



# Inside the Committee on the Christian View of Human Life

Margaret McFarland reports on a GC committee organized to discuss bioethical issues facing the church.

by Margaret McFarland

**P**ARTICIPATING FOR TWO YEARS AS A LAY MEMBER of the General Conference Committee on the Christian View of Human Life has made me more hopeful about the Seventh-day Adventist Church than I have been for 20 years. It has been deeply satisfying to be a part of a committee with a representative membership (14 of the 30 committee members are women), whose members vigorously express widely divergent opinions, listen carefully to one another, and then find common ground within Adventism regarding fundamental issues confronting contemporary society. I am proud to be taking my spiritual pilgrimage at the end of the 20th century in a church that can produce a group this thoughtful, tolerant, and productive.

The Committee on the Christian View of Human Life had initially set out three topics for

study: termination of pregnancy, *in vitro* fertilization, and euthanasia/termination of life. The first topic the committee took up was the most difficult: abortion or pregnancy termination. Indeed, the first four sessions, through 1989-1990, focused on that issue.

The most recent session, in spring 1991 [at which Jack Provonsha and David Larson presented the papers appearing in this issue of *Spectrum*], took up the human and spiritual issues presented by the high technology of *in vitro* fertilization.

From the beginning, the committee members insisted that the recommendations of the committee not be turned into doctrinal statements of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Rather, statements should be used as pastoral guidance. Indeed, at its first meeting in 1989, the committee set for itself the goals of developing a consensus statement on abortion, some guidelines for Adventist hospitals, and some counsel for individual members facing a decision to abort or continue a pregnancy. In addition, the committee hoped, at some time, to also develop guidelines for teachers in acad-

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emies and colleges, and for pastors of churches.

So far, the committee has drafted a set of biblical principles for reference during our deliberations on all the human-life issues, a set of guidelines for hospitals addressing the difficult abortion issues, and a draft statement concerning Adventist teaching on abortion.

I purposely use the word *teaching*, to distinguish it from a doctrine and any test of fellowship. A teaching is what the church has on military service. Since the Bible gives us guidance, but no “thus saith the Lord,” on war, the church has a teaching on military service. The Adventist consensus view on military service favors a noncombatant position. However, serving in the military and bearing arms, or refusing to join the military voluntarily or involuntarily, also are actions accepted by the church without impugning the good and regular standing of its members.

The same is true with the draft consensus statement of the committee on abortion. There are no “thus saith the Lord’s.” When agonizing over the moral choices about abortion, euthanasia, or *in vitro* fertilization, some committee members would increase reliance on the doctrine of Creation and its corollary, individual choice and responsibility. Other committee members believe Scripture points to only one choice: preservation of life, in whatever form, at whatever cost. But both groups—and the great number of those in between—have worked to forge a consensus view of Adventist teaching.

I have found it exhilarating to gain an enhanced view of what the Adventist Christian heritage brings to these difficult contemporary issues. Our emphasis on both the Old and New

Testaments has given us experience in discerning God through the stern face of the Old Testament and the forgiving face of the New Testament. As Adventists we emphasize both Creation and the cross, the commandments of the Old Testament and the loving forgiveness of Christ in the New Testament.

The committee’s draft consensus statement on abortion appears in this issue of *Spectrum*. Drawing on the committee’s study of Scripture, the statement affirms the sacredness of life in the process of becoming and affirms those

confronted with the burden of a choice to terminate life at any stage. It attempts to set out “teaching” guidelines that define what is morally acceptable for Adventists in most circumstances.

General Conference officers have asked the committee to continue studying the draft statement and to solicit comments from church members worldwide. Any responses from *Spectrum* readers regarding abortion or the high tech reproductive techniques will be passed on to the committee.

Perhaps as interesting as the content of the abortion or *in vitro* fertilization discussions is the process the committee has followed in working toward a consensus on a topic as controversial as abortion. In addition to its representative membership—half male, half female, and one-fourth of its members not employed by the church or its institutions—the committee has been unusual in its high rate of attendance: 25 of 30 members have come to at least three of the five sessions. There are no silent members, more than a few vocal ones, and a high degree of Christian fellowship and

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respect even when there is disagreement. The group has been drawn together by the excitement of searching Scripture together in a quest for the common ground of Adventism.

For me, being a part of this process has meant being a part of an effort by a church to embrace a core of biblical beliefs, entertain both conservative and liberal views, and address fundamental issues while holding to-

gether a worldwide church. After each session, I return to my law office excited to share with my non-Adventist coworkers the spiritual experience I have participated in and proud to report the way the committee is working on such emotionally charged topics. I believe the committee's working method, as much as its product, should be the envy of other Christian denominations.