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# The British Union: Some Comments on the Issues

by Jeanie Picart

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I shall attempt to reply specifically to certain portions of Mr. Porter's article which I believe warrant definite answers, but I see the article as the tip of the iceberg, with the real issues lying below the surface; it is to these that I primarily wish to devote myself.

Mr. Porter is to be commended for the amount of research he has obviously done, and for his attempt to walk the middle line on a very emotional and highly charged topic. If the points raised are the personal views of the author only, they are important. If, as I sense, he is the articulate voice for a larger white constituency in the British Adventist Church, then they become highly significant.

Britain has during the past half-century edged its way toward being what the popular press likes to term "a multiracial society." This trend has been even more pronounced among Adventists, putting the British Adventist Church in a unique position to set the world an example of true Christianity and racial harmony. Whether we have

achieved this goal is a different matter. As Porter implies, initially, when there were only a few black Adventists in England, they were welcomed, but when it became clear that these people were no longer passing through, and that the racial makeup of the church was changing, the welcome began to cool. If we ask "Why?" part of the answer, surely, will be the feelings of fear and hurt and loss that often attend our human attempts to love all our brothers and sisters.

However we explain this matter, Porter, as I interpret him, is now concerned 1) with what he sees as the problem of a church two-thirds black evangelizing a predominantly white community, and 2) with the diminishing numbers of the whites who make up one-third of the British Adventist Church. Mr. Porter implies that black immigration has negatively affected white membership numbers, and also that it has deterred other whites from joining the church. But this begs the question of the type of "Christian" one is hoping to attract and to keep in the church, and that surely is an important consideration.

Suppose we accept Porter's claim that black immigration drove out white members, some of whom were "subsequently reclaimed for the movement when white com-

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panies were established in predominantly white areas.” Was this caused by mere apprehension of two different cultures facing each other in a common worship hall, or is the real question “Who wants to attend a black church?” Is there some form of stigma attached to this strange venture? There seems to be the unspoken implication that blacks somehow lower the standards of “white Adventism,” as though the concern is with the difference between first and second-class citizens — one definitely does not mix the two because the first-class person runs the risk of being categorized as second class!

If so, what type of person will we be hoping to attract to the church? The white academia? The doctors, lawyers, dentists? People from all walks of life? Will the drunk, the drug addict, find room in the church? Will a “soul rating” be assigned to each person, based on financial status, academic excellence? What happens if only the souls rated “zero,” the “sinners,” the down-and-outs of society, are attracted? Will we leave to form new, *exclusive* churches? Once we start classifying people, we lose sight of the individuality of a human soul, upon which Christ placed such store that he said, “If only one . . . I would still have come!”

Concerning Britain’s lack of regional conferences on American lines, all that can be said is that such a setup is an indictment of American Adventism. The fact that the London Laymen’s Forum seems to have campaigned for a regional conference appears, on the face of it, rather strange; but it should be borne in mind that the suggestion for a regional conference came from administrative levels, and that the original aim of the London Laymen’s Forum was for “full and complete integration, unity and growth.” That the regional conference was suggested, and the London Laymen’s Forum came to subscribe to the idea, is past history. The outcome so far has been a failure to establish a regional conference; perhaps God has merely been saying to all concerned, “I am still in command.”

At one point Porter addresses the question why an integrated church has been so hard to

establish. It no doubt has to do with racial bigotry and insularity, and these raise the question, “Why have these crept into the church, and on what do they feed in our ‘enlightened’ society?” The answer is partly historical. To justify slavery, whites had to convince themselves that the slave was sub-human; once convinced, they were hard to unconvince. The church, by not raising a

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loud enough voice — and in this I implicate all the churches, helped to maintain the status quo, and never set out wholeheartedly to restore to the black race the humanity and dignity with which God endowed all men at creation. Consider, too, the picture we have — and here I specifically implicate Adventist literature — of the origin of the races. Before the differentiation of the races, there was one race . . . and it was white! To see this, ask yourself what picture comes to mind when I say, “God, Adam and Eve, angels.”

Turning now to Porter’s hope for a church that will appeal, as he says, to “the vast bulk of the population” — this would involve, he believes, “mainly white administration” of a church now mainly black — we may simply note a warning sounded by Martin Luther King:

Nowhere is the tendency to conform more evident than in the church which has served to crystallize, conserve and even bless the patterns of majority opinion. The erstwhile sanction by the church of slavery, racial segregation, war and economic exploitation is testimony to the fact that the church harkened more to the authority of the world than to the authority of God. Called to be the moral guardian of the community, the church at times has pre-

served that which is immoral and unethical. Called to lead men on the highway of brotherhood and to summon them to rise above the narrow confines of race and class, it has enunciated and practiced racial exclusiveness (*The Strength to Love*).

Jonathan Butler, in his *Insight* articles (January 1979) on church relations, points out that church leaders have not always been apathetic on the subject of race relations. He recorded the words of former General Conference President William Branson:

“Perhaps no religious group in the US or the world claims so loudly that it is international in its attitudes and services as do Seventh-day Adventists, and yet in this matter of Negro segregation we are trailing behind. Shall we wait till our hands are forced on this matter, or shall we move forward carefully but surely as men who believe that all ye are brethren? It seems that we have come full circle; the question is, do we now move forward or backwards?”

This, perhaps, is a word for us today.

The Bible’s account of man’s creation makes it quite clear there can be no such thing as a superior race in God’s sight. The whole of mankind was created in God’s image, without racial and cultural distinction. As David Field, in his *Taking Sides*, has written: “The dignity and equality which creation in the divine image gives each human being brands every attempt to discriminate between men on racial grounds abhorrent to God. . . . As a result of Christ’s reconciling death, therefore, all divisive racial partitions between Christians are smashed.” There is neither Jew nor Greek, as Paul declares, for we are all one in Christ. In light of this, how can we justify regionalism and separation as a matter of social expedience? What are we going to make of John’s vision, in the book of Revelation, of the heavenly congregation standing before the throne and before the Lamb, its members coming “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues”? (Revelation 7:9).

Every day we pray “Our Father.” When will we realize the universality of the God whom we worship, and how lightly we use words? Says Martin Luther King in *Strength to Love*:

A spiritual myopia limits our visions to external accidents. We see men as Jews, Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or Americans, Blacks or Whites. We fail to think of them as fellow human beings, made from the same basic stuff as we, moulded in the same divine image. When the church is true to its nature (the nature of God), it knows neither division nor disunity.

I accept this view, and agree with David Field that the Christian “is to insist on nothing less than full integration, especially in the church, where any kind of spiritual apartheid is ruled out altogether by New Testament teaching” (*Taking Sides*).

**I**n conclusion let me say that my first reading of Porter’s article left me numb. It was the type of attitude I had heard for well over a decade, but this time it came from within the church of which I am a member, and with a religious slant to it! All of us, of course, are prejudiced to a greater or lesser degree. Once we can admit we are prejudiced, we are on the road to recovery — not by might or power, but by the spirit of the Lord. I may have taken what sounds like a hard and emotional line on a seemingly insignificant problem, but for too long, racial bigotry has been cherished and nurtured and called by every other name except by its God-given one — sin!

I hope that in the light of all that has been said, we can now examine our lives, acknowledge our sin, and together with the poet Langston Hughes dream a dream of a world, by God’s grace to become a reality, where “love will bless the earth and peace its paths adorn,” a world where “black or white, Whatever race you be, Will share the bounties of the earth, And everyman is free.”