Remembering the Radical Politics of the Pioneers: John Byington

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Walla Walla University Focuses on Racial Justice for Adventist Peace Education Week

The following article was written by Emily Muthersbaugh and is an original contribution to the APF blog. Walla Walla University’s fifth annual Peacemaking Weekend, which this year coincided with the APF-led first annual Adventist Peace Education Week, focused on racial justice and injustice in the light of recent events in Ferguson, New York, and throughout the country. (link)

Peace and Justice are at the heart of Advent Hope’s church life in New York City

Jacqueline Murekatete, is an internationally recognized human rights lawyer, a Rwanda genocide survivor, and the Adventist Peace Fellowship coordinator at the Church of the Advent Hope in New York City, which is one of five Adventist congregations that have passed official motions to become certified peace churches. She shares some of the recent and ongoing actions for peace and social justice that church members at Advent Hope are involved with. (link)

Glendale City SDA Church becomes first APF certified Adventist Peace Church!

Glendale City Seventh-day Adventist Church has become the first church to complete all of the steps to become an APF certified “Adventist peace church.” Todd Leonard, who is the congregation’s senior pastor, was recently interviewed by Adventist Today about why Glendale City chose to join the APF network. An accompanying news story highlights the church’s community outreach and activism. (link)
Remembering the Radical Politics of the Pioneers: John Byington (by Brian Strayer)

(Dr. Brian Strayer, Professor of History at Andrews University, is currently working on the first biography ever written on the life of John Byington, the first president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists who was also a radical abolitionist who actively assisted fugitive slaves fleeing to Canada and who contributed to the development of many social, political, and religious institutions in Antebellum and Victorian America. The following article is an original contribution to the APF blog by Dr. Strayer drawing on material in his forthcoming book.)

Probably the image most Adventists have of Elder John Byington is based on the only photograph they’ve ever seen which portrays the aged patriarch as a silver-haired, balding, bearded, wrinkled, scowling preacher in a black frockcoat and white shirt buttoned tightly around the neck. Consequently, they might be surprised to learn that he was a loving, devoted husband to two wives—Mary Ferris (1823-1829) and Catharine Newton (1830-1885)—for more than sixty years; a warm-hearted but firm father to eight children; and a generous grandpa and great-grandpa to seventeen grandchildren and great-grandchildren who loved to visit him “down on the farm.” Indeed, the Byington’s family reunions made the front page of Battle Creek’s leading newspaper. Despite being busy with farm and church duties, John and Catharine frequently visited, wrote letters to, and prayed earnestly for their scattered family members living in Michigan, New York, New Jersey, and Kansas.

Even Adventists who have heard that Elder Byington never received a salary from the church probably don’t know that the reason he could volunteer his services is because the Byingtons operated profitable farms. In New York John and Catharine owned 200 acres of prime land with 87 farm animals; every year they sold tons of hay, wheat, corn, oats, and potatoes and hundreds of pounds of butter, cheese, and maple syrup as far away as Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. When they moved to Michigan in 1858, they bought 340 acres and sold a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, hides, honey, and Catharine’s homemade mittens and candles in nearby towns. In addition, John sold calendars, repaired teeth, and made loans at ten percent interest. In short, the Byingtons operated profit-making agribusinesses that netted them hundreds of dollars in profits each year. Unlike conservative Adventists, however, the family ate meat, drank tea and coffee, and bought insurance policies (especially after their barn burned).

Perhaps one reason why the Byingtons’ lifestyle differed from other Adventists is that for half a century, the family had been Methodists. John’s brother Jared had helped to establish the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Connecticut in 1799; their father Justus, a circuit-riding preacher in Vermont, had played a key role in founding the Methodist Protestant Church in 1829. For nearly four decades after his conversion in 1816, John himself became a licensed preacher of Methodism in Vermont and New York, and in his forties, he helped form the new Wesleyan Methodist Church in St. Lawrence County, New York. Indeed, prior to his conversion to Sabbath-keeping Adventism in 1852, John had built Methodist chapels and parsonages in Bucks Bridge, Morley, and Lisbon, New York. To a certain
extent, Elder Byington remained a “Seventh-day Methodist” throughout his long life (1798-1887), subscribing to the Methodist paper *The Christian Advocate*, reading John Wesley’s sermons, and regularly attending Methodist (as well as many other) Sunday services. In 1886, only months before he died, Byington recommended in the *Review* that Adventist social meetings should be revised to follow the pattern of Methodist class meetings.

*If John Byington’s close connections to Methodism may surprise many readers, even scholars have been unaware of his radical politics...John himself frequently chaired meetings of the St. Lawrence County Anti-Slavery Society, participated in abolitionist conventions, and—along with several other Byingtons and their Hilliard cousins—signed petitions in the 1850s demanding that the U.S. Congress abolish slavery, which he called ‘an outrage’ and ‘a sin.’ New evidence indicates that Anson and John Byington actively assisted fugitive slaves in escaping to Canada along the famous Underground Railroad which ran through Bucks Bridge in St. Lawrence County.*

If John Byington’s close connections to Methodism may surprise many readers, even scholars have been unaware of his radical politics. As early as the 1830s, John was active in the short-lived Anti-Masonic Party which opposed membership in all secret societies. In the 1840s, he chaired conventions of the Liberty Party (1843-1848) and the Free Soil Party (1848-1852), both formed to end slavery in the United States. After the Republican Party was created in 1854, John and Catharine became life-long voting members of that party.

In part, the Byingtons’ involvement in the Wesleyan Methodist Church and in the Liberty and Free Soil parties reflected their strong abolitionist views. John’s brother Anson, who in the 1830s and 1840s was president of the Chittenden County, Vermont Anti-Slavery Society, had been expelled from the Congregational Church in 1849 for his abolitionist views and cancelled his subscription to the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in 1859 because he felt that Uriah Smith did not advocate abolitionism strongly enough. John himself frequently chaired meetings of the St. Lawrence County Anti-Slavery Society, participated in abolitionist conventions, and—along with several other Byingtons and their Hilliard cousins—signed petitions in the 1850s demanding that the U.S. Congress abolish slavery, which he called “an outrage” and “a sin.” New evidence indicates that Anson and John Byington actively assisted fugitive slaves in escaping to Canada along the famous Underground Railroad which ran through Bucks Bridge in St. Lawrence County. Throughout his life Elder Byington enjoyed a close relationship with African Americans like Sojourner Truth and during his travels around Michigan, he was a frequent guest in the Hardy and Minesie homes, Black Adventists living near New Caledonia and Jamestown.

To a significant degree, Elder Byington remained a circuit-riding revivalist preacher throughout his life. Unlike his Adventist ministerial colleagues, he did not receive a salary either from the Michigan Conference or from the General Conference; he did not conduct evangelistic tent meetings to convert non-Adventists; he did not preach long doctrinal sermons or write books on theology. Instead, he and Catharine set out to cheer the discouraged, reconcile differences, urge repentance, and build faith and unity by holding revival, testimony, prayer, quarterly, social, and business meetings; by preaching short homilies about heaven, grace, prayer, conversion, and perseverance; and by visiting and praying with every family in every Adventist congregation in his vast parish. To prepare for this mission, they began every New Year with fasting and prayer. Then they covered hundreds of back roads by horse, buggy, sleigh, and foot and traversed muddy quagmires, snow-drifted fields, dusty paths, and rock-strewn highways, facing carriage accidents, disease, and frequent opposition. Yet during his thirty-five-year ministry, Elder Byington witnessed stronger congregations, faith healings, hundreds of baptisms, and a tightly unified, rapidly growing denomination.

The Byingtons themselves contributed significantly to help make the Seventh-day Adventist Church grow in
numbers and unity. John believed firmly that “God is a God of order in temporal as well as spiritual matters.” In 1853 his daughter Martha taught the first Adventist home school; in 1854 his wife Catharine taught the second (after Rochester, New York) children’s Sabbath school; and in 1855 John built the third (after Jackson and Battle Creek, Michigan) Adventist meetinghouse in Bucks Bridge, New York. Called to Michigan in 1857, Elder Byington spent the next thirty years combatting heresies, organizing local churches, promoting “Gospel order” and systematic Benevolence, and helping to create new institutions such as the Review and Herald, the Michigan Conference, the General Conference, the Western Health Reform Institute (where his son Fletcher served as a physician), and Battle Creek College. In addition, he served as the first General Conference president (1863-1865); helped to secure noncombatant status for Adventist soldiers; chaired numerous church committees; and held ministerial credentials into his eighty-eighth year.

As a busy family man, farmer, preacher, and administrator, Byington had little time for writing books, tracts, and articles. Instead, he penned short letters, reports, and two- or three-paragraph exhortations to readers of the Review and Youth’s Instructor reflecting his optimistic, can-do spirit and deep piety. Unlike the heavy doctrinal and theological sermons sent in by his ministerial colleagues, John wrote homilies emphasizing the need for homes “permeated with prayer” and offered sage advice about a wide spectrum of practical Christian living. While he strongly opposed some of the popular fads of his day (debating schools, bloomers, croquet, and spiritualism), he also played the role of an Adventist “Dear Abby” in his question-and-answer column ion the Youth’s Instructor. His final written contribution (“Peace with God”) appeared in the Bible Echo in May 1887 four months after his death. In it he made the point that justification “has no reference to our good works,” but to Christ’s forgiveness of our sins, and that unless “the Holy Spirit fills the heart, we cannot have peace with God.” But if the Spirit dwells within us, he added, we can have grace, power, and a “hope that reaches forward to the heavenly rest.” In these few words, Elder John Byington aptly summarized the underlying theme of his ministry and, in a sense, staked his position on a contentious issue that would be debated at the Minneapolis General Conference the following year.
Peace activists convene at Oakwood University for Adventist Peace Education Week

Dr. Keith Augustus Burton (one of the APF’s founding Advisory Board members and the director of the Adventist-Muslim Center at Oakwood University) presents the 2015 Adventist Peace Fellowship Peace and Justice Calendar to internationally known peace activist Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence.

(Republished by permission of Kay Campbell writing for the Huntsville Times)

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – Want to feel less discouraged about the disarray and violence in the world? Then join a protest movement, say Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, and Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink, a pro-peace group originally organized by mothers against war.

During the evening presentation on Monday, Jan. 12, 2015, marking Adventist Peace Education Week at Oakwood University, Kelly and Benjamin took questions from the audience of about 30 about what their protests and demonstrations do. Kelly has just been sentenced and will report on Jan. 23 to a federal prison for a three-month sentence for walking into Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri with a loaf of bread and letters from Afghan teenagers she was trying to deliver to the commander of the base from which drones are controlled that are killing people in Afghanistan.

“You always feel like a fool out there,” said Benjamin, who recently participated in a “die-in” in Senator Elizabeth Warren’s office to bring attention to the civilian deaths in Gaza from Israel’s strong-handed response to Hamas. “But that’s how a movement starts. That’s how it gets built up. That’s how it gets talked about.”

But it's been 13 years, with no end in sight, that the U.S. has been at war in the Middle East. When will that stop? Given the money involved in the military-industrial-congressional complex, Kelly and Benjamin said, perhaps never unless American citizens become more active in protesting the growing militarism abroad – and at home, for that matter, as local police departments become a dumping ground for excess military supplies. Despite the horrors in the world, both activists said they see signs of progress.

“People who do these actions tend to be more optimistic than people just sitting at home, getting more and more disgusted with how things are,” Benjamin said. “When you’re on the front lines, you do find those little victories.”

Career of action

Kathy Kelly has spent most of her adult life on the frontlines. Kelly holds a master’s in religion, but has spent most of her adult life traveling to the heart of dangerous and pained places. During the embargo on Iraq, she helped to take medication and other humanitarian supplies – in violation of the United Nations embargo – to people who were dying.
“It was a death row for children,” Kelly said, quoting a British aid worker she talked to in Iraq when she delivered the supplies.

She was living in Baghdad at the time of the American invasion as a living example of how pro-peace actions involve simplicity and direct service. In Afghanistan, where she has also lived for years, she helped set up a woman’s cooperative to make blankets to give to people who are freezing, sometimes to death, with the war-caused disruption of electricity in the cities. To make sure she in no way contributes to America’s wars, since the early 1980s, Kelly has voluntarily limited her income to below the taxable level of income tax.

“The IRS became my spiritual director in living in solidarity with the poor,” Kelly said.

“Blood will not wash away blood,” Kelly said, summing up why she is against war. The connection between America’s actions in Iraq and the recent escalation of ISIS and even the massacre in France is clear: Most of the leaders of ISIS were held as teenagers in cruel circumstances in the same American prison in Iraq, where they met and began pledging their lives to fighting together. The gunmen in France were trained in the camps in Yemen that also have direct connections to people formerly held in American camps in Iraq.

“Please don’t hear me make excuses for anyone anywhere who decides to put up a gun and kill, but let us be aware of the consequences, let us see the context in which evil is going to exist,” Kelly said.

**Huntsville's bloody hands**

Like several of the Huntsville-area peace activists who welcomed the crowd, both Kelly and Medea Benjamin made reference to the reliance that the Huntsville area has on the machinations of war, including being a center for development and testing of the drone bombers and surveillance machines. Those instruments of death could be turned to good, Medea said.

“These could be used for good – to fight forest fires, to track endangered wildlife, to help farmers or realtors or as hobbies,” Medea said. “Let’s develop technology for positive uses, and let’s quit using drones for killing.”

Medea has been part of protests that have flown surveillance drones over the homes of those making decisions about military uses of drones to let them see how it feels to have that impersonal monitoring. They don’t like it.

“They usually have us arrested,” Medea said, shrugging.

Only peace activists can introduce new solutions to global disruptions, both Kelly and Medea said. Otherwise, those in power will hear only from people who think the way to solve problems of violence is with a stronger counter-violence. And citizens also have push the government to quit supporting repressive governments – like that in Saudi Arabia – and encourage patient negotiations, which, so far, is what is happening with Iran despite some pressuring for military action there, too.

“We’ve just concluded the biggest arms deal in the history of humanity with Saudi Arabia – the center of this radical Muslim teaching and a terribly repressive government,” Medea said. “How do you think that looks to people in the Muslim world who are trying to build democracies?”

Keeping the long arc of justice in mind is crucial to peace work, Kelly said.

“Just think – if this meeting were held 100 years ago, how many people in this room wouldn’t be able to vote, to own land, to marry,” Kelly said. “Some things that seem unthinkable, even impossible, can be closer than we think. Let us not despair. We are all part of one another – and that way peace lies.”
Adventist Peace Church in Chattanooga works for racial and economic justice (by Lisa Diller)

(The Well in Chattanooga is one of five Adventist congregations currently working toward certification as an “Adventist Peace Church”. Lisa Clark Diller, a professor of history at Southern Adventist University and the APF coordinator for the The Well, shares this update of recent Well activities focused on racial and economic justice as well care for creation.)

One of the Well’s (wellonthesouthside.org) core values is that it must strive to be an incarnational community. This means the Well is very intentional about being present in the physical space of our immediate neighborhood.

When the community is celebrating, mourning, building, or dialoging, we at the Well want to be there alongside our neighbors. We host the local Jefferson Heights Neighborhood Association meetings at our facility. Our once-a-month Deep Well Sabbaths take our worship into the neighborhood through fellowship, education, service, or small group worship.

It is this commitment to being part of the Kingdom of God in the Southside of Chattanooga that leads us to connect with the mission of the Adventist Peace Fellowship. Becoming an Adventist Peace Church, when we discovered this network, was a very obvious move for us to make. The APF campaigns that we are most deeply involved with as a natural part of our life and ministry on the Southside are racial reconciliation, care for creation and economic justice.

We appreciate the vocabulary and the language of APF in helping us root our peacemaking activities in the theology and history of the Adventist Church and its local congregations around the world. Thinking intentionally about what we are doing helps give greater meaning to it. It is also true that being part of the network of Peace Churches helps us stay accountable to what we are doing.

For instance, in the months of November and December we helped the Cowart Place Neighborhood Association plant dozens of trees in the industrial landscape of the Southside as they turned an empty lot into a park. Our children/family group collected quarters and handed out Christmas greetings with rolls of quarters and small quantities of laundry detergent at local laundromats on the Southside. While this small activity does not go far towards achieving lasting economic justice, it does educate our children and families about the realities of many people in the urban core and the challenges they face in going about the most mundane elements of everyday life, such as doing laundry.

Finally, members from the Well joined several urban peace workers and the Chattanooga Police Department on a march for peace and reconciliation in one of the most challenged of our Southside Communities, Alton Park. This was a way of recognizing, in a peaceful way, the national conversation we are having in the U.S. about the police violence and racial reconciliation. The march consisted of a very diverse group of people, and it was an educational experience for the Well members who participated.
We look forward to more inspiration from our sister churches and for more ways to be part of the Kingdom of God and as we grow the followers of Jesus in Chattanooga.

About these ads
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Remembering the Radical Politics of the Pioneers: John Byington (by Brian Strayer) →
Walla Walla University's fifth annual Peacemaking Weekend, which this year coincided with the APF-led first annual Adventist Peace Education Week, focused on racial justice and injustice in the light of recent events in Ferguson, New York, and throughout the country.

The weekend events, which took place January 16 and 17, were held just before the national holiday celebrating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to honor King’s commitment to peaceful struggle for racial equality, elimination of poverty, nonviolence and social justice. Recent clashes between police and protestors in the United States highlight the need for ongoing work to realize Dr. King's dream of a more just society.

Adventist Peace Education Week at Walla Walla included a Friday night candlelight vigil outside the University Church immediately following the vespers program. The vigil was organized by Walla Walla University's Amnesty International Club. Nearly 50 students, faculty, staff, and community members gathered to honor lives lost in recent clashes, both police and civilians alike, by lighting candles. After a reading from Matthew 5:3-12 and a prayer, participants marched with candles around the perimeter of the campus, singing songs.

The candlelight vigil and peacemaking march ended at the Student Activities Center where over 50 students engaged in a debate on the incidents in Ferguson. Students were divided into three groups to represent either police, Michael Brown, or the peacemakers, and were given 15 minutes to prepare in their group for the debate. The debate was held in three rounds with three judges (two students and one professor) evaluating the presentation by each group. The group representing the police was deemed the winner, presenting the most compelling argument.
from the position of authority.

Saturday morning featured a panel discussion on the topic “Race and Peacemaking: Authority, Responsibility, and Justice.” Panel participants included Pastor Terrance Taylor, an Adventist pastor from a neighboring city who attended Walla Walla University and has experienced racial profiling and encounters with police officers; Chris Current, associate professor of social work and sociology at Walla Walla University whose research has studied minority and immigrant populations and work as an ally; and Henning Guldhammer, executive pastor of the Walla Walla University Church.

The panel was moderated by Terrie Aamodt, professor of history at Walla Walla University with a background in African American studies, and discussed the role of authority in peacemaking, the responsibility of all members of a community in promoting and achieving peace, and the definition and implementation justice in peacemaking as it relates to race, both historically and today.

The Walla Walla University Peacemaking Weekend Committee and the Office of Diversity are already beginning preparations for next year’s Adventist Peace Education Week, with a commitment to promoting peaceful discourse in the Walla Walla Valley.

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(Jacqueline Murekatete, is an internationally recognized human rights lawyer, a Rwanda genocide survivor, and the Adventist Peace Fellowship coordinator at the Church of the Advent Hope in New York City, which is one of five Adventist congregations that have passed official motions to become certified peace churches. She shares some of the recent and ongoing actions for peace and social justice that church members at Advent Hope are involved with.)

Based in the middle of New York City, Church of the Advent Hope (which has passed an official resolution to become a certified Adventist Peace Church) is uniquely positioned to make a positive impact in our local and global community. Year after year, our members have engaged in various social justice and peace initiatives with the aim of sharing the gospel and God’s love not just through words, but action.

Through our Meals on Heels ministry as well as our partnership with God’s Love We Deliver, members of our church frequently cook and deliver nutritious meals to many of our homebound neighbors, which also often provides an
peace and justice are at the heart of advent hope’s church life in new york. our annual commemoration of the 1994 genocide in rwanda is an occasion to remember the millions of men and women who have lost their lives to war and genocide in recent times, and to discuss the dangers of racism, hate, state sanctioned discrimination and the type of intolerance which enables genocide to take place. it is also an opportunity to recommit ourselves to peaceful co-existence with all of our neighbors irrespective of their race, religion or ethnicity.

through our annual holiday benefit concert, we have raised awareness and funds to address many local and global crises as they appeared, such as the haiti earthquake, the heavy floods in the philippines, and hurricane sandy in usa. this past december we raised more than $11,000 for an adventist hospital struggling to stay open amidst the ebola crisis in liberia.

as part of world aids day on december 1st, and building on our annual participation in new york aids walk, church of the advent hope held an educational workshop where an adventist physician and a social worker who work with those living with hiv/aids spoke about the complicated social and economic inequalities that often lead to the spread and inadequate treatment of this illness. they also discussed the need for church members to be less judgmental and show more of god’s love to those living with hiv/aids.

as we were confronted with the tragic deaths of michael brown in missouri, tamir rice in ohio, and the death of eric garner which took place in our own new york city backyard, church of advent hope also stood up with those calling for racial justice and better police-community relations by holding a conversation about the role of the adventist church in promoting racial, economic and social justice.

in the coming months, we plan to hold additional social justice and peace programs, including a program during the adventist peace fellowship sabbath on may 23rd, as well as an event surrounding the united nations international day of peace, which takes place annually on september 21st.

church of the advent hope is honored to be part of the adventist peace fellowship network. we look forward to working with fellow adventist peace churches as we strive to promote peace and justice for all and to answer jesus’ call to love our neighbor as ourselves, not just through words but also through actions.

← walla walla university focuses on racial justice for adventist peace education week (by emily mutthersbaugh)
glendale city sda church becomes first afp certified adventist peace church! →
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Glendale City SDA Church becomes first APF certified Adventist Peace Church!

Glendale City Seventh-day Adventist Church has become the first church to complete all of the steps to become an APF certified “Adventist peace church.” Todd Leonard, who is the congregation’s senior pastor, was recently interviewed by Adventist Today about why Glendale City chose to join the APF network. An accompanying news story highlights the church’s community outreach and activism.

The values of peace and justice were not new to the Glendale church, so joining the APF network seemed like a natural step, Leonard told Adventist Today. Even though members of the congregation have a range of political views, they are unified in their desire to serve their community. “We took it to our church board and shared the mission of Adventist Peace Fellowship,” Leonard said:

“One of the comments on the board was, ‘This already seems to be the values of our congregation. This doesn’t seem to be a stretch or different from who we are.’ So it was probably one of the easiest decisions we’ve ever made as a church. In our congregation there are people all along the political spectrum about how we should address
issues in American politics, but we’re united about this. In the context of what our church is doing, this is who we’ve been as a church—about healing brokenness, being inclusive where others exclude."

Over the past year, the Glendale congregation has co-founded two nonprofit agencies to focus on different areas of service. The Caesura Youth Orchestra will provide musical instruments and lessons for youth who could not otherwise afford to participate in extracurricular musical pursuits. The Glendale Communitas Initiative is a collaboration between public and private sector organizations to care for families at risk of becoming homeless. The goal is to reduce poverty in Glendale by 10 percent over the next five years.

Leonard explained to Adventist Today why the Glendale City church board sees joining the APF network as strengthening the church’s work in the Glendale community. His congregation “would love to have the collaboration and collegiality of networking with other churches who have the same mission and vision for their congregation. We can share ideas, share what’s working in our local context, find resources that would be beneficial for one another. There’s that connection where the sharing and the interaction can happen more effectively and much easier.”

Leonard says he hopes that the Adventist peace church movement will “catch fire” and “would be something that more and more Adventist churches would want to be a part of” as they see “our heritage of not only preaching about the kingdom to come but actively working in society to make life better for the world we’re in”.

To learn more about the Glendale congregation, visit their website. To learn how your congregation can join the peace church network, visit the APF website.

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