

A Reaffirmation of Purpose

The Association of Adventist Forums has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1967 and plans to continue helping members find increasing fulfillment in the Adventist Church.

The association appreciates the cordial, yet candid relationship it has had with Neal Wilson over the last 17 years. As he said in his statement to Annual Council, he is a friend of many active in the association and its journal *Spectrum* and knows them to be loyal, active members of the Adventist Church. We regret Elder Wilson's departure at this time as a denominational consultant to the board of the association. We are further saddened by his stated reasons for resigning. Our respect for Elder Wilson as a person, as president of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and as a brother in the church, lead us to respond to his public statement about the association and *Spectrum*.

The purposes and goals of the Association of Adventist Forums have remained the same since the association's inception in 1967. First and foremost is a commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an instrument of God in our time. The association and *Spectrum* remain dedicated to building up the Adventist church.

The association has worked toward accomplishing the goals expressed at its founding. Because of the fellowship created in local Forum chapters and through *Spectrum*, many individuals have improved their relationships to the church they cherish. We have been told by current graduate students at non-Adventist universities that Forum chapters on Adventist college campuses, by

nurturing enduring bonds with members of the denomination, have had a pastoral impact in their lives. The recent national conferences of the association have led individuals to tell members of the board that after years of discouragement, their commitment to Adventism had been refreshed and renewed at the conferences. In a very direct sense, the fellowship fostered by the association has been a form of evangelism that has not only retained members in the church, but helped them lead non-Adventists to join the church. Many of these Forum members now serve the church in varying capacities of denominational and lay leadership.

Meetings of the association and the pages of *Spectrum* have also been open to thoughtful interchanges between Adventist and non-Adventist scholars. The recent conference on Millerite thought and practice is only one example. Also, at the prodding of the association, pastors sensitive to graduate students have increasingly been appointed to churches in university cities. In all of these ways, the association continues to pursue its pastoral and evangelistic goals.

Spectrum, as planned in 1967, has served as an organ of communication for many church scholars and writers. For some years the editorial policy of the journal has been to include special sections on significant topics not at the center of church controversy: vegetarianism and Adventism's worldwide food industries; moral issues such as refugees, prison reform, abortion, and the environment; challenges in the local church;

attitudes toward sexuality; various responses by Adventists to nuclear weapons; new directions for Adventism (including praise from a prominent non-Adventist historian for Adventism's core affirmations). The journal has published reports on obvious achievements of the Adventist community: the expansion of radio programs in the United States produced by Adventist ethnic groups, conferences on evangelism by black Adventists in North America, lay-operated schools in India, and the growth of Adventist vegetarian restaurants in urban centers.

Spectrum has lived up to its name by presenting a variety of viewpoints. Totally different positions have been published on a variety of topics, for example: Adventists and military service, creation of black unions in North America, the sanctuary and the investigative judgment, ways to improve denominational organization, the sources of Ellen White's writings (including her testimonies on health reform), and nuclear disarmament.

From the outset it was understood by leaders of the denomination and the Association of Adventist Forums that it would be best if the association and *Spectrum* remained clearly independent of church administration. In that way, venturesome responses to crucial questions could be explored without putting administrators in the position of having to approve new perspectives as official positions. The journal has always been, and will continue to be, a place where hard questions can be raised and diverse—and sometimes controversial—answers explored. We have been gratified that denominational leaders at all levels of church administration have told members of the association board that their pride in being Adventists has been enhanced by the quality of exchanges and discussion to be found in the pages of *Spectrum*.

Printing articles with varied perspectives simultaneously encourages fresh thinking and helps individuals to firmly grasp truth for themselves. Ellen White strongly counseled that:

Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts. Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields open for research in nature and revelation. Let them contemplate the great facts of duty and destiny, and the mind will expound and strengthen. Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men strong to think and to act, men who are masters and not slaves of circumstances, men who possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions (*Education*, pp. 17, 18).

Ellen White's statement epitomizes what *Spectrum* has attempted to provide the church. The church is stronger as a result.

In his statement to Annual Council, Elder Wilson mentions most often the undermining of confidence in church leadership and organization as the way the association and *Spectrum* have hurt the church. We note that Elder Wilson recurringly refers throughout his statement to the church's "organization," "structure," "leadership," and "authority." We are concerned that Adventist church structure is being raised to the level of doctrinal orthodoxy.

It is true that, in meetings of the association and the pages of *Spectrum*, the subject of church structure has been more fully discussed during the last two years than during the early years of the association. Rather than simply report complaints about administrators or church organizations, the association felt it was more constructive to sponsor a task force that would do the research and study necessary to produce careful proposals for improving the denomination's structure. *Spectrum* published the substantial report of the Forum task force, along with criticisms of it. When union con-

ferences and the General Conference established official denominational committees and commissions to study church reorganization, their recommendations, have been discussed in association meetings and the pages of *Spectrum*. We have been part of what is a live, open question before the church: What structure best expresses the heritage, affirmations, and mission of Adventism?

We trust that Elder Wilson did not mean to suggest that the few denominational leaders who have "had church leadership responsibility or the more awesome and sacred responsibility of trying to maintain unity in a spiritual world family" are the only members of the church who can legitimately participate in discussions of church structure and organization. If the Protestant concept of the priesthood of all believers is to be a reality, then believers must be free to become informed of and involved in major developments in the life of the church.

On this and other subjects the association remains committed to encouraging the expression and examination of a variety of viewpoints. Nurtured in a church that has always been committed to progressive revelation, we reaffirm our dedication to pursuing truths that continue to unfold. How does

the new come to be acknowledged as truth? By being compared to inspired writings, tested by the witness of the Spirit in our lives, and very importantly—at least in Protestant churches—discussed by the church. Discussed not just by a narrow circle of either administrators or scholars, but by the membership at large. Precisely through the continued probing, searching conversation of the sort that takes place in Sabbath school classes, college classrooms, workers' meetings and within Forum chapter meetings and the pages of *Spectrum*, there develops a consensus about which new ideas are true and which are not.

New insights are not found by imposing silence, but by encouraging their expression; their validity is not best tested by less examination but by more. It is part of the very nature of the church that it continue to search after the God whose goodness and beauty remain inexhaustible. To call members to such a pilgrimage is not an act of betrayal, but an invitation to an eternal adventure, of which God's people will never tire.

Currently, Adventists are in the midst of a serious, searching examination of what form best expresses their Adventist heritage. Now is not the time to become discouraged or leave the conversation. Now is the time to accept anew the responsibility for being, along with leadership, the church.

—The Board of the
Association of Adventist Forums