. Does this mean that those of the Arian notion were not real Adventists? Were they unworthy of membership, or fellowship, or leadership, or employment? And if we overlook that divergence in the past, do we also ignore it today?

More to the point is the divide over the role of Ellen White in the church and the prophetic office. In the early days, many did not accept what is generally proffered today as her authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Not only was her work rejected in parts of Europe early on, but church leadership devised her time in Australia not so much as a mission venture,

but as a way to get her out of North America and away from the General Conference leaders.

As its preamble maintains, the statement of beliefs is changed from time to time in order to incorporate better understanding and language to more clearly convey the church's shared perception of biblical truth. But by this very concept, the statements are demonstrated to be only an expression of beliefs at a given moment in time, of perceived truth found in Scripture. If the Bible is the only creed, as the preamble states, then we should not be writing into the fundamental beliefs wording and expressions that are not in the Bible. In this context, much has been made of the effort to insert into the fundamental beliefs wording regarding creation that is not in Scripture itself. And speculation abounds as to how insistence on this wording will play out in such matters as membership and employment.

### Decision-Making Process

The San Antonio GC Session clearly demonstrated that the process we currently follow to do the business of the church has become nearly nonfunctional. Attempting to carry on an open-floor discussion with more than 2,500 people is not a viable way to do business. The system needs to be changed to reflect reality. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point.

Given that all changes to the Church Manual require a vote from the session, one item discussed at length was whether the preposition "in" or "on" should be used in the document under consideration. Multiple speakers with varying linguistic backgrounds and native languages weighed in at length on the matter. Not only was the folly of such a discussion on the floor obvious, but the fact that the document would be translated into multiple languages made it even more absurd for the world church to spend time on such matters.

Another similar editorial change that had to be voted by the session was to change the name for one of the divisions in order to more accurately reflect the territory and people it was serving. But rather than merely making such an obvious editorial adjustment in the text, it had to come to the floor for a vote, where it engendered useless discussion.

Perhaps the most abused practice during an open-floor discussion among thousands of delegates is the "point of order" request. In the San Antonio GC Session, this abuse was rampant. Whether it was based on ignorance of the rules of order in a democratic process or was an intentional attempt to subvert the process is difficult to assess. However, when speakers at the microphone calling for points of order nearly equal the number

speaking to the issue before the body, it is clear that the process is broken.

In an attempt to devise a better system, perhaps it would be helpful to provide deputy or assistant parliamentarians on the floor to screen such point-of-order requests before spurious interruptions to the process consume the time of the business at hand. (In San Antonio, the GC Session employed the services of just one parliamentarian, whose role was to advise the chair.)

### Nomination and Election

The work of the nominating committee is, in particular, an unrealistic process. Soon after the opening of a session, a caucus representing the divisions/attached unions is selected and voted by the session as its nominating committee. These individuals, who had no advance knowledge that they would be on the committee, elect a chair and a secretary from their midst, who likewise have no time to prepare for such a responsibility.

This large group, comprising over 100 individuals from all areas of the world church, must nominate hundreds of persons to serve not only in General Conference leadership positions, but in the 13 division territories as well. Few on this committee have adequate knowledge of either the territories represented by the world church or their unique leadership needs and personnel.

After getting organized, the work of nomination begins, usually by the first Friday morning of the session. The first order of business is the nomination of the General Conference president, which is expected before noon. When the name of their nominee is presented to the floor of the session, acceptance is generally assumed and the vote is called for quickly. This short time frame of a few hours on Friday morning of the session stands in stark contrast to the church's other nomination and leadership processes and requirements.

The nomination of local church officers and leaders generally occurs over a period of a month or two of careful study, and once presented to the church body, the nominations require a first and second reading, separated by one week or more. The selection of a new pastor often extends into several months, or even a year of search. Principals and presidents of educational institutions are likewise typically chosen after a long and careful search process. In this context, it seems astonishing that we would expect the election of world church leadership to be pressed into a few hours on the first Friday of a General Conference Session.

The nominating committee is tasked not only with providing for the election of General Conference leadership, but division leadership as well, given that divisions are not constituent entities and do not have such authority on their own. Since

the nominating committee is expected to staff entire divisions, which the bulk of the committee members know little or nothing about, the divisions go into caucus and create a list of prospective officers and leaders. This list goes to the nominating committee for what is basically a “rubber stamp,” then the selections are passed to the floor of the session for the “rubber stamp” of the delegates, most of whom know even less about the individuals nominated than do the members of the committee. One has to wonder why this work is not just left with the divisions, to complete at a time and in a setting much more conducive to making informed and careful decisions.

### Perception and Reality

A persistent perception among Adventists is that the General Conference has a policy or vote forbidding the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, but such is not the case. No such action exists, nor has it existed in the history of the denomination. The most prevalent notion of a prohibition is that the actions of the 1990, 1995, and 2015 GC Sessions forbid the ordination of women. Following are the minutes of the actions at these three sessions:

**1990 Session in Indianapolis.** “The Commission, having listened to the arguments and presentations for and against the ordination of women; having sensed the needs and concerns of the world field; having carefully considered what is probably best and the least disruptive for the world church at this time; and recognizing the importance of our eschatological mission, the witness and image of our spiritual family, and the need for openness and unity in the Church, reports to the 1990 General Conference Session upon the recommendation of the 1989 Annual Council the following result of its deliberation:

“1. While the Commission does not have a consensus as to whether or not the scriptures and the writing of Ellen G White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, it concludes unanimously that these sources affirm a significant, wide ranging, and continuing ministry for women which is being expressed and will be evidenced in the varied and expanding gifts according to the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

“2. Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world Church and in view of the possible risk to disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church, we do not approve the ordination of women to the gospel ministry.”<sup>8</sup>

**1995 Session in Utrecht.** The motion reads as follows: “To refer to the General Conference session the North American Division request that the General Conference in session adopt

provisions on ordination as outlined below:

“The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies. In addition, where circumstances do not render it inadvisable, a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division executive committee takes specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions.”<sup>9</sup> [Not voted.]

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**2015 Session in San Antonio.** “The General Conference Executive Committee requests delegates in their sacred responsibility to God at the 2015 General Conference Session to respond to the following question: After your prayerful study on ordination from the Bible, the writings of Ellen G. White, and the reports of the study commissions, and after your careful consideration of what is best for the church and the fulfillment of its mission, is it acceptable for division executive committees, as they may deem it appropriate in their territories, to make

provision for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry? Yes or No?”<sup>10</sup>

The action presented in all three of these sessions was to approve the ordination of women. The action failed on all three occasions. When a motion fails, it simply goes away. It does not create the opposite of the intent of the motion. Therefore, the result in these sessions neither establishes nor forbids the practice of ordaining women.

Three factors are significant in this issue. First, the ordination issue does not belong to either the division or the General Conference levels. It is assigned by policy to the union conferences.<sup>11</sup> As such, without changing the basic structure of the world church, this item does not belong on a GC Session

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agenda. Second, there is not, nor has there been, a policy against ordaining women to ministry. Since no such policy exists, there is no valid reason to vote on giving permission. We do not need to authorize that which is not forbidden. Finally, the failure of the vote to authorize such ordination on these three occasions results in no action. A motion that fails is neither authorized nor forbidden. It merely goes away.

It is accurate to say that both precedent and perception regarding such ordination lead to the opinion that it is not allowed. However, neither precedent nor perception is policy. Given that these actions do not forbid the ordination of women to ministry, then as stated, the position of the church remains as it was before these actions. The question, then, is what is that position?

Ordination authority is clearly defined in General Conference policy. Regarding the approval of persons designated for ordination, GC Working Policy B 05 states, “decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference....” Regarding such decisions, the policy further states, “each level of organization exercises a realm of

final authority and responsibility....” Thus, in the selection and authorization of such individuals, the General Conference has no authority over the union conference decisions, so long as these decisions are in harmony with the criteria established for ordination by General Conference policy.

The General Conference Working Policy does establish the criteria for ordination. There are 15 such criteria listed in GC Working Policy L 50, none of which refer in any way to gender. If, therefore, any individual approved by a union conference meets these 15 criteria, the General Conference authority has been satisfied. Given that there is no gender reference in these requirements, the union conference is acting within its authority to ordain women as stated in GC Working Policy B 05. Policy exercises governance over both practice and perception. But in the case of gender issues in ordination, there is no policy. However, over a century of practice has created the perception that policy exists on this matter, and 100 years of practice certainly does establish precedent. But it remains that the issue in ordination is policy rather than practice, precedent, or perception.

The actions of the 1990, 1995, and 2015 GC Sessions are not based on policy; so what were they based on? Practice? Precedent? Perception? Or perhaps prejudice? Unless the General Conference changes its policy and takes away the authorization given in GC Working Policy B 05 to other levels of governance—such as the local church regarding membership, or the local conference regarding employment, or the union conference regarding ordination—it is not free to intrude into these areas. Thus, its attempt to counter the union authority in the area of ordination is a violation of its own policy.

If the General Conference wishes to address the issue of gender in ordination to ministry, it may do so, but only after changing its policy to a straightforward requirement that ordination is gender exclusive, forbidding the ordination of females. There is no such policy presently in existence, nor has there been in the history of the church. Practice, precedent, perception, and even prejudice do not constitute a policy. Only straightforward, clearly articulated policy governs the issue of gender-inclusive ordination.

Another existing perception is that the General Conference cannot violate policy and that whatever it does constitutes policy, but this is not so. The General Conference can violate policy just as surely as any other level of the church, if and when it acts contrary to the provisions of policy. Unless and until the General Conference changes the policy by specific vote, any action contrary to that policy is a violation. Thus, the union conferences are not out of policy on this matter of gender inclusiveness in the



ordination of ministers. The General Conference itself is out of policy by intruding where it does not have authority.

## Correctives

What actions, therefore, need to be taken to address these policy and function disorders? The following is a suggestion of areas to be addressed:

1. Make divisions a constituent level of the organization, and transfer much of the business of the GC Session to this level. As the church nears the membership mark of 20 million, and as most divisions number over 1 million members, the church should shift leadership and authority for each division's work to its own territory for better efficiency and understanding of needs.

2. Find better methods of seeking input on issues, rather than attempting to conduct open-floor discussion with over 2,000 people. The democratic process can still be accomplished by providing GC Session delegates the opportunity to vote on issues without open discussion in a time-crunched environment.

3. Do not confuse a uniformity of action imposed on all divisions with unity of purpose for the entire church. Diversity of behavior already exists within the church in such matters as lifestyle, dress, Sabbath activity, polygamy, family relationships, and a host of cultural, religious, and traditional behaviors. Imposing the traditions and tastes of one area of the church upon another is not a method of securing unity. Rather, it is a recipe for disunity, clearly demonstrated by the cheering, booing, and hissing that accompanied perceived victories over votes taken at the recent GC Session.

4. Stop faulty interpretation of the Bible. When narrow fundamentalist readings of Scripture trump the counsel of the leading biblical scholars within the church and its seminaries, then the process of hermeneutical interpretation and biblical understanding is in jeopardy. To pick and choose parts of Scripture in order to make a point while ignoring other parts—at times even in the same verse—is dangerous at best, and perhaps even dishonest.

5. Clearly define and adhere to authority in the various constituent levels of the church. Each part of the church must operate in “a realm of final authority” regarding its assigned responsibilities according to policy, lest we reverse the church structure developed in 1901 under the leadership of Ellen White and return to the error of “kingly” power she so strongly opposed at that GC Session.


6. Halt or reverse the tendency toward ever-expanding and explicit fundamental belief statements, which lead toward creedalism. Jesus summed up our core beliefs with two simple

but profound statements: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart ...,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27, NIV). The early Christian church summarized its requirements in four restrictions: Abstain from (1) food sacrificed to idols, (2) from sexual immorality, (3) from the meat of strangled animals, and (4) from blood (Acts 15:20). We can do better than to build an ever-expanding and more tightly defining list of beliefs.

7. Address issues of broad scope for the mission of the church at GC Sessions, and avoid minutiae such as the editing of documents. Prepare materials that require session approval with opportunity for widespread input over adequate time frames, and vote them up or down without floor discussion.

8. Protect the GC Session from encumbrance by those who, out of ignorance of process or intent to disrupt or a vain desire to be seen and heard, frustrate the purpose of the agenda and proper procedure.

9. Clarify that practice, precedent, and perception are not policy. No matter how long an idea may have persisted, actual policy is what governs the church at all levels. If the world church does not like a particular policy, it can change it. But it must not violate policy by usurping authority that belongs to another constituency.

10. Construct the session program to cast a large vision for the future of the church, rather than focusing on minutiae that can be better handled by other levels of the church structure. 

*Dr. Gary Patterson is a retired field secretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He served as senior pastor for some of the largest congregations in the denomination, a conference president in two conferences, and assistant to the president of the North American Division.*

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1875), p. 492.

<sup>2</sup> White, Letter 4, 1896, published in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 17 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> White, Letter 77, 1898, published in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 17, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> White, Manuscript 37, 1901, published in *Sermons and Talks*, Vol. 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1994), pp. 159-160. Some would argue that this statement does not refer to the General Conference in session. However, Ellen White did not make the statement she is referring to about the “voice of God” in other contexts. It was about the General Conference in session, which in the early days met annually.

<sup>5</sup> White, Manuscript 26, 1903, published in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 14 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), pp. 279-280.

<sup>6</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/28\\_Fundamental\\_Beliefs\\_\(Adventist\)#Preamble](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/28_Fundamental_Beliefs_(Adventist)#Preamble)

<sup>7</sup> General Conference Working Policy B 05.6.

<sup>8</sup> GC Session Minutes, July 11, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> GC Session Minutes, July 7, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> GC Session Minutes, July 8, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> For additional information on this topic, see my article “Response to General Conference Opinion Paper,” *Adventist Today Online*, Aug. 26, 2015 (<http://atoday.org/response-to-general-conference-opinion-paper.html>).

## WHAT THE 2015 GC SESSION MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ADVENTIST FAITH

SINCE THE GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION vote that divisions would not be given the freedom to ordain women clergy, I have experienced varied thoughts and feelings. My initial disappointment has been followed by a settledness in my call by God; pain and sadness at the questioning of that call by others; and tears of release at words of support and affirmation from

service was not to be scheduled until after the 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis, Indiana. When the session delegates did not approve an Annual Council recommendation that women clergy in the Seventh-day Adventist Church be ordained, approval of my ordination was withdrawn. That time was one of the most painful for me in my pastoral ministry.

# EXPERIENCES OF ADVENTIST WOMEN PASTORS

BY LESLIE H. BUMGARDNER

**While my own call from God is unshaken, I wonder how our church will find its way forward in affirming Adventist women who are called by God to pastoral ministry.**

family, colleagues in ministry, and church members, some of whom I've never met personally. In addition, my thoughts turned to the ministry of 11 women pastors living in the United States whose ministry experiences provided the basis for my doctoral dissertation. But before I explore that topic in detail, I'll provide a bit of context.

Forty-five years ago, as a senior in academy, I experienced God's call to pastoral ministry. I completed my undergraduate degree at Walla Walla College, and more than 30 years ago I was hired by the Ohio Conference. My personal experience with the issue of the ordination of women began in 1989, when the Ohio Conference and then the Columbia Union approved my ordination for ministry. However, the

In 1991, I was commissioned and issued a Commissioned Ministers Credential, which I have carried since that time; by policy this credential includes numerous functional limitations on service as a pastor. My ministry experience includes the Worthington and Dublin churches in Ohio, the Walla Walla University Church, and my final pastoral placement at the Pasco Church in the Upper Columbia Conference. I retired Sept. 1, 2015, after more than three decades as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor.

For most of these years I have served without female pastoral colleagues in close proximity, and early in my ministry I was without female clergy mentors. It has been a lonely journey at times. Wondering about the experiences of other female pastors led to my doctoral dissertation<sup>1</sup> topic: why do Seventh-day Adventist women stay in ministry? This narrative study of 11 Seventh-day Adventist women pastors in the United States includes their call to ministry, educational preparation, and ministry experiences. These women were educationally prepared, employed by local conferences as pastors, and at the time of the research had served collectively for 150 years as pastors in large and small churches around the country. Their identities remain confidential, which enabled them to share their experiences with candor.

After the GC Session vote on July 8, 2015, many analyses and responses—some of which do not align with my research—flooded social media, websites, and publications. My goal is to contribute to the conversation as the church moves forward to support and increasingly include women as pastors in churches.

When the women in this study

parallels to my ministry and came away from the conversations encouraged about the future of women serving as pastors.

In light of the renewed focus on women in ministry, I began to wonder about the experiences of these women since my original research. How many still serve as pastors? What have been their experiences in the intervening years? A quick Internet

recommendations to be valuable in furthering support for female pastors:

- Ask women pastors to share their greatest joys in ministry. Also ask them directly about their greatest challenges and what they most need.
- Dialogue with women about ministry placement, then follow that conversation with assertive action on their behalf.

## IDENTIFY WAYS TO SUPPORT WOMEN CLERGY

addressed why they entered and stayed in ministry, the depth of God's call on their lives exceeded any other reason. One woman stated, "To deny my call would be disobedient to God," a sentiment shared by others. In addition, these pastors related numerous stories of their interactions with people as they led them into church membership, taught them about growing to be more like Jesus, and walked with them through the joys and sorrows of their lives. For these women, ministry is not about status, money, or rebellion, as some accuse. It is about embracing and utilizing the gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit.


While the study and discussion before and after the 2015 GC Session focused on the ordination of women, one particularly important finding in my research is that a lack of ordination is not the biggest challenge these women faced. Among their greatest challenges, they described: disapproval of their ministry by church leaders and members, denial of their ability to function in ways allowed by church policy, invisibility to leaders and members, lack of female pastor mentors, sexual harassment, and daily stresses of ministry unique to women. However, without exception they found the depth of their call and the joy of serving people to outweigh the challenges. As I listened to the stories of these women, I found many

search showed that of the original 11 women, three continue to serve in pastoral ministry at a local church. Of the others, two are retired, five are employed by the church in other roles, and one is no longer in church employ. In order to further understand the experiences of female pastors, I will be conducting a follow-up study to explore their experiences over the past 10 years. In brief calls inquiring about their willingness to participate, the seven women I have contacted have all expressed eagerness to participate. I have yet to reach the final four women. It is my hope that this follow-up study will aid in better understanding what women in pastoral ministry identify as their needs.

While my own call from God is unshaken, I wonder how our church will find its way forward in affirming Adventist women who are called by God to pastoral ministry. I did not anticipate passage of the recommendation this summer, yet after hearing the results of the vote, I found myself thinking about young women and men who have newly entered or are preparing for pastoral ministry—and their peers. Those I spoke with prior to the vote expressed optimism that equality between men and women would be affirmed, and they are sorely disappointed at the outcome.

Church leaders, pastoral colleagues, and church members may find the following

- When a difficulty arises during the process of placing a female ministerial candidate, consult with her for ideas and preferences. Deciding what is best for women without their input may serve to close opportunities prematurely.
- Think creatively about involving clergywomen in ministry, and provide opportunities for women to publicly function in pastoral roles in order to help foster their acceptance.
- Provide funding for woman-to-woman mentoring and women's clergy conferences, especially for women who are more isolated from other female pastors.

I pray that God will help us find a grace-filled way toward the full and equal inclusion of all those called by God as we journey toward the kingdom. 

*Leslie H. Bumgardner, PhD, recently retired after more than three decades as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor in North America, where she served in the Ohio Conference and in the Upper Columbia Conference. She is a graduate of Walla Walla University and earned her doctoral degree at Andrews University.*

<sup>1</sup> L. H. Bumgardner, *Staying in Ministry: A Qualitative Study of Seventh-day Adventist Women Pastors*, 2005. (See the full dissertation at <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/252/>)

## WHAT THE 2015 GC SESSION MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ADVENTIST FAITH

# DOES 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY FIRST-WORLD ADVENTISM NEED THE GENERAL CONFERENCE?

BY ERVIN TAYLOR

AS THE RESULTS OF THE 2015 SAN ANTONIO GENERAL Conference (GC) Session are disseminated and evaluated, I predict that this GC Session will come to be widely viewed as an unmitigated disaster for the future of Adventism in the contemporary Western world. Despite proclamations to the contrary, the church decisively and unceremoniously laid to rest any remaining illusion that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is a united body of believers. Attempts at projecting the myth of Adventist unity became completely untenable in light of the debates in San Antonio over the issue of ordaining women to ministry. The highly controversial decisions made at that session have revealed unbridgeable tensions and multiple fault lines in both practice and theology within the contemporary Adventist denomination. These tensions and divisions will start to play themselves out in unpredictable ways in the coming months and years.

Functionally, two separate Adventist denominational entities now exist. Broadly speaking, there is a First-World Adventism and a Third-World Adventism. Neither of these entities is monolithic in terms of polity or theology. Within each exist major divisions, based on a variety of localized cultural, political, and ethnic issues. However, despite their internal diversity, these two populations of Adventists are clearly committed to very different visions of what Adventism should look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Only time will tell how this schism will affect the relationship between the corporate Adventist denomination and its affiliated educational and medical institutions.

Over the last half-decade, the Adventist institutional church at the General Conference level—under the leadership of the current GC president, together with a small group of like-minded administrators and several allied organizations (such as the Adventist Theological Society)—has been able to redefine the ethos of a corporate “worldwide” Adventism so that it is almost entirely consistent with the fundamentalist and highly sectarian stance that characterized much of American Adventism in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, efforts of the current GC president to effect rejection of the proposal to allow divisions

to decide whether or not women could be ordained in each division, coupled with his endorsement of the addition of non-biblical, fundamentalist language to the Fundamental Belief No. 6 dealing with creation, are symbolic of a new reality projected by corporate Adventism.

Despite all of the negatives surrounding these recent and previous decisions, some Adventists may take comfort in the possibility of a small light visible at the end of a very dark tunnel imposed on the church in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps the anticipated damage resulting from decisions made at the recent GC Session will be of sufficient import and weight to cause many Adventist theologians, church administrators at other levels of the church, and especially laypersons in the First World to conclude that the General Conference has rendered itself completely irrelevant as far as First-World Adventism is concerned and, thus, is no longer worthy of respect or support.

If such a conclusion were widely shared, what could be the implications? From the point of view of organizational viability, perhaps the most important might lie in the area of finance. The lifeblood of any major corporate entity, such as the Adventist denomination, is its cash flow. Without predictable financial resources to support staff, overhead, and infrastructure, a bureaucratic organization is highly vulnerable to instability requiring a rapid downsizing.

Many members believe that Adventism is special and unique, and in one respect, they are certainly correct. Adventism has evolved one of the most hierarchically based political systems of any contemporary Christian church. As a result of an organizational reorganization a century ago, corporate Adventism developed five bureaucratic levels of operation. In the developed world, these levels are the local church, local conference, union conference, division, and General Conference. Crosscutting this system in parts of North America are additional organizational entities: the so-called regional conferences, which are separate conference institutions run by and for segments of the African American Adventist membership. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church, with a much larger membership and even more ethnic and cultural diversity, operates with only three bureaucratic levels: parish (local church), bishoprics, and the Curia sitting in Rome reporting to their Supreme Pontiff.

As noted above, one key implication of the new Adventist reality at the General Conference level may be in the area of church finance. A small set of numbers tells an important part of the story. In 2014, based on published budgetary figures, the total tithe given to the worldwide Adventist denomination by its members was approximately \$2,430,000,000—almost \$2.5 billion U.S. dollars. Members in the North American Division



contributed approximately 40 percent of those funds. That fact alone should cause certain Adventist administrators to pause as they contemplate the future of the world church “ASA” (After San Antonio). Currently, denominational conference entities—including the General Conference—are supposed to maintain enough “recommended working capital” to cover a few months of operating expenses, but not all manage to maintain it. Any disruption in the cash flow proceeding from a relatively small number of local conferences (or a single union) in the North American Division would immediately impact the operations of

*Perhaps the anticipated damage resulting from decisions made at the recent GC Session will be of sufficient import and weight to cause many ... to conclude that the General Conference has rendered itself completely irrelevant as far as First-World Adventism is concerned.*

the Adventist church at a number of bureaucratic levels.

Some may react to such a suggestion with outrage, charging that such talk would foster a “disloyal” or “rebellious” spirit. However, such terms presuppose the existence of a legally or even morally binding contract among the various bureaucratic levels of the Adventist political system. I am not aware of the existence of any such agreement. The system works largely on the basis of tradition, with working policies in the various levels that are simply a reflection of that reality. The relationship between the various levels has been established on the basis of essentially a historical understanding carried out by common consent of administrators at the local conference levels.

However, individuals most familiar with the current political system in the Adventist church caution that any major reform in how North American corporate Adventism operates is not likely to be enacted from inside the bureaucracy. This is not because church administrators at the local, union, and division levels are not sensitive to the problems. In almost every instance

(though there have been and currently are certainly exceptions), these individuals are dedicated and hard-working individuals who hold themselves to high personal ethical standards. But they are human.

In most cases, these individuals have served the denomination their entire careers, beginning in a pastoral role and then, if they were a member of a politically powerful church dynastic family or attracted the attention of an administrator in some higher level of the church, gradually rising within the church hierarchy. Their long-term service within the established bureaucracy has conditioned them to avoid controversy and to counsel against undertaking any major change that would disrupt church operations at any level. They are particularly sensitive to change that would disrupt the tithing system, which provides the cash flow to various levels of the church’s institutional system. And naturally, operating from inside the system, they resist changes that would result in eliminating a large number of church administrative positions. In any large corporate system, whether it is General Motors or the Adventist denomination, the greatest bureaucratic sin is to “rock the boat.” Therefore, we should not look to a church administrator to provide leadership for undertaking substantive changes.

However, all may not be lost. Formal action at the local or conference levels would be unnecessary if a relatively small number of lay members (or a relatively small number of local North American churches with relatively large memberships) redirected their tithe contributions to only the levels of the church that have taken an ethical stand on the issue of women’s ordination by actively ordaining women. If, on the basis of moral outrage at the injustice of the actions taken at the GC Session, individuals were to implement such actions, the reality on the church’s ground level would dramatically shift. The vote taken at the GC Session with regard to women’s ordination, as well as decisions made at any level of the denomination above the local church, would quickly become moot.

Admittedly, such a response might be described as reflecting an emergent post-institutional or even post-denominational perspective. I challenge individuals who disapprove of a movement toward this stance to show, by principle or argument, that a commitment to an authentic, contemporary Adventism somehow implies a commitment to the current system of “kingly power” being exercised at the top of the General Conference. The future is now up to an informed and activist laity. 📣

*Ervin Taylor is emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, and a former executive editor of Adventist Today.*

**WHAT THE 2015 GC  
SESSION MEANS FOR  
THE FUTURE OF THE  
ADVENTIST FAITH**

# HOW FORBIDDING INCEST RUINED THE CHURCH MANUAL

By Tom de Bruin

FOR MANY THE HIGHLIGHT—OR lowlight—of the General Conference Session in San Antonio was one of the two busiest days: Sunday and Wednesday. The hall was packed, seating was at a premium, and special guests were asked to sit elsewhere. I was one of the exceptions. In all honesty, I was bored on the days focused upon women's ordination and the changes to the fundamental beliefs; both the discussion and the votes were predictable.

For me, the last Friday was the most exciting and ultimately the most disappointing. On this day, only a couple hundred delegates were present on the floor to discuss changes to the Church Manual. Many find Church Manual discussions boring and uninteresting, but these amendments to the Manual are very important, as they govern every local church worldwide. The Manual is written to support the local church in its mission, but sadly, one amendment made things much worse for mission rather than better.

I am talking about point 405: *Reasons for Discipline*. Over the course of two days, discussions and debate reduced what, in my view, was a good suggested change to the Church Manual to a mockery. The changes ultimately voted pertain to sex and how we should be having it. Sadly,

very few delegates were present at the vote, and almost none seemed to understand the horrible implications of the changes that had been made in the last couple of days. When, out of frustration, Dutch delegate Megan Molé (who also happens to be my wife) suggested that we appoint a Sexual Perversions Study Committee, I think I was the only one who agreed.

But let's back up a little.

## Leading Up to the General Conference

The amendment to *Reasons for Discipline* was on the GC agenda at the suggestion of the Dutch and Norwegian Unions, acting independently. We felt that the old wording, where clearly criminal and hurtful sexual acts (such as child abuse) were put in the same line as ones that we felt were “merely” fornication (such as homosexual practice or the use of pornography), was inaccurate and problematic. Grouped together, these acts were termed “sexual perversions.” Working from this perspective, both unions suggested the same change: remove this seemingly random listing of sexual perversions and make it very clear that engaging in any sex outside of marriage, or committing non-consensual sexual acts, is a reason for discipline.

I personally felt that this was an elegant solution. The quite arbitrary list of sexual

perversions would be gone, and it no longer implied that, for example, watching pornography was equatable with child abuse. The Church Manual committee agreed, much to my surprise, and referred these suggestions to the GC Session. I had good hopes that through these changes, the Church Manual would become a better tool for the local church.

## At the Session

On the third day of business at the session, July 5, this point was discussed and two delegates felt that the old list should remain. This was never specifically voted or discussed, however. Later, the motion was referred back to the Church Manual committee at the suggestion of North American Division President Dan Jackson, for different reasons. On that final Friday, with very few delegates present, the Church Manual committee at last returned with their amended suggestions. The problem for which it was originally sent back was not changed, but to some delegates' great surprise, a list of “fornication issues” had been added: “promiscuity, homosexual activity, incest, sodomy, and bestiality.”<sup>1</sup> Despite protests from both Dutch and Norwegian delegates, this proposal was voted through.

The Church Manual committee gave no indication of how they reached this list of

“fornication issues.” I would imagine that this is what the committee thought of as the most basic list that all Adventists agree goes against the commandments.<sup>2</sup> Maybe I am in the minority, but I have issues with this list in general and with some items specifically. Because “homosexual activity” has been discussed far and wide lately, I’d like to stay away from that topic here. Instead I’d like to look at—hold your breath—incest. Let it be a case study on why this list makes the Church Manual less useful for the local church.

### Incest

Looking at Europe, incest is an illegal sex act in some countries, such as Germany. In others, like the Netherlands, incest is not illegal, but it is also not legally possible for family members who are directly biologically related to marry. For the Church Manual, these two variations make no difference; any incestuous sex would be considered extra-marital and therefore be classed as fornication. How would a local church deal with a case where close relatives are legally married? This situation is not entirely hypothetical; in the Netherlands cousins and adopted siblings can legally marry, a situation many might consider incestuous.

There could well be more incestuous marriages on the horizon. Last year, the German government ethics committee advised that the laws against incest go against the fundamental human right of sexual self-determination. This ruling followed the somewhat notorious case of Patrick S and Susan K, siblings, who had four children together. Patrick S and Susan K had never known each other as children; they met when Patrick was 23 and were not aware when they started their relationship that they were siblings. The case can be made that while the two are biological siblings, they are

not relational ones. This is inverse to the situation in the Netherlands, where adoptive siblings can marry, as they are not biologically related. It does not seem unlikely that local churches will someday need to deal with a legal marriage that the local church feels is incestuous.

### Local Difficulties

Incest is clearly a social taboo, and many people have a physical reaction to the thought of it. But, as the German ethics committee pointed out, “criminal law is not the appropriate means to preserve a social taboo.”<sup>3</sup> I would like to continue that thought and claim that church law should also not be used to preserve taboos. As strong believers in the Bible, Adventists should base our rejection of sexual acts and types of marriage on sound biblical exegesis, not cultural stigma, when considering disciplinary measures. Unfortunately, I am quite sure that in this case that has not been done.

How should a local church deal with an “incestuous” married couple? Surely the couple will appeal to the Church Manual’s various definitions of marriage as heterosexual, monogamous, lawful, and between one man and one woman. The couple would point out that they follow this definition to the letter, and that there is no instance of abuse or of non-consensuality in their relationship. They might point out that this is the only place incest is mentioned in the Manual and that it does not define the term in any way.

In fact, the only time the church has in any way defined incest is in a statement on child abuse, voted in 1997. It reads: “Incest, a specific form of child sexual abuse, is defined as any sexual activity between a child and a parent, a sibling, an extended family member, or a step/surrogate parent.”<sup>4</sup> This definition, treating the abuse of minors, does not

apply to the situation we are discussing here.

In this situation, the local church would need to look at what the Bible says, and the Bible doesn’t seem to be terribly interested in speaking against sibling marriages. Two passages discourage

**MANY FIND CHURCH MANUAL DISCUSSIONS BORING AND UNINTERESTING, BUT THESE AMENDMENTS TO THE MANUAL ARE VERY IMPORTANT, AS THEY GOVERN EVERY LOCAL CHURCH WORLDWIDE.**

sexual relations between a man and his sister: Leviticus 18:9 and Deuteronomy 27:22. Both of these passages are part of the Israelite cultic laws, which Adventists generally do not keep unless they are repeated in the New Testament or are part of fundamental Adventist values (e.g., the clean/unclean food laws). I will not discuss these passages in detail, but I am sure a strong case can be made that these cultic practices are no longer binding. Thus, the local church is put into a difficult position. Individuals on both sides of the issue can argue their case from the Church Manual, and the church board would be required to rule on a very complicated situation.

A second problem with the list of

*Continued on page 46*

# POST TENEBRAS LUXIS

By Jack Hoehn

AFTER DARKNESS, WHAT? THE REFORMATION MOTTO CLAIMED: After Darkness, Light. What do we do when darkness overtakes the light? What do Adventists damaged by the unfortunate decisions of the 2015 General Conference Session do now?

## Boko Haram

On a night in April of 2014, a group of religious extremists overtook a school where teenage girls were taking final exams in physics. The kidnappers, claiming to be security forces, herded the girls into trucks and then drove them to a forested area with fortified camps. This group, Boko Haram, has been known to target schools, believing that girls should not be educated and using them as cooks or sex slaves. Although some of the girls escaped, over 234 were missing.

Most of these girls were Christians. Houses in the town were burned down during the incident. If this were your town, what should you have done the next morning?

## ISIS/ISIL

Black-clad Jihadists took over Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, in 2014. A militant extremist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or ISIS, has become known for its acts of "ethnic cleansing" and for deliberately destroying cultural heritage sites. Since the Arabic word for Christian is *Nazarene*, the terrorists put the Arabic letter for "N" on the doors of homes they believed to house Christians. Torture, murder, rape, and/or beheading are the typical fate of the occupants.

Yet, at the cost of their lives, young men and women have formed clandestine organizations to report on the beheading of Christians in public forums. They have taken photos in secret

and published images of homosexuals being thrown from buildings. Mosul Eye and Al-Raqqawi members have been sentenced to death for telling the world about ISIL's reign of terror.<sup>1</sup>

So what if you lived in Mosul, and the Arabic "N" was written on your door? If your house was marked and you were one of those who escaped before being killed, what should you do the next morning?



This is not a happy face.<sup>2</sup> It is the Arabic letter for "N" and marks the home of a Nazarene (the Arabic word for "Christian") as a target for horrific violence.

## Nazi

The occupation of Denmark by the German Nazi forces began early in World War II and lasted for five years. At first the Danish government and their king attempted to cooperate with the invading forces to maintain a form of self-government. However, the Nazis took away freedom of the press after occupation, and finally they dissolved the government and imposed martial law. The Germans then attempted to gather and export to death camps all Danish Jews previously protected by the government, which had refused to pass the anti-Jewish laws urged by the Nazis.

Imagine that you were a Sabbath keeper, but not a Jew. How would you explain that to a Nazi? What should you do?



## Waldensian

Several times in my life I have left Milan through Turin, stopping for lunch in Parma (ever hear of Parme-san cheese?) before continuing into the foothills of the Italian Alps called Piedmont (*pied* is Old French for “foot,” as used in distance and length, and *mont* is French for “mountain”). In Torre Pellice stands an ancient Waldensian church, and you can drive and hike up into the mountains to see various sites where the people of God withdrew in the face of papal persecution. Back in the mountains, I watched a grandmother spin wool on a distaff while watching both her grandson and her cow on the unfenced mountainside.



Fascinated, I watched her control the cow by voice command. When the animal began to wander, she would call it back. The cow fully obeyed her mistress's voice, and the simplicity of such harmony within nature charmed me. I reread in *The Great Controversy* a telling of the Vaudois story that took place near a mountain hideout there. Italian Waldensian churches after the Reformation spoke French, because papal death squads had killed all of their Italian pastors, and the replacements who came from French-speaking Geneva educated a new generation in French. But on each church, a Latin phrase appears over the door, often with a single candle shining in darkness:

LUX LUCET IN TENEBRIS = Light Shines in Darkness.<sup>3</sup>

I saw the same phrase on the ruins of a wiped-out protesting church in Southern France at the ruins of Les Baux, a Provence city that adopted the Reformation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, before being destroyed by Cardinal Richelieu.



POST TENEBRAS LUX = After Darkness, Light!<sup>4</sup>

So when the representatives of God's church gather together in council and vote decisions after prayer to promote the work of God on Earth by the church,<sup>5</sup> demanding unity in practice and belief of its members, what do you do? What was the strategy behind the Waldensian persecutions? What will you do during the coming years of darkness?

## Keep Doing What We Have Been Doing?

For many years now, some of us have been writing, blogging, sending letters to Adventist leaders, and taking part in study committees—such as the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC)—to prove that there is no biblical reason to deny ordination to women. We have participated in faith-and-science summits—such as the 2014 International Conference on the Bible and Science—in an attempt to demonstrate that there is no scientific possibility that God created the Earth either recently or in 144 hours. However, this information has not helped those who accept a King James literalism mindset, or who feel that Ellen White has scientific and chronologic authority as part of her inspiration.

Knowledge has increased, and men do run to and fro now. There is more-than-adequate information on which to base a decision for both of these fundamental questions. Ellen White is firmly on the side of gender equality in ministry and firmly on the side of a creation week comprising six 24-hour days. She is also firmly on the side of progressive truth, and she encourages us to give up old doctrines in favor of better ones once God shows the way. Information about her ministry published recently by the Review and Herald makes it clear that both Ellen White and her son did not consider her an expert on the chronology of history, including the chronology of creation.<sup>6</sup>

Has this education campaign worked? Some predicted that the vote on women's ordination would be 70 percent “No,” so the

fact that approximately 40 percent voted “Yes” might mean that the educational approach of the last 20 years helped 10 percent of our members to rethink the women’s ordination issue. Many strong Adventist voices were promoting a “Yes” vote. But with Ted Wilson’s administration so strongly advocating a “No” vote, education alone proved insufficient. Dealing with convicted anti-ordination Adventists is almost like arguing with many Mormon missionaries. Likewise, dealing with committed Young Earth Creationists on the possible age of the Earth and the length of creation days yields similar results.

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In discussions with Mormon missionaries, if you come to a point where reason fails, they will put up their hands and say: “I testify to you, I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. I know the Mormon Church is true.” End of discussion.

Even if Adventist fundamentalists do not put up their hands (as they should, according to the verse they use against ordaining women, which also demands hands-up prayer for men<sup>7</sup>), they dig in their heels and say in effect: “Nothing that you show me can change my mind. I know Ellen White was a prophet of God. I know the Bible is true, as I read it in simple English!” End of discussion.

### Change of Focus?

In times of darkness, I suggest we focus our efforts on teaching the young how to understand God’s will in the Bible. This may mean offering alternative Sabbath School curricula or publications focused on the children and young adults. *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today* may need to replace its aging warriors with younger writers who can open and expand the doctrine of creation to all Christian scientific opinions, who will show that it is a sin to hinder anyone from working for God based on race, class, or gender.

Others have suggested that their support for the ministry would include sending the Lord’s tithes to the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University for placement in a scholarship fund reserved for female theology students. Someone who talked to me this morning was thinking of sending donations to our African or South American universities for the same purpose, thereby creating trust funds for female students desiring theological training. This would provide support for gender-neutral ministry in a presently underfunded area.

Perhaps we could set up funded chairs in religion and science at each Adventist college and university, so there would be at each school a permanent Adventist instructor and researcher in the field of science and religion to attempt to bring concord between the two fields of knowledge. These professors could explore openly and fairly the way creation can be understood with Young Earth creationism (YEC), Old Earth creationism (OEC), theistic evolution (TE), or some combination of the above. Such explorations would enable our students to graduate with a thorough understanding of all viable Christian options for belief that God, through Jesus Christ, is our Creator and Redeemer.

### Boycott?

Perhaps the quickest way to force change in our administrators is to stop supporting them financially. I suspect that if the worldwide membership of Seventh-day Adventists did not approve of the officers voted by the 2,337 delegates who claim to have represented the millions of us, we could force a resignation in a month or two if we all agreed to boycott offerings and tithes to the organization until changes were made.

But this is unlikely, for many reasons. Some of us think it immoral to not bring the tithe “into the storehouse,” which has been drummed into our souls as representing the organized church treasury. Others do not wish to cause chaos for the many employees of the church who are dependent on the tithe for their salaries and pensions. (Although, if we wished to send the General Conference a clear message, trust funds are set

up for pensions, and reserves could carry all levels of church organization for a boycott lasting month or more).

But there are creative ways of maintaining tithing that could be useful in getting light back into the present dark times. Some of us have decided we will “tithe” only to conferences and unions that do not discriminate based on gender in ordination. Strong support for those conferences and unions would be a wonderful stimulus for change within laggard unions and their conferences. In addition, it would help subsidize those funds lost by the anti-women’s ordination forces who have withdrawn their tithes! I’d love to see Sandra Roberts, president of the Southeastern California Conference, have excess tithes she could loan to struggling male-only conferences as a gift of love.

Of course, all of us need to continue to support our local churches wherever we are. If you have a concern about using the Lord’s first 10 percent of your income for your church’s ministry, then give them an additional 5 percent anyway. If you feel the Lord wants you to support your congregation’s ministry with some of his tithe, then by all means obey the Lord.

If you want to support your conference but don’t want funds to go out of your conference, then don’t send your gifts marked as “tithe.” Instead, give the funds as a trust (i.e., “unrestricted operating funds to be used only in the Upper Columbia Conference”). The treasurers are legally obliged to assign earmarked donations for the purpose you state. No conference is forced to accept your donation, but I suspect that if faced with a drop in “tithe,” the treasurers would be happy to accept “unrestricted operating trust funds” for use in their conference wherever the need is greatest, including paying pastors and teachers. And they would be obligated to not send such funds up the feeding chain to “higher organizations,” such as the General Conference (GC) and its divisions.

### **Rebellion?**

There is no quicker way for an Adventist employee of any organization to be fired than to suggest any deviation from the tithing system as it now stands. So we cannot ask these reforms of our pastors or local administrators. These ideas must come from business and management professionals outside of denominational employment.

Of course, the fact is that despite the sacred nature of tithe, only a fraction of Seventh-day Adventists pays a full tenth of their income. So part of my “rebellion” is to plead that every Adventist, from paperboy to the makers of Little Debbie snacks to the CEO of Adventist Health, pays an honest tithe. It doesn’t belong to you; it belongs to God.

If you and everyone else who claims the name of Seventh-day Adventist paid the Lord his tithe, we could have church schools, secondary schools, colleges, and universities that people would be scrambling to get into, hospitals that had generous charity programs, and churches that were quite able to meet community needs. We could be generous with our self-sacrificing teachers and expansionist with our mission in third-world countries.

There is a huge spiritual benefit for believers who tithe. And as I have written elsewhere, some of us will give second, third, fourth, and fifth tithes!<sup>8</sup> So I am very pro-tithe—before taxes, off the top. Try it, and see how God blesses what’s left. Dr. Leslie

**I want the General Conference to be a lean and clean administrative organization, which coordinates the Lord’s work but does not control it by finances or doctrines. The only way I know to make this happen is to withhold support from the darkness that has come upon our church and to instead fund the sources of light.**

Hardinge said that if you don’t think you can afford to tithe, then put the tithe money in a jar when you get your paycheck and put the jar on a shelf. Keep it there till your next paycheck. If you need it for yourself, use it. But if God blesses the 90 percent and you didn’t need to dip into the tithe, then give it to him at the end of your pay period. This is called testing the tithe blessing. Prove it, God challenges.<sup>9</sup>

### Responsible Tithing

I am, however, against supporting the present GC administration in their regression back to unthinking biblicism and dogmatic fundamentalism. I don't want them to have enough money to buy black SUVs and hire bodyguards for our president. I don't want them to have enough money to squander on ineffective Daniel and Revelation seminars in major cities that don't need or care about that topic. I don't want to let them send out millions of unedited 19<sup>th</sup>-century prophecies for 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers.

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My subscription (and gift subscriptions for my children) to the *Adventist Review* (which is now a GC house organ) is going away, whereas my donations to *Adventist Today* and *Spectrum* will continue. My church budget offerings will keep up, and my tithe will go to the places the Lord tells me to send it. When the present administration gets the message and opens the church to progressive truth, or is less able to oppose present truth and progressive Adventism, I'll be happy to return to my previous systematic benevolence through the existing Adventist organization. Giving through our "regular church channels" has its wisdom, but the fundamentalism-run-wild that is currently taking place at the General Conference level demands an alternative giving strategy.

### Darkness

Many progressive Adventists view the 2015 General Conference at San Antonio as inflicting terrible damage to the mission of Seventh-day Adventists, which is to be a blessing to the world and to hasten the spread of the gospel. The delegates, through their decision to tie creation to an unsupportable scientific opinion—the weakest of three or four Christian options available—have hindered our influence. They have dishonored God's plan for gender equality in ministry, in home life, and in administration by the anti-women vote. They have shut the door on gender-inverted people by not accepting monogamy as an attainable goal for those so challenged. Worst of all, they have made Adventism comfortable for the judgmental and rigid in our church but discouraging for the kind and open and gentle members.

What is not inspired about the following words from Sister Ellen White? "How little do we enter into sympathy with Christ on that which should be the strongest bond of union between us and Him—compassion for depraved, guilty, suffering souls, dead in trespasses and sins! The inhumanity of man toward man is our greatest sin. Many think that they are representing the justice of God while they wholly fail of representing His tenderness and His great love. ... You may stand up stiffly, feeling, 'I am holier than thou,' and it matters not how correct your reasoning or how true your words; they will never touch hearts."<sup>10</sup>

What in this heart-touching direction does not apply to the gender-inverted, drug-abused, tobacco-addicted, ex-criminal, and cohabiting people in your community? And if the inhumanity of man toward man is our greatest sin, then the inhumanity of chauvinistic, abusing males is surely right up there near it.

Does Jesus' condemnation of those who would hinder little girls from coming to him in full service, and 100 percent equality






to little boys, not faze those male-headship guys? This applies to sexual abusers, of course, but it also applies to emotional and spiritual discriminators who say that girls and women are not fit to lead and serve the Lord as equals (if not superiors) to men. This harms girls and hurts women, and Jesus was unequivocal about those who do it.<sup>11</sup>

### After Darkness, Light

I love the Seventh-day Adventist church with all of my heart. I have written before why I love it: it does good to people.<sup>12</sup> But I mourn the tares that have come into the Lord's planting through a creedal, papal, unthinking fundamentalism and the misuse of Sister White's gift that has taken charge of this denomination's leadership. The 10 days that our church met in San Antonio in July of 2015 were days of darkness for the truth as it is in Jesus on a superficial but important level. However, the final chapter has not yet been written. Even popes have been willing to reopen the door to the light.

On Monday, June 22, 2015, Pope Francis publicly apologized for the Catholic Church's treatment of the Waldensians. These believers suffered hundreds of years of darkness, enduring multiple attempts by church leaders to exterminate them. "On behalf of the Catholic Church, I ask forgiveness for the un-Christian and even inhumane positions and actions taken against you historically," said Pope Francis. "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgive us!"<sup>13</sup>

The pope has plenty more forgiveness to ask before all Christians can be under one Shepherd, and that Shepherd will be Jesus, not him. But I fear that our Adventist Church is moving toward the same type of Catholic subjection of women, forbidding lay people to break the communion bread and serve the wine, specializing in denouncing sins instead of offering a Savior, making Adventism into a rigid, narrow creedalism and accepting a hierarchy system of government—a system that poisoned God's apostolic church and turned it into the apostate church.

We are not the apocalyptic beast of Romanism. And we are not called to "come out" of Adventism. But we must look for the light that will keep us from becoming an image to the beast, a copy of it in teachings or character. Looking unto Jesus, we must help Adventism reflect the image of Christ. That will not happen with narrowing of our doctrines; it will come with an opening of our hearts. 

*John B. "Jack" Hoehn, MD, is a family physician practicing with the Adventist Health Medical Group in Walla Walla, Washington. Earlier in his career, he served for 13 years as a licensed Adventist minister and for 13 years as a medical missionary in both Lesotho and Zambia in Africa.*

<sup>1</sup> Hollie McKay, "ISIS' Latest Executions Show Risk Faced by Caliphate's Secret Resistance," FoxNews.com, July 9, 2015. (See <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/07/09/belly-beast-isis-latest-executions-show-risk-faced-by-caliphate-secret/>)

<sup>2</sup> Photo from <http://davemiers.com/we-are-n/>

<sup>3</sup> Photo "Waldenser-Wappen" licensed under public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

<sup>4</sup> Photo by Jack Hoehn, taken in Les Baux des Provence.

<sup>5</sup> Eight centuries ago, in November 1215, a "GC Session" with 71 patriarchs, 412 bishops, 900 abbots and priors, plus several governmental representatives was held in Rome's Lateran basilica. The leaders of the church presented 71 decrees for consideration by the Fourth Council of Lateran. According to historians, "those gathered in council engaged in little discussion and generally approved the decrees presented." Votes that passed included exhortation to the Greeks to reunite with the church "that there may be only one fold and one shepherd." Clergy were denounced for sexual transgressions, drunkenness, and attendance at "farces." There were regulations on marriages and how to handle donations to the church. The Council attendees denounced the doctrines of two theologians plus voted procedures and penalties against heretics and their protectors. They defined "Christians" as those who confessed their sins and took communion at least once every year. This "GC Session" led to the bloody destruction of the *Cathars (Pure Ones)* or *Albigenses* of Toulouse, a reform movement, as well as further persecutions of the followers of Peter Waldo, or the *Waldensians*, another Christian reformation. (See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth\\_Council\\_of\\_the\\_Lateran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Council_of_the_Lateran))

<sup>6</sup> See *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), pp. 705-707 under "Chronology, Biblical": "Nothing would prevent those who value her writings today from accepting the conventional age for the universe determined by scientists." Ellen White's younger statement that "the world is now only about six thousand years old" in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 3, p. 92, was omitted by her when she published *Patriarchs and Prophets* some years later (see pp. 111-116), suggesting that information available at that time made the previous Ussherian chronology less reliable.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 2:8 (NIV) says, "Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands..."

<sup>8</sup> (See <http://atoday.org/the-speech-you-didnt-get-to-hear.html>)

<sup>9</sup> Malachi 3:10 (NIV) says, "Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty..."

<sup>10</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 18:6 (NIV) says, "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

<sup>12</sup> Jack Hoehn, "The Smoke of a Thousand Villages," *Adventist Today* Online, Jan. 29, 2014. (See <http://www.atodayarchive.org/article/2297/opinion/hoehn-jack/the-smoke-of-a-thousand-villages>)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/28/pope-francis-waldensians\\_n\\_7644916.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/28/pope-francis-waldensians_n_7644916.html)



## WHAT THE 2015 GC SESSION MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ADVENTIST FAITH

### Now Is the Time

By Alden Thompson

My assignment in this column is to respond to San Antonio, but in a sense that's not very fair, since I was not there and did not monitor events closely. Yet I saw enough to know that the church faces a crossroads. I don't see how the church can afford another General Conference Session like this one. Whenever we divide the church into winners and losers, as the General Conference did at San Antonio, everyone loses.

Early on, Dennis Hokama, a member of the *Adventist Today* press team and also an official delegate, reported on the *Adventist Today* website that he had been denied entry to the main floor with the presentation of his press credentials. Finally, a sympathetic security guard told him that he would have to hide his press credentials and enter simply as a delegate. That worked. This was Hokama's fourth General Conference. Never before had press credentials meant exclusion from the session.

But enough diagnosis already. I want to turn to prescription. For, in spite of the pain of San Antonio, I see this moment in history as a great opportunity for the church—if we can focus on two goals, the first very simple and specific, the second more complex and all-encompassing.

#### 1. Adoption of a Common Ministerial Credential.

At San Antonio the church voted to prohibit the ordination of women. That's a huge gift, because now we can go a step further and not ordain anyone at all. For many years I have said that I am opposed to the ordination of women, because I am opposed to the ordination of men. Why should we curse women to the same disease that has afflicted men, compliments of a "privilege" that flies in the face of the teachings of Jesus? But I despaired of ever finding a way of eliminating the ordination curse completely. We males have been reluctant to drop our hierarchical privileges, half-heartedly hoping that the gifted women in our midst could come up to our "honored"

level. But all of a sudden, the church has handed us a wonderful opportunity: We can come down to our sisters in ministry, down to equality at the foot of the cross.

**Enough diagnosis already. I want to turn to prescription. For, in spite of the pain of San Antonio, I see this moment as a great opportunity for the church.**

The biblical mandate is found in Jesus' response to James and John when they requested top places in the "hierarchy" of the kingdom. Jesus was blunt: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45, NRSV).

In short, there is no hierarchy in Jesus' kingdom. We are all called to serve, just as our Lord served. Our current practice of ordination is not rooted in Scripture, but in Roman Catholic tradition. The laying on of hands is thoroughly biblical, but not as a sign

that those so blessed have been exalted to a position above their brothers and sisters. The community simply lays hands on those who have been called to service by God. And in the eyes of Ellen White, those called to lead the church could be “businessmen” and the one called to lead “need not be a preacher, and he must not be a policy man.”<sup>1</sup>

My own eyes were opened to this understanding by David Wright, a devout church historian at the University of Edinburgh who was an active layman in the Presbyterian Church. He had never accepted ordination due to his conviction that the laying on of hands was a function of the local community and a recognition of God’s calling, not an initiation into a place of honor within a hierarchy of church officers. After the 1995 General Conference at Utrecht, I proposed this approach in an article published in *Ministry*.<sup>2</sup> But the time was not right. I am hoping and praying that the time has now come.

**2. Ending Presidential Privilege.** The need for this more complex goal is best illuminated by three paragraphs from a 1907 Ellen White testimony to “The Workers in Southern California.” These lines should be scattered to the church like the leaves of autumn and made the subject of prayerful discussion:

“When a worker is selected for an office, that office of itself does not bring to him power of capability that he did not have before. A high position does not give to the character Christian virtues. The man who supposes that his individual mind is capable of planning and devising for all branches of the work reveals a great lack of wisdom. No one human mind is capable of carrying the many and varied responsibilities of a conference embracing thousands of people and many branches of work.

“But a greater danger than this has been revealed to me in the feeling that has been growing among our workers that ministers and other laborers in the cause

should depend upon the mind of certain leading workers to define their duties. One man’s mind and judgment are not to be considered capable of controlling and molding a conference. The individual and the church have responsibilities of their own. God has given to every man some talent or talents to use and improve. In using these talents he increases his capability to serve. God has given to each individual judgment, and this gift He wants His workers to use and improve. The president of a conference must not consider that his individual judgment is to control the judgment of all.

“In no conference should propositions be rushed through without time being taken by the brethren to weigh carefully all sides of the question. Because the president of a conference suggested certain plans, it has sometimes been considered unnecessary to consult the Lord about them. Thus propositions have been accepted that were not for the spiritual benefit of the believers and that involved far more than was apparent at the first casual consideration. Such movements are not in the order of God. Many, very many matters have been taken up and carried by vote, that have involved far more than was anticipated and far more than those who voted would have been willing to assent to had they taken time to consider the question from all sides.”<sup>3</sup>

Although I could provide multiple examples from my own experience to illustrate the present need for reform, I will content myself with a small slice from the publishing history of my book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*.<sup>4</sup> It was the church, through the Review and Herald Publishing Association, that invited me to write the book, triggered by my four-part series on inspiration published by *Adventist Review* in September of 1985. Knowing that the book was potentially volatile, the press sent out 57 review copies instead of the

typical six to 10, and 51 of those went to people not employed by the Review. Of the 28 individuals who actually responded, 22 said it should be published. The committee making the decision was a sizeable one, with more than 50 voting members. When the finished manuscript came up for vote, objections were voiced, but in the end, no negative votes were recorded.

So the book was published. And the response has indeed proven volatile, though immensely instructive. But through it all, I continue to ponder why it is so difficult for my fellow believers to follow the counsel that Ellen White gave to President G.I. Butler with reference to his dealings with A.T. Jones:

“If a brother differs with you on some points of truth, do not stoop to ridicule, do not place him in a false light or misconstrue his words, making sport of them; do not misinterpret his words and wrest them of their true meaning. This is not conscientious argument. Do not present him before others as a heretic, when you have not with him investigated his positions, taking the Scriptures text-by-text in the spirit of Christ to show him what is truth. You do not yourself really know the evidence he has for his faith, and you cannot clearly define your own position. Take your Bible, and in a kindly spirit weigh every argument that he presents, and show him by the Scriptures if he is in error. When you do this without unkind feelings, you will do only that which is your duty and the duty of every minister of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

In the course of time, I began exploring with the Review and Herald the possibility of a print-on-demand reprint of *Inspiration*. A Review employee suggested a conference call with key publishing house personnel. As I was exploring that possibility, one of the potential participants in such an event simply told me: “I don’t think anything has changed. I have been on committees where the whole committee voted no, but the administrator said yes. I have been on committees where the whole committee voted yes and the administrator said no. It makes the whole committee process rather pointless.”

The conference call never happened, but word did come from unnamed individuals at the General Conference: “Don’t ever reprint that book under any circumstances.” So I sent a simple, one-page letter to

key people at the General Conference, quoting Ellen White’s counsel to Butler and concluding with the request for someone to sit down with me and explain the problem with the book. No one had done that yet. After several weeks had passed with no response, I inquired of the press. The Review administrator

**God’s ideal is that we learn from each other. But that is virtually impossible when we don’t talk with each other or when anyone lords knowledge or position over his brothers and sisters.**

exclaimed without hesitation, “I don’t think they have any intention of responding to you.”

What I had asked was nothing more than the application of Matthew 7:12: “Treat others as you want them to treat you” (CEV). Why should that be so difficult?

It wouldn’t be difficult, if we were following Jesus’ way. But the problem is deeply rooted and resistant to change. Recently a union conference president suggested to me that it might be wise to change terminology. “President” has hierarchical overtones that work against the ideal spelled out by Jesus. That may be part of the solution.

For my part, I love this church with a deep and abiding passion. I know that I have insights that could benefit the church. But I also know that my insights need to be constantly reshaped and refined. After all, Ellen White once exclaimed with reference to the Bible teacher: “So today the Lord does not impress all minds in the same way. Often through unusual experiences, under special circumstances, He gives to



some Bible students views of truth that others do not grasp. It is possible for the most learned teacher to fall far short of teaching all that should be taught.”<sup>6</sup>

God’s ideal is that we learn from each other. But that is virtually impossible when we don’t talk with each other or when anyone lords knowledge or position over his brothers and sisters. By God’s grace, we can take Jesus’ counsel to his disciples in Mark 10:43-45 as quoted above, along with Ellen White’s counsel to “The Workers in Southern California,” and work together toward his ideal for his people.

*Alden Thompson, professor of biblical studies at Walla Walla University, is a prolific writer, frequent speaker, and long-time contributor to Adventist Today.*

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, Special Testimonies, Series A 8:2-11, 1897, published in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923), p. 321.

<sup>2</sup> Alden Thompson, “Utrecht: A Providential Detour?” *Ministry*, October 1997, pp. 18-21.

<sup>3</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 9 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1909), pp. 277-278.

<sup>4</sup> Published by the Review and Herald, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> White, Letter 21, 1888, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1913), pp. 432-433.

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## Editorial *continued from page 3*

continue to be a contributing editor. My prayers are with him, and I invite those whose lives have been touched by David’s ministry to share their stories with us for a private book that we will share with him at the end of this year.

Leaders with the serious commitment to the cause of Christ that David Newman has modeled will bring the Adventist people out of the despair and disappointment, anger and frustration that so many feel in the aftermath of San Antonio. The hope of Christ’s return will unite us despite our tremendous cultural differences, as more leaders dare to demonstrate—as David has—the compassion and grace of Jesus.

*Adventist Today* will be part of this process, with a new editor and a renewed commitment to providing information and dialogue for contemporary believers and new generations.

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## Rosado *continued from page 21*

a loss of members, especially from the North. This happened after Utrecht, but I expect it now on an even larger scale. And instead of being the “lead institution” in society—the institution from which all the other institutions get their cues for operation—the church will become more and more irrelevant within the three geographical areas supporting women’s ordination. Growth will continue to take place exponentially in South, and the browning of Adventism will continue to increase.

I also foresee a possible split in Adventism mirroring what happened with the Southern Baptists over the issue of women’s roles. Two factions will likely emerge: (1) a progressive element arising out of North America, Europe, and Australia, and (2) a more traditional and retrenched element fueled by the growth of the church in Africa and in Latin America. San Antonio will more than likely go down in Seventh-day Adventist church history as its Kadesh-Barnea or its modern 1888 moment, when the majority rejected the minority report. Although Adventism will continue to wander in the years ahead with a theology influenced by culture, the Spirit will be poured out on the church’s sons and daughters, as God raises a whole new generation who will move the church forward with an inclusive vision, values, and mission that is reflective of Christ’s earthwalk. 🏠

*Caleb Rosado, founding pastor of the All Nations Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan, has been a university professor for more than 30 years. He now lives in Dubois, Wyoming, and is semi-retired but continues to teach online.*

<sup>1</sup> David R. Hawkins, *Power vs. Force: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 1995), p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, Manuscript 24, 1886, published in *Selected Messages Book 1* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew McChesney and Marcos Paseggi, “Delegates Vote ‘No’ on Issue of Women’s Ordination,” *Adventist Review*, July 8, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> In 1995 I published an article in response to the GC Session vote taken on the question of the ordination of women. See “How Culture Affects Our View of Scripture,” *Spectrum*, December 1995, pp. 11-15. The vote in San Antonio has made it clear that very little has changed in 20 years.

**Leeper** continued from page 9

frustration.

“Our God we worship and love can’t possibly hate us because of the person we fall in love with, or because we get lost along the way,” she added. “Isn’t the main thing loving and worshiping him? I believe God is way better than people make him seem [when they say] ‘God hates \_\_\_\_ [insert derogatory term].’ No, he doesn’t. People hate.”

These types of sentiments are exactly what the leaders of our denomination need to hear: real testimonies from real believers who are struggling with the inconsistencies of our faith.

Personally, I am ashamed to be a piece of the so-called body that claims to reflect the character of Christ and yet will openly jeer against those of a different mindset, thus dividing the body. I am ashamed to belong to a group of people who will compare women’s ordination to homosexuality and transgender bathrooms, as if any of these are categorically evil. But what I find most repulsive is how I have at times picked up this sense of Adventist superiority from “more conservative” Adventists.

Please don’t mistake my meaning. I’m not liberal, and I’m not conservative. I’m just seeking the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

## Conclusion

If we, as a denomination, are truly concerned about spreading the gospel, we need to also learn how to be truly biblical. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist faith who claim to preach the truth must not cling to such inconsistencies.


Being a true Seventh-day Adventist—being a true Christian—is simple: Do as Jesus would do; don’t get caught up in the legalistic works that snagged the Pharisees. Study the Scriptures. Profess. Believe. Surrender to the Holy Spirit. And do all things in love.

*Stefani Leeper writes from Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska. She is a junior studying communications with emphases in journalism and emerging media.*

**de Bruin** continued from page 35

“fornication issues” is that it now raises questions about practices that are not listed. This list is not exhaustive. Should the local church investigate everything that goes on behind the doors of marriage?

And so the Church Manual, which is meant to be a boon for the local church, has instead made itself ineffectual. I can imagine that if I were a local church pastor, I would now be forced to put the Church Manual aside and deal with matters as the church saw fit. As a result of an attempt to cover all details and do away with all ambiguity, the local church may be forced to no longer abide by the guidelines set out by the General Conference Session. More useful would be a focus on basic principles, as the Dutch and Norwegians argued, that could be applied to the various local situations worldwide.

Ultimately, the amendment voted at the General Conference Session demonstrates the shortsightedness of attempts at legalism. The implicit wish to be completely clear about our stance on specific issues actually created unnecessary problems. The strong fear many delegates had about slipping sexual mores and about the acceptance of homosexual relationships has made the Church Manual less useful and less meaningful. In the rush of many delegates to fight specific agendas, it seems as if we are throwing the baby out with the bath water. In this climate, maybe the Sexual Perversions Study Committee wasn’t such a bad idea after all. 

*Tom de Bruin, PhD, is currently youth director for the Netherlands Union*

*Conference. He has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a senior pastor, church planter, and union executive secretary. De Bruin is active academically as a contract lecturer for Newbold College in the United Kingdom and as a visiting scholar at Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society in the Netherlands. He maintains an English and Dutch website and blog: tomdebruin.com.*

<sup>1</sup> (See <http://www.adventistreview.org/%E2%80%8Bfifteenth-business-meeting>)

<sup>2</sup> The 1987 statement on Sexual Behavior reads, “Sexual abuse of spouses, sexual abuse of children, incest, homosexual practices (gay and lesbian), and bestiality are among the obvious perversions of God’s original plan.”

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by the British newspaper *The Telegraph* (see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11119062/Incest-a-fundamental-right-German-committee-says.html>)

<sup>4</sup> (See <http://www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/statements/article/go/0/child-sexual-abuse/>)

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# Adventist Man

## A SATIRICAL LOOK AT ADVENTIST LIFE

### What I Was Doing at San Antonio

Life has been a bit dicey the last few weeks here at the towering Adventist Today building. Nervous copyboys, linotypists, and paste-up guys have had to run the gauntlet through hordes of angry demonstrators camped out in our courtyard, cringing so as not to be struck by picket signs reading, “Adventist Man—Where Were You at San Antonio?” and “You’ve Got the Cape and the Muscles—Why Didn’t You Use Them?” and “A-Man Wimps Out, and a non-PC GC Reverts to B.C.!”

By shrewdly arriving and departing through an antebellum sewer tunnel under our Gothic edifice, I have been largely able to avoid these raw expressions of wounded outrage. But the questions are fair ones. Why wasn’t Adventist Man right there on the General Conference (GC) Session floor, doing his best to sway the Big Vote?

Now it can be told.

As you know, an approaching GC Session generates a lot of important agenda items that never make it to the floor, because even more momentous items take precedence. I was asked to be part of a committee to formulate and discuss the most crucial of these second-tier issues, in case there might be time left over.

Here, then, are a few of these practical proposals, which I believe could enhance Adventist culture all over the world. They seem simple, but their implementation could rock the planet, save the whales and spotted owls, and eliminate lion poaching. (At least, that’s what our committee felt. Of course, by

this time it was two in the morning, and—dizzy from too much Postum—we had just finished holding hands in a circle and singing “We Are the World.”)

Anyway, check out these proposals that never made it to the GC Session floor:

*Infiltrate McKee Foods with undercover teams, who pose as employees but secretly mix increasing levels of a healthy chocolate substitute into Little Debbie snacks. Code name: “Operation Carob Spring.”*

*Recommend that evangelists add one more frightening final-days-political-crisis “beast” sermon to every prophecy series. Title: “The Last Trump.”*

*To facilitate inexpensive intermember communication, engage a prominent Adventist to resuscitate an out-of-favor Canadian smartphone—there should be a lot of them available—and rename it the Barry Black Blackberry.*

*Use social media to viralize the practice of rushing with your smartphone to the pulpit in the middle of a sermon and snapping your picture with the pastor. Welcome to “soulfies”!*

*Recontextualize Luke 13:32 so that Christ’s comment “Go tell that fox” becomes a prophetic reference to a conservative news network.*

*Start a vigorous shaming campaign against people who begin all of their sentences, even answers to questions, with “So.” Examples: “What is the chief export of Paraguay?” “So, the mineral industry of Paraguay produces about 25 percent of the country’s gross domestic*

product.” “What is your favorite Bible verse?” “So, ‘For God so loved the world...’” How can this shaming be done? So, since social media is worldwide, this should be easy.

Of all such vital proposals, the most far-reaching might be the following:

*Insert into worship service hymns extra verses that subliminally influence children and youth. For example, here’s a proposed final stanza to “Amazing Grace:”*

*When we are in the potluck line,  
Be sure to stay alert  
And give to all the older folks  
The first crack at dessert.*

And as a last, polemical stanza of “This Is My Father’s World:”

*This is the worship hour,  
And to my list’ning ear  
Come sounds of beeps and chirps and tweets.  
So, listen, little dear—  
Turn off your little phone  
And store it in your coat  
Or I will come right over there  
And shove it down your throat.*

**Do you have a tough question? Adventist Man has “the answer.” As a former member of “the remnant of the remnant,” Adventist Man was ranked 8,391 of the 144,000—and working his way up. Now he relies solely on grace and friendship with Jesus. You can email him at [atoday@atoday.org](mailto:atoday@atoday.org).**

**BACK COVER AD**