

# An Adventist in Congress

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*an interview with*

JERRY L. PETTIS

*Mr. Pettis, how does it feel to be the first Seventh-day Adventist elected to the United States Congress?*

I feel like any Adventist feels who enters a new field of service — like any pioneer ought to feel. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to act as a Christian, whose ethics, behavior, and record in public service must testify to his convictions. I have been given the privilege (if you want to call it that) of setting a precedent, and I want to make it a good one.

*Do you feel that the disciplined life that goes with being an Adventist will sometimes be a social or political disadvantage?*

It will probably appear so at times. Certainly I cannot drink with the boys, or make deals with shady characters — according to the popular conception, or misconception, of the political officeholder. If I thought that this sort of thing was necessary, I would never have run for office. I have confidence in the fairness and good sense of my constituents and of my colleagues in Washington, so that I have been able to project for myself a behavior pattern consistent with my beliefs.

Actually, in all my association with people during my campaigning, I was never offered liquor. On other occasions it has been offered, and no doubt it will be again; but I ask for orange juice or ginger ale. Time and again people around me have said in effect, "You're smart. I wish I didn't drink." Nobody has ever been unpleasant about it.

On more than one occasion during my first campaign I asked my volunteer field men (some of whom were Catholics, some Mormons, some Protestants, and some without religious affiliation) whether my being an Adventist was any disadvantage as far as they were concerned. These were the men who worked for me with the voting public; so their judgment was important to me. Their consensus, which impressed me greatly, was this: "We want men of integrity in public office. We may not share your theology, although we have more in common with you than we have differences. But the important thing is that we know you cannot be a Seventh-day Adventist unless you live by a rather strict code. This is enough for us."

I would remind you of Walter Judd (formerly a medical missionary, an official in his church, a Congressman from Minnesota for several terms, and a United States representative to the United Nations) and of George Romney (formerly the governor of Michigan and now President Nixon's secretary of housing and urban development) — both of whom live according to codes of behavior based on their religious convictions. And there are also many others who have demonstrated that a man can hold public office and at the same time follow a strict personal moral code. He may even be more respected because of it.

The late Senator Everett Dirksen, whom everybody knew as a Bible-reading and Bible-quoting public figure, put it to me forcefully when I asked him what he thought my chances were. "Jerry," he said in substance, "I cannot see that being an Adventist need be any handicap to you in Congress or in running for reelection — unless you compromise with your principles. If you do that, then may the Lord have mercy on you, but don't expect any mercy from the electorate."

*In the Comprehensive Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White there is a long list of references to statements advising Adventists against involvement in politics. What do you have to say about this?*

I am familiar with these statements and, believe me, I have read them carefully — especially those in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, *Gospel Workers*, *Education*, and *Testimonies to Ministers*. As the context in each case shows, most of these statements are addressed to ministers and educators employed by the church. Who can argue with the assertion that for a minister to engage in political action is a misuse of his position, a wrong use of his time, and a misappropriation of the funds the church pays him as salary? But I am a businessman, a member of the church in good and regular standing — but not an employee of the church (although I look

back with pleasure and gratitude to the years when I was employed by the church).

Mrs. White counsels educators in the schools of the church against using their position to involve — or to appear to involve — these schools in political action. This is the same position taken by the State of California in regard to its own colleges and universities, which are forbidden to take sides in political argument or in support of candidates for office. I am in complete agreement with this concept.

There are a number of other statements that Mrs. White undoubtedly addressed to church members generally. A careful reading shows, in my opinion, that her chief concern was that political strife should not invade and divide the church, and that church members should not engage in what (for want of a better term) we call “dirty politics.” I would deny most vehemently, by the way, that holding public office necessarily involves “dirty politics.”

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*But some Adventists interpret this counsel very differently. How do you support your interpretation?*

Take a look at this statement: “Many a lad of today, growing up as did Daniel in his Judean home, studying God’s Word and His works, and learning the lessons of faithful service, will yet stand in legislative assemblies, in halls of justice, or in royal courts, as a witness for the King of kings.”<sup>1</sup>

I had read this statement more than once before it dawned on me that the situation pictured here is not at all like Paul’s defense before King Agrippa, in which the apostle stood in chains to testify to his faith. In the history of the church many Christians have done this and have acted with wisdom and courage, as did Paul on this and other occasions. But this was not at all the experience of Daniel. True, he had been brought to Babylon as a captive. But once there, under Nebuchadnezzar he became a court official and then minister and senior consultant to the king, and later under Darius he became a high-ranking official in the Persian empire. Daniel was a member of the government who had won the confidence of the imperial rulers because of his competence and integrity as a son of God — and in a pagan culture at that. It is this kind of witness in government and public service that Mrs. White, by her reference to Daniel, appears to hold up as a desirable aspiration for at least some Adventists.

*The statement you have cited is not always interpreted this way. Can’t you do better than this?*

To me the statement seems crystal clear. But if you want something that can have only one interpretation, hear this:

God . . . requires every one of us to cultivate our powers, and attain the highest possible capacity for usefulness, that we may do noble work for God, and bless humanity.

Dear youth, what is the aim and purpose of your life? Are you ambitious for education that you may have a name and position in the world? Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day stand upon the summit of intellectual greatness; that you may sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations. . . .

Integrity, unswerving integrity, is the principle that you need to carry with you into all the relations of life. . . .

Balanced by religious principle, you may climb to any height you please. . . .

But never commit so great a crime as to pervert your God-given powers to do evil and destroy others. . . . It is a fearful thing to use God-given abilities in such a way as to scatter blight and woe instead of blessing in society. It is also a fearful thing to fold the talent intrusted to us in a napkin, and hide it away in the world; for this is casting away the crown of life. God claims our service.<sup>2</sup>

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This is an imperative to be a person of action, a person dedicated to the service of God and man. If the Christian has the ability, the inclination, and the opportunity for public service, Mrs. White clearly commends it — always with the reservation that his motives must be such as to have God's approval.

If Christians are to be the salt of the earth, they must have enough faith and confidence to be dropped out of the salt shaker and spread over all segments of human society — including government. I have found devout Christians in Congress, and I am honored as an Adventist to join my colleagues at the Christian fellowship breakfasts that are held each week.

*Do current world problems suggest areas of special concern to you as an Adventist?*

I think that a Seventh-day Adventist must take the larger view on many subjects. Without diminishing his patriotism and loyalty to his countrymen in any way, he must look compassionately on people everywhere. The enslaved, the hungry, and those who (almost without hope) are seeking something better should be on the mind of any legislator. A Congressman should be nonpartisan where stark human need is involved. An Adventist in particular should think and live above the racial strife that threatens the peace and prosperity of our nation and of the world. A genuine feeling of brotherhood should save him from both prejudice and reaction. His sense of values should be anchored in sound, God-given concepts of Christian love.

*Has belonging to the Seventh-day Adventist Church influenced your choice of causes or bills to support? Has it made a difference in the way you vote, in the way you function as a member of the House of Representatives?*

As I see my general responsibility, it is to serve the nation and my district to the best of my ability, according to my convictions, and to live among my colleagues so they will know me as a Christian.

I have a duty to my district, to discover its needs and to work to meet them; this is the essence of representative government. Beyond this, I am a free American. I have no commitments to any group or organization — not even to my church as an organization. I would be disappointed if the church officially asked me to sponsor this or that legislation, or to support or oppose a particular bill. I am convinced that the church would not make such a request, for it and I both believe in a separation of church and state. Whatever I do as a Congressman, I must weigh according to my own moral and ethical convictions, on my own responsibility as a Christian and as an Adventist.

I have wondered what I would do if some of the events which Adventists expect to involve this country should begin to happen while I am in Congress. I hope that in such a situation the Lord would give me wisdom and courage to express the prophetic insights of Adventism, using the advantage of my position in Congress (including the attention and interest of the news media) to get a hearing for them.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

The foregoing questions and answers are based on a conversation between Congressman Pettis and Keld J. Reynolds, former vice president for academic affairs at Loma Linda University.

- 1 ELLEN G. WHITE, *Education* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press 1903), p. 262.
- 2 WHITE, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association 1923), pp. 82-83.