
Preacher-Politician In the Caribbean

by Dion E. Phillips and Glenn O. Phillips

During the early and mid-1960s, a number of British colonies in the Caribbean obtained their political independence. These Caribbean Commonwealth states included Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Guyana. Within a brief period, a small number of practicing Adventists emerged as politicians within most of these Caribbean governments. One such person is Victor Johnson of Barbados.

Victor Johnson is currently minister of transportation and works. He has also served as minister of labor in the ruling government's cabinet and for one two-year term was chairperson of his political party, a position usually held by the country's prime minister. In his career, he has defeated at the polls well-known opponents including Frank Walcott, head of the largest union organization in the country, the Barbados Workers Union; and Wes Hall, a very popular Caribbean sports hero. Concurrent with his profession as a politician, he serves as the first elder of the Gardens Seventh-day Adventist Church, and in November, 1982, Johnson led a six-week evangelistic campaign that resulted in 24 people joining the Seventh-day Adventist

Church. He continues to spearhead other religious activities as his political responsibilities expand.

Phillips: How and when did you become an Adventist?

Johnson: I first came in contact with the church in 1948 when I moved into the home of my aunt in the northern part of Barbados.

Phillips: We know you lived in the United States for a number of years and became very aware of the struggle of minorities and immigrants. As a West Indian, how would you characterize your experience and that of other immigrants?

Johnson: My American sojourn was primarily in the Brooklyn, New York, area. In the institutions of higher learning I attended, I was exposed to a number of radical sociologists who so influenced me that I began to identify with the issues and demands made on American society at that time. Living in the midst of the American black ghetto during the civil-rights period, I identified intensely with the goals and methods of Martin Luther King and the movement.

Since I was a student of sociology, the movement had a greater impact on my life than if I had been studying in some other field. I still believe in the basic rights of all men and in the fundamentals of liberty, but now, having grown more conservative, I use a different approach to produce the same results I sought in those days.

Phillips: What about the relationship between West Indians and black Americans?

Johnson: I kept close to the West Indian

Dion E. Phillips is a sociologist at the College of the Virgin Islands. Glenn O. Phillips is a historian at Morgan State University in Maryland. The brothers graduated from Caribbean Union College and received their doctorates from Howard University. They returned together to Barbados to conduct this interview.

community and had little contact with North Americans except at work. Based on my peripheral contact, I observed that West Indians and Black Americans are suspicious of each other. Here are two ethnic groups who, although both are black, are from different subcultures. North American blacks who were displaced by West Indians were most likely to feel threatened. On the other hand, West Indians coming to the United States suddenly felt the pressure of being black in a white society, an experience which they did not have in the same measure in the West Indies.

Phillips: Do you think the issue of race in our church is dealt with adequately?

Johnson: No, we need to take a more critical look at the role of race in the church. We must integrate our conferences a great deal more than we do now. The church appears to go out of its way to keep black and white Adventists segregated. I don't think that is necessary today.

Phillips: What influenced you to become involved in party politics?

Johnson: As a youngster, I was attracted to political discussions and made it a point of duty to attend political meetings wherever they were. I enjoyed the exchange of ideas. It was an excursion for me.

Phillips: There are two established political parties in Barbados. What prompted you to join the Barbados Labor Party?

Johnson: I joined the Labor Party because of my deep commitment to liberating the black community. I recognized that it was the Barbados Labor Party under Sir Grantley Adams that had made the greatest impact on social change in Barbados. I wanted to be identified with the party that had the greatest commitment to the liberation of the black masses.

Phillips: You have been described as a Bible-reading, Bible-carrying public figure. Is this the type of image that you intentionally carved out for yourself?

Johnson: All my colleagues in government, my constituents and the media across

the country are aware that I am a Seventh-day Adventist.

Phillips: Do you allow Adventist teachings to influence the kind of legislation you support or the way you vote in parliament?

Johnson: I do not base my political considerations purely on my religious beliefs, but my religious commitment greatly influences my perspective on political matters. I was the chairperson of my political party for two years. During those years, I was covered extensively by the mass media, particularly at party conventions. I would always emphasize the need for political leadership to rely on God. This is not a view that is exactly popular within the party because there are those who believe that God has nothing to do with politics.

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Phillips: In Adventist circles, there is a dichotomy concerning what ought to be the appropriate level of political participation for the layperson. How do you justify your involvement in politics?

Johnson: I bought the index of Ellen White's writings to make sure that I could read every statement that she had written with respect to politics. Also, I spoke with a number of Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders and authorities to find out what I consider to be the official church position: Seventh-day Adventists can participate in politics according to the church and still hold membership in good and regular standing. I am not saying that every single Adventist should jump into politics. However, I believe that those who rely on God have the resources that allow them to be successful politicians.

Phillips: There are other Adventists in the Caribbean who are active in politics.

Have you ever had any contact with them? Have you had discussions concerning the practice of your faith or things you might share in common?

Johnson: There are other Adventist politicians in the Caribbean, but I encounter them very rarely. I did meet Dr. Philip Carey, an Adventist who is the director of National Insurance in the Bahamas. Of course, technically he is a high-ranking civil servant and not a politician. One Adventist politician who comes to mind is Dr. Gallimore, minister of state in the Jamaican government. Interestingly enough, during my visit to New Zealand in 1979 on government business, I came across a good many Adventist politicians from New Guinea, Samoa, and places like that who were attending the conference.

I share the view that we should not participate in trade unionism. But as the minister responsible for labor I had a duty to ensure that people who elect to be trade unionists got from their membership what the law provides.

Phillips: You have served in the cabinet as minister of various agencies: labor, social security, and sports. Was there any role conflict between your responsibilities and the Adventist position on trade unions?

Johnson: Naturally, since I am a Seventh-day Adventist, I share the view that we are not to and should not participate in trade unionism. But it so happened that I was a public servant, called upon to shoulder a public function as the minister responsible for labor in my country. While it was true that I was not a union member, I had a duty and responsibility, under the laws of Barbados, and by virtue of the confidence that the people reposed in me, to ensure that an environment existed whereby people who elect to be trade unionists, got from their membership what the law provides. But you are correct, there are occasions of conflict. I had conflict with an abortion bill that came

before the House of Assembly. It was not within my portfolio, but as minister of labor and member of the cabinet, I was surrounded by colleagues who were involved, and I indicated to them that I had difficulty with the bill.

Phillips: What do you do when your roles as Adventist and politician conflict, for instance, when your presence is needed in parliament on Friday nights?

Johnson: It is never necessary. My political associates on the cabinet, including the prime minister, are aware of my religious practices regarding the keeping of the Sabbath. When meetings of the parliament on Friday are likely to extend beyond sunset, the day's agenda is often carefully analyzed because my colleagues know that I will be leaving early. If I lose sense of the time on Friday afternoon, members of the House point to the clock or otherwise motion to me, indicating that it is time for me to depart.

With regard to my attendance at political meetings on Friday nights, my party has frequently held them. But, in the six years that I have been involved in political campaigns, I have never spoken on a political platform on a Friday night. Let me give you an example. Traditionally, the minister of labor attends the annual May Day celebrations in Barbados. May Day has, within the time that I have been a minister of labor, fallen on Sabbath. I have always indicated to union officials that as much as I would like to attend the celebrations in my capacity as minister, I am unable to do so because of religious circumstances. In lieu of my physical presence, I have one of the senior-level officials deliver the ministry's message to the workers.

Phillips: We live in a world that is rife with problems. Some argue that many of these problems are, at their roots, structural ones. Against this background, what ought to be the posture of the Adventist Church with respect to social change?

Johnson: I am skeptical of any church that sets out, as its main objective, the desire

to change society. The church has a spiritual role to perform. The gospel itself is a message for social change, but not in the political arena.

Phillips: Do you therefore take a dim view of the liberation theology that is having a field day in Latin America and even trickling into the Caribbean?

Johnson: I am very uncomfortable with liberation theology. This posture is not a function of the church. The function of the church is to preach the gospel, not involve itself in the issues of the day, from national insurance to old-age pension. I really don't want to see the church on the picket line. It is not a safe place for the church.

Phillips: In the aftermath of the socialist revolution in Grenada and the alleged "communist adventurism" of Cuba, the governments of the region have placed priority on national security or military defense. How do you reconcile your position as an Adventist noncombatant with being part of a government that will instruct to kill in the interest of protecting its own sovereignty?

Johnson: You are right; I am a noncombatant. I served in the United States Army for two years in the medical corps. I believe that every country has a public duty and a civic responsibility to provide protection for its citizens. That is unfortunate. In the ideal community, we wouldn't need defense, but we have to have it in the communities in which we do live. I don't see any problem with it. I don't have to fight, but I do have to help provide laws and regulations for the community that will govern that body the way it should be governed within the context of civil law.

Phillips: You shared your views on abor-

tion. What are your views on the status of women, particularly in the church? What is your conception of the role of women at the leadership level?

Johnson: I believe that society's perception of women and their role is changing daily. Barbadian Adventists are no exception. In 1983, the Gardens Seventh-day Adventist Church elected a woman to serve as an elder. The only problem that we face is that the official church in Barbados does not feel that women should be ordained into the "lay ministry." I haven't really made up my own mind about this issue, but I believe that women have a leadership role to perform in the church.

Phillips: The apostle Paul spoke against the ordination of women.

Johnson: Paul's statement was even more far-reaching than that. Paul said that women should keep silent in church. Women are no longer keeping silent in the church so I think that the church, in due course, will have to review its policy position on the status of women.

Phillips: If there was one thing that you would like to see the Adventist Church do to help spread the gospel, what would that be?

Johnson: The Adventist Church maintains a lower profile than it should. It does not allow itself to tell the world what a magnificent view of education it embraces. The preaching ministry is not going to effect all that is necessary to finish the work. The impact of the medical ministry within the Caribbean region and the Inter-American Division is not felt the way it should be. We need to do a better job of mobilizing the resources of the thinking people in the church.