Adventist Responses to United States Supreme Court Decisions about Same-Sex Marriages Reveal a Wide Range of Opinion: Though an official pronouncement has gone out, reaffirming the Adventist Church's support for marriage as defined by "one man, one woman," some Adventists also see the ruling as a step forward in recognizing the rights and freedoms they believe should be afforded all Americans, regardless of gender and orientation. The ruling does not compel churches to solemnize any marriages deemed incompatible with the basic tenets of their faith. The real challenges, it is believed, could affect staffing strategies of Adventist institutions and guidance of minors who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation. This feature-length article examines complex issues raised by this ruling....(Read more)

Netherlands Union Conference Votes to Ordain Female Pastors: In a delayed announcement reflecting a decision made last May to erase all distinctions between full-fledged male and female pastors, the Netherlands Union Executive Committee has authorized ordaining women to serve co-equally with invested male clergy. In an action last year at a Constituency meeting, the assembly voted to erase all semantic distinctions between male and female candidates for clerical investiture, by the end of 2015. After examining the situation further, however, the Union has decided immediately to begin listing all qualified women as ordained pastors. The announcement is a surprising one, not for its content, but for its timing, well in advance of the General Conference session, which begins a full two years from now....(Read more)

Other News Stories of Interest

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New York City Evangelism Campaign Culminates in Coliseum: Crusade events continue in New York City, as baptismal numbers float in from various sources. Crowds are very real, however, with an estimated two out of three already Adventist....
Adventist Responses to United States Supreme Court Decisions about Same-Sex Marriages Reveal a Wide Range of Opinion

Submitted: Jul 4, 2013

By Adventist Today News Team

After the United States Supreme Court last week announced ground-breaking decisions on two cases related to same-sex marriages, a number of statements representing the views of Seventh-day Adventists were released. The statements ranged from negative to positive reactions, while others attempted to take middle ground.

"We reaffirm, without hesitation, our long-standing position ... following the biblical principles and patterns ... for marriage between one man and one woman," said the official statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. Pastor Dan Jackson, president of the denomination's North American Division, expressed concern with "growing attacks on the biblical institution of marriage," but also said, "all people, no matter of their sexual orientation, are children of God. We do not condone singling out any group for scorn and derision, let alone abuse."

Advent Truth Ministries, an independent Fundamentalist group, stated that "one man/one woman marriage is creating a deep divide even among Christians [and] many see what God has ordained as an affront to their personal feelings and choices." The statement placed the issue in an apocalyptic frame, claiming that "the Bible has predicted the conflict over one man/one woman marriage," citing Romans 1:26-27 and 2 Timothy 3:1-3. It also connected the issue to "the debate over God's Sabbath, the other institution established by God at creation" and ended with an advertisement for a book entitled God's Sabbath Truth which the organization has been distributing for some time.

Adventists Against Proposition 8, a coalition in California that opposed the initiative four years ago which was ruled unconstitutional last week by the Supreme Court, welcomed the decision. The statement cautioned that it expressed the views of a few of the organizers and not necessarily all 1,300 Adventists who signed the petition against Proposition 8 in the fall of 2008. Among the signers are Adventists who oppose the practice of same-sex marriage and also think it is wrong for believers to use the law to enforce a religious belief in much the same way that Adventists have always opposed Sunday laws.

The statement by Adventists Against Proposition 8 applauded both Supreme Court decisions on the basis of "our distinctly Adventist commitment to cherish the dignity of each human being as a child of God and safeguarding the liberty and conscience of all people." It also pushed for change in the denomination's official position. "Our church continues to promote an attitude and a theology that views gays and lesbians as second-class members of God's family. We must stop promoting a 'shut door' theology of ignorance and prejudice."

Matthew Staver, an Adventist who is dean of the law school at Liberty University in Virginia, joined with Catholic Deacon Keith Fournier in drafting a statement that was signed by a long list of right-wing Christian leaders. "We are united in our common faith in Jesus Christ," the statement said, and in efforts to uphold the Biblical definition of marriage as "a bond between one man and one woman, intended for life and open to the gift of children."
The statement declared that "the Supreme Court has no authority over marriage" which is defined by moral and spiritual principles, although "the future of a free and healthy society [depends] on marriage and the family." Staver was a pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination before he went to law school. He has made a career of advocacy for conservative political positions, including arguing before the Supreme Court on several occasions. He once opposed a law that requires that anti-abortion activists stay at least 36 feet away from patients and staff entering a clinic.

No one will be required to perform same-sex weddings as a result of the Supreme Court decisions, Nicholas Miller told Adventist Today. Miller is a specialist on religious liberty and a church historian on the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He has a law degree from Columbia University and a PhD from Notre Dame University. He is coeditor of *Homosexuality, Marriage and the Church* published by the AU Press.

Asked if the two decisions last week pose any immediate problems for the Adventist Church, Miller stated that churches and pastors do not have to perform a ritual that would be against their religion. The "problems will be around counseling and employment."

California last year enacted a law forbidding the involvement of children in counseling intended to modify their sexual orientation. Churches "can preach what they believe, but can't actually provide assistance to parishioners under 18 who are struggling with these issues and wanting to live what they believe is a biblical lifestyle," Miller said. Restrictions of this kind are likely to increase.

It will become more difficult for education and health care institutions affiliated with the denomination to require certain standards of sexual behavior for employees and students, Miller told Adventist Today. Current standards state that sex outside of marriage is not appropriate for employees or students, and same-sex marriage complicates this guideline. If the institutions are more specific about the type of marriage, there could be legal problems.

In the future, another issue that could become a problem for Adventist schools has to do with how the topic is addressed in classes, Miller stated. Public schools will teach the acceptability of same-sex marriage and over time attempts will be made to get private schools to do the same. "At the college level, I think we're going to have trouble getting programs certified [in] social work and psychology if we don't teach the moral acceptability of homosexual behavior." He noted that this is already happening in Canada and other nations.

Miller was asked how the Adventist Church can maintain its theological position on homosexuality and avoid getting involved in anti-gay politics. "With difficulty," he said. "No one wants to be involved in anti-gay politics, but the church may need to be involved in pro-family politics." There are arguments to be made that having both a mother and a father is important to children and should be viewed as a favored arrangement in public policy, "even while we're tolerant and allow others to make other moral choices for their sexual behavior." Any defense of traditional marriage could be considered anti-gay bigotry, but Miller does not think it necessarily is. He pointed out that in recent protests in France, some in the gay community were not in favor of same-sex marriage.

Where is the line between the denomination's position and the use of laws to enforce that position on non-members? Miller recalled that Adventists had to deal with this question early in their history when temperance reform and laws about alcohol were being debated and changed in America. "They engaged in public policy campaigns to change laws that impact non-church members. Where appropriate we can advocate for public policy, not on spiritual grounds, but on grounds that is good for society."

There are risks in this area. "We have to help the overseas church see that we should not be advocating for criminal laws against homosexuality," Miller stated. "We should not be supporting discrimination and harassment in the workplace." Gay and lesbian people "need to be protected as all citizens are."

The Supreme Court decisions have opened the door to a new line of discussion among Adventists. "Much as it might like to, the church can no longer evade questions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage, for society is, with increasing stridency, forcing Christians to confront them," he wrote in the preface of the book he co-edited.
Netherlands Union Conference Votes to Ordain Female Pastors

Submitted: Jul 6, 2013

By AT News Team

Last year at a constituency meeting, the Netherlands Union Conference was one of the first in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination to vote an end to gender discrimination in ordination of clergy. On May 30 (2013) the executive committee decided to implement the decision of the constituency delegates and ordain female pastors, recognizing them as equal to their male colleagues. The delegates from the churches had charged the church leadership with the task of implementing the principle of equality as soon as possible. After much discussion, and after weighing many options, the executive committee decided that the best way to implement equality is through extending ordination of men and women.

The 2012 constituency session voted this action: "Considering the biblical principle of the equality of men and women, the delegates in session indicate that they reject the current situation of inequality in the church on principle. For this reason, and considering the context of Dutch society, they charge the executive [committee] to vigorously promote this perspective in the worldwide church. As quickly as possible, and no later than six months after the next session of the General Conference (2015), equality between men and women will be implemented at all organizational levels of the church in the Netherlands. The equal ordination of female pastors also falls into this category."

"As [the] Dutch church we wish to stand firmly behind the principle that all human beings are fundamentally equal, regardless of gender, race, or background," stated a news release received by Adventist Today. "This equality informs an integral part of our fundamental beliefs. The decision not to distinguish between pastors based on their gender falls under this principle. Through this decision the Netherlands Union Conference will be at variance with the policies of the world church. We wholeheartedly wish to follow these policies, and recognize that there must be unity in the church of Jesus Christ. This made implementing the [vote of the constituency session last year] and making this decision particularly complicated. In the end, this decision was the result of weighing the principle of unity against the principle of equality. Other possibilities were also discussed, including the option of not ordaining any pastors until the world church recognizes equality, and the option of waiting until the upcoming session of the General Conference of the world church to reach a decision. Ultimately it was decided that from June 1, 2013, all ordained and commissioned pastors, regardless of gender, will be considered ordained in the Netherlands. In practice this means that Pastor Elise Happé-Heikoop (pastor of Arnhem, Nijmegen and Doetinchem) is now considered ordained, and that on September 21, Guisèle Berkel-Larmonie will be ordained together with her (male) colleague Enrico Karg."

An English translation of the item in the executive committee minutes, supplied by the Netherlands Union Conference, reads:

"Considering the decision of the 2012 Union Session regarding the equality of men and women (#153), and taking our ethical objections to unequal treatment into account, the Netherlands Union Conference will no longer differentiate between male and female pastors as of June 1, 2013. All pastors, irrespective of their gender, will be 'ingezegend' pastors. When reporting to the world church, the Netherlands Union Conference will list all pastors as being 'ordained.'"

Because of the potentially delicate nature of this topic, it was decided that the communication of this decision would be delayed until July
5, 2013. This gave the leadership enough time to properly and correctly inform the Trans-European Division of the General Conference.

The Netherlands Union Conference has 5,276 members in 71 congregations (55 organized churches and 16 church plants). Last year the 26 pastors in the Netherlands baptized more than 150 new members. In recent years the church has grown steadily, averaging an increase of 3.5 percent per year. While some of this growth can be attributed to immigration, the church-planting movement has been particularly successful in reaching the native-born Dutch population in one of the most secular countries in the world.

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North American Adventist Church Growth: The Untold Story

Submitted: Jul 1, 2013

By Danny Bell
Church dignitaries anxious to capitalise on apparent gains in our worldwide movement have again given false impressions of the health of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The virus was first picked up in Australia when Church leaders there began trumpeting results from the most recent Australian Census indicating the Adventist Church in Australia was the fastest growing denomination. Like a fever, these fantastic reports have circled the globe, despite the statistical evidence from the Church archives telling an entirely different and grim picture. [1]

Despite the warnings I gave in my earlier article, the virus is still alive. At a regional meeting recently I again listened in disbelief as a church representative brought to the attention of the congregation the news that North America was doing exceptionally well and that we should be proud of our movement. This was based on an article in USA Today, indicating that the Adventist Church was growing at the fastest pace of any Christian denomination in the country. [2] This led me to squirm in my seat, as I was witnessing yet another message of misinformation, giving average church members a false sense of security.

First consider a few facts from the general population in the US. A recent Gallup Poll indicated that 77 percent of Americans identify with Christianity and 18 percent have no religious affiliation. [3] This survey finding is consistent with other studies near this figure and the observations of many analysts that those who no longer believe have increased substantially. [4]

There is dispute about church attendance among American Christians. Researchers challenge the polls that give a rosy picture of 40 percent when, in fact, it is closer to 20 percent. [5] There is a disconnect between Americans and the Church. They are happy to buy the product, but don’t make them go to the store to get it.

So is the Adventist Church in the United States really doing that well? One way to measure this is to look at data available from the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics and Research. [6] The latest information is for 2011 because 2012 data is still being compiled. I have applied the same parameters to the North American Division (NAD) which I did in the Australian Union Conference study, even though the NAD is much larger in scale and geography. The results are no less disappointing.

For the Adventist Church in North America the data show that the increase in membership was 15,224 souls for 2011. This net figure is after adding all of the increases such as baptisms, profession of faith, and transfers in and then subtracting the losses from deaths, dropped, missing and transfers out. [7] However, we still need to apply a couple more parameters to get a more realistic growth picture for the NAD in 2011.

Another way of looking at these data is called Kingdom growth, as I pointed out in the my article on the Australian Church. [8] The idea behind Kingdom growth is that the Church community increases by a non-believer becoming a Christian, leaving a deficit in the non-Christian community from which they came. For the purposes of illustration, if we were dealing in real growth terms it would look like this on a scoreboard:
So the Church’s gain is a decrease in the number of non–Christians. Knowing this, we need to also understand that it is estimated that about half of those who join the church annually come from Biological growth. These increases come when we baptise our own children, those who have been brought up in the church. While it is a time for rejoicing when young people commit to Christ, it’s not true Kingdom growth. The non-Christian population has had no loss.

On way to explain this is by imagining that a church has 100 people attending regularly, 90 of whom are baptized and 10 who are youth who have not yet been baptized. If those 10 youth are then baptised, how has the church grown? The church is still 100 people and the community has not been impacted by the Gospel. Nothing has changed except inside the church.

The NAD’s net growth figure of 15,224 souls for 2011, therefore, can’t be classified as true Kingdom growth. If we concede half as being biological growth, that gives us a Kingdom growth net increase of 7,612 in 2011. To get a true picture in human terms we need to divide that figure among the 6,125 congregations of the NAD. This leaves us with an average increase of one-and-a-quarter persons per congregation. Sound cold and calculating? That’s reality, unfortunately.

If we were true to the idea of Kingdom growth, we could also say that the 5,556 souls that came in on profession of faith are not true Kingdom growth either. These members are deemed to have had a previous experience with Christ, before becoming Church members and, therefore, are not converts from the non-believing community. This adjustment tips the scales into negative territory where most Christian denominations in the U.S. clearly rate. The NAD’s ability to connect with the non-believing public, therefore, is a losing battle, as its gains are among those who are already Christians, by an overwhelming majority.

I find most staggering the number of those who went missing during the year. The title “missing” means their local church does not know where they are. The 8,212 souls that just slipped out the back door into oblivion is a statistic that should shock us to our core. Building a more personal tracking system needs to be a major consideration.

I see retention as being part of the solution, but even with good retention rates, poor Kingdom growth is still a factor. As with Australians, most Americans identify with Christianity but are not attracted to church, as indicated by low attendance figures. They like what we are selling but our market stall is not user friendly. They like the potato salad but they didn’t trust the person who sold it to them.

The reality is that the Church in western society has become insular, self-centred, and unconcerned about a suffering, dying world. We prefer to stand at church doors and call out to the public rather than go out and get involved in the dirty business of befriending the scum of the earth. The fortress mentality is alive and well in our churches and until we realise that it’s not all about "going home to heaven" and "wishing Jesus would come," the sooner we can properly engage in the Master's business.

This is a mighty challenge for the NAD to seriously consider the current ways of doing things and ask if we are holding onto old forms of religion that are outdated and have lost currency with the masses. Are smaller, more personal efforts needed rather than large, ineffective and costly forms of evangelism? The public interest has clearly shifted away from what once attracted significant numbers.

Rather than pining for heaven and going home, we need to re-focus on what God still wants to do. Amos delivers a poignant final word and puts it better than I, for my conclusion: "What sorrow awaits you who say, 'If only the day of the Lord were here!' You have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will bring darkness, not light. In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear. Escaping from the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and he’s bitten by a snake. Yes, the day of the Lord will be dark and hopeless, without a ray of joy or hope. I hate all your show and pretense - the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living." (Amos 5:18-24)

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1. Danny Bell, "What Did the Australian Census Really Tell Us About Church Growth?" Adventist Today [www.atoday.org], May 19,
Danny Bell lives in Western Australia. He has been a pastor, chaplain, family court mediator, counsellor and editor of Trench Mail, a men’s ministry publication. He is currently leading a church plant called Lion Hearts which focuses on attracting men. His passion lies in making the Church relevant to the Church’s largest unreached people group—men.

There is no real way of measuring this except by anecdotal evidence. I understand that many may query this but if we look through our publications and baptisms we attend we can safely say that 50 percent is a conservative estimate. In reality it is much higher for many churches. It would be interesting for there to be some compiled data on this but I have yet to find any.
Leading Christian Digital Publisher to Launch a Product Line for Adventists

Submitted: Jul 3, 2013

By ANN

Logos Bible Software, the leading publisher of Bible software and digital media for churches, has hired a Seventh-day Adventist pastor to develop a new line of products for the Adventist market. A story released by the Adventist News Network (ANN), the denomination’s official news service, written by Mark Kellner, news editor of the Adventist Review, has announced that Pastor Martin Weber, who retired recently as communication director for the Mid-America Union Conference, has been employed by Logos as the firm’s Adventist product manager.

Based in Bellingham, Washington, Logos has more than 2 million customers that use its Bible software worldwide. With users in more than 210 countries, it publishes in more than 30 languages. It is the only electronic publisher to offer The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary and the Ellen G. White writings as part of an integrated Bible software package. Logos is believed to be the first interdenominational publisher to launch an initiative specifically aimed at serving the Adventist market.

Weber, in a telephone interview, said his task will be to expand the list of Adventist-related publications—which now stands at 18, including the recent addition of the Andrews Study Bible notes—to cover a broad range of the movement’s writers and thinkers. “I’m hoping to take leading Adventist writers and speakers, contemporary and historical, and have them available in an Adventist-specific package,” he said. Logos has a proprietary database system in which thousands of documents can be searched at once for highly specific results. For example, it will be possible to type “Rev. 14:6” and see where every Adventist author in the database has ever quoted that text.

Logos can also transcribe into print format various Adventist audio and video archives and make them searchable with a keystroke by users. Potentially, a user could instantly discover every time Voice of Prophecy founder H.M.S. Richards was recorded speaking the word “Gethsemane” in his nearly five decades of radio talks or every time noted evangelist George Vandeman used the word “Armageddon” in his 35 years of television sermons. Logos hopes to package the written transcripts of their messages, and those of more than a dozen other beloved Adventist teachers past and present—with their original audio or video—thus opening up a multimedia trove of materials.

Weber is working with Logos management to provide Adventist materials in languages other than English, giving priority to Spanish, Portuguese, French and German. Ultimately, he said, thousands of articles in the archives of numerous Adventist publications can be bundled into general categories such as spirituality, outreach, Adventist history, prophecy, etc. The whole mass of documents can then be searched specifically, so that any Adventist document included in the database that used the word “Millerite” will be instantly discoverable. Participating Adventist publishers and authors would receive royalties from Logos sales of their documents. Weber said he wants to “work in collaboration with existing Adventist publishers, seeking ‘win-win’ partnerships for the sake of benefiting church members globally.”

Another advantage for Adventists, Weber said, is that evangelists and pastors can publish Ebooks through Logos, opening up distribution to the entire Christian marketplace. These materials would be available to the wider Logos user base across denominational lines.
Weber’s four decades of employment by the denomination on five continents uniquely equip him to serve the Adventist market through Logos. In addition to his role with the Mid-America Union Conference, Weber served at the Voice of Prophecy in 1983 and two years later became assistant to the director at It Is Written. He wrote 100 television scripts and answered more than 8,000 letters from viewers seeking biblical information.

During the early 1990s Weber served as associate editor for Ministry magazine and as a member of the General Conference executive committee. He also authored several books, served as an adjunct faculty member at several Adventist colleges, was a member of the International Police and Fire Chaplain’s Association, and was board chair for The Hope of Survivors, an international organization advocating on behalf of victims of clergy sexual abuse.

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New York City Evangelism Campaign Culminates in Coliseum Event

Submitted: Jul 1, 2013

By AT News Team  Correction added at the end of the story on July 2

An estimated 15,000 people crowded into the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum in a Long Island suburb on Sabbath (June 29) to celebrate the NY13 evangelism campaign in New York City. The  
Adventist Review  reported in an online bulletin Saturday night that "at least 148 were baptized" at the event and "nearly 2,000" had been baptized earlier in the year "as the New York City area hosted more than 400 evangelistic outreach events held by Adventist congregations." It is unknown how many of these baptisms were people who were already church members being rebaptized.

One of the events leading up to this occasion was the evangelism series led by Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (GC), in the Greenwich Village neighborhood on Manhattan. When the series began on June 7, "668 guests came," according to a report in the  
ASI News published earlier last week.  
ASI News  is the newsletter of Adventist-Laymen's Services and Industries, the officially-recognized association of small business people and "supporting" independent ministries associated with the denomination. The source of this figure was not identified, nor is it clear if this is the attendance on the opening night or a cumulative attendance. A different source told Adventist Today that about two thirds of those in attendance were church members.

"Nearly 160 other evangelistic meetings too place concurrently in the Greater New York area," the newsletter reported. "To date 1,100 people have been baptized in the Greater New York Conference and 52 people were baptized on Sabbath, June 8, in the North Bronx Church as a result of meetings by Breath of Life." The North Bronx Church is affiliated with the Northeastern Conference and Breath of Life is an Adventist television ministry, both with an historic focus on reaching African Americans.

The  
ASI News  had predicted that "approximately 1,000 people will be baptized" at yesterday's coliseum event. It also reported that "ASI involvement began [in] January, when ASI member Denzil McNeilus presented a one-day ... training program to nearly 300" people at the Fort Washington Spanish Church. The participants were taught how to use DVDs developed by ASI. It emphasized that the campaign in New York City is "comprehensive outreach ... including prayer, community service, health education, women's and youth ministry."

At the event yesterday, the mayor of the nearby suburban town of Hempstead, Wayne J. Hall, welcomed the crowd and Una S. T. Clarke, a former member of the New York City Council and mother of U.S. Representative Yvette Clarke (D-Brooklyn) was among the VIP guests. Bill DeBlasio, the New York City public advocate, praised the contribution that Adventists make to the city.

Wilson told the  
Adventist Review  that he had “an amazing experience in Greenwich Village. The audience stayed with us the whole time.” He also emphasized that the day's event was not the end of Adventist outreach in the region. He said, “We came to New York to highlight ‘Mission to the Cities.’ This is not a culmination today in New York City: the work is continuing.”

A statement from the GC Ministerial Association also underlined the wholistic and ongoing nature of the denomination's strategic focus on metropolitan areas. "Our mission to the cities is a marathon of compassion that must have an on-going and sustained presence in the cities, and must continue beyond 2013.” Some 300 denominational employees from all 13 of the GC divisions have been participating in a Field School of Evangelism in New York City during June. Similar campaigns are underway in Sydney, Australia, and London, the UK.

Addendum

There are two Adventist churches in New York City named North Bronx and the one where the Breath of Life ministry conducted an evangelism campaign is affiliated with the Greater New York Conference, Pastor Lloyd Scharffenberg told Adventist Today. He also stated that the 668 attendance figure reported above "was for one night. On several nights the church was filled with additional people in the fellowship hall watching via [closed circuit television]." Adventist Today has been told by other sources that the Manhattan Church
seats about 800.

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