



World Adventism Is Becoming Worldly

Adventists are conforming to their own societies while becoming increasingly different from one another.

by *Ronald Lawson*

IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD, ADVENTISM IS growing so rapidly that it is still largely a first-generation religion. However, in these countries, contrary to what might be expected, Adventism is typically not stridently sectarian in tone and marked by high tension with society and government.¹ Adults in the developing world are attracted to Adventism by perceived opportunities for upward mobility. They frequently compromise key church standards, and leave the church in higher percentages than in the United States. Adventists in many of these countries have risen to political prominence. When tensions with the state arise, prominent members ease them with considerable success. In the developing world, tension between Adventists and their environment is rarely sharp. The significance

of this worldwide accommodation of Adventism to society deserves both a historical and sociological analysis.

Adventism began in the U.S. and is now active in 208 of the 236 countries recognized by the U.N.² This means that it was imported to 207 of these countries, beginning with the first foreign missionary sent to Switzerland in 1874.³ Adventists were received rather differently in different regions. In countries where Christianity was religiously dominant, such as most of Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa, they were stigmatized as heretical and sectarian because they were small and different. Their growth in these parts has been relatively slow, with the result that Adventism there is now made up of mostly second-generation members. They have experienced less upward mobility than their American counterparts, because of the paucity, lower quality, and frequent lack of accreditation of their church-run educational institutions. In Europe and white countries of the British Commonwealth, Adventism is still usually regarded as a sect—although its situ-

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ation may not be markedly different from the groups that are regarded as churches and denominations:

In some European countries those religious institutions which once boasted the name and the reality of Churches are, with secularization, faced with being reduced to the status of sects; that is, of being reduced to relatively small, heterodox groups who believe and practice things which are alien to the majority. They differ from sects, however, in lacking the intensity of commitment.⁴

In many countries of the developing world, Adventism has often differed markedly from this description. Missionaries were sent by what was seen in the U.S. as a small, schismatic sect, and the Adventist penetration often brought complaints from the "historic churches"—that their doctrine was heretical, that they were sheep-stealers.⁵ However, the local people did not distinguish between the various church missions, seeing them "as part of the process of Western cultural importations, rather than as special brands of them."⁶ Adventism found an explicitly religiously pluralistic context, where it had no need to set itself over against an indigenous established church or religious orthodoxy.

From the outset, Adventism outside America was often less separated. Unlike Adventists in America, who typically avoided friendly, cooperative contact with other religious bodies, missionaries frequently joined ecumenical

"mission councils" and "councils of churches." These ecumenical bodies negotiated issues with colonial authorities that were important to Adventist missions, including responsibility for such things as which mission bodies should be admitted to the country.⁷ Adventism shaped its proselytizing strategies around institutions—initially grade schools and clinics, then hospitals and high schools, and finally colleges and universities. The focus on institutions fostered the process of bureaucratization:

On the missionary field, the Adventists are not seen as a fringe religious movement, as they are usually regarded in western countries. . . . Their impressive record of medical and educational provision has gained for them some approval of governments.⁸

Adventism typically grew more quickly once it reached beyond Europe, a situation that has accelerated over time. Adventist growth has skyrocketed in the developing world (see Table 1). Even though there has been an

TABLE 1
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST MEMBERSHIP GROWTH
SELECTED COUNTRIES—1960-1994

COUNTRY	YEAR ENTERED	MEMBERSHIP DEC. 1960	MEMBERSHIP DEC. 1994	34-YEAR INCREASE	1993-'94 INCREASE
KENYA	1906	33,493	369,426	1103.0%	9.5%
ZAMBIA	1905	9,644	229,107	2375.6%	11.1%
ZAIRE	1921	8,656	277,904	3210.5%	3.6%
GHANA	1894	7,695	171,268	2225.7%	5.0%
BRAZIL	1894	59,759	707,922	1184.6%	6.4%
PERU	1898	19,293	415,721	2154.8%	2.1%
MEXICO	1893	25,003	409,827	1639.1%	2.9%
JAMAICA	1893	31,093	165,762	533.1%	4.2%
INDONESIA	1900	18,721	147,377	787.2%	4.6%
PHILIPPINES	1906	72,519	627,595	865.4%	5.7%
PAPUA-NEW GUINEA	1908	13,504	152,485	1129.2%	6.7%
U.S.A.	-----	317,036	775,349	244.6%	1.8%
WORLD TOTAL	-----	1,245,125	8,382,558	673.2%	5.3%

Sources: General Conference, 1961, 1995

Adventist presence in many of these countries for a century, the membership is still made up predominantly of converts. This situation, together with the fact that missionaries were typically more conservative than their fellow members in the homeland, would lead us to expect that Adventism in developing countries would exhibit a higher tension with society than it does in the United States.

Actually, Adventism in these parts increasingly follows a trajectory similar to that taken in the United States. Already, international Adventism is far less sectarian than American Adventism was when it had a similar proportion of first-generation converts among its membership. Several factors have contributed to this situation.

Desire for Upward Mobility

Adventists have experienced widespread upward mobility, and new members are attracted to Adventism because it is seen as offering such opportunities. In spite of the fact that converts to Adventism are typically poor and that their teachers are usually conservative Adventists who emphasize that the world will soon end, one of the ingredients in the attraction of many of the converts to Adventism is the prospect of upward mobility. In the highlands of New Guinea, for example, where a veritable people movement is pouring into Adventism, the newcomers say that they are joining because God is blessing this church, and the evidence for this is that Adventists get rich! The tradition of measuring wealth in terms of how many pigs a person owns continues to some extent, even though this wealth is highly expendable, given the cultural demand that a “wealthy” person throw parties for his extended kin. The Adventist prohibition against keeping pigs (since they are regarded as unclean) and participation in parties (because of their association with alco-

hol and spirit worship) has had the effect of freeing members from their cultural obligations to kin and of fostering individualism, and has thus prepared them ideally for the emerging capitalist economy. Even though the bulk of the Adventist membership in Papua New Guinea is in the highlands, almost all the ministers there have to be recruited from coastal areas: The highlands youth prefer to go into business.⁹

Converts have also been drawn to Adventism because its system of parochial education offers members opportunities for advancement. Adventist education was developed first in the U.S., where its prime purpose was to be a means of training workers for the church: clergy, hospital personnel, teachers, accountants, secretaries. However, over the decades the proportion of U.S. graduates following secular careers has multiplied, with the result that Adventism’s educational institutions have become the major source of upward mobility for American members.

Adventist missionaries made education the keystone to their evangelization, and therefore gave highest priority to developing schools: “for [Latin American] peasants who desired a school for their children, an Adventist teacher complete with salary was a powerful inducement; in exchange, he organized them into a congregation.”¹⁰ Schools taught literacy, which was essential if the people were to read the Bible and study Adventist doctrine: “Elementary literacy was part of the prerequisites for baptism”;¹¹ they were also the means of preparing workers for the church. However, the people quickly realized that education was the key to upward mobility in rapidly changing societies, so that missionaries in Africa, for example, soon complained that their graduates frequently took the higher-paying secular jobs that were available. For example, one wrote that this was “largely a waste of training effort and money. . . . We are not training teachers at Malamulo, Solusi, and Kamagambo

to provide the government and other agencies with educated help."¹²

This trend continued as the Adventist Church added the higher layers to its educational system. Educational administrators now bemoan the fact that the majority of students enroll in programs, such as computer science and accounting, where there are few opportunities for church employment, rather than preparing to serve the rapidly expanding church. A striking confirmation of this pattern occurred in the early 1980s at the Adventist University of Eastern Africa, in Kenya, which had been founded in 1978. Students there, complaining that having the church's name on their degrees would limit their employment opportunities, staged demonstrations and strikes that eventually forced the university

council to change the institution's name to the "University of Eastern Africa Baraton."¹³

The patterns of upward mobility resulting from church-provided education vary from one country to another because of differing economic conditions. In India, for example, where graduates from universities often find it impossible to secure positions that utilize their qualifications, virtually all who graduate from the Adventists' Spicer College are offered church employment. Many of these graduates have used their qualifications and church contacts as a means of securing entry to the U.S.: More than half of the college's graduates in recent years have migrated.¹⁴

Adventist educational institutions are less likely to offer avenues for widespread upward mobility where they lack government accreditation, where their programs are severely

Jehovah's Witnesses Separate From Society

Other religious sects functioning in the developing world have related to society very differently from Adventists. Interestingly, they arrive at different ends through parallel means. For example, ties between international headquarters and national groups have been strong. The Jehovah's Witnesses of Africa, like their Adventist counterparts, are connected to a centralized global organization, the Watch Tower Society (WTS). In the U.S., this organization has overseen the shaping of Witnesses into an "established sect." This connection also played a powerful role in shaping the course taken by the Witnesses in Africa. For example, it was the WTS in America that decided Witnesses should "eschew all association and co-operation with other missionary bodies." They consequently stood aloof from the mission councils in Africa, refused to build schools even though Africans requested them, developed the policy that adherents should not recognize

secular authority, and prohibited singing national anthems, saluting flags, voting, and entering the armed forces.¹ Such decisions kept Witnesses separate from society, and protected their peculiarities or differences. Assimeng's study of Jehovah's Witnesses in Africa finds that, since they refused to build and operate schools, they did not provide their followers with a means for upward mobility.² In some countries in particular, such as Zambia and Malawi, "its relationship with political authorities . . . has been characterized by acute strain."³

However, as with Adventists, there were also local factors at work. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses could not have foreseen that its baptismal ritual would be seen as magical in Central Africa, a factor which helped their growth there.⁴ Most important, it was not responsible for the fact that its missionaries were excluded for decades from Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), so that their faith

was spread by poorly trained Africans, converted while itinerant workers in South Africa. Ironically, the preaching of these men, over whom the Witnesses could have little control, led the movement to be regarded as a manifestation of early nationalist stirrings for self-determination. That reputation heightened tensions between Jehovah's Witnesses and colonial administrators.

1. Max Assimeng, *Saints and Social Structures* (Legon, Ghana: Ghana Publ. Corp., 1986), pp. 53, 218; _____, "Sectarian Allegiance and Political Authority: the Watch Tower Society in Zambia, 1907-1935" (*Journal of Modern African Studies*, 8:1 [April 1970]), p. 100.

2. _____, *Saints and Social Structures*, pp. 53-113.

3. _____, "Sectarian Allegiance and Political Authority," p. 112.

4. _____, *Saints and Social Structures*, p. 251.

5. _____, "Sectarian Allegiance and Political Authority," p. 112.

limited, or where almost all church members are too poor to go away from home for education. These conditions apply, variously, in much of Europe and parts of Latin America and Asia. For example, interviewees in southern Mexico frequently explained that the peasant members had no chance of traveling to the college in the north, or of affording tuition and board at the academy in the south; however, they credited the church's emphasis on tithing and a simple, healthy life-style with encouraging them to steward their resources and to complete more frequently the available grades at the local public schools, so that their houses were typically better than average and they had the confidence to engage in evangelism.¹⁵

The widespread concern for, and experience of, upward mobility among Adventist members in the developing world leaves them with an experience that is closer to that of American Adventists than the predominance of converts and the emphasis on sectarian teachings among the missionaries would lead us to expect.

Decreased Integration of New Members Into Adventism

Beginning in the early 1980s, Adventist leaders placed much greater emphasis on growth, promoted evangelism as a major proselytizing strategy, and pressured pastors and evangelists with high goals for new converts. As a result, the growth rate for the world membership increased from 69.9 percent during the decade 1970-1980 to 92.4 percent during 1982-1992.¹⁶ The bulk of this increase occurred in developing countries. In Africa, would-be converts had previously been required to be a member of a baptismal class for two years before being admitted. Now, they are typically baptized at the end of a three-week evangelistic campaign. Although the period of classes previously required in other

parts of the world was not usually as long as in Africa, the typical length of study before baptism has also been sharply reduced there. Moreover, post-baptismal nurture often disappeared, as pastors were forced to turn their attention to attracting the next wave of prospective recruits.¹⁷

Weakened Member Commitment

Given the role of opportunities for personal advancement in attracting converts in the developing world and the pattern of reduced socialization of converts flowing from the competition for growth statistics, it is not surprising that the apostasy rate is high. The official statistics show an apostasy rate that was equal to 26.3 percent of conversions in the developing world during 1994. However, interview data suggest that this is a serious undercount. This is because the system of record-keeping, which was designed in the U.S., often proves too complex for those who must report from churches where the standard of education is lower, especially when pastors who can show notable growth are rewarded and they can be penalized when it is considered low: The one thing they can be relied on to report accurately is the number of baptisms.

There is no doubt that the apostasy rate is a serious problem, which I illustrate with but one of many examples. I had the opportunity to meet together with all the church pastors in the city of Kinshasa, capital of Zaire, where campaigns by visiting Afro-American evangelists during the previous three years had resulted in 1,500 baptisms. When I asked them how many of those converts were still attending Adventist churches, they consulted with one another before presenting me with the total: 50, a mere 3.3 percent.

There is a cultural factor in Africa that amplifies and helps explain the seriousness of

“the apostasy problem” there. Africans often do not share the Western understanding that commitment to one faith precludes adherence to others: “In Africa, it is very rarely the case that a person is exclusively a member of only one religious movement at any particular time, and very few movements succeeded in imposing the exclusivity principle.”¹⁸ Indeed, many Africans see advantages in identifying with several religious groups. Consequently, some persons who respond to the call of an Adventist evangelist to be baptized, and who thereby become members of the Adventist Church, may the next month respond similarly to an

invitation from a Pentecostal preacher. During the early days of Adventist missions in Africa, it was the practice to insist that converts and those preparing for baptism withdraw from their villages and form a new Adventist village that was built around the church and church school.¹⁹ This had the effect of strengthening ties to the church. However, that practice is now a thing of the past: in Kenya it was ended by government legislation in the late 1940s.²⁰ The long period of training in baptismal classes was also designed to cement commitment; however, as noted above, this has also been abandoned.

Pentecostals Are Indigenous and Apolitical

The trajectory taken by Pentecostals is different organizationally from both Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not have a single, centralized global organization. Instead, several umbrella organizations, each itself usually a collection of independent groups, leads to a great deal of local independence. Pentecostals became seen as “truly indigenous,” often embracing the indigenous religion and culture's preoccupation with the miraculous, such as the African concern to rid communities of misfortune frequently manifested in witch-hunting cults.¹

Assimeng found that

Their concern with salvation and the advent tends, in day-to-day practice, often to be eclipsed by their distinctive teachings of Holy Ghost power, spirit blessings and physical manifestations—particularly glossolalia. These charismata—and especially the “gift” of divine healing—have been popularly embraced in Africa where traditional religion was itself strongly thaumaturgical, instrumental and expressive.²

In Nigeria, where the impact of Pentecostalism was greatest, it adopted a number of indigenous characteristics: For example, it seemed to confirm from Scripture the traditional witchcraft theories of disease.³ Similarly, in Mexico “many rural pastors are former shamans who, in effect, continue to divine and cure under the new religion, as a more effective source of power and legitimation. In Haiti . . . pentecostal healing tends to validate belief in voodoo. . . .”⁴ That is, it has been embraced mainly by the poor. Martin concludes that it “became truly indigenous. . . .”⁵

Pentecostals exhibit some tension with the environment. In Latin America this is, in part, because their membership is predominantly poor, and there is little evidence that it has fostered much upward mobility among its adherents, although some analysts expect this pattern to change with time.⁶ There have been occasions when Pentecostal churches have offered some legitimacy to national security states in return for recognition. The case of Chile's Pinochet is a striking example, as it was for Adventists.⁷

In general, however, Pentecos-

tals tend to be apolitical, to view the machinery and the process of politics as corrupt and hateful, and, when they vote, to be moved by anti-Catholicism as their prime consideration.⁸

There has been no attempt in Latin America, as of yet, for Pentecostals to follow the example of some of their fellows and funders in the United States who have become active in the “Christian Right.” Their growth and non-threatening politics are reducing antagonisms toward them; this process is likely to be hastened if the predictions of upward mobility are realized to any notable extent.

1. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 231; Max Assimeng, *Saints and Social Structures* (Legon, Ghana: Ghana Publ. Corp., 1986), pp. 137-143.

2. Assimeng, *Saints and Social Structures*, p. xiii.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

4. David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 113.

5. Martin, p. 231.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 231; Stoll, p. 116.

7. Stoll, p. 316; Martin, p. 241.

8. Martin, pp. 236, 265.

Given the evidence of widespread limited commitment among Adventist members—with poor socialization, multiple memberships, high apostasy rates, and focus on opportunities for career advancement—it is not surprising that many members have proved willing to compromise the standards of their faith rather than face difficulties. For example, although Adventist leaders had taken a strong position against armed participation in war, when such options proved unavailable in most of Latin America, members there, beginning in the 1890s, chose to serve with arms. When conscripted, Adventists carried guns rather than face the penalties regularly heaped on such objectors as Jehovah's Witnesses.²¹

However, the major test for Adventists has usually been observance of the (Saturday) Sabbath. American Adventists who have refused to work when scheduled on that day have fought the issue all the way to the Supreme Court, which has issued decisions protecting their right to observe their holy day. In Africa, groups of Adventist students at both church- and state-run colleges and universities stated that the core of Adventist doctrine as preached there was the Sabbath. Nevertheless, when Adventist families, in the former French and Belgian colonies (for example, Zaire, Rwanda, the Cameroun, the Ivory Coast) and increasingly in such former English colonies as Nigeria and Ghana, were faced with

the problem of classes and exams being scheduled on Sabbath, most of the Adventists parents sent their children to attend those classes and examinations.²² Adventists in many other countries, ranging from Korea to Eastern Europe, have frequently made similar choices. Indeed, in Korea and India, so many members spend Saturday mornings at their jobs that churches have arranged special worship services for them on Saturday afternoon. Even in the U.S., fewer members have in recent years been choosing to make an issue of being called to work on the Sabbath.²³

Emerging Political Presence

The rapid growth of Adventism in parts of the developing world, together with the upward mobility that members have often experienced there, has transformed Adventists into a political presence in some countries. This is especially the case in Jamaica and in Papua New Guinea and other island groups in the South Pacific, where several Adventists have served as members of cabinet. In Micronesia, the president of Palau is a church member. In Uganda, an Adventist served as prime minister, then vice-president. These developments took the leaders at church headquarters in the United States by surprise, for American Adventists have rarely walked the corridors of political power.²⁴ Nevertheless, in 1986 denominational officials held a series of seminars for church members involved in politics.²⁵

A similar process has occurred at a more local level in other countries where the Adventist presence is more geographically concentrated. This is the situation among the Aymara of Peru, in the highlands around Lake Titicaca. Here Adventists brought education and literacy, and so many conversions followed that they became the largest Protestant group in the country. However, their education was not politically and economically



relevant while the old, Catholic-dominated social system remained intact. When population growth outran available land, forcing the Aymara to shift from subsistence agriculture to wage labor on the coast, Adventists seized the opportunity: Since they were better educated, they were able to find better jobs during the time spent on the coast, and consequently gained more possessions. Moreover, when local government was reorganized and secularized, and thus opened to non-Catholics, only they were educationally ready for these changes. A small group of Adventists subsequently emerged "as the power elite in the community."²⁶

Relations With Governments And Other Missions

In other parts of the developing world, such as Latin America, the Philippines, South Korea, Kenya, and Ghana, Adventists have moved, often successfully, to reduce political tensions with authoritarian regimes.

Adventist missionaries typically joined the ecumenical organizations representing mission bodies in Africa, but in Latin America, they initially stood aloof from other Protestant missions. Adventists dismissed other fundamentalists as apostate. In turn, because of their strong focus on Adventist doctrinal and behavioral peculiarities, Adventists were seen as legalistic, even heretical. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, they came to desire acceptance as evangelical Christians, and largely succeeded.²⁷

Reducing Church-State Separation: A Case Study in Accommodation

Policies that have evolved in Adventism's home base in America have often been

embraced by the leaders of the international church and then fostered elsewhere. This increasingly centralized and hierarchical organization has reduced tension between the church and its environment. This is illustrated from the area of church-state relations.

During its early decades the Adventist Church in the U.S. was in "considerable tension with society," including the state. Adventism's interpretation of the biblical Book of Revelation led it to expect persecution, before the imminent appearance of Christ, from an alliance formed between other churches and the federal government. When church members were arrested in several states for working on Sunday, this was interpreted as evidence that the predicted attack was being readied. The arrests were seen as challenging the freedom of Adventists to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, and therefore as a religious/political issue.²⁸ In the midst of these tensions, Adventists were forced by the American Civil War to grapple with the issue of military service, and took the political risk of declaring themselves to be conscientious objectors. While this position placed them among a small deviant minority, and subjected them to scorn and questions concerning their loyalty, it did not result in legal punishments, since they were able to take advantage of the loopholes in the military draft designed for the Quakers.²⁹

In the years after the Civil War, Adventism began to grow more rapidly and it set about building educational institutions: It was putting down a stake in the society. At the same time, it began to see the time until the Second Coming of Christ as lengthening, and the threat from the U.S. government as less immediate: the tension with the state was beginning to relax. Consequently, when the National Reform Association launched a campaign in the 1880s to extend the Sunday sacredness "blue laws" already in effect in some states to the national level, Adventists, rather than rejoicing because all they had prophesied was

about to be fulfilled, abandoned their usual political stance and set out vigorously to combat the initiative.³⁰ Their defense of religious liberty in the U.S. as the best way of fending off the persecution that they had predicted for themselves continued into the 20th century. Initially their outlook was conspiratorial, as they nervously anticipated threats to their liberty that could be fitted within the narrow confines of their eschatology.

Adventists were greatly relieved when, after they had helped to defeat all of the nearly 150 Sunday observance bills introduced into Congress between 1888 and 1933, such initiatives largely disappeared.³¹ During World War II, Supreme Court decisions addressing Jehovah's Witness issues strengthened religious liberty. Roosevelt included freedom of religion as one of his four basic freedoms. The editor of the *Review and Herald* commented at that time that what Adventists had prophesied clearly lay farther in the future.³²

Seventh-day Adventists, worldwide, showed accommodation to society by warming to military service. During the American Civil War, Adventists bought their way out of serving in the Union Army. In World War I they were officially "noncombatants," but during World War II said they were "conscientious cooperators," and during the Vietnam War said they would not pass judgment on those who bore arms.³³ By the time of the Gulf War in 1991, the office of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries estimated the total number of military personnel listing themselves as Seventh-day Adventists as 6,000-8,000, and that 2,000 of these had participated in the war.³⁴ A

similar pattern of Adventist involvement with military took place in Argentina, imperial and Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union.

As time passed, Adventists found it increasingly difficult to define precisely the wall of separation that they were committed to defending. Between 1944 and 1972 there was considerable conflict and debate within Adventism. Religious liberty staff opposed school and hospital administrators over what to accept in government aid. Adventists began by approving vaccinations for school children. Then, in 1949, they agreed to accept war surplus and capital funds. The ensuing debate

The research reported here is part of a large study that included 3,000 in-depth interviews of Seventh-day Adventists in 54 countries in all 11 divisions of the world Adventist church.

over the funding of church schools was especially bitter. A compromise was not reached until 1972. The background of this decision was enrollment decline and financial distress among Adventist schools. Church leaders finally admitted that quality affordable education had be-

come increasingly difficult to achieve without government help. The compromise allowed Adventist educational institutions to accept a broad range of government aid—for new buildings, equipment, salaries, and other operating costs—as long as the independence of the schools and their purpose of inculcating religious principles were maintained.³⁵

In the early 1980s, when church leaders discovered that it was possible for the Adventist Church to obtain vast sums in government aid, mostly from USAID, they transformed the church's disaster relief agency into the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). These denominational leaders saw ADRA as a new "entering wedge" that could penetrate regions where there was little Adventist presence and conventional missionar-

ies were often unwelcome. In earlier years, Adventist hospitals had played this role. However, the source and restrictions placed on the use of most of its funds in many ways transformed ADRA into an arm of American foreign policy. For example, during the Contra War in Nicaragua, ADRA distributed a great deal of aid in Honduras but nothing in Nicaragua.³⁶

The switch in the American church's policy toward participation in the military and the federal government inspired the transformation of Adventist relations with the governments of other countries. This policy proved to be especially effective with authoritarian governments, whether they were right-wing military regimes in Latin America, Asia, or

Methods of Research

The research reported here is part of a large study of Adventism, which has included more than 3,000 in-depth interviews with church administrators, teachers, hospital administrators and medical personnel, pastors, students, and leading laypersons in 54 countries in all 11 divisions of the world church. The countries were chosen to represent the diversity of the international church, paying greater attention to those where it is more established and/or experiencing rapid growth. Local itineraries were designed with the help of people who knew the various regions well.

The U.S. was researched first, since this was where Adventism originated and is the location of the General Conference, its world headquarters. I conducted interviews at all eight union headquarters and many local conferences, the 12 universities and colleges, several academies (high schools), the major hospitals, both publishing houses, the media center, and at a great variety of urban, suburban, and rural churches, representing all major racial groupings. Canada was also covered, although less intensively. The research itinerary also included several weeks at the General Conference. Before venturing overseas, I returned to Andrews University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Michigan to ask international students there about issues in their countries.

I followed a similar research plan in the other 52 countries, completing interviews at headquarters, seminaries, schools and other institutions, and among pastors, leading laypersons, and Adventist students at secular universities. In general, interviewees were chosen to fit key categories. At regional headquarters, I interviewed the president, the other officers, and some of the departmental leaders (depending on who was there and my interest in the department). At colleges, I typically interviewed the president, academic dean, many of the teachers (covering a broad range of departments, but with a bias toward teachers of religion), deans of students and counselors, and student leaders. I also met with diverse groups of students. At hospitals, I interviewed administrators and medical staff. I set out to interview a variety of pastors representing different kinds of congregations, and also a selection of leading laypersons. I used the quinquennial General Conference Sessions in 1985 and 1990, when delegates assembled from all regions of the church, as opportunities to interview significant people who had been absent during my visits or not on my routes and to ask previous interviewees additional questions.

With promises of confidentiality to interviewees, I received

extraordinary cooperation throughout the world church. Even when interviewees were initially reserved or suspicious, these problems were almost always quickly overcome.

I chose not to tape interviews. I took very detailed notes (through using my own system of shorthand, interviews were recorded almost verbatim), initially with pen and pad and later, as laptop computers became available, on disk. The typical interview was between two and three hours in length, with some notably longer.

I prepared an interview schedule of core questions for each category of interviewee (church administrator, college teacher, etc.). These covered such areas as personal background; information concerning the unit they represented; changes and issues there as well as their perceptions of changes and issues more broadly within the church.

Data concerning earlier decades were culled largely from secondary sources. Much of the data concerning more recent decades comes from my interviews; the paper also draws extensively on periodical articles to explore more recent pronouncements, practices, and attitudes.

In order to keep the confidentiality of interviewees, as promised, the convention adopted by the study is to refrain from citing their names when they are quoted, except when they are major figures in the church.

Africa, or communist states in Eastern Europe. Under such relationships the Adventist Church was accorded favors in return for being useful to the regime, such as through lending it legitimacy.

For example, when General Pinochet was invited to visit the Adventist college in Chile, which was greatly disadvantaged by not having accreditation, he was greeted in a welcoming ceremony before television cameras during which the college president offered a prayer in which he thanked God for sending Pinochet to save the nation. This occurred at a time when Pinochet was under considerable attack from the Catholic cardinal for his human-rights violations. As a result of this, the college received accreditation and Adventists became known in Chile as "friends of Pinochet."

Similarly, although the Adventist Church in Poland was small—with a membership then of less than 5,000 in a population of 38 million—it came to be greatly favored under the communist regime.

In a situation where publishing was tightly controlled by the state, works by the Adventist prophet, Ellen White, published during the last seven years of communist rule exceeded everything in copies but the Bible and the works of Lenin! These were freely distributed, and Adventist magazines were the only religious publications sold regularly at the state-operated magazine kiosks. These favors were afforded Polish Adventists at least partly because they were willing to publish anti-Catholic articles, especially when the Pope, the citizen the regime feared most, was about to make a visit to his homeland. Also, the book by Ellen White that was most widely distrib-

uted—*The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*—was full of what the political leaders saw as anti-Catholic propaganda.³⁷

Similar policies were actively encouraged and pursued by the leaders of the world church. For example, Neal Wilson, then president of the General Conference, proved willing to intervene in both the U.S.S.R. and Hungary, where schismatic Adventist groups, discontented with the Adventist history of close relations and compromises with the state, were an irritant to political leaders. In both cases, Wilson gave his blessing to the compromising church. He announced the principle that the official branch of the world church was that recognized by the state.

During subsequent visits to the Soviet Union, Wilson cemented a close relationship with Konstantin Kharchev, chair of the U.S.S.R. Council on Religious Affairs. These contacts ultimately resulted in approval from the council for the creation of an Adventist seminary outside Moscow.

That is, the Adventist

churches in all these countries were encouraged to follow the path pioneered in the U.S. of actively seeking to win the favor of the state and thus to reduce tension with it.³⁸

Over the past century, then, a policy of pursuing reduced tension with governments emerged and eventually flourished within Adventism. This policy was developed in the U.S., where the General Conference was directly involved in the evolution of the relationship with the American military and the accompanying dramatic changes in the official church position on military service. Once the relationship with the federal government had been transformed, this became the model for other

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countries within the world church to pursue.³⁹

In some cases local leaders, now aware of the model, may have taken the initiatives themselves. For example, the product of the interaction between Adventist norms and the familial and cultural systems of the New Guinea highlanders was not foreseen. Adventism, by promoting the economic prosperity of many members, raised the status of the church in society. Moreover, some of the actions by the General Conference had unintended consequences: Leaders were caught by surprise when rapid growth in some countries raised Adventists to political prominence. It was not the purpose of those who decided to build schools in order to train church workers that this would result in upward mobility among members. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in recent decades the leadership of the world church has made reducing tension between their church and its environment a priority. It became highly concerned with public image, acceptance, and gaining respect.⁴⁰

The central administration of Adventism and the administrations in developing nations have both, over time, considerably reduced tensions between themselves and their surrounding sociocultural environments. Weber's "Protestant Ethic" applies extremely well to the Adventist experience, whether it be in America, New Guinea, Kenya, or Peru. In spite of the traditional Adventist expectation of both persecution and apocalypse, Adventist culture places a high value on success, whether defined as numerical growth, widespread upward mobility among its members, or the flowering of exchange relationships with governments. Of course, all of these are linked.

However, this analysis must end with a cautionary note, for the data presented

here suggest that Adventism in the developing world is experiencing such rapid change and consequent insecurity that its future direction must be regarded as unsure. The high growth rate seems to be a product of dramatic social changes, such as decolonization. The sudden realization of a need to Westernize, and the desire to develop skills relevant to the emerging societies. One cannot help but ask whether this is a phase that will inevitably wane.

Moreover, Adventism's rapid growth among the poor all over the world is spreading its resources, which are drawn primarily from the U.S., very thin. Total tithe and offerings per capita in the world church, measured in 1950 U.S. dollars, had fallen by 1994 to only 37.2 percent of what it was in 1950 (see Table 2).

As a result, although Adventists have recently developed educational institutions of stature in some countries, such as their universities in Zimbabwe and Kenya, overall their schools in the developing world are falling behind: They have no hope of accommodating the numbers of potential students from among the vast array of young converts, and their quality is suffering in comparison with their rivals. The state of Adventist hospitals is often worse still. It seems inevitable, then, that these institutions will decline as vehicles for upward mobility. The switch to public evangelism as a major strategy is not just an attempt to increase the growth-rate, but also a recog-

TABLE 2

TOTAL TITHE AND OFFERINGS PER CAPITA 1950-1994

YEAR	CURRENT U.S. DOLLARS	CONSTANT DOLLARS (1950 U.S.)	DECLINE IN CONSTANT DOLLARS (FROM 1950)
1950	73.60	73.60	-----
1960	83.66	68.00	92.4%
1970	112.69	69.86	94.9%
1980	202.19	59.07	80.3%
1990	180.70	33.29	45.2%
1994	168.66	27.39	37.2%

Source: Extracted from Yost (1995), p. 29.

dition of the decline of the traditional, institution-based approach.

But once it is realized in communities that Adventism no longer offers the same opportunities for upward mobility, will it continue to attract converts at the same rate? Will it be able to continue to avoid major schism? Church leaders focused the recent quinquennial ses-

sion of the General Conference so closely on the theme of unity that they left no doubt that they greatly fear disunity.⁴¹ Their fears are well-founded. The research reported here suggests that increasing accommodation of Adventism to whatever society it finds itself within, worldwide, will create an Adventism that is increasingly diverse.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge argued in *The Future of Religion* that the best indicator of sectarianism is tension between a religious group and its socio-cultural environment ([Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985] p. 23).

2. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *98th Annual Statistical Report—1960* (Takoma Park, Md.: Office of Archives and Statistics, 1961), p. 42.

3. R. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1979), p. 145.

4. Bryan R. Wilson, "Religion in Secular Society," from Roland Robertson, ed., *Sociology of Religion* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969 [1966]), p. 154.

5. Bryan R. Wilson, "A Typology of Sects," from Robertson, ed., (1963), p. 378; Max Assimeng, *Saints and Social Structures* (Legon, Ghana: Ghana Publ. Corp., 1986), p. 223

6. Assimeng, *Saints and Social Structures*, p. 53.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 222-225.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

9. From interviews.

10. Stoll, p. 103.

11. Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, *Religion and Social Change: A Sociological Study of Seventh-day Adventism in Kenya* (Lund, Sweden: University of Lund Press, 1993), p. 108.

12. T. R. Flaiz, "Medical Missionary Objectives," *Ministry* 23:5 (May 1950), p. 30.

13. From interviews.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Derived from General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *130th Annual Statistical Report—1992* (Silver Spring, Md.: Office of Archives and Statistics, 1992).

17. Bryan Wilson, the Oxford University sociologist of religion, reports an important factor in his book, *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London: Heinemann, 1967), that is significant to this explanation. He found that those sects which he defines as "revolutionist" tend to move much more slowly from sect toward denomination than those he defines as "conversionist" sects. This

is because the "revolutionists" demand that converts have considerable knowledge before they are admitted, while the "conversionists" add new members rapidly without a great deal of prior training and socialization. In terms of this analysis, Adventism in the developing world has shifted sharply toward becoming a "conversionist sect" over the past decade or so: the grounding of converts in the sectarian teachings and separating life-style of Adventism is now often much weaker than it was in earlier decades. According to Wilson, such a change is likely to reduce sectarianism and foster denomination-like characteristics.

18. Assimeng, *Saints and Social Structures*, p. 16.

19. Nyaundi, pp. 93, 94, 108-117.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

21. From interviews.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. From interviews. There are currently three Adventist members of Congress, which is the highest such number to date.

25. The author participated in the seminar held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

26. Ted Lewellen, "Deviant Religion and Cultural Evolution," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18:3 (September 1979), p. 245; Martin, pp. 224, 225; and from interviews.

27. Stoll, p. 103

28. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 48; Jonathan M. Butler, "Adventism and the American Experience," in Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-19th-Century America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 173-177.

29. Peter Brock, "When Seventh-day Adventists First Faced War: the Problem of the Civil War," *Adventist Heritage* 1:1 (1973), p. 23; Ron Graybill, "This Perplexing War: Why Adventists Avoided Military Service in the Civil War," *Insight* (October 10, 1978), pp. 4-8.

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31. Douglas Morgan, "Adventism, Apocalyptic, and the Cause of Liberty," *Church History* (June 1994), p. 246.

32. Editorial, *Review and Herald* (July 22, 1943).

33. George R. Knight, "Adventism and Military Service: Individual Conscience in Ethical Tension" (paper read at a conference on Pacifism in American Religious Tradition, 1992), p. 17; and from a statement "The Relationship of Seventh-day Adventists to Civil Government and War" (minutes of Annual Council, General Conference, 1972).

34. From interviews. More details of this transformation are available in Ronald Lawson, "Onward Christian Soldiers? Seventh-day Adventists and the Issue of Military Service" (*Review of Religious Research*, 37:3 [March 1996], pp. 193-218; _____, "Why *No* to Women but *Yes* to Killing?" (*Spectrum*, 24:4 [March 1995], pp. 43-57).

35. Douglas Morgan, "The Remnant and the Republic," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Chicago Divinity School, 1992); Eric Syme, *A History of SDA Church-State Relations in the United States* (Mountain View, Calif.:

Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1973), pp. 120-143.

36. From interviews.

37. Ibid.

38. Neal C. Wilson and Alfred Lohne, "A Letter to Soviet Adventists," *Spectrum* 11:4 (1981) [1979], p. 46; Sidney Reiners, *Betrayal in Budapest* (Grand Rapids, Minn.: Christians in Crisis, n.d); and from interviews.

39. For further examples, details, and a much fuller development of this line of reasoning, see Ronald Lawson, "Church and State at Home and Abroad: The Evolution of Seventh-day Adventist Relations with Governments" (forthcoming, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV/2 [1996], pp. 57-89).

40. Ronald Lawson, "Seventh-day Adventists Respond to Branch Davidian Notoriety: Patterns of Diversity Within a Sect Reducing Tension With Society," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34:3 (September 1995), pp. 323-341.

41. This took place in the Netherlands in June-July, 1995.