

A Time for Healing

by Roy Branson

Just before a Sabbath School class met during the middle of November, I asked Don, the son of a good friend of mine, what he was majoring in during his junior year at Walla Walla College. Don has always been one of the leaders of youth activities in our local church, and had performed so well academically during his academy years that he had been invited into an advanced program at Johns Hopkins University. Now Don had decided on his own that he wanted to transfer to an Adventist college.

Well, he said, getting to my question, he loved to study and discuss theology, and wanted to help people. So, he had decided to become a pastor, perhaps some day a theology teacher. But he had been talking with some of his older friends at college who had also been planning to become ministers. With all the resignations and firings going on in the church, they had switched to pre-law and business.

“I love to argue,” Don went on, “and I don’t mind politics—it’s necessary to get some things done. But I don’t want to go into the ministry and end up spending all my life in denominational fights. I’ve decided to find some other place where I can still help people and as a layman give my spare time to the church.

Right now, the greatest threat to the Adventist church in North America is not doctrinal error, but fatigue. We are so exhausted from fighting each other we have little energy to undertake bold, new tasks—

or ignite the enthusiasm of the next generation. Even some who have tried to bring together contending voices find that they too become principals in new controversies that absorb their time and emotional resources. A time for healing and renewal is imperative if the church in North America is to fulfill its mission.

Certainly the church will survive. It is not without resources. Its health-care system is the seventh largest in the United States, and it has one of the most extensive parochial school networks in the country. Financially, it may well be that the denomination’s remarkable strength will remain unshaken by the Davenport affair, if the commission recently established by the General Conference acts fairly and decisively.

But Adventist administrators, faculties, pastors and lay persons continue to be distracted by months of accusations and rebuttals, charges and countercharges; not simply about the theological positions others hold, but their basic loyalty to the church. Some otherwise dedicated and talented members (on different sides of denominational debates) are becoming so demoralized that they brush past discussions of issues to ask whether opponents are truly Adventists, and suggest disputes might have to be settled with lawsuits. Too many of those resigning from the ministry and those administrators firing pastors and teachers do not merely disagree with others in the church, they regard them as enemies. In the face of continuing rancor in the church, a chilling

number of members are quietly abandoning further participation in Adventism.

That is not to say that renewal can come through cessation of spirited discussion. Quite the contrary. Respecting each other enough to continue conversation on truly significant topics is one important route to renewal. Charles Bradford, vice-president of the General Conference for North America, refers to our colleges and universities as “reservoirs of renewal.” He knows that our schools not only forge friendships and associations that are the unifying core of the denomination’s life, but that Adventist faculties are dedicated to exploring and debating how the church can best embody Christianity in the midst of twentieth-century society. Members need to let their faculties and church administrators know that they appreciate their schools pursuing that exploration.

If there is to be reconciliation through sustained study and conversation, Adventist leadership and laity must appreciate the necessity of not just tolerating, but insisting that the search for truth continue—in our universities, our colleges, our publications, our pulpits, and our Sabbath School classes.

Without that commitment the credentials of persons to call themselves Adventists will continue to be challenged and revoked; and increasing numbers of persons will grow weary and excuse themselves from the lively conversation that has been Adventism. An entire generation of Adventists will no longer dream dreams—will cease to see visions. And without a renewed vision this people will perish.

If the church is to be reinvigorated it will remember that our forefathers made a special commitment to the belief that God’s revelation is not static, but progressive. If the Adventist church today is loyal to that daring belief, it will reject the view that truth is neatly defined, easily packaged, and conveniently passed on to the next generation, like a pill guaranteed to be effective. Rather, Adventists will share the conviction that truth is like a diamond; the more one examines it the more facets one sees, and the greater the wonder and fascination.

If Don and his friends were confident that the church knew that it depended on them to continue the exploration of truth, they would be clamoring to participate. Whether the Adventist denomination fulfills its promise depends on convincing our children that we are committed to making our forefathers’ search for truth a permanent quest.