BRUCE MANNERS

Bruce Manners, PhD, is senior pastor of the Avondale College Seventh-day Adventist Church, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.



Reclaiming church identity in a *whatever* society

Whatever."

Said with attitude, that word is the ultimate statement of apathy, and a very good descriptor for post-postmodern society in which truth or values are really only personal choices depending upon how each person sees the world. In this society, differences, including the most basic beliefs, are treated casually; a society where tolerance of another's views and practices is considered a virtue (except where extreme positions are taken); a society with a confusing array of religious and spiritual beliefs readily available.

Though this "whatever" attitude can be problematic enough within society, it's now seen within churches. Individuals now tend to choose their church, or swap among churches, with little regard for denominational labels or doctrinal teaching but, rather, on the basis of things like appeal to young people, worship style, or social networks. Some parts of the "emerging church" movement[1] in Western Christianity want to forego labels entirely. "Aren't labels simply artificial divisions that make us feel safe or help us exert control? Why not mine the riches of many traditions?"[2] The concept of a separate and distinct denominational identity can be seen as arrogant, even exclusivist, especially in a "whatever" world.

Yet identity makes a distinct church distinct. Identity is nothing if not about boundaries and differences. An individual's, or group's identity is defined by what makes them different from others. "We are not consciously aware of a particular identity unless we come up against another group who are different. . . . Identity is defined by the other."[3] For a religious group, the idea of identity "generally includes both ideological (or cognitive) features and the more concrete materiality of religion, such as distinct rituals and art[i]facts."[4] It is what "makes a congregation unique, distinct from all others."[5]

Identity is strengthened when differences are highlighted. If an organization comes under attack, the differences become obvious as the attack from without and the defense from within are played out. Identity becomes very clear. In a "whatever" world, little tension exists from outside, thus making identity maintenance difficult.

The uniting church: A case study

In 1977, after several years of negotiating, Australia's Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations formed "Australia's first home-grown church,"[6] the Uniting Church. This was intended as a beginning, the first step toward the "desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking union with other churches."[7] It was an attempt to build an ecumenical denomination that would not be "rigidified by rules and regulations nor hidebound by ritual and tradition."

However, the difficulty of uniting these three denominations—the Congregationalists with their independent congregations, the Methodists with their concerns for social justice, and the Presbyterians with their strong Calvinism—should not be understated.[8] The quest for unity was often a "source of division within negotiating congregations."[9] The fallout from revising denominational structures was greatly miscalculated and people were "often hurt when the well-beloved disappeared."[10] Many local congregations reevaluated who they were, with many, at least in the early years, simply changing the name on their notice boards but carrying on as before.

In those early years, though, an external force did draw them together. When the Queensland, Australia, premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, challenged their support of Aboriginal claims against mining bauxite at Aurukun (1978), it helped to reinforce the new denomination's "emerging self-image being a community of faith."[11] This strengthened the church's resolve and provided an external "enemy" that helped unite them. For churches in a "whatever" world, this rarely happens.

Early debates over baptism, and later over abortion and homosexuality, have made a common identity difficult to find. Questions about the relationship between unity and diversity were raised early and many are wondering if much diversity is adequate? Are there limits? The difficulty is that "our church now appears more as a group of individuals. It has moved from accountability and responsibility to a theologically diverse individualism."[12] Finally, "the

same long search for consensus that produced the Uniting Church" now works to avert "church disintegration in recent years."[13]

Exacerbated by falling numbers and declining financial resources, the Uniting Church remains unsettled.[14] Questions were raised more than a decade ago at the 1997 Uniting Church Assembly in Perth, about why the Assembly had failed to find its identity,[15] though some claimed that identity cannot be found in the Assembly anyway or in "councils of the church beyond the congregations," but in local communities.

The Uniting Church demonstrates the difficulty of creating a congregational or denominational identity. In attempting to make three denominations into one, their experience may be an extreme case, but the task of renewing identity for any church in a "whatever" age is a difficult one.

Suggestions for renewing church identity

Following are three suggestions for renewing Adventist identity in our "whatever" society, something that proves easier at the congregational level than at the denominational. The denominational or corporate level can be helpful in creating an overall image and in supporting and promoting doctrinal, ritual, and lifestyle practices, but the outworking of these will be found at the congregational level.

1. A solid theological and philosophical base aids identity. Imagine a congregation or denomination as a castle.[16] In the center of the classic castle is kind of a special-guarded room, called the keep. The keep is the safest place in the castle. Here the most precious objects are kept, and it's the place of final defense when the castle comes under attack. For Castle Church, the *keep* represents the theological and philosophical base on which it is built, forming the basis of what "makes a congregation unique, distinct from all others,"[17] and also directs its mission. Here you find Castle Church's purpose for being.

Alden Thompson, in writing about the Adventist Church as a castle, used the imagery in this way: The *keep* is the inner fortress, the safest and most secure place of the castle where the core doctrines accepted by all are found. The *courtyard* is not as safe as the *keep,* but it enjoys the security of the castle and allows more freedom. Here Adventists discuss the meaning of what is in the *keep* and ponder whether something new should be added or old taken out. The *outer wall* functions as the boundary that separates the church from the world. Those who go beyond the *outer wall* are no longer part of the community.

"Example? The Sabbath is in the *keep;* but what it means and how one celebrates its sacred hours are matters for the Courtyard. If, however, someone no longer believes that the day is blessed by God, that person has moved beyond the Outer Wall."[18]

The *keep* of Castle Church will contain more than the core doctrines, but they are an essential part of what forms the base of the congregation or denomination. In a "whatever" society, unless the adherents understand and know this base, they will find it difficult to maintain a strong sense of identity within their congregation or denomination.

A further complication is that the "whatever" society, by its very nature, is a changing society. This causes tension within any congregation or denomination that wants to remain in touch with society and yet remain true to its mission.

Religious bodies are tempted to claim that what is in the *keep* are unchangeable eternal truths only. However, as Thompson has noted, there will be discussion about what belongs in the *keep* and what should be moved out. For instance, as seen, indigenous rights became a core and identifying issue for the Uniting Church soon after its inception. The environment, once not rated highly, has taken a central place in many congregations. Within the Adventist Church, the teaching on a core doctrine, the sanctuary, has evolved over time: "It has been deeply impacted by a better understanding of linguistic, contextual and other studies of Leviticus, Daniel, the Epistle to the Hebrews and Revelation, as well as by a more mature grasp of Righteousness by Faith."[19]

THE DENOMINATIONAL OR CORPORATE LEVEL CAN BE HELPFUL IN CREATING AN OVERALL IMAGE AND IN SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING DOCTRINAL, RITUAL, AND LIFESTYLE PRACTICES, BUT THE OUTWORKING OF THESE WILL BE FOUND AT THE CONGREGATIONAL LEVEL.

Having conceded change within the *keep,* the church will face a slow and sometimes painful process unless the situation demands immediate attention. This emphasizes both the importance and significance of what is in the *keep*.

2. Identity is more than the core. Just as a castle is more than its keep, so a church is more than its theological base and philosophy. The castle also has outer walls with gates and, perhaps, a drawbridge. Within the castle walls are such things as stables, a storehouse, and an armory. There are a variety of rooms ranging from the banquet hall to the kitchen and the dungeon. They all have their various uses, and all form a part of the castle. Castle Church is much more than its *keep.* Some teachings will be distinctive or have a stronger emphasis, which will make them important for congregational and denominational identity.

However, other influences help create identity. These include the church's history. A church begun in the Reformation era will still have elements from its beginnings. The perceived purpose of the church (which, again, may change or be adjusted) has an obvious impact. At the congregational level, geographic positioning will also impact identity (compare a congregation in a retirement village with one on a school campus). Significant people have their impact. Martin Luther, John Wesley, and William Booth still have impact in the denominations they founded, while today, some living personages can greatly impact a church's identity.

A difficulty faced by Castle Church is the complexity brought about by time. Within an active, lived-in castle, you find relics from former ages alongside modern technology. Banquet halls become restaurants, the armory may have flat-screen televisions showing how the weapons were used, and the stables may house modern vehicles. These now form part of the castle's identity.

Over time, Castle Church naturally becomes an extremely complex organization. This complexity alone can make it difficult to maintain a distinct and understood identity without the added pressure of the "whatever" society.

What is found in the *keep* of Castle Church will always be important, but the fullness of identity is far greater than the *keep*. While that which is outside the *keep* may seem secondary to the theological and philosophical base, sometimes the things that appear minor can have a significant impact and meaning to a congregation—things like the church potluck, the local choir, or a midweek seniors' club.

A healthy identity consists of a church or congregation being true to what it is. It will understand its doctrinal and philosophical base and any other identity points it may have. The congregation will then celebrate them in meaningful ways.

3. Openness is the antidote to fundamentalism. Shoring up the walls of identity can lead to an unhealthy fundamentalism, a kind of siege mentality that seeks to create a "pure church with only one sort of believer."[20] If a congregation or denomination is a castle that wants to avoid this kind of fundamentalism, it will be a castle with the gates always open and the drawbridge always down. Fundamentalism can never take root with an organization open to outside influences. With a secure *keep* and a healthy understanding of its identity, free access by any to the rest of Castle Church may bring change but will not damage its identity in significant ways. On the contrary, this openness could become part of its identity.

This approach to church sees the center or core of the church (the *keep*) as clearly understood, with the boundaries outside the center recognized but permeable.[21] In this model, questions of identity are less about who *is* inside and who *is* outside and more about direction—who is moving away from or toward the center. The role of the congregation is then less to police its boundaries and more to "define and articulate its center." This "centered-set understanding of a congregation allows for both identity and openness."[22]

Conclusion

Together these three suggestions provide the following: First, a foundation for a strong theological and philosophical base. Second, a recognition and celebration of other identity markers that can lead to a full and healthy sense of mission and purpose. Finally, a realization that the safeguard against the risk of fundamentalist attitudes in strengthening identity is openness.

In a "whatever" world, without a sense of identity, a congregation or denomination will have difficulty in sorting out its priorities.[23] On the flipside, a strong sense of identity brings liberation for those within the group because they know who they are as they face the future.[24]

1 The "emerging church" movement began toward the end of the 1980s as a response to postmodernism and in an attempt to impact secular society. In their research, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger suggest that "Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities." Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *What Is the Emerging Church? Creating Christian Cultures in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 45.
2 Ibid., 37–39.
3 Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 72.
4 Atsuhiro Asano, *Community-Identity Construction in Galatians* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 1.
5 Janet R. Cawley, *Who Is Our Church? Imagining Congregational Identity* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 5.
6 Stephen Crittenden, "The Uniting Church Is 25," *Religion Report,* ABC Radio National, June 12, 2002, www.abc.net.au/rn/religionreport/stories/2002/578463.htm, accessed August 28, 2008.
7 D'Arcy Wood, *Building on a Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986), 10.
8 It also needs to be noted that not all within these denominations were convinced that they should unite, and each of them continues in some form or another.
9 Alan W. Black, ed., "Introduction: Recent Studies in the Sociology of Religion in Australia," *Religion in Australia: Sociological Perspectives* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin Australia Pty. Ltd., 1991), 5.
10 Graeme Ferguson, "The Uniting Church and Its Struggle for Identity," *St. Marks Review* 135 (Spring 1988): 14.
11 Ibid.
12 Paul Blacker, "It's Chronic Fatigue in Uniting Church," *Crosslight,* May 1999, 7.
13 Rodney Smith, "The Assembly," in *The Uniting Church in Australia: The First 25 Years,* eds. William W. Emilsen and Susan Emilsen (Armadale, Victoria, Australia: Circa, 2003), 7.
14 Ibid., 5.
15 William W. Emilsen, ibid., xi.
16 A castle, though useful to illustrate a point here, is not the best description for the church. A castle is a fixed structure for defense and protection. The church can never be static or fixed for it has been commanded to *go* (not stay) into surrounding areas and beyond, into the whole world—to be as salt and light in tasteless and dark places. However, castle walls do give a clear demarcation between those inside and those outside—between the *them* and *us* as we look at identity factors.
17 Janet R. Cawley, *Who Is Our Church?* 5.
18 Alden Thompson, "Pictures: The Castle," *Gleaner,* August 3, 1992.
19 Arthur Patrick, "The Investigative Judgment, 1844-2008: A Short, Documented History of an Adventist Teaching," unpublished paper presented at Forum, Wyee, NSW, November 1, 2008.
20 Stephen Bates, cited in Peter Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity* (England: Routledge, 2007), 90, 91.
21 Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology Got to Do With It?* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 33–35. Robinson describes three types of churches: The open-set church where everyone is welcome, you believe what you want, and there are no boundaries between those who are in and those who are out. This type of church will have difficulty in working out its identity. The bounded-set church, which is more exclusive, does not have easy entry, but will have a clear and, usually, confining identity. It has little openness to differences or questions. The centered-set church has a clear center, but no boundaries or permeable boundaries defining inside and outside.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Janet R. Cawley, *Who Is Our Church?* 8.

Tell us what you think about this article. Email MinistryMagazine@gc.adventist.org or write to 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904.