Can Intellectuals Be at Home In the Church?

by Alvin Kwiram

In 1968, Robert Pierson, president of the General Conference, initiated a study aimed at developing more effective means for reaching the (secular) intellectual. As an outgrowth of that action, Alvin L. Kwiram, now chairman of the Board of Editors of SPECTRUM, was one of those invited to suggest approaches that might be explored in dealing with this issue. Since then, a subcommittee of the General Conference, formed to study this entire question, has asked the Association of Adventist Forums to prepare a written report on this subject. The following article, based on the analysis Kwiram submitted earlier, is an introductory exploration of the problem. We urge our readers to communicate ideas and suggestions to us so that a broad range of views can be represented in the final report.

<div align="right">The Editors</div>

The leaders of the church are asking, "How can the church more effectively reach the intellectual?" If I assume that the key term in the question has an agreed-upon meaning, that might lead quickly to serious misunderstanding.

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Let me begin, therefore, with a brief discussion of the word "intellectual."

The dictionary says that an intellectual is "one whose work requires primarily the use of the intellect." But this definition seems to exclude persons whose daily work is primarily physical, but who, nevertheless, are *confronted* by profound intellectual issues in the spiritual and moral realm. The problem is even worse if we restrict the definition to those who have taken advanced education leading to graduate degrees. Many without advanced or even formal education engage in a quest for meaning just as "intellectual" as that of someone with a Ph.D. Moreover, no one operates in an "intellectual" mode at all times. Thus, one might reasonably rephrase the original question so as to include in the discussion everyone (regardless of work or education) who experiences "intellectual confrontation," especially on issues with spiritual overtones.

Even so, in this article the term "intellectual" will refer to someone with an advanced education who relies primarily on his or her intellect in his daily activities. He tends to be well read. He is at ease in the world of ideas. He is imbued with a certain quality of mind, a willingness to try new approaches and to examine ancient precepts, a certain taste for rigor. Such a person may be considered an exemplar of everyone in the

church who experiences "intellectual confrontation."[1]

The primary question of how the church might attract the intellectual immediately raises a secondary question. How are we treating the intellectual already in our midst? I shall address myself to this question first.

My own experience indicates that our home-grown intellectuals are leaving the church in alarming numbers (especially those not employed by the church). Surprisingly, however, they are not leaving because the church imposes too many restrictions; instead, it is because they feel that the church fails the test of relevancy in many of its practices and, all too often, refuses to speak at all when ethical issues are at stake. Whether this judgment is true, is partly beside the point. For it is the church's responsibility to reach them at their level of perception.

Too often, when intellectuals do reach out for help, they get their hands slapped. More often than not, the questioning and analytical approach intrinsic to their way of thinking is seen as a threat to the institution. Often, the response of layman and ordained minister alike is to reject and exclude them. This is done, first, by the rejection of the *issues* that trouble the intellectual; in his eyes the church ignores scientific, social and psychological problems; it accepts glib and unreliable formulae for complex problems. It is done, second, by rejection of the *individual* who expresses concern about such topics. We inveigh against his "critical" attitudes, impugn his motives and his dedication to the institution and so on. No intellectual can long survive in such an environment. Everyone needs community, a sense of being accepted, of being worthwhile and respected. Even without acceptance, many struggle to remain members of the community of believers, but the social and intellectual isolation ultimately weakens their commitment to the point of despair.

The church, therefore, must reject the tacit view that the intellectual is either an enemy or a traitor. He must, in fact, be viewed as a child of God who is seeking for a fuller understanding of God and His will. At the same time, we must recognize that the frame of reference in which he pursues his quest may be quite foreign to the typical pastor or church member. He brings different criteria to bear; he even has different perceptions of reality. This means that even the task of nurturing intellectuals already in the church may be very difficult.

I do not believe that, up to now, we have a well-developed program that speaks to the intellectual. Provonsha's book[2] is a fine effort, but the labor pains generated within the institution by the birth of that small volume should be thoughtfully noted. One of the first things we must do, therefore, is to *encourage* capable persons to write and to speak to the intellectual audience in the church, with the assurance that their efforts will not lead to reprisal or ostracism. To meet the issues honestly and effectively will require much more frankness and openness. Clearly, such discussion may not be appropriate for the church at large, since it might deal with issues that some would not appreciate. Nevertheless, we must develop the means to generate such material and to use it effectively. This will require time, commitment, hard work, effective communication and a decisive reversal of present practices.

There is no point, however, in preparing the tools and the soil unless we are also committed to the development of ministers who understand the problems of the intellectual and can deal with them effectively. There are few such ministers in our ranks now. Partly, I believe, this is a reflection of the pressures the young minister feels. Any young man with intellectual tendencies will tend to be somewhat independent on intellectual issues. If that independence is viewed as a lack of loyalty to the organization and appropriately "punished," then the young minister (whose intelligence and talents open many doors of opportunity) will leave the ministry to pursue advanced degrees in medicine, sociology, psychology or other fields. Here we may note, too, that students in our colleges sometimes opt to avoid a ministerial career for fear of becoming entangled in unproductive conflict. There are numerous examples of both such ministers and such students, and this trend will continue, given the present climate. Concomitantly, we will fail to hold (let alone convert!) very many intellectuals. Young ministers *must* be provided some measure of protection so that they can grow and develop without compromising their intellectual freedom and integrity. Indeed, we need to encourage and sustain centers where diversity is not deliberately destroyed.

Assuming a willingness to care for intellectuals within the church, where and how should we begin our outreach to intellectuals outside of it? Let me say, first, that this is a task which must be approached in the finest missionary tradition. We have labored for years in places like the Middle East, experienced insult upon rebuff, and taken it all in stride with ultimate rejoicing because we have baptized a few souls after ten years of hard work. We try to learn the language, the customs, the idiosyncracies of those we seek to win. No less is necessary or appropriate for the intellectual. Quick results should not be expected, particularly because our very attitudes represent part of the obstacle to his conversion.

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Indeed, there is an urgent need here for a certain amount of consciousness-raising.

In general, I think it is easier to reach the young intellectual than the seasoned veteran with his entrenched habits and commitments. I believe our best opportunities for success will be among the students at secular universities. (In this mission field, as important as any other in the world, we have no missionaries.) Our conventional evangelistic approach is not appropriate for this group. Although the essence of the gospel is the same for all persons, the means we employ to attract their attention must be different. The issues and the language will change with time; the ultimate message of the gospel will not. Today, for example, we might capture the attention of the secular university student with issues such as vegetariansim, Christian meditation as an alternative to transcendental meditation, the harmful effects of drugs and smoking, the importance of ecology and the need to maintain a balanced harmony with nature. To be successful, however, such an approach would require a nucleus of strategists and expeditors who *understand the rhetoric of both sides.*

Unfortunately, the church has not encouraged intellectual independence among those who might otherwise be ready to meet this challenge. Thus, it will be necessary to encourage and cultivate persons who might take up the task. It will not be enough merely to appoint one or two "campus ministers" (although many thoughtful persons have urged and pleaded that even that much would be a start). Such an approach will end in failure unless all the other considerations which have been discussed above are carefully thought through and appropriate changes implemented.

Of course, other segments of the "intellectual" society could be attracted to our faith. I have simply chosen the millions of university students as the most obvious prototype. In terms of adding numbers to our ranks, however, I must return to an earlier theme: *the greatest success would attend a serious effort among the home-grown intellectuals.* Even if only 50 percent of those who now leave decided instead to remain in the church, it would greatly add to the strength of the church and save countless heartaches on the part of parents who see but do not understand the growing disaffection of their children. Moreover, the society at large is not improved by these embittered ex-Adventists.

I have outlined a number of problems, and I would now like to suggest several practical ways of exploring these problems more systematically.

1. A preliminary approach would be to encourage a discussion of these topics in *The Ministry* and in SPECTRUM.

2. A second step would involve setting up conferences in which church leaders meet with selected participants for an amicable consciousness-raising discussion of the problems. I would emphasize that the choice of participants for such a conference is crucial.

3. A very important part of such a program would involve scheduling of regional meetings with General Conference leaders. This, in itself, would bring great encouragement to many frustrated individuals. In fact, the Association of Adventist Forums could serve to coordinate such conferences and could even hold preliminary sessions to develop position papers. The

union and local conference presidents and selected pastors should also be invited for a frank and open discussion. I believe this would provide the leadership a valuable opportunity to see how serious the problem really is, and would give them a broad range of input on the perceptions of this segment of the church.

4. Finally, the Christian Leadership Seminars, a General Conference-sponsored program for the ongoing education of the church's administrators, and the Academy of Adventist Ministers, could be used to expose a greater number of the workers to these issues.

I think that a systematic and broadly based approach such as this could have a tremendous impact on the church and give strength and encouragement to a segment of the membership that too often feels unwelcome. Further, it would give the leadership some basis on which to select laymen, ministers and locales for the most effective introduction of trial programs.

Some will question the wisdom of such an enterprise. They will say the risks are too high, that if the church encourages more openness to contemporary questions and the people who ask them, it will stir up controversies, confuse the people, weaken their commitment to the standards and doctrines and otherwise create a ferment of ideas that militates against stability. But this, after all, is the age-old tension. What we need to do is understand it; we especially need to understand that comfortable ruts are incompatible with reform and progress, and that the vast majority always prefer ruts. The path of

least resistance merely requires that we mechanically mumble the established clichés. (Robert Frost's "good fences make good neighbors" comes to mind; the old man repeats the maxim regardless of whether it is still grounded in meaning or not.) We need to remind ourselves that conceptual advances have been made by minorities, whether in Christ's days, Luther's, or Ellen White's. Such advances are always opposed by those who feel called upon to "prevent heresy."

The problem of balancing institutional stability against creative change must be recognized by responsible leaders and handled with poise. To the extent that leadership is not sensitive to this issue, to that extent the whole enterprise of reaching the intellectual and providing an arena for him within the church is doomed.

I trust that the spirit in which these painfully candid comments have been made will not be dishonored. The comments reflect a deeply felt concern for the vitality of the church—a concern shared by many intellectuals in the church. But I would respectfully suggest that if the leaders fail to recognize the dedication of many intellectuals to the church, or fail to understand the nature or intensity of the debates that they engage in, then the task under discussion in this note will be an extremely difficult one. On the other hand, I am greatly encouraged by the interest the leadership has shown in the matter and hope that a spirit of cooperation and mutual trust can bring a new vitality to the work.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I would like to suggest that the entire issue of "intellectual confrontation" especially as it relates to conversion and its obverse, apostasy, might be understood much more clearly if one were to invoke a mathematical formalism known as "catastrophe theory" recently invented by the French mathematician, René Thom, [See, for example, *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis,* by René Thom, translated by D. H. Fowler, W. A. Benjamin, Inc., 1975.] This theory is particularly useful for describing and analyzing "...those situations where gradually changing forces or motivations lead to abrupt changes in behaviour." [Taken from an introductory article by E. C. Zeeman, *Scientific American,* 234 (1976) 65.] Consider for example, someone for whom a particular religious tenet is challenged by a series of *convincing* arguments. On the one hand, his loyalty to his institution and his own self-image are

threatened. That is, he experiences a fear—rarely articulated—of losing his belief-system or faith. On the other hand, he has a strong commitment to rational dialogue and the demands of evidence. It is this commitment which *compels* him to seriously pursue the argument to its logical conclusions. These two forces are in conflict— his fear of losing faith, and his compulsive pursuit of intellectual honesty. There can be no neutrality here. Even relatively minor considerations can cause a discontinuous change in his intellectual outlook. If he is a secular person moving from a position of rejection to acceptance of spiritual matters, we talk of conversion. If the reverse is taking place, we speak of apostasy. But the crucial element in this transformation is *confrontation.*

2. *God Is With Us* (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974).