

# Coming of Age

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SPECTRUM begins its fourth year of publication with this issue, and its parent organization — the Association of Adventist Forums — is well into its fifth year. Now is an appropriate time to remind ourselves why such an association and journal exist and what they have contributed to the life of the Adventist community. Although opinions vary widely among Association members, the Association and SPECTRUM function on certain fundamental assumptions based on the nature of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

The Reformation recovered the importance of each Christian's relating directly to God through (*a*) reading the Scripture translated into the common language, (*b*) confession of sin immediately to God, and (*c*) greater personal involvement in worship services. Ever since, Protestants have adhered to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Along with their fellow Protestants, Adventists believe in a church whose authority is God, whose will is revealed in the Bible, which is available to all members. The church is not just the clergy, but *all* the members. The Association of Adventist Forums is committed to what is implicit in the concept of the priesthood of all believers — a democratic church.

## I

The only way democracy can function is by constant and full communication among members of the community. When that happens, democracy is not only theologically sound but pragmatically desirable. When new proposals and ideas come quickly before a broad and representative cross section of the church, several desirable consequences follow.

*First*, the environment thus formed encourages new and hopeful creative suggestions — the kind of initiatives any community, including the church, needs if it is to flourish. *Second*, wide disclosure ensures that ideas which

survive have withstood the general scrutiny of the church. Such a rigorous test helps sift out the least useful suggestions. *Third*, if agreement takes place after full and open discussion, the consensus formed is the kind of genuine unity that binds the church together. Indeed, if this process is not followed, new departures will be either ineffective or schismatic. Considerations of this sort may well have caused the early Adventists to publish many varied and conflicting viewpoints in their publications. One thing is certain: a unity emerged that has endured through the phenomenal growth of the church in a rapidly changing world.

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The organization of the Seventh-day Adventist church is often compared to the structure of the American political system. Many defenders of American democracy cite the importance and practicality of free discussion. When dedicated and sometimes impassioned spokesmen of varying viewpoints carry on their conversation openly within the community, citizens can learn quickly of new opportunities and challenges. They can also rapidly begin to reflect on the most appropriate response. If major departures are rejected, citizens have few second thoughts — because they have had a part in that rejection. If new policies are adopted, citizens who have participated in their formulation (at least by remaining informed) are readier to support and implement the changes. Apologists for the American constitutional system argue that free expression of ideas chastened by vigorous response has enabled the United States in its short history to make amazing social, economic, and technological changes, while its political institutions have remained relatively stable.

The Association of Adventist Forums is convinced that candid communication among Seventh-day Adventists not only flows from theological presuppositions, but is as healthful and practical for the Seventh-day Adventist church as it has been for the United States.

## II

There has been cooperation between the Association and the leadership of the church from the inception of the Forums organization. The pages of *SPECTRUM* have been used by church officials to communicate with members. Members have found the journal and the activities of the Association to be channels for talking to each other and to church leaders. During the past four years, the Association has contributed to many significant developments in the life of the church.

The movement of Adventists to coordinate higher education was discussed by Charles B. Hirsch, secretary of the General Conference Depart-

ment of Education, in an early SPECTRUM. The article of a student who discussed the same subject in SPECTRUM was reprinted in *Insight*. Alvin L. Kwiram, the first president of the Association, is a charter member of the General Conference Board of Higher Education.

The Commission on the Draft — which met for several days in Washington and is in the process of revising the wording of National Service Organization pamphlets — was in part a response to discussion of the topic by laymen at several AAF regional conferences and in SPECTRUM.

SPECTRUM has published a number of articles on missions by Gottfried Oosterwal and others. These articles are encouraging the church to take a new look at the purpose and effectiveness of Adventist missions in contemporary society. Several of these articles are already being used in classes and mission institutes.

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Delegates to the General Conference have said that they used materials from SPECTRUM in their deliberations. SPECTRUM was the only Adventist publication to print the basic arguments for the organization of black unions, an organizational development that could affect all Adventist activities in North America.

Serious discussions on graduate education in Europe (including the possibility of a European seminary) have taken place among representatives from the Northern European, Central European, and Trans-Mediterranean Division offices. The first printed proposal for graduate education in Europe appeared in SPECTRUM.

Official Fall Council resolutions have been voted encouraging unions and conferences to appoint chaplains for Adventists attending non-Adventist universities. Even before its official organization, the Association urged the General Conference to make such recommendations. Graduate students often undergo culture shock when they first attend a non-Adventist school. Later, as young professionals, they struggle with the meaning of their vocations. Many of these church members, who have much talent to contribute to the mission of the church, have said that the monthly gatherings of the local Forum chapters have helped make them feel a part of the Adventist community.

### III

The national Association of Adventist Forums has refrained from taking official stands on topics of interest to its members. However, it has provided opportunity for members to talk and discuss issues in an orderly and reflective manner. Sometimes the discussions have led to action.

For instance, members of the New England Forum met to discuss possible resolutions on race relations to be voted at a constituency meeting of the local conference. An AAF member's account of the inspirational qualities of the constituency meeting appeared in the *Review and Herald*. The resolution was published in SPECTRUM. With minor revisions, it was adopted in Atlantic City by an official vote of the General Conference world session.

In Canada, the Toronto chapter has had several sessions to discuss criteria for higher education. Members of the conference and union administrative staffs attended and appreciated learning facts pertinent to the future of Canadian Union College and Kingsway College.

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The Chicago chapter invited Thomas S. Geraty, chairman of the department of education at Andrews University, to meet with them. Even though it was a small meeting, they were able to present their concern about the increase in the number of academies in the union. As a result, the union has resumed its study of the problem.

A retreat in Tennessee, attended by members of various races, discussed the issue of black-white relations. Since then, members attending the retreat have been active in spearheading interracial association in Nashville and Memphis. The interracial meetings in Nashville have been on a rather regular basis, and planning between black churches and white churches has advanced considerably.

#### IV

With the kind of record the Association has established during the last five years, with its growing membership in the United States and throughout the world, and with the arrival of financial solvency (through many contributions at the end of last year), the Association of Adventist Forums has come of age.

More can and should be done by the Association to increase communication within the Adventist community. Much more can be achieved in clarifying the contributions of Adventists to other Christians and to contemporary culture. As the Association continues to publish SPECTRUM, as it meets in local and regional study conferences and explores further ways to assist the church, it will be guided by the deep conviction of its members that the mission of the Adventist church can be served only by engaging the whole church in significant conversation about fundamentals of faith and practice. Only through free and open communication can all church members feel that they are truly a priesthood of Adventist believers. Only in that way can the church combine the vitality of change with the strength of unity.