A matter of identity

A couple of weeks ago, our team hosted a training forum for Conference presidents and church communicators. One of the guest speakers at the event was Garrett Caldwell, Public Relations director for the General Conference.

In his presentation on the new global church website—currently in development—Garrett said the PR team were very serious about accurately portraying the identity and personality of the Adventist Church. As a result, they are modelling the design after somebody who is wise, fun, honest, loving and gracious.

For Garrett, this person was his old choir director—a wonderful Adventist lady who supported him and was a very real representation of God's love.

How about you? Is there somebody in your life who fits that description? If you could personify the Adventist Church into a single person, who would that be? Send in your thoughts by replying to this email—we’re curious to see your responses.

While we’re on the subject of Adventist identity, check out the news and views in this week’s edition of Record eNews.

TED president talks ordination

How do you condense 700 pages of meticulous research into a one-hour lecture? On Tuesday, 10 September, Dr Bertil Wiklander, president of the Trans-European Division (TED), made a valiant attempt as he shared the results of his two-year search for the biblical roots of ordination.

Cracking the compassion code

Smile awhile, and give your face a lift (wheeee!) with the latest issue of RECORD—in churches tomorrow!
There was an activism engrained in the DNA of early Adventism. In an age of reforms the tiny, but rapidly growing Adventist Church was often at the forefront of reform. Have we lost this part of our DNA?

Understanding us

There are three streams of Adventism: “Evangelical Adventists”, “Uniting Adventists” and “Unique Adventists”. What are the characteristics of each group? With which of these do you most resonate?

or are you some kind of hologram, hovering at the edge of family life. Trafford Fischer challenges mums and dads to disconnect the electronics and connect meaningfully with their kids.

Check out the latest eGIVING videos for Australia and New Zealand.
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What the audience of 90 at the Newbold College Diversity Seminar heard was not so much his role as administrator, politician, and academic, though there were elements of all three. Instead, here was a Bible student and a conscientious pastor, concerned to teach and guide his people.

Dr Bertil Wiklander, president of the Trans-European Division (TED), speaks on the results of his two-year search for the biblical roots of ordination.

Dr Wiklander began his lecture by explaining the latest round in the process which the global Seventh-day Adventist Church is going through, as it struggles once again to decide whether to ordain women to the gospel ministry. He described the appointment by the General Conference of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) and his co-operation with Newbold College theologians and other TED leaders in the Division's own Biblical Research Committee with a brief to report to TOSC. He made clear how central to the whole process is a developed view of exegesis and interpretation, and he listed clearly the principles his committee had agreed on.

Dr Wiklander went on to describe his biblical findings. He described a variety of processes of 'imposition of hands' in the Bible. Laying on of hands was used to transmit virtue but also, as in the scapegoat ceremony, to pass on responsibility for sin. Laid on hands could dispense blessing, healing and baptism. Certain patterns of Jewish scribal ordination in the Old Testament might have influenced the early church to lay hands on deacons—a practice neither recommended nor repeated in the rest of the New Testament. Jesus did not ordain but He made or appointed apostles and warned them not to be like the scribes but to follow the servant model of leadership. There is no general command to the Christian church to ordain anyone to a leadership position. The concept of ordination is not found in the Bible and emerges in the second and third-century as the Roman church mirrored what was done in the Roman Empire's legal and civic system. This Roman Catholic concept was not fully challenged during the Protestant Reformation and unbiblical practices remained. "In the New Testament", said Dr Wiklander, "there is no term for ordination as a process of induction to church leadership. It is a pagan practice."
After focusing on the Reformation, the lecture moved on to look at early Adventist history. Dr Wiklander had researched in depth the ecclesiastical heritage of James White and many other Adventist pioneers. They brought with them into the Adventist Church from their previous group—Christian Connection—the three orders of ministry: pastor, elder, and deacon. The idea of apostolic succession—that only ordained ministers could ordain ministers—took hold but, "it has no biblical root," Dr Wiklander insisted.

Finally the audience was treated to a whistle-stop tour of an extensive list of church leadership tasks which Ellen White told the church leadership in 1901 that women should take and for which they should be paid by the tithe. "And she said this," said Dr Wiklander, "at a time when women were not even allowed the vote in political life."

After an hour, Dr Wiklander concluded the lecture on a personal note. "I become quite emotional when I speak about this," he said. "The research has given me a big question. I believe we should bring men and women into the ministry on equal terms."

Gifford Rhamie (right) hosting the lecture and expressing a great interest in the debate that continued well past closing time.

As usual, the question and answer session brought more fascinating insights. "I've been ordained . . . so I feel a bit pagan now!" said one pastor. "If ordination is a pagan not a biblical practice, should we ordain at all?" Dr Wiklander admitted that he had considered that possibility but rejected it. "We need to have a way of ensuring that we are led by educated and appropriate church leaders and we need a practical way of doing that. There are a lot of traces of paganism in our lives, praying with our hands together, Christmas trees, and the names of the days of the week. Our significant concern needs to be what meaning we assign to ordination. I believe we need a deep reform to make our practices of ordination more biblical."

Questions explored the possibility both of what might happen in the church if women's ordination is agreed and if it is not. People shared concerns about submitting to a vote rather than to the voice of scripture. Dr Wiklander explored the worst possible scenario—a massive schism in which people go their own way and the tithe system is threatened. Some will be unhappy whatever is decided and research needs to be in place as a basis for our teaching. Either way, we need to have a big reform of ordination in our Church and in relations between clergy and laity so that members do not feel the status of pastors separates them from lay people. We can only go forward together if we are all together as servants.

Finally, the president gave more personal commitments to his belief in the ordination of women. "I am converted completely to what I said tonight. I would die for it."

Newbold's pastor, Patrick Johnson, was impressed. "There was a great deal for pastors to think about in this lecture," he said. "I've heard Bertil speak many times but I've never heard him speak with such passion and conviction."
Cracking the compassion code

It's a paradox. The more the early Seventh-day Adventist Church prepared for the imminent return of Jesus, the more it made a difference in the world. Typically, churches focused on the end of the world exist for themselves. But Adventists did more than convert people and build churches. They built schools, hospitals, medical clinics, started up food businesses, publishing houses and engaged the community.

Activism

There was an activism in early Adventism and a deep, holistic philosophy behind it. In an age of reforms the tiny, but rapidly growing Adventist Church was often at the forefront of reform. Adventists opposed slavery. They worked in the southern states of America, often amid danger and opposition, to help advance the recently freed black population. They became leaders in the dynamic arena of health reform and advocates of the temperance movement. They tackled the complex issue of education reform, and spoke out on matters as diverse as dress reform, opposition to gambling and religious liberty.

This dynamic reforming element appealed to people wanting to change the world. It contrasted with the later fundamentalist withdrawal from engaging society that happened in conservative American Protestantism after the 1920s and in Adventism after the death of Ellen White. Indeed, Ellen White was usually at the forefront of this broad vision of reform, constantly pushing the Adventist Church into new areas and challenging it to express a unique voice.

I suspect that behind the rapid pace and constant introduction of new reforms in the early Adventist Church was a specific Divine purpose. God wanted to place into the small, embryonic Adventist Church a particular philosophical DNA which, once established, would reproduce itself as the Church spread across the world into new environments desperately in need of gospel witness and transformation. This DNA centres around a holistic concern for the restoration of the total person (social, mental, physical, relational, emotional, spiritual, moral) based in the power of the Gospel. Jesus wants to open up the fullness of His victory against sin, selfishness, suffering and Satan to all nations before He returns. While this DNA sometimes parallels elements of secular reforms or progressive legislation, our motives and methods are to uniquely reflect Christ’s ministry. That's a personal work in harmony with God's law, motivated by grace that mobilises churches and individual members to embody God's love.¹

Denaturing the DNA

When this DNA deteriorates the Church stops making a healing difference in the world. If the DNA is neglected we become dull reflections of our consumerist culture, instead of the living counter-cultural anticipation of Jesus’ kingdom that God intends. At other times fanaticism cripples this DNA and makes us narrow, sectarian and extreme. Health reform turns into health deform. Or we love the latest prophetic speculation more than our neighbour. Either way the Church becomes irrelevant, trivial and incapable of retaining or inspiring its youth.
Recovering the DNA

Whenever this DNA is recovered the Church is re-energised. The Gospel is seen, heard and felt. Advent hope intrudes into present pain. The emergence of organisations such as ADRA and programs like StormCo and Complete Health Improvement Program (CHIP) are examples of this DNA re-expressing itself. All seek to bring God’s love to some damaged element of humanity. One gets a sense of the gracious scope and restorative balance of this DNA by reading Ellen White’s book *Ministry of Healing*.

A humbling and hopeful history

If we are honest the subsequent history of the Adventist Church reveals a mixed obedience to this DNA. Let’s not be naïve or triumphalist. The good and the bad in our history is important for us to see. We need to be challenged by both our faithfulness and our failures.

Greater rediscovery

We have never lost this DNA. This is why good things are happening in so many churches. ADRA continues to be a vital part of our wider ministry. And yet God’s Spirit wants to do so much more. I offer two suggestions of how a continued rekindling of our God-given DNA might impact our churches and our world. These are just examples. God calls us to much more. I’ve deliberately picked one example you’ll instantly warm to (the fight against slavery) and—just to make it hard on myself—I’ve picked one you’ll possibly cringe at (yes, I’ve picked dress reform).

Slavery

The early Adventists opposed the horrors of slavery, even to the point of advocating civil disobedience. It was something of absolute importance. Unfortunately, slavery’s curse is still with us. Among its worse forms are bonded and forced labour of children and the hideous sex slave trade. Just as early Adventists joined in the wider 19th century movement to abolish slavery, we should also join in the current movement to end modern slavery. I realise some Adventists are already making such efforts. But what has been missing is the wider realisation that this is in our DNA. It's not some foreign add on. We must care about this. And I believe many young Adventists are longing to make a difference in this area.

Dress reform

What of dress reform? I deliberately picked this because it appears impossible to rehabilitate. It conjures up images of overzealous guardians harassing sparsely clad young ladies. And, yet, originally dress reform was as much a way to counter the physically damaging effects of fashion on women as it was to encourage modesty. I believe the issue of fashion, self-image and mental wellbeing is more pressing now than in the 19th century. Every moment young people are bombarded with images of photoshopped and airbrushed beauty. Even worse, the cosmetically enhanced, surgically altered and botoxed celebrity has become a cultural icon. Even secular commentators are deeply concerned. We speak now of the "sexualisation of children" and of the "pornification of culture". Perversity is being normalised. This is the suffocating air we all now breathe and choke on.

Young girls, in particular, bear the damaging psychological prospect of internalising this demoralising environment. They have to resist immense pressure to cave in to voyeuristic fashion trends and adopt distorted ideas of body image. Young men are unconsciously trained in a subtle misogyny. Guess what? This is what dress reform is now about! Granted, we probably need a new name. Unfortunately, our natural traditionalism risks thinking in terms of a list of rules and regulations and not the transformative philosophy and values behind our standards. When this happens the misplaced goal is gaining conformity instead of helping young women cultivate inner resilience and a protective moral integrity.

Refinding our voice

The Church must re-express its full spiritual genome. How? We must remember what's encoded in our past and embody it in today’s environment! We must again help people made in God’s image find freedom from literal slavery by supporting modern anti-slavery efforts. And find full freedom from spiritual slavery by encountering Jesus Himself. Contrary to the forces that would distort a young person’s
body image, we must unmask the predatory powers by teaching young people to think critically in a Christ-centred, biblical fashion. They should know they are being preyed on and manipulated. Let’s provoke godly revolt and holy rebellion! We can cultivate an environment where women and men model the confidence, self-respect and spiritual strength that resists demeaning fashion and reveals a relevant alternative. Young girls and guys are most powerfully influenced and informally mentored by being able to observe dynamic Christians (think intergenerational activity and community!). My prayer is that God unleashes yet again this reforming impulse; that new expressions of this DNA deep in the genome of church are seen, heard and felt by a broken world.

1. We are not to be a "religious right" or like liberal churches of the left that too readily baptise secular causes (some even in tension with Scripture) and confuse the Church's mission with political advocacy. The world does not set our agenda. That honour belongs to Matthew 28:18-20 and Revelation 14:6-12.

2. Great good would come if more churches explored ADRA’s local community projects (such as social inclusion programs which assist refugees, prisoners, indigenous people, create community gardens or youth resiliency programs and the like).

Anthony MacPherson is pastor of Plenty Valley and Croydon churches, Vic.
I suppose it was an unusual job but last GC Session I was assigned the role of chaperoning visitors from other faith communities. That meant everything from chauffeuring guests around Atlanta, to sitting cocooned with guests in a skybox high above the Georgia Dome peering down at the proceedings.

During the week I was repeatedly called on to explain the various curiosities of our Church. What visitors found most perplexing was pegging us into the right little box. Each sermon seemed to say something slightly different about us; each person seemed to fit into a slightly different category.

Ironically, it was through the confusion experienced by visitors, that I came to understand our Church a little better. Better, because up until that time, I had thought of the variations in our community on the old liberal–conservative continuum. But that continuum repeatedly failed to capture the complexity our visitors observed.

So what matrix did I turn to? I found it helpful to break Adventism into three streams. For ease of use, I call the streams: “Evangelical Adventists”, “Uniting Adventists” and “Unique Adventists”.

Evangelical Adventists place a very strong emphasis on grace and the centrality of the cross. They tend to focus on the New Testament, with a particular enthusiasm for Paul’s writings. Like the broader evangelical community, they tend to oppose gay marriage and abortion (except in extreme circumstances). While they are concerned about the poor, they generally emphasise work and opportunity as the paths to ending poverty combined with private acts of charity, rather than income redistribution or government programs. Their approach to Ellen White is sometimes marked by tepid acceptance with caveats or soft scepticism.

Uniting Adventists have a strong emphasis on social justice. They tend to focus on passages like Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25. They often emphasise equality in society and the protection of the environment, with government intervention generally viewed as a critical means to achieve social goals. They generally embrace Ellen White’s activism on matters like tobacco control and ending slavery. They tend to be less enthused about the specifics of her teachings in some other areas. They generally emphasise the human and cultural influences contributing to the Bible’s content in their understanding of it; the creation record is a metaphor, the biblical teachings on homosexuality are a cultural artefact—not a moral truth, etc.

Unique Adventists view the Old and New Testaments as a whole, and generally interpret the text literally unless it’s explicitly symbolic (creation occurred in six literal days, Job was a real person, etc). Revelation 14 and Exodus 20 are among the passages most likely to be emphasised. They hold the full gamut of Ellen White’s writings in a very high regard. They tend to focus particular attention on overcoming sin through the power of the indwelling Christ, they emphasise prophecy and the soon second coming, and they are often quite
focused on diet. Sometimes the enthusiasm for eschatology crosses into the realm of conspiracy and the concern for diet may at times tend toward extremes.

Of course, this is just a rough sketch that is so succinct it can never capture the breadth or nuance. Nor does it fit everyone or every variation.

So what to make of the different streams in Adventism? Should we battle each other to the death? After all, a church where the gift of prophecy is sidelined, where love is defined in direct contradiction to the Bible, a church focused on chasing conspiracies or promoting extremes, is a church dying from the inside out. Or should we recognise that we all have things to learn from each other, and work to identify and avoid the pitfalls within the stream with which we most closely align? After all, a church with Jesus as the “Author and Finisher of our faith”, with a passion for “the least of these”, a church that has “the faith of Jesus and keeps the commandments of God” sounds very much like the kind of church we are called by God to be. Maybe it is only by combining the strengths of the three streams we can fully achieve the mission entrusted to us.

1. After sharing this analysis with friends at the GC, I was sent a two decades old article containing a similar analysis. Is there nothing new under the sun?

James Standish is editor of RECORD.