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Crisis or opportunity?

Adventist pastors speak on Creation stewardship

Most would agree that there is something gut-wrenching about a polar bear perched forlornly on a melting ice floe hardly bigger than the bear itself, while surrounded by an area of sea that was recently covered with thick Arctic ice. Influential media and scientific sources in Western countries bombard us with poignant images of an environmental crisis, gloomy accounts of extinction, examples of pollution, forecasts of global warming, and evidence of accelerating environmental damage inflicted by humanity.

As a result, Seventh-day Adventist ministers and church leaders are grappling with issues relating to the environment. As theists who believe in a literal six-day Creation, Adventist ministers find themselves vexed by questions about their role in preserving creation. As one minister complained, "My main concern with getting involved in environmental issues is the problem with the supposed 'facts.' One day it all sounds absolute, but the next it is debunked . . . as a church we have a biblical mandate to be good stewards, but it would be sad if [we] become radical and premature."

Should the Seventh-day Adventist Church advocate on behalf of creation? Should other more pressing matters relating to faith, belief, and theology take priority? Should pastors or congregations be practically involved in matters of unresolved science?

The basic tension

The beliefs and attitudes of Seventh-day Adventist ministers towards creation stewardship have largely been unknown. In response to this situation, a 2008 survey of Australian Adventist ministers was conducted. The 278 responses provided unique insights into the thinking of these pastors. How aware were ministers of the big environmental issues and what did they think about them?

In the survey, the statement, *"One of the most important tasks given to Adam and Eve was to tend to God's creation,"* attracted an overwhelming level of support: 89.4 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agree with it. At the same time, we found that Australian Adventist ministers find themselves struggling to reconcile an expectation of inevitable environmental decay associated with end-time events and the need to be proactive in protecting the environment. Most agreed or strongly agreed (94.4 percent) that the Bible forecasts widespread environmental destruction at the end of time; a similarly high number (92.3 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the Bible does require humankind to protect what God created.

How this tension between apocalyptic expectation and contemporary commitment becomes resolved remains unclear. Is this tension inhibiting pastors from leading their churches into practical demonstrations of their theological views of creation stewardship? Given the specific mission of Jesus Christ in atoning for human sin, His enabling ministry with people, and virtually no references in the Gospels to environment, we were surprised that 89 percent indicated they thought Jesus would be interested in modern environmental problems.

Clearly, Adventists have been passionate about matters not explicitly part of Christ's ministry. Adventists have played leading roles in advocacy for education, health care, religious liberty, community development, and vegetarianism—all of which were hardly priorities of Christ—at least according to the Gospels. Should the environment be added to this list?

To conquer or to care for?

Perplexingly, people commonly criticize the Judeo-Christian tradition as a belief system that places humankind above nature with the remainder of creation in a position of subservience. Genesis 1:26 reads, "Then God said, 'Let us make man

in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule [have dominion] over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground' " (NIV). *Strong's Concordance* indicates that the word used for dominion (interpreted above as "rule") is the Hebrew *radah,* which means "tread down, subjugate, prevail against, rule over." However, rulership in the Judeo-Christian tradition clearly requires justice, wisdom, compassion, and benevolence (as seen in Psalm 72:1–3). Indeed, 55.9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the Bible gives believers in God the right to conquer nature, though what respondents mean by "conquer" remains unclear. More so, whether "conquering" precludes "care" is also not stated.

There is no question, however, that a large group of respondents (83.8 percent) feel that the environment (creation) is "in bad shape." Nearly two-thirds (61.4 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the most significant current environmental problem is man-made climate change; 85.9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the Western way of life is harmful to the natural environment. Therefore, it may be inferred that ministers know the actions of humankind are harmful to creation.

In terms of social justice, expert consensus says global warming will impact most on the world's poor. In early 2008, the United Nations (UN) secretary-general reiterated the UN position that "it is the poor, in Africa and developing small island states and elsewhere, who will suffer the most, even though they are the least responsible for global warming."[1] However a significant third, 32.6 percent of Australian Adventist ministers surveyed, expressed uncertainty or disagreed that this would be the case.

View from the pew

Part three of our survey dealt with ministers' perceptions of their own congregations and was designed to complement forthcoming surveys on youth and congregations. Close to 50 percent thought their congregations were interested in environmental matters; 22.6 percent, in contrast, anticipated a lack or strong lack of interest from them.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (73 percent) thought their congregations would not oppose a sermon on environmental stewardship; 77.2 percent felt their congregations could "do a lot more to help the environment." If ministers are correct, a significant portion of Adventists are interested in environmental matters, though a large majority are doing relatively little to advocate for or protect creation. Moving this inertia to activities based upon religious beliefs stands as an enormous challenge for the church at large. There may be some fear of a backlash, as revealed in the comment, "I believe environmental stewardship is important; however, I have seen a congregation turn on its leader who promoted such an idea. Therefore I am wary of broaching the topic with a conservative church."

A little more than one-third of ministers (38.8 percent) objected to the statement, "The main thing that stops the congregation I lead (or attend) from helping the environment is the belief that we can't really make a difference." We speculate that apathy, habit, ignorance, and lack of awareness about viable ways of making a real difference stand in the way of congregations doing something. Of concern is the fact that more than 75 percent of respondents did not indicate that their church congregation had taken steps to reduce its impact on the environment.

Given the statistics above, we might speculate that about three-quarters of ministers are reasonably sure their congregations would support a sermon on environmental stewardship. A prevailing sense of powerlessness exists, however, that churches can reduce their environmental footprint. The question begs asking, Why do Adventists, who believe God made earth, not work together as a congregation to caretake creation? Why does financial stewardship remain high on the official list of priorities while creation stewardship languishes? Why do we put so much energy into encouraging members to donate more money without emphasizing our other responsibilities?

The Adventist Church as a whole

The last part of our survey explored the ministers' personal commitments to creation stewardship and their perceptions of the denomination at large. In terms of who is best positioned to advocate for creation, there was little opposition to formal church engagement. Just 20.2 percent of ministers were neutral or negative about the idea of the Seventh-day Adventist Church including environmental stewardship as an important part of the denominational message. Interestingly, 22.9 percent expressed concerns about becoming sidetracked from the church's mission. However, 79.9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that environmental stewardship should be an important part of the denomination's message. At the same time, 84.6 percent agreed or strongly agreed that Christian respect for God's creation is an important part of church mission. Ministers overwhelmingly reject the idea that trying to make a difference is pointless; 85 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am personally committed to environmental stewardship."

Our denomination has an opportunity to equip pastors to be relevant and responsive. Just 36 percent of ministers reported feeling equipped to promote creation or environmental stewardship. This is partly because of the narrow focus involved in most theological training programs and the complex nature of environmental science. For example, few ministers would be familiar with climate modeling, the Gaia hypothesis, solar variability, continental drift, and a range of

natural phenomenon impacting on climate. Ministers need help if they are to support the official church stance in practical ways, separate good science from the bad, and feel confident in their stance on creation stewardship.

The official Adventist position below is unequivocal, though widely unknown among laypersons and ministers. To this end, one must ask how official and important it is? Does the Adventist position translate into action, resources, and change? In 1996, the General Conference Committee of Seventh-day Adventists approved and voted the following statement:

> It is the belief of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that humankind was created in the image of God, and is thus to represent God as His steward and to manage the natural environment in a faithful and fruitful way. Nature is a gift from God.
>
> Unfortunately, men and women have been increasingly involved in an irresponsible destruction of the earth's resources, resulting in widespread suffering, environmental degradation, and the threat of climate change. While scientific research needs to continue, it is clear from the accumulated evidence that the increasing emission of destructive gasses, the massive destruction of the American rain forests, and the depletion of the protective mantle of ozone (the so-called greenhouse effect), are all threatening the earth's eco-system. There are dire predictions of global warming, rising sea levels, increasing frequency of storms and destructive floods, and devastating desertification and droughts.
>
> These problems are largely due to human selfishness and greed which result in ever-increasing production, unlimited consumption, and depletion of non-renewable resources. Solidarity with future generations is discussed, but the pressure of immediate interests is given priority. The ecological crisis is rooted in humankind's greed and refusal to practice good and faithful stewardship.
>
> The government and people of Costa Rica are to be commended for their support of a comprehensive policy of sustainable development in harmony with nature.
>
> Seventh-day Adventism advocates a simple, wholesome lifestyle, where people do not step on the treadmill of unbridled over-consumption, accumulation of goods, and production of waste. A reformation of lifestyle is called for, based on respect for nature, restraint in the use of the world's resources, re-evaluation of one's needs, and reaffirmation of the dignity of created life.[2]

The church statement is clear (despite the mistaken statement that ozone loss is the greenhouse effect).

Conclusion and recommendations

Our survey reveals that Seventh-day Adventist ministers are concerned about the apparent plight of creation and do think it an issue requiring "some" advocacy. The majority of ministers also think their congregations are interested in the environment and overwhelmingly conclude that the denomination needs a strong position on environmental stewardship (almost 80 percent).

At the same time, the question is always asked, Should other more pressing matters relating to faith, belief, and theology take priority? It would be interesting in further research to investigate the concerns ministers have about potential divisiveness. As one minister commented, "While my congregation is generally committed to environmental stewardship, methods and opinions vary greatly. We have nature lovers and SUV owners who are concerned about the environment but use very different methods. Any policy would have to be non-political and inclusive of all methods. The potential for division could be as big as music has been."

The wider church, we would argue, needs education about the consequences of inaction and its forecasted impact upon the world's needy. Continued theological tension between apocalyptic expectation and working until Christ returns requires a continuing conversation among us. Balancing these two polarities challenges our choices and practices. The environmental crisis presents many opportunities for Adventists to react with practical godliness and relevance in increasingly secular societies that view religion as irrelevant and outdated. M

A COMMENT ON METHOD:

Two hundred seventy-eight ministers and church leaders completed a 40-question survey by circling a number on a sliding scale of 1–10 according to how much they agreed or disagreed with a statement. The software package SPSS was used to disaggregate and analyze results.

BIODATA FACTS

- 278 valid survey responses.
- 97.7 percent of respondents were male.
- 79.2 percent of respondents held an undergraduate degree or higher.
- 72.3 percent of respondents reported being of Caucasian ethnicity.
- 72.3 percent of respondents reported their form of ministry as pastoral.
- 25 percent of respondents reported less than 5 years in ministry.

ENDNOTES

1. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon quoted in Daniel Wallis, "Global Warming to Hit Poor Worst, Says U.N.'s Ban," *Washington Post,* February 5, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/05/AR2007020500273_pf.html.
2. See http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main_stat10.html, accessed June 24, 2008.

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