

# Adventist Women Adopt Common Action Plan

*The recent Women's Summit reveals a new, refreshing boldness and confidence*

by Iris Yob



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On the weekend of September 21-23, three dozen women from the United States and abroad met for a Women's Summit in Pennsylvania. They came as representatives of the various Adventist women's organizations—the Association of Adventist Women, the Adventist Women's Institute, and TEAM (Time for Equality in Adventist Ministry). Some came simply as interested individuals. They were responding to decisions made recently by the General Conference in session, and were determined to renew their church with a vision of inclusiveness.

Women spoke more explicitly than ever of their radicalized conviction that the Christian message gave them the grounds for their equal acceptance and place in the family of God. They laid personal claim to a biblically-based prerogative to full participation in the role and function of the church.

The women also spoke with a new boldness. They were not viewing themselves as occasional recipients of favors begged from powerful church leaders but as privileged associates in the work of God. Empowered by a sense of self-worth through the grace of God, they were not about to formulate requests and recommendations. They were instead ready to pronounce their expectations and forthrightly declare their purposes and intentions.

This change is significant for the future of the church.

This summit brought together for the first time a coalition of women and women's groups, representing different publics and different agendas. The coalition formed a steering committee to look into the setting up of a women's caucus with a specific focus on affirmative action in the church. Members of the steering committee have begun laying plans and working on strategies.

Another accomplishment of the summit was the writing and signing of a declaration—a statement of what must be in place by the next General Conference session in 1995 if the church of the 21st century is to have true gender equality. The declaration, included below, is an articulation of the next steps to be taken toward the day when women will serve in all capacities of the church at all levels, as God gives them the gifts and the opportunity to do so.

## TOWARD 2000

### A Declaration

By International Adventist Women in a Joint Meeting of Representatives from Major Women's Organizations and Individuals

Addison, Pennsylvania  
September 21-23, 1990

Whereas the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has adopted a plan known as Global Mission, and

Whereas the North American Division has voted to accept that plan and implement its objectives throughout the division, and

Whereas that plan states:

" . . . Based on our understanding that every believer is commissioned to minister in his or her spiritual gifts, we therefore call for every church member to participate creatively in a global strategy to take the everlasting gospel to every people group and each individual on planet earth. . . ." and Whereas the North American Division strategy calls for ". . . Creating vital and dynamic worship, fellowship, . . . in Bible-based, Christ-centered congregations . . ." and ". . . RECLAIMING inactive and former church members . . ." and

Whereas action 323-89N, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SERVICE, was voted at the 1989 NAD year-end meeting and has been adopted as policy D 75, which reads:

"The official position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is that all members in good and regular standing shall be given full and equal opportunity within the Church to develop the knowledge and skills needed in the building up of the church. This position and its resultant course of action requires that all services and all levels of Church activity be opened to all members on the basis of their qualifications. The North American Division will seek applications from qualified women, minorities, and the handicapped, and will afford all individuals equal opportunity in employment, appointment, promotion, salary, and other organizational benefits without consideration for race, color, gender, national origin, ancestry, physical handicap, age, height, weight, marital status or prior military service."

And Whereas among the statements of Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, statement thirteen says:

" . . . In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. . . ." this assembly of international Adventist women calls for the following actions to be accomplished throughout the world church between now and 1995 so that women may be full participants in Global Mission and in the governance of the church at all levels.

1. To more closely reflect the 2:1 church membership ratio of women to men, elect or appoint at least 30 percent female representation to all levels of decision-making bodies, including administration, boards, committees, and delegates to Annual Council, year-end meetings, and constituency sessions. This calls for a change in the present methods of formulating these groups so that they will more accurately represent church constituencies with reference to women and minorities.

2. Implement NAD policy D 75 throughout the North American Division; adopt the same policy in the General Conference and each world division; and develop a monitoring or auditing instrument to measure the progress of implementing this policy worldwide.

3. Appoint a full-time Director of Women's Ministries at all levels, including local conferences. Her duties will include identifying, assessing, and developing strategies to meet women's needs; generating and disseminating

accurate information concerning the role of women in the church; sponsoring retreats for the purpose of spiritual nourishment; and educating women regarding church governance and policies. At the General Conference, the director should be a General Field Secretary. At all levels, this position should be fully funded with an appropriate budget to cover travel, the cost of research, publications, translations, materials, and meetings.

4. Encourage and recognize the formation of a women's caucus. This would include at least annual international meetings and more frequent meetings at the division and union levels.

5. Prepare and/or promote and distribute worldwide, publications on women's issues in key languages.

6. Educate ministers and church leaders through a series of seminars and articles in official church publications (e.g. *Ministry*) regarding the true nature of the inclusiveness of the Gospel.

7. Develop and implement a standard of equity that governs and implements church policy making. Among other things, this calls for an auditing, too, for worldwide use that will indicate how conferences, unions, or divisions are meeting the objective of equal pay for equal work.

8. Recognize and ordain women in the role of deacon and elder at the local church level, with the goal of at least one woman elder in each church.

9. At the General Conference level, by 1995,

a. elect at least one woman vice-president;

b. establish an Office of Human Relations; and

c. permit divisions, where culturally acceptable, to authorize ordination of qualified women and confer on those women all rights and responsibilities pertaining to ministry.

## SDA Women Threaten Tithing Practice

by Michael Hirsley

Unlike many American religions that trace their histories to other parts of the globe, Seventh-day Adventism is a worldwide religious movement of more than 6 million members whose roots are in America.

They are humble roots. The first words of the movement are attributed to Biblical scholar William Miller, who died in 1849. And the church grew from a dubious non-event on Oct. 22, 1844, which became known to Miller's followers as "the great disappointment."

Citing scriptural prophecy, Miller had predicted the world would end on that day.

Having survived, indeed thrived since the great disappointment, Seventh-day Adventists have now bumped into a modern-day disappointment.

A group of Adventist women in America, angry and frustrated at leadership votes this year to maintain the church's policy against ordaining women as pastors, have called for an economic boycott of sorts.

They want members who agree that non-ordination constitutes discrimination against women to stop tithing to the church until the policy is changed.

The Adventist Women's Institute, after agreeing in principal at a recent board meeting, intends to create a special escrow fund next month as an alternative coffer for tithing, which is specifically called for in the denomination.

This is a sort of quiet, deliberative protest," said Fay Blix, attorney and treasurer of the escrow fund. "But there is a lot of anger among a lot of us.

"We know many members feel tithing is their duty as Seventh-day Adventists, but also don't feel right to give to a church that discriminates

against women," said Blix. She had been a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist, and a member on the executive committee of the Southeastern California Conference, but quit the church this year over the ordination issue.

Reactions in the denomination's hierarchy to the Women's Institute action have been mixed

"They constitute a small group, and they ignore the fact that women are not left out of responsible leadership positions" said Shirley Burton, director of communications for the worldwide church.

Philip Robertson, treasurer of the Southeastern California Conference, whose 50,000 members constitute the church's largest American district, said he could understand the "significant level of frustration" that prompted the group's action.

"When members feel a need to act in such a manner, it seems to call on each of us as leaders to re-evaluate the sensitivity with which we earn the confidence of our members," he said.

After the worldwide convention of delegates from 184 nations voted last July not to ordain women, and before the Women's Institute enacted its tithing boycott, a California district conference wavered on the issue.

In a straw vote, members favored ordaining women, but in a formal vote, they said they could not stand against the church's position.

"I suppose the people at the Adventist Women's Institute meeting felt, 'If Southeastern California wouldn't do it, who will?'" said Roy Branson, editor of *Spectrum*, an Adventist journal.

A sixth generation Adventist whose grandfather was president of the worldwide church, Branson said:

"I see this as an act of desperation on the part of individuals who are very dedicated to Adventism, but very

dedicated to equality, and feel there is no movement on that question.

"It could be quite an important move, depending on how many people follow."

Blix said some donations have already been received, from women and men, earmarked for the fund that she hopes to have officially in place by Dec. 1.

Robertson said any impact from a significant withholding of tithes "will probably be felt most keenly by local churches and conferences," which might have to reduce personnel and programs.

Iris Yob, president of the Adventist Women's Institute, said the escrow account "will be advertised, but we don't intend this as a threat or a bribe."

She said conditions for releasing the fund to the church would be its ordaining a woman. In the meantime, interest from the account "will be used in harmony with the principle of tithing, for ministry to women."

Burton said that women can hold licensed minister positions, but cannot be ordained as "elders," a position that enables them to pastor anywhere in the world. With a U.S. membership of 700,000, most of the 6.2 million Seventh-day Adventists live in other parts of the world.

Two main arguments are made against ordination of women, Burton said: "There is no biblical support for ordaining women, and most parts of the world are not ready for women ministers."

Proponents of women's ordination argue that discriminating against women conforms neither to Scripture nor to justice. "As the church has failed to grow with the times, younger members are becoming less and less vested," Blix said.

While the effect of the tithing action remains to be seen, she said, "This happens to be one of the vehicles that the church listens to. It involves money and image."

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## Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism as a Feature Film Classic

Reviewed by Jonathan Butler

*Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream.* Malcom Bull and Keith Lockhart. Harper & Row, San Francisco. 1990.

If the writing of Adventist history were compared to film making, Arthur L. White's six-volume biography of Ellen G. White might be likened to home movies that splice together numerous scenes from the prophet's life without an interpretive framework. Historians like Richard Schwarz (*John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.*; and *Light Bearers to the Remnant*), Gary Land (*Adventism in America*), or Ron Graybill (*E. G. White and Church Race Relations*) have produced documentary films, so to speak, that organize themselves into insightful narratives.

In Adventist historiography, however, we have seen little of what could be termed the feature film. That is, the expensive, imaginative history, the big book which, like the big film, views the Adventist past through the eye of a single and powerfully integrating thesis. As book-length studies of Adventism, *Prophetess of Health* by Ronald Numbers, and *Seeking a Sanctuary* by Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, are perhaps the only examples of the feature film.

As "filmmakers," Bull and Lockhart have codirected less the epic spectacle than the intimate, personal movie; less Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Command-

ments" than Woody Allen's "Crimes and Misdemeanors." As writers they prefer refined and nimble conversation to grandiloquent oratory. But this is not to say that their book lacks size or gravity. Quite the contrary. In alternating between Adventism's past and its present as both historians and sociologists of religion, they have combined an astonishing command of their resources with a penetrating, interpretive vision.

Their book is not a creation out of nothing. In fact, it is fitting to note here that two decades of *Spectrum* appear to have provided for the authors an invaluable window into Adventism. But in the inventive use they make of this new scholarship, along with an abundance of other materials, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Undoubtedly, critics will poke a few holes in their whole. Their range as authors is, after all, both a strength and a weakness. In order to create this panorama, they cannot possibly handle each scene with the rigor and precision of the narrower specialist. But make no mistake about it. For both its breadth and depth, this is the best study of Seventh-day Adventism that has ever been written.

Essential to its success is the fact that it balances, on the one hand, an exhaustive understanding of the internal subworld of Adventism with, on the other hand, an astute sense of Adventism's place in the larger world.

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For Bull and Lockhart examine the Adventist experience as it relates to the American nation. Though one of America's few indigenous religious movements, Adventists set about to create a sanctuary from America. As a result, they established one of the more "successful of all alternatives to the American way of life" (p. ix).

In Part 1 of the book, then, the authors chronicle the development of Adventist theology, but not as insular, doctrinal history. Rather, they trace the ideological boundaries between Adventism and the world. They find that the basic difference between the movement and the mainstream is Adventism's rejection of American society as the means of universal redemption. As a remnant of American society and values, Adventism usurped the role of savior from the nation. In its Saturday Sabbath (a holy day so near and yet so far from America's Sunday Sabbath), Adventism formed its own version of American civil religion.

Part 2 of the study, which focuses on Adventism and American society, suggests that in both its ideas and its institutions the church has "recreated America within America" (p. 171) while at the same time keeping its distance from the nation. "Adventists do not so much participate as imitate," the authors write. "They have not

been incorporated into American society; they function as a separate organism within the larger body" (p. 167). As an example, Adventist missionary expansion corresponds to American influence in the world, or Adventist self-control in regard to sex is an idiosyncratic expression of America's belief in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In Part 3, the authors turn from Adventism as a group to the subgroups within Adventism (women, blacks, ministers, doctors, educators, self-supporting Adventists) in order not only to document the remarkable diversity within the church but also to further elaborate on the symbiotic relationship between Adventism and American society. Here they reflect on the irony of a church of "feminine" values and a woman prophet with, nevertheless, a patriarchal structure. Or ministers who base their authority on distinctive Adventist theology, while the doctors appeal to secular science. Or parochial education which, designed to insulate Adventists from the world, instead narrows the gap between the church and society.

With their book, Bull and Lockhart, who describe themselves as a non-Adventist and an Adventist, should improve the public understanding of a quiet and misunderstood American minority, as well as enhance the group's own self-understanding. Adventists have been perceived by the public as apocalyptic fanatics at the lowest, entry level of the movement, or philanthropic physicians at the highest, and often exit level of the church—either as William Miller or as John Harvey Kellogg. Hidden from the public view is the internal experience of Adventism personified by Ellen White, about whom the authors write as insightful revisionists. Their metaphor of Adventism as a "revolving door" (Chapter 20), occupied by aspirers, sustainers, and transformers (with little contact between these groups), should stimulate many a Sabbath discussion.

Indeed, for many years to come, even the more disputable aspects of this provocative book would set the agenda for discussion on the nature of Adventism, both inside and outside the church. Without question, LeRoy Froom and F. D. Nichol have been displaced. Building on the generation of Adventist scholarship since them, *Seeking a Sanctuary* probes Adventism in profoundly new and important ways.

The book is wrong, I think, in casting Adventism as a hierarchy over against American democracy; Adventism democratizes its own—spiritually, intellectually, economically, and socially. While the book is obviously right about the slighting of visual arts in Adventism, I think its explanation for this approaches the fanciful. In general, I feel less certain than Bull and Lockhart that Adventism is an alternative to the American way of life, in those instances where it seems so fully a part of it as to be an intensification of Americanism. But I also wonder to what degree they (and others of us) have distorted the story, and will one day be discarded, because of an American rather than a more global perspective.

But no matter how often I disagree with them, I always take them seriously. To what extent, however, will Adventists in general read and reflect on this book? Until now, the church has not flocked to a book as "feature film." With more than 5 million members, world Seventh-day Adventism is approaching the size of Los Angeles and Chicago combined. But I imagine the number of Adventists who will read Bull and Lockhart could fit comfortably in an early service at the Sligo church (while Adventists who watch TV's "Roseanne" could populate, say, Lincoln, Nebraska). I hope I am wrong about this, because this book, for both its substance and its artful and engaging style, deserves not just critical but popular acclaim. I give it two thumbs up.

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*Make no mistake about it. For both its breadth and depth, this is the best study of Seventh-day Adventism that has ever been written.*

## Seeking a Sanctuary: The Insiders' Insights for the Outsiders' Interest

Reviewed by R. Laurence Moore

**S**ee*king a Sanctuary*, Malcolm Bull's and Keith Lockhart's ingenious and valuable look at the Seventh-day Adventist community over the full term of its existence, begins with a puzzle. Most Americans know next to nothing about Adventists, often confusing them with Jehovah's Witnesses. However, scanty and erroneous information does not keep them from holding a negative image of Adventism relative to other Christian groups. Adventists rank a shade below Mormons. Now this is odd. Adventists have a sufficiently long history to make detached judgments possible. At no time in their past have they engaged in socially disruptive behavior, at least not since Millerism's Great Disappointment, which contemporary Americans in most cases have never heard of. Adventists have never sought a plurality of spouses, have not engaged in war-

fare with their neighbors, have not kidnapped or brainwashed anyone, and have not sacrificed animals in devil worship. They practice their Sabbath on Saturday, but so have some Baptists and all Jews. Their most distinctive contributions to American culture could not be construed as anything but "mainstream"—breakfast cereal, a stringently pure diet, an abundance of sensible medical care, and a back-to-basics school system.

In truth, Bull and Lockhart sometimes seem puzzled themselves about just what issue has lost the popularity contest for Adventists. They don't locate the reason in theology. Even when the theology of Adventists was most peculiar relative to older Christian groups, during the 19th century, "its obsession with eschatology, its doubts about the Trinity, its emphasis on human perfectibility" were scarcely unusual. What finally mattered, according to Bull and Lockhart, was not doctrine but a "unique and isolated history" that Adventists choose to pursue, first in Battle Creek and then at other geographically specific centers around the nation. In view of the geographic concentrations of Adventists, it is somewhat surprising that Bull and Lockhart distinguish Adventism by its time orientation rather than by space orientation, which they claim is characteristic of Mormonism. But in either case, according to Bull and Lockhart, it is not the mere content of space and time conceptions (the doctrine) that has mattered, but the way in which Adventists have used the ordinary cultural material of America to create a society within a society. Adventist so-

ciety is "alternative" not because the values it pursues are "un-American" but because it uses these values to damn the nation in advertising its version of eschatology.

One implication of Bull's and Lockhart's analysis is that American Adventists are immune from the patriotic jingoism of American politicians, a fact that may be borne out by close inspection but that has not been particularly obvious in the era of the Cold War. Ellen White, it has seemed to me, would have been perfectly at home with Ronald Reagan so long as they restricted their conversation to Armageddon and the American values of hard work and perseverance. However, Bull and Lockhart are surely right in saying that Adventists have not sought redemption through American politics. Moreover, Adventists have designed an inward-looking set of institutions that can carry believers from the cradle to the grave with surprisingly little reliance on help from the non-Adventist world. These alternative institutions have, in fact, created points of stress between Adventists and other Americans when, for example, Adventists have wanted to control their own schools and hospitals without state certification and when they have wished to apply their own standards about what constitutes a fair wage for men and women. Even so, the negative ranking of Adventism may stem less from the assertiveness of their separatist imperative than from the inability to hold firm on these matters. Americans seem to admire the more stubborn Amish because of their successful tenacity in drawing boundaries against the world.

**A**s it happens, American Adventists have not maintained a firmly closed door either in their theology or in their social posture. Bull and Lockhart, in their skillful chapter on the "revolving door" features of Adventist membership, demonstrate that Adventist

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exclusivism leads too quickly, not to conflict with the larger American society, but with Adventism's own institutions and cultural creations. Converts to the Adventist Church tend to come from unprivileged social backgrounds. The strict morality of the church and the opportunities offered by the church bureaucracy propel them socially upward and endow them with business and managerial skills. Their children, even those educated totally in Adventist schools, can follow a well-marked path into the professional role of doctor, dentist, or educator. Yet in seeking to excel in these roles, Adventist professionals are necessarily exposed to standards of excellence that are not generated primarily within the Adventist community. Bull and Lockhart describe the conflicts between Adventist clergy and Adventist doctors very effectively. The outcome of conflict is not necessarily expulsion or apostasy. However, the career path of John Harvey Kellogg, who pursued roles valued by Adventists, remains a possibility that causes more problems for Adventists than, say, for the equally successful and equally sectarian Mormons. In devising means to make

Adventists distinctive, the church constructed a revolving door that tried to permit believers to move from inside to outside and back to inside. Unfortunately, it allowed them to make a calamitous pause in what often seemed the fresh air of "outside."

The model, offered by Bull and Lockhart, suggesting the inevitability of lost membership, is a long way from proved. The "revolving door" thesis is argued more as a matter of inference from questionable survey material than as a matter of solid evidence.

What most strikes this neutral observer of the Adventist Church is its enormous success. The church doesn't hold on to all its converts or all those who are born into it. No church ever did. But Seventh-day Adventism has from the beginning found formulas of success that have given it the energy to retain and expand its core group. In fact, what is most sorely missed in the Bull and Lockhart book is an adequate account of the growth of the church abroad. That was not their purpose, but a full understanding of the dynamics of Adventism, especially in the contemporary world that occupies probably more than half of Bull's and

Lockhart's attention, must push beyond its American roots.

I would venture two other criticisms. Readers of *Seeking a Sanctuary* must bring a considerable amount of information to the text. Bull and Lockhart move swiftly into their analyses, and they expect readers to know, for example, what happened at Glacier View. The other criticism is that for all its encyclopedic coverage and sociological perspective, the book conveys no portrait of average Adventist believers. It is based primarily on printed works by the leading figures in the Adventist Church. Even Part 3 of the book, which deals with Adventist subgroups, readers are provided with little information that they can, with statistical confidence, call "typical." I am not inclined to blame Bull and Lockhart for this failing. Religious communities provide notoriously poor information about themselves. Adventists in this respect are not different. Bull and Lockhart have worked in terrain that is not friendly to scholars, and they have accomplished something that I admire very much.