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# Challenges on the Horizon

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## Adventism in the Nineties

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George W. Reid

Playing prophet is hazardous at best and disastrous at worst. However, recent events do allow us to project in part what lies ahead for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, presuming the past to be prologue to the future. In His wisdom the Lord may choose to lead our church swiftly by unanticipated paths to the rapid completion of His work, bypassing all projections. For example, few people foresaw the recent changes in Eastern Europe or the more recent Soviet move toward a free market economy and religious freedom. These events demonstrate dramatically how new factors can upset all previous forecasts.

On the basis of current trends, however, it is possible to draw the contours of seven major challenges we are likely to face in the coming decade. These forces affecting our church can be classified as theological or functional, although they influence each other. Since practice generally follows concept, we will look first at theological trends followed by those with more practical dimensions.

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### A New Encounter With Science

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About four centuries ago human exploration of nature displaced revelation as the dominant method of interpreting our surroundings. Science's ability to satisfy curiosity and predict outcomes won the day. This forced believers either to rely on a faith commitment that contradicted mounting evidence or to try to integrate biblical teachings with scientific discoveries.

Science had a staggering impact on religion, causing a near collapse of faith in the 18th century. However, the 19th century saw a

revival of religious faith, one that embraced a literal interpretation of the biblical claims about origins and meaning. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, published in 1859, provided a materialistic explanation for much of what religionists had attributed to God. Adventists, however, sought to integrate revealed truth with observed phenomena. In fact, our first pointed discussions centered around the creation/evolution issue. However, today's church struggles with the question in broader terms.

As participants in an increasingly technological world, Adventists are having to explain our commitment to creationism. We also must decide whether to cling to the relatively short chronology presented in the Bible. In some sectors of our church, controversy over the age of life on earth has been developing over the past decade or so. During this time the topic has remained relatively obscure. However, it appears likely to move to the forefront.

Admittedly, several scientific studies have challenged our church's belief in a short chronology for life on earth. Nuclear physics in particular presents problems in interpretation, as its measurements suggest very long time periods within the geological strata. In an attempt to harmonize the creationist worldview and the scientific model, various mediating positions are being discussed by members in the more rationalistically oriented parts of the world.

On the whole, however, the church will remain committed to creationism and a short chronology. Theological ties between Genesis 1 and 2 and the Sabbath, reiterated in the fourth commandment, will continue to have a strong impact. The Genesis ac-

count goes beyond abstract theology. It presents an accurate accounting of origins and subsequent human activity on earth in relation to the plan of salvation.

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### Spiritual Life Versus Secularization

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In much of the world our church's most formidable challenge is not theological argument by the denomination's critics. It is the far more subtle tendency toward secularization.

Religious institutions have a history of surviving in a formal, fossilized form long after they have been drained of spiritual power. Members ushered to adulthood under the benevolent preceptorship of the church may or may not seek a new birth experience for themselves.

To those who reach that deep religious experience the church and its institutions buttress an already vital personal relationship, providing fellowship, support, religious and intellectual nurturing, and opportunity for service.

Although physical and psychological structure are to a degree inherited, the element of personal choice means that spirituality is not. Consequently, some are born into an Adventist environment, grow up under the influence of its institutions, but fail to develop a deep religious experience. They value the church largely from a utilitarian standpoint. Although they think of themselves as Adventist, their values emphasize practical considerations. Religious experience occupies a benign, inactive role in their lives. In essence they are guided by secular norms.

In parts of the world where growth is mostly internal, the church in the 1990s will struggle to

draw the line between walking in genuine faith and participating in an Adventist culture, between a living connection with Christ and assent to an upbringing.

Studies of missing members frequently neglect the fact that regardless of one's upbringing, a conscious personal submission to Christ is essential. Failure here is the most significant single contributor to loss of faith, although difficult to measure statistically. Most of us are scarcely conscious of how secularity encroaches on our faith or how to guard against it. To cope with these losses our church must focus its attention to questions of worldview, lines of demarcation between Christian and secular values, and how to incorporate these matters into Christian education, both formal and informal.

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### The Role of Revelation and Inspiration

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Theologically, the character of revelation and inspiration is the most difficult question facing the church, for ours is a faith built on biblical authority. As this authority decreases, human judgment fills the gap. Absolute values are replaced by rational constructs based on experience.

From the beginning Adventists have believed that God is a reasonable Being and that His Word is to be understood in a rational manner. While acknowledging the subjective ministry of the Spirit, we have argued for the primacy of the written Word over inner enlightenment. For this reason the Adventist approach to God's communication takes the form of reason in search of God, not reason alone. Our focus on the prophetic sections of the Bible requires an analysis of symbolism and a comparison with history. Like other areas of modern life, the Bible has been subjected to analytic study by scholars committed to the scientific method. The Scriptures thus are seen as possessing unusual insights, but as

authoritative only to the believing community.

Under such reinterpretation the human component of the Scriptures overshadows the divine. The Bible becomes little more than good advice and cultural history, with little authority—a collection of case studies from which one abstracts principles.

This view of the Bible causes serious problems for an Adventist community that continues to accept biblical claims to inspiration while the scientific approach denies the reality of the transcendent.

To what degree will Adventists allow the social sciences to dictate their interpretation of God's Word? We have barely begun to think about this question, although its outcome certainly will influence the direction of the church.

Concerns about scriptural interpretation also apply to the Spirit of Prophecy writings. The 1980s were a stormy decade for Ellen White's influence. Misunderstandings about the methods she used to compose her works have undergone correction. That having been done to the satisfaction of most believers, the coming decade will likely be a time of rebuilding confidence.

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### Review of Basic Doctrines

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Typically, religious communities reassess who they are and what they believe sometime during their second century. The pioneer leaders are gone, and new generations have taken over leadership. Old ideas are tested to examine the foundations of the faith.

Adventists believe that human understanding of truth is progressive. The lead paragraph introducing the church's official statement of fundamental declares:

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.

However, having said this, we still believe that new truth must not contradict previously established truth. New truth simply extends our understanding of areas not previously explored. Ultimately all truth is a unified whole because it has only one point of ultimate reference—God.

Working within this perspective, our church is currently reviewing its understanding of several major teachings. One deals with the Sabbath. The question of which day to keep is not at stake. However, the significance of the Sabbath is being redefined. The Sabbath has traditionally been presented as God's memorial to His creative act within history. Emphasis was placed on its commemorative value, reminding us of the origin of all things earthly and its expression of God's purpose in Creation. Creatorship has been its major emphasis, reinforced by our church's emphasis on the first angel's message of Revelation 14:7.

In the 1990s this theme will be tested, as the Sabbath is reexamined more in terms of God's redemptive act. Such an approach minimizes the Sabbath's historical origins while pointing up its utility in meeting human needs. At the same time our sense of its eschatological significance weakens.

Another basic teaching under discussion is the atonement. Is Jesus' atoning work primarily substitutionary? In this view the innocent dies in place of the guilty so that justice may be preserved while forgiveness is granted. Or is Christ better described as an emissary from heaven who came to taste the human experience and to teach us about the love of God? The biblical teachings on the atone-

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ment allow theological development in several directions. Will the long standing substitutionary view survive the coming discussions? Given the biblical support and direct endorsement of Ellen White, it will certainly prevail.

Yet another theological discussion of this decade deals with prophetic interpretation. Will major time prophecies, formerly interpreted historically in terms of a day-for-a-year, be repeated in the future on a day-for-a-day basis? Theological controversies will also center around Christ. Did He assume the nature of unfallen Adam or fallen Adam? Related questions will probe the nature of sin and the possibility of total victory over sin in this world. Through all of these discussions the Holy Spirit will lead God's people to clearer understandings.

Having discussed several theologically oriented controversies, we move now on to those with a more practical slant.

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### Social Forces and Global Mission

Historically, the Adventist Church has maintained a fortress mentality. We have undertaken missionary forays into the surrounding world, followed by withdrawal to out-of-the-way places for spiritual shelter. Early schools and health-care institutions promoted the agrarian ideal.

Today's widespread urbanization means that many if not most Adventists live in urban or suburban locations. Furthermore, the growth in numbers encourages believers to become active in social structures such as government, education, and health care.

Governmental regulation of personal freedom has accelerated the process, as the prophetically foretold time approaches when autocratic power will dominate personal life, including religious practice.

How will the church of the 1990s cope with these changes? Will it keep alive its sense of mission, preparing a people for deliverance to a better land? Or will it emphasize present service? Will it put its energy into improving the current world, consigning the hope of Christ's return to the background? The choice between proclamation and service to society is important. Public relations favors the latter. Proclamation, on the other hand, is prophetic, disturbing, and generates opposition.

This will be a decade of vigorous outreach to previously unentered communities through the Global Mission program. Great masses of people, largely concentrated in Asia and the Near East, have had no Adventist witness. Traditional means of outreach in these areas have been largely unproductive, so new approaches will be essential. What concept of mission will prevail? Will we set as our goal active evangelization or will we settle for some form of passive witness, following the service motif, hoping that a more directly Christian outreach will follow?

The implementation of Global Mission will surely affect Adventist action on every continent and involve thousands of members. Its fundamental approach—whether social service or direct recruitment of new believers—will generate much discussion.

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### The Question of Structural Unity

Modernism's emphasis on individual rights encourages entrepreneurial independence. Current technology makes it possible for a single person or a small group to attract enough supporters to launch what has come to be called an "independent ministry." At least 75 such groups have sprung up in North America, and others are multiplying in other parts of the world.

Typically these groups describe themselves as Seventh-day Adven-

tists loyal to the faith, but fostering a work not being carried on by the organized church. Several advocate variants in belief, often elevating to high profile questions not regarded as central by the church as a whole. Others operate small institutions dedicated to special ministries; yet others are former ministers with a charismatic bent who have stepped aside to instruct in special methods of fund raising, evangelism, or other special skills.

Such independent ministries draw financial resources from within the denomination and represent parallel but organically separated movements. Some cooperate closely with the organized church and support its mission; others do not. Many distribute printed materials, whose cumulative volume almost certainly exceeds the output of the church itself. The burgeoning of these groups will certainly remain an important issue in this decade.

Increasingly, the question of unity versus uniformity in religious practice will challenge the church. Related issues include a trend toward congregationalism in some areas, the role of the laity in church policy making, as well as differing views on marriage and divorce, the role of women in the church, and other concerns. Will our church allow some regional diversity or will we seek to maintain uniformity in policy in practice around the world?

Achieving the ambitious goals of Global Mission will certainly require the unified concentration of efforts and resources of our entire church.

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### Toward a More International Church

Since Adventism is the most geographically widespread of all Protestant groups, it seems contradictory to speak of becoming more international. Rapid growth outside North America has

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and assist in practical problem-solving when possible.

\* Write letters to your local newspapers about the need to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

\* Write to your legislators telling them what the Convention on the Rights of the Child can do for children, and urge them to support its ratification.

\* Lead discussions on the rights of children in your church, in parent-teacher associations, and in service organizations.

\* Recommend to educational authorities that this document and the plight of children be studied and discussed in school.

\* Choose a local children's program, starting with your church, as your special responsibility and help those involved in making children's lives better.

\* Support the best national and international children's organizations.

And remember the words written by Isaiah:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter;

when you see the naked, to

clothe him,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

(Isaiah 58:6-9, NIV.)

*If you would like more information or a copy of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, write to Vicki Graham, ADRA International, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA. Fax: (301) 680-6380.*

#### NOTES

1. *Time*, October 8, 1990.

2. Kay Castelle, *In the Child's Best Interest*.

3. *World Press Review*, October 1989.

4. *USA Today*, July 12, 1990.

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produced major concentrations of members on every continent.

Due to its historic primacy and its economic and educational advantages, the North American church has supplied leadership and economic resources out of proportion to its members. However, equalization is in progress. Given current projections, membership at the close of the decade will be overwhelmingly non-North American. Economic balance will follow, but more slowly.

Worldwide availability of educational opportunities will accelerate the internationalization of denominational leadership. At stake will be the unity of the church. Given the naturally centrifugal character of large groups, the present degree of unity among Adventists is a marvel to observers.

We frequently hear calls for cultural diversity in the church. When attire, cuisine, and social niceties are at issue, the case is strong. But given the human tendency toward prejudice and division, it would benefit all believers to stress their similarities rather than their differences.

The challenge of the coming decade will be to reinforce mutual respect throughout the church. We must see one another first as brothers and sisters. Racial, ethnic, linguistic, or economic variations must not divide us. As Jesus said to His contentious disciples, "You have one teacher, and you all are brethren" (Matthew 23:8 RSV). Adventist men and women, of whatever national origin, must see themselves as part of the family of God—as pilgrims with a common mission and destiny.

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## Basic Human Rights of Children

Protected by the Convention of the Rights of the Child\*

- Protection from sexual abuse and exploitation
- Protection from economic exploitation
- Protection from abduction, sale, and trafficking
- Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion
- Protection from cruel treatment, torture, and capital punishment
- Access to education
- Access to health care
- Protection from armed conflicts until over the age of 15
- Right to a name and nationality
- Right to live with their parents
- Protection during the adoption process

(\* ) A child is defined as a person under the age of 18.