Adventist identity in a changing world

Rick Ferret

Pastor, I became a Seventh-day Adventist after a preacher came to our town and held evangelistic meetings. He told the people that Saturday, not Sunday, was the day of worship. He told us that Jesus was coming soon, and I was so excited. I'm 93 years old now and Jesus hasn't come."

"What does it mean to be a Seventh-day Adventist today? Our denomination—its structures, institutions and, dare I say it, the bureaucracy—is huge. We've always believed that our church is the remnant church, with 'the truth' that everyone needs to hear. But doesn't our message also need to penetrate the secularized societies of our time?"

"I want to make a difference in the world, that's why I'm studying to be a nurse. I want to help people. I hate the way society ignores issues like injustice, minority rights, environmental and ecological problems. What sort of world do we want to leave behind for others? What can we as a church do about these things?"

Rick Ferret is a pastor in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

A sect or a church?

These comments illustrate some of the tensions that exist especially among Adventists in Western cultures. Given this mood, the words of former General Conference President, Robert H. Pierson in 1978 are even more relevant today. Following the announcement of his retirement, Elder Pierson delivered "An Earnest Appeal" to denominational leaders and personnel, urging them to retain Adventism's distinctive profile and resist at all costs, taking the path of so many others and evolving from a dynamic sectarian movement into a church.

"A sect," he said, "is often begun by a charismatic leader with tremendous drive and commitment . . . it arises as a protest against worldliness and formalism in a church. . . . Each member makes a personal decision to join it and knows what he believes. There is little organization or property, and there are few buildings. The group has strict controls on behavior . . . then it passes on to the second generation.

"With growth there comes a need for organization and buildings. . . . Children born into the movement do not have to make personal decisions to join it. They do not need to hammer out their own positions. These have been worked out for them. . . . In the third generation, organization develops and institutions are established. The need is seen for schools to pass on the faith of the fathers. . . . Members have to be exhorted to live up to the standards. . . . Leaders study methods of propagating their faith, sometimes employing extrinsic rewards as motivation for service by the members. . . .

"In the fourth generation there is much machinery; the number of administrators increases while the number of workers at the grass roots level becomes proportionately less. Great church councils are held to define doctrine. . . . The movement seeks to become 'relevant' to contemporary society. The group enjoys complete acceptance by the world. *The sect becomes church.*"

Elder Pierson concluded: "This must not happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This will not happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is not just another church—it is God's church . . . this is God's last church with God's last message."[1]

"God's church" or not, it's not hard to see what's happening to our movement is exactly what Elder Pierson feared.

Denominational expansion

Seventh-day Adventists are one of the fastest growing Christian denominations in the world; about 2,100 plus people join each day. From its humble sectarian beginnings of about 3,500 American members in 1863,

when first organized, Adventist membership as of 2001 encircles the globe and totals over 12 million, with nine out of ten members living in 205 countries outside North America.

The denomination has one of the most extensive Protestant educational systems in the world (5,846 schools, colleges, and universities) and one of the most comprehensive networks of health-care providers (166 hospitals; 371 medical launches and medivac planes; 30 orphanages; and 117 homes for the elderly).

Adventists speak in at least 725 languages and another 1,000 dialects, leading to the establishment of 56 church-owned printing plants and editorial offices worldwide. Globally, Adventists have 27 food industries and 10 media centers. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA) serves in 124 countries. And these statistics convey only a part of what makes up the work of the denomination.

Defining identity as time goes on

While no one could question the value represented by the incredible growth and development of the Adventist denomination, we must ask, What defines the Seventh-day Adventist Church? What terms actually identify it? What is the mission of the Church today? Many would suggest that we define who we are (our identity) by what we believe and preach, those distinctive doctrines that differentiate us from other denominations.

Charles Teel, Jr. suggests an alternative way of identifying the Church. " . . . the form of a religious movement (its organizational structure) no less than its content (belief system) communicates the essence of that movement."[2]

In other words, we are more than what we teach and preach. James Gustafson sums up the tension of the religious institution: "The vessel provides a parameter which holds, preserves, and gives shape to the treasured oils; yet any vessel is by definition limiting as well. The same form that preserves and protects also imprisons and imperils.[3]

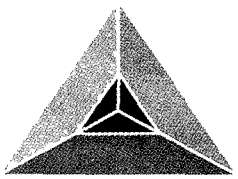
Mission is the stated reason for the existence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Yet as the denomination faces a new millennium, it finds itself (particularly in Western cultures) bedding down within society, illustrating that the progression of sectarianism towards the full church status Elder Pierson feared, is well underway.

The Church's original mission was predicated on the proclamation of Jesus' imminent return. The problem is, of course, that Jesus hasn't returned as originally expected. How do we face this fact?

The continual elapse of time has, along with other influences, spawned the maturing fruits of secularization, disorientation, and institutionalism.

George Knight, history professor at

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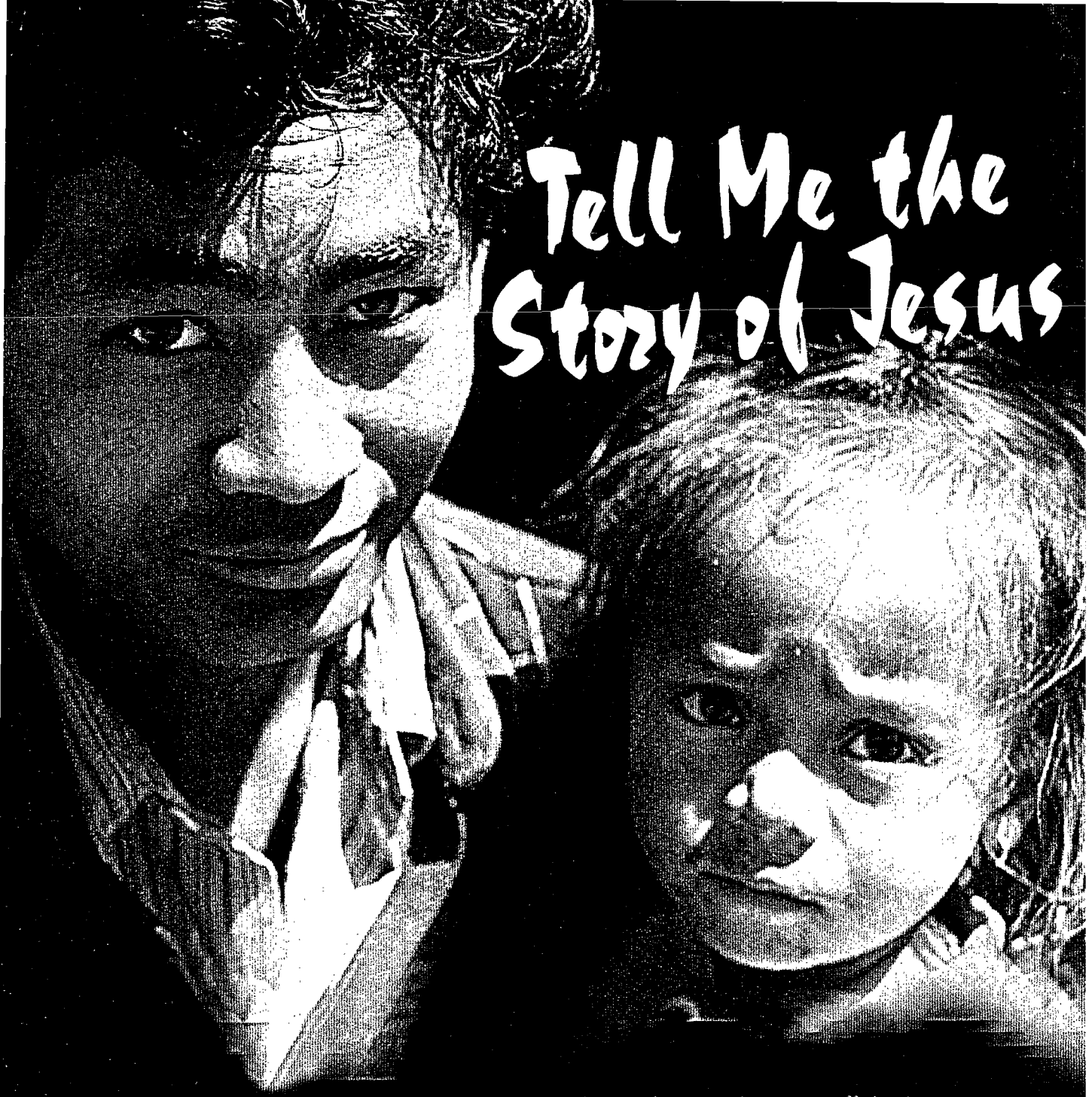
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Andrews University, suggests that there is a sense in which failure was built into the very success of the young denomination. "That is, in order to preserve the message of the imminent coming, institutions based on continuity and semi-permanence had to be erected. And in the process subtle and not-so-subtle transformations took place."[4]

Michael Pearson describes the Adventist dilemma of Christ's unfulfilled imminent second coming as an ambiguity. Adventists experience the tension produced by the dual imperatives, "Prepare to meet thy God," and "Occupy till I come" (Amos 4:12 and Luke 19:13).[5]

Pearson recognizes that there is something awkward, at least at first, about an organization that, on the one hand, proclaims that Christ's return is imminent, and, on the other regularly engages in the construction of institutions costing millions of dollars. One can understand Gaustad's observation that, while Adventists were expecting a kingdom of God from the heavens, they have worked diligently for one on earth.[6]

Michael Pearson described the dilemma this way: "The survival of the 'remnant' [church] has been ensured by the mechanism of institutionalization, but that which has survived appears to some to bear little resemblance to the original."[7]

The perceived delay in Christ's coming is reflected in the life of the Church in a very pragmatic way. The longer the delay in the fulfillment of the Advent hope, the greater is the emphasis on occupation rather than preparation. The longer the occupation, the greater the tendency to embrace the concerns of the world and to diversify the interests and the mission of the Church.

The increasing demand that comes from rising generations of Adventists, that their church address itself to issues of a socio-political and ethical nature, is part of a pursuit of relevance in face of an advent that hasn't materialized as originally expected.[8]

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Adventist pioneers struggled also

James and Ellen White, with other Sabbatarian Adventist believers, faced the same tension but in a different context. One year after the 1844 disappointment, James continued to believe that Jesus would return in October 1845.

He once chided a young couple intending to marry because their wedding would be a denial of their faith in the Second Advent. At that time marriage was considered by many to be a wile of the devil. This view, James White later said, was held by "most of our brethren," since "such a step seemed to contemplate years of life in this world."[9] Twelve months later James married Ellen Harmon. His stated reason was that "God had a work for both of us to do, and he saw that we could greatly assist each other in that work."[10]

What had happened in Elder White's thinking? A paradigm shift of sorts. Though never denying the perspective of the immediacy of Christ's coming, early Adventists had begun to discern more fully the implications of "occupying until" the Lord did in fact come. As a result, "They took the first step toward the institutionalization of Adventism. If the end was not to come as soon as they first expected, they had to take adequate steps to prepare themselves in the interim."[11] They did not abandon their faith; rather, they were able to accommodate change as required.

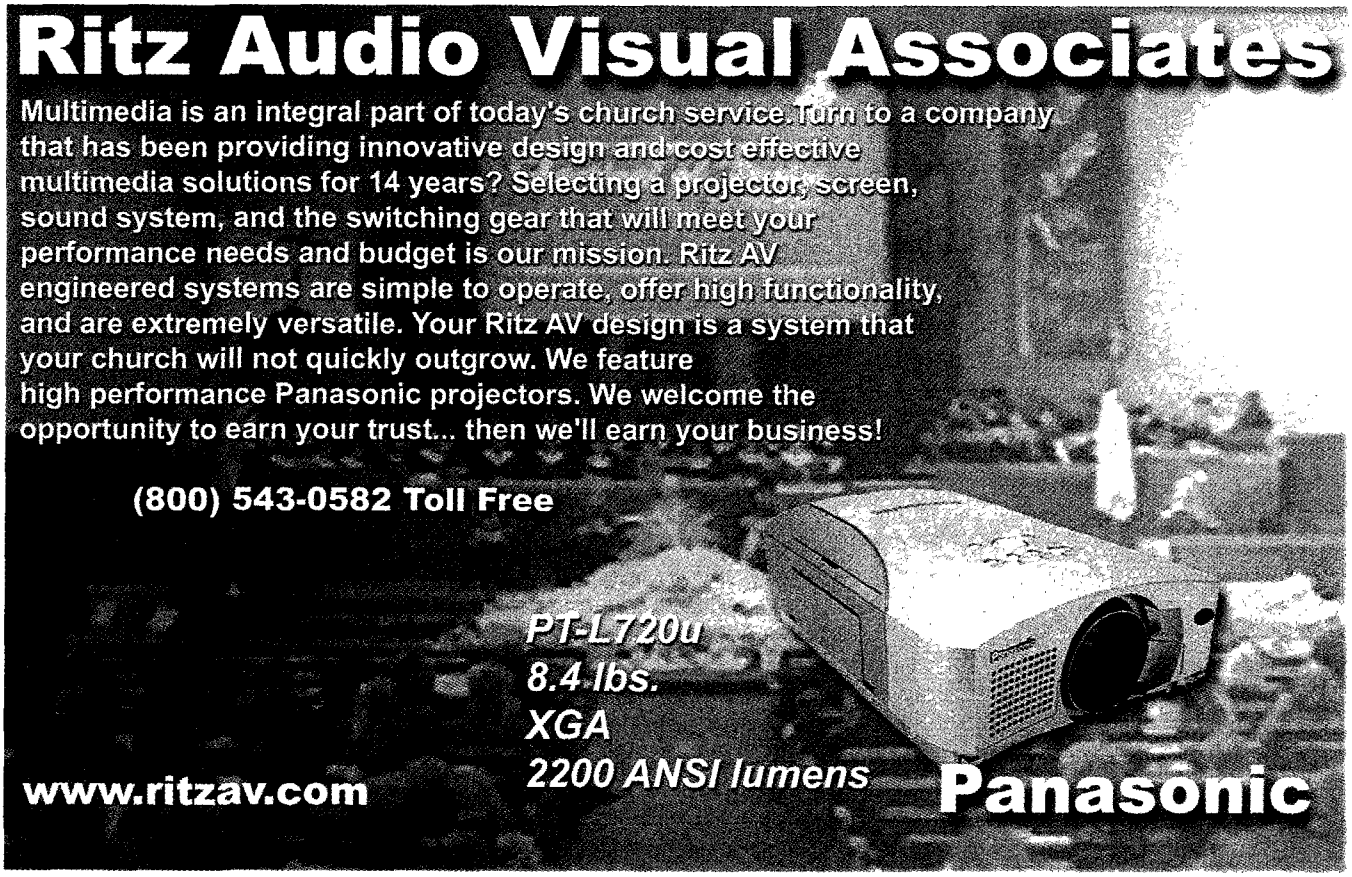
Change is certain; the way a church and we as individual Christians relate to change is vital. Our difficulty is to maintain balance.

Relating to change

George Knight declares that Adventism must relate interactively with change. He discusses three negative ways of relating to change that are being experienced within Adventism today.

1. One is *to live in the past in order to preserve "a golden age."* Such an approach disregards the actual realities that make up the thrust of the change, (note Elder Pierson's remarks concerning church/sect). Over time the proponents of this outlook lose their authority and their voice in the current generation because they have lost contact with that generation.

The clarion call is to retire to an era when all was "black and white" and



"the church knew for certain what it was about." This approach tends to appeal to those disengaged by modern society and traumatized by changes occurring within the Adventist Church. They desire to live in the past, where they perceive it was "good and safe."

2. A second dysfunctional way of relating to change and history is *to focus almost exclusively on the future.* This view loses contact with present needs and realities.

3. A third way is *to focus entirely on the present, disengaging from both the past and any meaningful hopes for the future.* The buzz word is "relevance." Every generation has stressed relevance. This alone, however, is not enough. "When Adventism or any other Christian body loses contact with either the historic past or the predicted future it will suffer disorientation in the present.[12]

Doctrine and deed

The temptation today is to mute the preaching of an Adventist end-time apocalyptic message and, instead, to busy ourselves with developing more institutions and structures to assist in "doing something useful" in the world.

If this happens, the primary focus of the Church becomes one of improving the present world rather than including and stressing hope of the Second Advent. If this happens, the Seventh-day Adventist Church will have come full circle, having traveled from the extreme of immediacy alone to the opposite extreme of occupancy.

For some Church members the issue can be defined as a matter of "doctrine or deed." Others suggest that it should be "doctrine alone"; others that "deeds" are sufficient. Perhaps "doctrine and deed" requires further assessment.

Knight summarizes the tension well: ". . . Adventism could evolve into the ultimate eschatological contradiction—a religious body that has immensely succeeded in institutionalizing for preaching the advent near, but a church that has lost the meaning of the very name that originally provided its identity."[13]

And so Teel suggests that our church face the twin paradoxes of form and content. The paradox of form envisions a confrontation by the demands of change, commitment, and spontaneity which characterized the movement's first love; and the demand for systematic order and structure that will ensure the movement's continuity.

At the same time, the denomination is faced with the paradox of content. This paradox demands a return to perceived historic Adventist doctrine that is encased in time, a community detached from the real world with eyes firmly fixed on the Second Advent, over against the real demands for witnessing within society and framing an affirmation of faith within the contemporary social order.[14]

Yes, a prophetic remnant is indeed

one which proclaims the Word, the doctrine, and truth—but it is much more. It is indeed a remnant church offering an alternative belief system—but that same remnant church is more than just a belief system.

It is community, human interaction, a social integration of wholeness, structures, and institutions. Our structures and institutions are indicators of our corporate identity alongside and contributing to what we teach and preach.

Thus the historical beastly powers of Revelation are able to retain their original interpretation and validity, but not to the exclusion of other contemporary beasts in our midst which include oppression, injustice, nonreconciliation, persecution, child abuse, sexual and environmental abuse, and a host of modern Babylonian institutions which rail against humankind, and which the Adventist Church, including its structures and institutions, must strongly oppose.

Creative tension

If our Christian identity is any indicator, we need to see that our existence as Christians will be a continuing seesaw of "creative tension." The temptation is to be led into one of the three exits mentioned above.

But if the Seventh-day Adventist Church loses its ability to face change dynamically, it will soon be ready for the museum of ecclesiastical antiquity; "it will have evolved from the likeness of the new wine skin that allowed it to expand and meet the needs of people, to the likeness of a crusty old wine skin that has lost the flexible dynamic that made it successful in the first place."[15]

Change for change's sake is, indeed, unnecessary; at the same time, change in this world is an undeniable present reality. Creative tension can be exciting. For when we relate maturely to the challenges of a changing world, we are, in a real sense, establishing a meaningful identity in the present.

It is valid and necessary to interpret the past in a way that informs both the present and future. At the same time, we must not be absorbed by the past or the future to the detriment of the present. Creative tension does not equal compromise; it seeks to balance past, present, and future.

We must be careful or, as Elder Pierson warned, the sect will become a church. Or has it already done so? ■

1 Robert H. Pierson, "An Earnest Appeal from the Retiring President of the General Conference," *Review and Herald*, 155 (October 26, 1978), 10.
2 Charles Teel, Jr., "Withdrawing Sect, Accommodating Church, Prophesying Remnant: Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Adventism." Paper presented at the 1980 Theological Consultation for Seventh-day Adventist Administrators and Religion Scholars, 3.
3 James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
4 George R. Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn , 1995), 153.
5 Michael Pearson, *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas: Seventh-day Adventists and Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 21.
6 Ibid
7 Ibid
8 Ibid., 22.
9 Letters and articles from James White. Cited in Knight, *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom*, 150.
10 James and Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches* (1888 ed.), 126, 238.
11 Knight, 151.
12 Ibid., 158, 159.
13 Ibid., 163.
14 Teel, 52.
15 Knight, 166.

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