

Our Once and Future Church

by Alvin L. Kwiram

The most dramatic peacetime political transformations of this century are taking place right before our eyes. In the Soviet Union, Secretary Gorbachev is trying valiantly to effect a midcourse correction on the Soviet ship of state. And although he has wrenched the wheel with all his might, the inertia of that political behemoth is enormous. Down in the hold, however, things are starting to bang around rather erratically. Thus we see significant shifts in the ballast, with Hungary dismantling the iron curtain and Poland rejecting the communist party as its ruling body. Azerbaijan seems to be sliding around out of control, and the Baltic states are straining at their moorings.

From Artistic Movements to Closed Societies

What is the force driving these stunning developments? In the early days of the socialist/Marxist movement, the people were inspired by the new vision (and in many ways a legitimate one); they were on the offensive—aggressive and free-wheeling. The movement derived its power from the convictions and the dedicated efforts of a large proportion of its members. They were believers in a cause; they had a sense of prophetic destiny. They fully believed that their system would be gloriously

triumphant. What happened to the great expectations of that movement? What happened to the artistic phase of the movement, that phase of vitality and incipient chaos that is characteristic of all prophetic movements?

In all movements throughout history the pattern is the same. In the early, artistic stage, new ideas that bubble up in the morning are being tried out in the afternoon, and a broad cross section of the citizens are excited and engaged in the process. But eventually the emphasis on order begins to take precedence. The vision dims, and the system begins its decline. In this stage, new ideas are not welcome and new experiments are frowned upon. Inexorably, there is a loss of purpose, and the system increasingly turns inward and assumes a defensive posture. Eventually the prophetic movement becomes a closed society.

The establishment of a closed society is not inevitable, but the enticement to create it is almost irresistible. The leadership of the Soviet Union, for over half a century, has successfully maintained a closed society, and has steadfastly controlled the flow of information. But the Soviets are poised precariously on the horns of a dilemma. Not only is it becoming increasingly difficult for them to control the many sources of information, given the dramatic advances in technology, but more importantly, they can no longer compete economically without being hooked into the global information network.

If the Soviet leaders increase the free exchange of information, they risk an eventual loss of control. But, if they continue to limit the information flow, the nation will fall farther and farther behind in the economic race. Their choice is both difficult and clear: either they pay now or they pay later.

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The situation I have just described has important parallels and lessons for the church. The similarity is that for nearly half a century both we, as Adventists, and the Soviets have been waging a defensive battle. We, like the Soviets, have many of the attributes of a closed society.

In the early days of the Adventist church, the members were intensely engaged in some of the great issues of the day: the abolition of slavery, the role of labor unions, the separation of church and state, the focus on health, and the commitment to missions. Over the years there has been a steady erosion of that intensity. Today we focus inward, and, at least in North America, we seem unable to inspire our young people with a sense of destiny. Like the Soviets, we have restricted the information flow and functioned defensively. We exhibit many of the characteristics of a closed society. Inevitably, such an inflexible organism will become frozen in time, like some great intellectual woolly mammoth.

Let me restate my central point. The role of the artist, the prophet, and the prophetic movement is to seek for understanding. But in all organizations, governments, and denominations, there are forces that seek to block the quest for change, for growth, and for renewal that is the essence of the human experience.

An example is the Adventist version of Lysenkoism. Lysenko was a Russian agronomist (plant “geneticist”) who did not believe in genes or plant hormones, and insisted that environmental factors be genetically transmitted. His views dominated Soviet research and scholarship in the field of biology, and essentially ensured that Soviet scientists were totally left out of discoveries in molecular biology, the greatest scientific revolution of the second half of the 20th century. Now, the Soviets are scrambling to catch up.

In the case of Adventism, the problem is not so much biological as geological. At a time when nine out of 10 Adventist scientists reject the 6,000-year model for the age of the earth, the church still seems to take its cues from the few remaining adherents of that anachronistic view.

Like the Soviets, we tried for years to control the flow of information to our members. Too often we merely served as defenders of dying

dogmas rather than active creators of an ever renewing and vibrant vision. We have become tiresome apologists rather than disquieting prophets. And sadly, for many of our young people, the church is no longer a credible guide to understanding. Today, the “cognitive dissonance” has become overpowering.

My comments should not be interpreted as a criticism of church leaders. Leaders assume the responsibilities we concede to them. Also, leaders in the church, like leaders in all organizations, have to make difficult decisions every day without adequate information. They often recognize that despite long agonizing they do not always make the best decisions. No, when I criticize the church I am speaking about you and me. And most importantly, I wish my criticism to be part of a constructive renewal of the church. How, then, can we recapture the confidence and vitality of Adventism’s earlier years?

I suggest that we consider two ways that parallel the two routes Gorbachev is pursuing in the Soviet Union: greater openness, including involvement with the world community (*glasnost*), and renewal of structure (*perestroika*).

Adventist Glasnost: Involvement in Society

First, how may Adventist *glasnost* be pursued? We can begin by asking what Adventism has to offer modern men and women. It is surely not the particulars of our 19th century world view. It is not turn-of-the-century applications of *The Great Controversy*. Instead, we need to rearticulate a vision that has relevance to society today. We have to build on the past, not live in it. Rather than parroting our comfortable rhetoric, we might do well to ask what the real thrust of the story in *The Great Controversy* is.

One of the more profound thinkers I know, a former colleague of mine who no longer participates in the Adventist community, once pointed out to me how ironic it was that Adventists tend to focus on the details of what Ellen White talked about in *The Great Controversy*, but tend to miss

the essential thrust of her message. She was trying to say that there are tremendous forces in society, corrupt powers that demean the human spirit. She used language that may be arcane, with specific examples chosen from her own time. But we must be smart enough to go beyond the particulars of her language and examples.

If you go back and read Newton's or Kepler's papers, you will find ideas and arguments in them that are wrong and some that look naive from our

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lofty vantage point. Does that mean they were not great scientists? Of course not. We have to see their contributions in the context of the ongoing development of scientific understanding. We have to go back and sort out the lasting contributions and the new insights from the mundane or erroneous. We need to select the parts that contribute to our understanding and put aside those things that were part of the unformed context of the times. Likewise, in our own spiritual community, we have to ask "What was the problem that the prophetic voice was trying to attack? How do we understand that issue in our time? How can we make the everlasting gospel meaningful to society? How can we help to transform a suffering world?"

I would like to suggest that the church establish a National Center for the Study and Transmission of Values. We could bring together pastors, educators, psychologists, sociologists, theologians, philosophers, and social workers from the Adventist church as well as committed and informed individuals from other churches and organizations to propose a framework for Christian living in modern society.

Imagine the impact that such a center could have. It would be both theoretical and practical.

It would bring together scholars to provide the historical, theological, and philosophical context and rationale. It would bring together psychologists, sociologists, social workers, and pastors to devise programs for implementing Christian values in creative and systematic ways. Both phases could draw on the resources of foundations and government agencies to help fund both research and experimental programs.

The center could also establish a youth corps to provide a nondenominational vehicle for the kind of national service under discussion in Congress. It could serve as a resource for the media. The center would initiate experimental programs and publish major studies as well as practical guides. Local churches could serve as test centers for the ideas and could themselves devise programs and services for their communities. In short, the churches could serve as laboratories, not museums.

I, and many others, would be pleased to support such a center operated by the Adventist church. Such a center could serve to put Adventists in touch with fellow Christians in other denominations. It might even serve as an animating theme for our discussions in Sabbath school and provide a new and more legitimate basis for instruction in the children's and youth departments. Such an enterprise could help to reinvigorate the entire church and provide a new sense of mission and participation.

Adventist Perestroika: Encouragement of Pluralism

Let us turn to the second parallel to what is currently being attempted in the Soviet Union. How might we achieve an Adventist *perestroika*? In the Soviet Union as in Adventism, one factor is pluralism—pluralism of cultures, ideas, and governance.

Cultural pluralism must lead us to recognize that the mental framework of the early 20th century is no longer applicable. In the next century, persons of color will constitute roughly three-quarters of the world's population. Even in this

country, it is estimated that within a generation or two, half of the population will be persons of color. It is estimated that within the next 10 years, 85 percent of those coming into the U.S. labor force will be women and “minorities.” Steps need to be taken now to adjust church policies to these changing times. Women need to be welcomed into the pastorate, not just in the name of justice, but for the benefits a more pluralistic ministry would bring to the church.

Pluralism of ideas is equally important. One of the great strengths of the Catholic church has been its capacity to embrace a wide range of practices and ideologies. Time after time, as concerned individuals called for new ideas and reforms, the church made room for new orders—Dominicans, Franciscans, Cistercians, Jesuits, Nestorians, Beguines, and Trappists, with all their diverse outlooks. All became part of the church, their pluralism strengthening Catholicism.

Adventism needs more, not less, pluralism and ferment. We need more vigorous and informed contributions from conservatives. Conservatives are our “institutional engineers”; they tend to provide a context for continuity and stability. But we also need the liberal, “artistic” elements to bring to Adventism an even greater sensitivity to human needs, to issues of justice and mercy. We need an inclusive church that relishes a pluralism of viewpoints.

Pluralism in governance is perhaps where *perestroika* is most obviously overdue in Adventism. As in the Soviet Union, we have had, in practice, a hierarchical structure. However, this model of authority is inadequate. It tends to stifle initiative and kills the creative spirit. Such a system provides precious little incentive, no effective means of motivation. The result for the Soviet Union is, economically, a state of near paralysis.

Any hierarchical structure, in its conventional operation, places too great a burden on the shoulders of its leaders. If the leaders fail to have the necessary vision, the movement sputters. If their emphasis is misguided, momentum is lost, and progress can be set back for decades. In short, such a system is not capable of self-renewal, it is not dynamic, and it cannot be competitive if it relies only on the vision and ideas of leadership.

What is the connection with the church? Just as citizens are being activated to participate in the public life of the Soviet Union, the church must once again engage the minds, the hearts, and the imaginations of all its members. Some argue that a congregational model (the “secession” model) would accomplish that.

I personally do not favor a strict congregational model, and believe that a centralized structure is necessary if we are going to be able to mount

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global programs and have sufficient critical mass to engage the larger society. But we must develop a new partnership between the leadership and the membership. As modern management experience has shown, only those organizations that empower their members at all levels of the organization, and give them a sense of ownership and involvement, can achieve long-term success. True teamwork is essential. Thus, though they would continue as dedicated participants in the larger organization, local conferences, local pastors, and local congregations must have much more flexibility to experiment, and must assume greater responsibility for the future of the church.

In short, Adventist *perestroika* must encourage pluralism in a variety of forms: diversity of culture, diversity of ideas, and greater diversity of leadership.

As an old-timer of the Association of Adventist Forums, perhaps I may be permitted to encourage the Association to demonstrate what I am urging on the whole church. The Association should re-examine how it might implement greater *glasnost* and *perestroika* within itself.

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