



# Welcoming the Third Millennium

Well-known and emerging Adventist leaders explore the contours of 21st-century Adventism.

by Gary Chartier

“ADVENTISM ON THE EVE OF THE 21st Century” drew approximately 200 people to the Fifth National Conference of the Association of Adventist Forums. Organized by the San Diego chapter, under the leadership of its president, Jim Kaatz, the conference met March 14-17, 1996, at San Diego’s Bahia Hotel.

What made the conference distinctive were the specific proposals by speakers like Fritz Guy and Frank Knittel; the personal vulnerability and openness of others, including Herold Weiss and Smuts van Rooyen; an ongoing discussion regarding the value and viability of church institutions; and the signs of generational tension within the forum, mirroring the one that exists within the Seventh-day Adventist community of faith as a whole.

A highlight of the weekend took place after a Saturday night Mexican buffet aboard the *Bahia Belle*, a faux Mississippi riverboat. An

unannounced but long-awaited roast of *Spectrum* editor Roy Branson, included, among others, AAF Advisory Council chair Nancy Bailey, La Sierra University president Lawrence T. Geraty, and satire-meisters Richard Rice and Jonathan Butler. The next day, Branson was fax-roasted by his cousin, former AAF officer and University of Wisconsin historian, Ronald L. Numbers. (*Editor’s Note: Transcripts are available, but only to AAF members who include Spectrum generously in their wills.*)

Keynote speaker Fritz Guy, University Professor of Theology and Philosophy at La Sierra University, offered four proposals for the Adventist future: reformulation of theology, renewal of spiritual fire, engagement with the needs of the world, and redefinition of church organization. He pointed delicately to the need for change in Adventist doctrine, specifically a new understanding of the significance of earth history, and an appreciation of God’s saving love that is more comprehensive than Adventists have often been inclined to endorse (see “Four Ways Into the Next Millennium,” pp. 25-32).

More allusive and less systematic than Guy,

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Herold Weiss advocated theological reformulation on the basis of contemporary Adventist experience. Weiss, a former Andrews University New Testament scholar who currently teaches at Saint Mary's College (South Bend, Indiana), maintained that theology should be seen as reflection on conduct and worship. A theology "from below" need not exhibit the systematic coherence and deductive rigor of a theology that begins with a clearly formulated doctrinal tradition as its ground. Thus, for instance, conflicting biblical statements on divorce can be accepted and held in tension with each other; there is no need to resolve the differences in an overarching unity.

Weiss suggested that theological conflict within Adventism was driven by the divergence between two visions. For an "apocalyptic" vision, salvation comes in escape from the world; for a "sapiential" vision, salvation is found through faithfulness within the world.

Frank Knittel delivered an especially memorable broadside directed at Adventist education on all levels. He is a product of Adventist schools, who is convinced that they prepared him better for graduate school than non-Adventist schools prepared his colleagues. Knittel declared that the current woes of Adventist education—declining enrollment, increasing costs, limited academic resources—necessitate drastic action. There are too many academies, he maintained; a reduction in the number could make secondary education more affordable. Also, the church in North America has eight or nine too many colleges, unless each Adventist college quickly develops an endowment of, say, \$200 million. Limits on the availability of library resources, educational enrichment programs, computers, and other goods and services could be most adequately addressed if there were far fewer Adventist educational institutions on all levels.

Responding to Knittel, former Pacific Union College president John Cassell called for a

central church decision-making authority, empowered to make system-wide decisions about Adventist education.

Knittel's and Cassell's dissatisfaction with existing institutional arrangements reflected a dominant conference theme—the ambivalence of institutions. Sensitive to the pain and injustice institutions can cause, Fritz Guy characterized them as valuable but deeply flawed.

Sunday morning, following Knittel's presentation, Susan Sickler, a member of the Columbia Union executive committee, and Larry Downing, pastor of the Anaheim, California, Adventist church, explored the place of institutions in the life of the church. Downing emphasized the loyalty to particular institutions that employees can develop. Also, church leaders, by concerning themselves with institutions' external missions, were behaving like parents who spend all of their time outside their homes, caring for people other than their own children.

The same theme played out in the dialogue between presenter Caleb Rosado and respondent David Larson. Rosado, a sociologist at the Humboldt campus of the California State University, argued strongly for pluralism, for a range of cultural, liturgical, and theological possibilities within the framework of the world church. Rosado criticized the pervasive "Americanness" of global Adventism, and objected to institutional attempts to reduce pluralism. While agreeing with Rosado that Adventism is diverse, as Christianity has always been, and that persuasion is more powerful than coercion in achieving change, Larson, director of Loma Linda University's Center for Christian Bioethics, asked whether pluralism was an essential part of the created order, or a consequence and corrective of human waywardness. Reacting to what he perceived as an anti-institutional tendency on the part of more than one speaker at the conference, Larson maintained that "organized religion is not an oxymoron."

Ronald Lawson, professor of urban studies at Queens College, City University of New York, explored international Adventism based on his hundreds of interviews of members around the world. The culture of Adventist institutions increasingly reflects the values of national societies (see "World Adventism Is Becoming Worldly," pp. 42-55).

The issue of institutions came briefly to the fore again on Sabbath morning. For Charles Teel, articulating "A Future for Adventist Mission," mission matters in part precisely because of its effects on the institution of the church. Teel, a sociologist of religion and Christian ethicist at La Sierra University, stressed that Adventism, inspired by the memories of those like Ana and Fernando Stahl, should seek to redeem institutions as well as individuals. He emphasized that individuals are always individuals-in-community. Respondent Gary Chartier argued, emphasizing the social and institutional character of religion.

The destructive character of some institutional decisions and the ineptitude of others has obviously bred a deep-seated skepticism within the church. From one perspective, the anti-institutional sentiments expressed at the conference might have been predicted. This was a progressive gathering, responding to the challenges posed by a conservative community. On the other hand, institutional settings have often provided secure settings in which independent thinking and loyalty to the church could develop in tandem. The conference mirrored an ambivalence about institutional Adventism experienced throughout the North American church.

Change is difficult, even for an avowedly and self-consciously progressive organization. It is thus, no doubt, appropriate that the Sabbath sermon, by Smuts van Rooyen, pastor of the Riverside church in California, and the response by Steve Daily, chaplain of La Sierra University, underscored the difficulty of change.

Van Rooyen identified love, faith, and hope as crucial elements in coming to terms with change that is inevitable. Daily urged a move beyond coping to conquering, maintaining that we must experience God in the present tense rather than contenting ourselves with living in the past.

The conference highlighted another way in which the forum mirrors the church. As an organization concerned with the reform of Adventism and the creation of progressive community within the church, the forum depends for its ongoing vitality on a core group of Adventists investing in the future of Adventism.

Though Roy Branson had been commissioned to speak on the topic, "Ethics and Adventism: Past, Present, and Future," he chose, instead, to assemble a panel of young Adventists working in ethics and in systematic and pastoral theology and invite them to consider the church's future. After sketching the development of Adventist work in ethics, Branson turned the discussion over to his younger colleagues in theology.

Anne Freed, a former member of the Pacific Union College religion faculty now completing a Ph.D. in philosophical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, focused most directly on the needs of the church. She urged a greater appreciation for the church as a community shaped by the story of Jesus, a community that ought to embody a distinctive style of life that will prove inherently attractive to the church's children. Siroj Sorajjakool, a doctoral student in pastoral theology at the School of Theology at Claremont, drew on his experience with ADRA in Thailand to highlight the genuine, painful needs the church can ignore if it remains focused on other-worldly concerns (see "In Search Of A God Who Eats Rice," pp. 32-38).

Similar issues surfaced in the remarks of Michael Zbaraschak—studying the philoso-

phy of religion and theology at Claremont Graduate School—and Gary Chartier, who stressed, respectively, the church’s need to work for justice and peace, and the value of feminism and feminist analysis in relation to power dynamics, religious experience, marriage, sexual orientation, and various sorts of dualism.

On Sabbath afternoon, other younger thought leaders—on a panel chaired by Larry Geraty—were invited to address the future of the church explicitly as young people. University of North Carolina history graduate Spencer Downing (son of Arlene and Larry Downing, and thus linked with an earlier generation of forum members), predicted something so fundamental as a redefinition of what it means to be Adventist.

Sheryll Prinz-Macmillan, newly ordained pastor of the Loma Linda Victoria church, urged that Adventist principles and ideals be repackaged. As an example, she suggested that vegetarianism, often supported because of its individual health benefits, has the capacity, given the economic and environmental consequences of meat-eating, to make a positive difference in the life of a hungry world.

La Sierra University graduate student and soon-to-be academy teacher Joelle Reed observed that too many young people remain linked with Adventism because of adherence to unthinking routine.

Adam Rose, AAF special projects director and a second-year Harvard Law student, observed that people leave the church because their needs are unmet. He noted that members of the so-called “Generation X” don’t simply assume Adventist or Christian convictions that many members of earlier generations did. They also lack the cultural ties to Adventism that previous generations experienced. While some Adventist rules—often a source of young people’s discontent—are misguided, Rose said, there is nothing wrong with rules. What is problematic is that the rules are unintelligible

to people to whom their significance has never been explained.

The “youth panel” was evidence that, just as a group of graduate and professional students in the 1960s felt that inattention to their voices made it necessary to establish the Association of Adventist Forums, similar concerns were inspiring some younger leaders of AAF in attendance at the San Diego conference. During the Saturday night cruise aboard the *Babia Belle*, informal conversation led to plans for a “Gen X” forum conference to occur before the next regular national conference, perhaps in 1997 or 1998. During the Sunday lunch that marked the conclusion of the conference, attorney Brent Geraty, vice president of the Association of Adventist Forums and a participant in discussions among the younger forum members, announced plans for the youth convocation. Directly and repeatedly, Geraty emphasized that the planned conference would be aimed specifically at young people.

The San Diego conference was clear that the church must simultaneously revise its theology, affirm and reorganize its institutions, care for people, and embrace diversity. It is also important to ask how these concerns inform the life of the forum. The church can serve as an outpost of grace in a chaotic and violent world, proving most effective when it seeks to be the church. So, also, the forum can attempt to leaven the church by transforming doctrine and institutional polity. Most importantly, AAF can embody the kind of life for the third millennium that it commends to the church as a whole.

*Tape recordings of AAF National Conference presentations are available from Sigma Audio/Video Associates; Box 51; Loma Linda, CA 92354 (see advertisement on the mailing wrap).*