‘In God’s Image' summit on sexuality opens in Cape Town

Nearly 350 Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders, pastors, academics, and human services experts have gathered in Cape Town, South Africa, for a four-day summit intended to help the worldwide Church better address the experiences of homosexuality and alternative sexualities.

Titled “In God’s Image: Scripture. Sexuality. Society.”, the conference at Africa’s southern tip is intended to be “a conversation with key people in the global leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to gain a greater understanding of the issues surrounding alternative sexualities, and to counsel together regarding the challenges the church is facing in this area,” organizers said.

Each of the denomination’s 13 world divisions has sent a delegation of at least 20 persons composed of senior administrators, theological and social science scholars, and “frontline personnel”—pastors, chaplains, and human resources directors—to the intensive event that begins March 17. Monday evening’s keynote address by world Church President Ted N. C. Wilson is titled “The Truth as It Is in Jesus.”

Pardon Mwansa, a Zambian who is a general vice president of the Church and chair of the headquarters committee that organized the summit, believes that the event is a watershed for Adventist discussion of difficult social and religious issues.

“We are dealing with an issue about which the world around us has already formed a perception,” Mwansa said. “We can’t avoid dealing with this matter because those perceptions affect how we
express ourselves. The Church needs to clarify its light: we must say where we are on this matter, so that people will understand us and how we view this subject."

"We are a moral group—a church—and we have to shine and say just what the light is on this issue."

Mwansa additionally underscored the importance of the Cape Town conference by pointing to the persons attending. "This is a meeting to which all Church leadership has been invited—and all will attend," he noted. "The quality of meetings is generally judged by who attends, and here you have all world division officers attending, along with pastors, teachers and human services personnel. The goal is to make sure that what is done here reflects the corporate thinking of the Church."

The summit organizers are clear that they intend no redefinition of the Church’s historic opposition to all sexual expression other than heterosexual marriage between one man and one woman. Listed first among the summit’s “learning objectives” is the goal to “describe the Bible’s teaching on alternative sexualities.” Two of the conference’s first three plenary sessions focus on how to read and understand the Bible’s teachings about human sexuality, as well as specific passages of both Old and New Testaments that address homosexual behavior.

On Tuesday evening, three Adventists who spent major portions of their adult lives in gay or lesbian relationships will relate their experiences in a plenary session panel. Wayne Blakely, Ron Woolsey and Virna Santos each describe themselves as “redeemed” out of homosexual behaviors, and now lead ministries designed to help others organize their lives according to Biblical norms. Woolsey, now for many years in a heterosexual marriage, is also an ordained Adventist minister.

The denomination’s legal and employment concerns with legislation about homosexuality in various nations will be in focus at a Wednesday morning plenary panel moderated by General Conference general Vice President Lowell Cooper.

Two additional plenary sessions on Wednesday afternoon and evening seek to update the international delegation on latest understandings of homosexuality and alternative sexualities from the perspectives of medicine and psychology. Dr. Peter Landless, Health Ministries director for the world Church, and Dr. Peter Swanson, assistant professor of pastoral care and a licensed psychologist at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Michigan, USA, will address research findings regarding the possible roles played by genetics and social influences in the formation of alternative sexualities.

On Thursday, the summit will focus on ministry to homosexuals and those practicing alternative sexualities, and discuss how the denomination will relate to church membership for those not following Scriptural teaching about human sexuality. Dr. Miroslav Kis, professor of ethics at Andrews University, will offer an overview of the ethical issues the Church must wrestle with at both global and congregational levels as it seeks to be both clear about its loyalty to Bible teaching and compassionate to individuals in various life experiences.

At sexuality summit, Adventist Church president reflects on ‘human brokenness’
Speaking to nearly 350 church leaders at the Cape Town International Convention Centre yesterday, Seventh-day Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson urged them to recognize that “human brokenness” is ubiquitous, dependent on the healing that comes only through the restorative power of Christ.

All facets of that brokenness, Wilson said, should be approached with the “clarity and tact” and faithfulness to biblical truth that Jesus demonstrated in his ministry on earth.

“Let us make it our personal goal, and the goal of this summit, to speak the truth as Jesus spoke the truth—to remember that every word by his disciples should be a word that helps someone else become a disciple of Christ,” Wilson said. “There is a way to speak the truth that leads to life, so let us talk and share and learn from each other in that way,” he said.

Wilson’s keynote—“The Truth as it is in Jesus”—came during the opening day of the Adventist Church’s summit on sexuality, where nearly Adventist pastors, chaplains, academics, health professionals, legal experts and human resource directors are meeting this week in Cape Town, South Africa.

The world church leader went on to define the parameters of the summit. Its goals, he said, do not include revising the Adventist Church’s perspective or statements on human brokenness to match “the changeable spirit” of current social trends and values. “Nor have we come to describe that brokenness in any greater way than the Word of God defines every human sin,” Wilson said.

Sin is not a hierarchy of human failings, he said—with some shortcomings “less dangerous or damaging” than others—but an expression of living life out of harmony with God.

“We are more accustomed to other sins: we wink at pride, ignore gossip, tolerate hypocrisy and sometimes avoid dealing with lust, adultery and the often-hidden sin of sexual abuse,” Wilson said, adding that “the uncomfortable but undeniable truth [is] that we are all sinners.”

He called it both “inconsistent and morally wrong” for the Adventist Church to isolate practicing members of the LGBT community for discipline “while it ignores those engaged in heterosexual pre-marital sex or adultery. God’s standard for sexual behavior requires that only in the union of one man and one woman in heterosexual marriage can the gift of sexuality appropriately and Biblically be enjoyed. Any departure from that standard must be addressed with similar seriousness and a similar attempt to bring about correction, repentance and restoration.”

“It is the first step toward a new life in Christ when each of us comes to the place where we admit that what God’s Word says is absolutely true about us: We are all sinners; we are all broken,” he said.

A major goal of the summit, Wilson said, is to develop an awareness of how to compassionately steer those living lives out of harmony with God toward “salvation and recovery.”
“We have come here because we are committed as a people to speaking the truth to each other and to the world around us, and because we are committed to learning how to speak that truth as Jesus did,” he said.

Wilson’s keynote relied significantly on Scripture and the writings of church co-founder Ellen G. White to describe Jesus’ approach to sharing truth. “[Christ] was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul. He did not censure human weakness. He spoke the truth, but always in love,” Wilson said, reading a passage from “Steps to Christ,” White’s classic volume about conversion and spiritual rebirth.

This week’s summit will include testimonies from former members of the LGBT community who have wrestled with brokenness and now describe themselves as “redeemed” from that lifestyle.

“The honest stories that we will hear will undoubtedly report those times when we as members of God’s remnant church have failed to communicate the love and thoughtfulness of Jesus,” Wilson said.

“We must listen as they tell us about their struggle and their pain; and we must not let our pride pretend that their mistakes are any worse in the sight of heaven than the ones we ourselves have made,” he said.

Preserve identity of church, but minister to gay and lesbian community, panelists at Adventist sexuality summit say

A panel of experts at the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s summit on sexuality yesterday discussed how best to negotiate issues surrounding the gay and lesbian community in a way that both upholds the theological identity of the church and acknowledges the realities faced by people struggling with sexual orientation.

Those realities are already impacting the life of the church, panelists said March 18 at the Adventist Church’s summit on sexuality in Cape Town, South Africa.

“Church membership runs the gamut between actively gay people and those who deny that reality,” said Willie Oliver, director of the Adventist world church’s Family Ministries department. “We’ve encountered [these realities] everywhere for years. People are hurting and experiencing feelings that some of us may not want to acknowledge.”

Currently, the governments of 18 countries and 15 U.S. states recognize same-sex marriage. More than 100 countries have decriminalized homosexual behavior. Thirty-four of 54 African countries, however, prosecute it as a criminal act, said Karnik Doukmetzian, general counsel for the Adventist world church, in an overview of legal realities.
“Get involved in understanding the laws in your country,” he said. “Legislative issues are progressing; laws are constantly changing.”

One practical example, Doukmetzian said, is whether an Adventist pastor can legally choose not to marry same-sex couples, citing a conflict of conscience. “Make sure legislation in your country allow clergy to opt-out,” he said, urging administrators and pastors to work together to craft in advance a response rooted in Adventist doctrine and belief.

In the sphere of employment, too, legislation can affect the Adventist Church, said Lori Yingling, associate director of Human Resources at Adventist world church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

“Because we are a religious organization, in the U.S. we have a legal ‘carve out’ that allows us to hire only Seventh-day Adventists,” Yingling said, noting that the exception allows church institutions to require conditions of employment based on the working policies and beliefs of the church that potential employees must read and sign.

But beyond the legal and employment questions are the struggles of real people, said Brett Townend, president of the Adventist Church’s Northern Australian Conference.

“We think it is about policies, politics and protocols, but it is about people,” Townend said. “If we just make pronouncements that rub salt in very open wounds, we aren’t helping. We must both preserve our church and deal with the very real pain these individuals are experiencing.”

Panelists also considered the growing need to minister to Adventist young adults exploring or struggling with questions of sexual identity.

“What we’re seeing, particularly on college campuses, are students trying to discover who they are,” said Elaine Oliver, associate director of the Adventist world church’s Family Ministries department.

“Sadly, many Christian parents are silent about this topic,” Oliver said. “When we’re silent dealing with our children’s identity issues, there are many voices out there willing to help them figure out how to deal with their identity. We can no longer afford to be silent.”

Ekkehardt Mueller, associate director of the Adventist world church’s Biblical Research Institute, strongly agreed. Young adults today, he said, are “bombarded with messages in the media.” Mueller noted a “shift” in mindset as younger generations increasingly approach gay and lesbian issues through the lens of social justice rather than morality.

The panel, moderated by Adventist world church Vice President Pardon Mwansa, also discussed whether church membership should be granted to same-sex attracted people who are not acting on that attraction.

“The very least we can do is recognize that orientation itself is not sinful,” Townend said. “Did Jesus die for [same-sex attracted people]? Does he want them to enter into a relationship with him? I would baptize them without too much hesitation.”

Townend acknowledged that such a move could generate a surge of conversation in local congregations, but said that “discussions must start from the position of listening, not
condemnation.” Church, he said, should be a “safe place” where mentors are assigned to newly baptized members still wrestling with sexual identity.

When asked how he would respond to a same-sex attracted person actively working to change their orientation, but failing, Peter Swanson, associate professor of Pastoral Care at the church’s Andrews University, said he would “affirm” the person’s “persistence,” but would ask whether the person’s goals were “unrealistic or unattainable.” Another factor, he said, could be whether the person has the love and support of a circle of Christian friends and family members.

Earlier in the day, Kwabena Donkor, associate director of the Adventist world church’s Biblical Research Institute, presented the hermeneutics, or interpretation, of homosexuality in the Bible. He said the main points of contention are differing interpretations of scripture—“traditional” versus “contemporary” hermeneutics.

“Contemporary hermeneutics creates a distinction between what the text meant and what it means, and this marks the shift from traditional hermeneutics,” Donkor said. The goal of contemporary hermeneutics, he said, “is to set in motion this so-called ‘extra linguistic world,’ the projection of new worlds of meaning.”

In a handwritten note, one anonymous delegate asked if they, a subscriber to contemporary hermeneutics, would be accepted at the summit. Donkor replied that the church needs to maintain discussion with people who have other “presuppositions” rooted in such an approach.

For example, Donkor said, theorists supporting contemporary hermeneutics say the Sodom story in Genesis 19 is taken as a linguistic signifier, where the primary referent is not homosexuality, but injustice, which is expressed as a breach of hospitality customs and attempted homosexual rape.

“They are denying the basic premise that this was actually an attempt at homosexuality and they’re trying to get around it,” Donkor later said on the conference sidelines. “But as a church we need to dialogue with people who have these presuppositions,” he said. “We write them off as ‘liberals,’ but labels don’t help. They are committed and we need to understand them and talk with them.”
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