

# The Year of SDA Congregationalism

Five independent Adventist congregations emerged in 1996 and 1997. Is this a trend?

by Alita Byrd

FIVE ADVENTIST PASTORS ACROSS THE UNITED States have established churches independent of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The pastors involved are well-known, some nationally. Organized separately over an 18-month period from May 1996 to November 1997, all these churches now control their own tithe dollars and assets. They say they are pursuing a new, gospel-centered ministry, using contemporary worship methods to reach the unchurched. In 1997, they cooperated in forming the Evangelical Sabbath Association.

The largest congregation has a weekly attendance of about 600 persons; two others have about 400 attending. The first Adventist pastor to start an independent congregational church was Eric Bahme, senior pastor in Woodinville, Washington, near Seattle. Bahme was terminated from employment by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in May 1996. He,

and 98 percent of his congregation, started the New Life Fellowship of Congregational Seventh-day Adventists, a non-denominational, unaffiliated church in Woodinville. Currently, they have an average attendance of 140.

Next, Bob Bretsch, former senior pastor of the 1,450-member Sunnyside Seventh-day Adventist Church in Portland, Oregon, was fired in May 1997 and told he could no longer pastor in the Oregon Conference. Now he pastors the Bridge City Community Church in Portland. Bridge City, which began meeting in June and now attracts more than 600 people in Sabbath worship each week, understands itself to be an independent church with theology rooted in Adventism.

The next to start an independent ministry was Chad McComas. For six years, McComas served as senior pastor of the 600-member church in Medford, Oregon. In December 1996, the conference told him he could no longer pastor the Medford church. On July 5, 1997, the Set Free Christian Fellowship held its first service in Medford, under McComas'

---

*Alita Byrd, a graduate of Columbia Union College, in Takoma Park, Maryland, is serving an editorial internship at The Washingtonian magazine in Washington, D.C. She is Spectrum's editorial assistant.*

leadership, with 60 people attending.

When Richard Fredericks, pastor of the 600-member Damascus Seventh-day Adventist Church in Maryland, ceased to be employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on October 27, 1997, most of his members followed him to the independent Damascus Road Community Church, worshiping in the local high school. This new, non-denominational congregation, about 30 miles north of Washington, D.C., continues to meet on Sabbaths, offering a "Saturday morning option for the burned, the bored, and the bypassed." Approximately 400 attend each week.

Most recently, Clay Peck had his credentials revoked by the Rocky Mountain Conference on November 5, 1997. He has been pastor of Grace Place, a 400-member congregation meeting at the Berthoud High School in Berthoud, Colorado, about 40 miles north of Denver, since September 14, 1996. The congregation had formed their own non-profit organization even before they began meeting independently. They have retained their assets and meet in the same location, though they are no longer an official Adventist church.

## The Evangelical Sabbath Association

Part of what makes the events of 1996 and 1997 seem like a movement is that these five new, independent churches all participate in the Evangelical Sabbath Association, a loosely organized group of churches providing sup-

port, guidance, and resources for pastors and congregations who have left the denomination. The association formed in late July 1997 under the direction of Don Ashlock, a Portland, Oregon, businessman who had long dreamed of an association dedicated to the congregationalist community. The Evangelical Sabbath Association states that its mission is to equip, serve, and empower grace-based Sabbath celebrating ministries. The pastors and congregations participating in the association emphasize that it is *not* another denomination. Still in its infancy, the Evangelical

Sabbath Association also maintains a World Wide Web page offering information on the churches involved with the association.

Many have remarked on the similarities of the Evangelical Sabbath Association to the Protestant, non-denominational Willow Creek Association, also organized to support congregational ministry. Each year, Willow Creek Association—with more than 2,200

member churches from 70 denominations and 15 countries—holds workshops and conferences, as well as one large annual church leadership conference. Seventh-day Adventist pastors and church members have been attending these conferences for years, and the Evangelical Sabbath Association was founded during the Willow Creek Leadership Conference in 1997. Although Willow Creek gave them a model, Ashlock says, "this is a pre-Willow Creek phenomenon. Willow Creek has just provided oxygen to a flame already burning in Adventism."

---

*Each year, Willow Creek Association—with more than 2,200 member churches from 70 denominations—holds a leadership conference, attended for years by Adventist pastors and members. The Evangelical Sabbath Association was founded during the 1997 Willow Creek Leadership Conference.*

## Links Among the Five Churches

In discussing the similar situations of these five pastors and their congregations, several issues regularly arise. The most frequently discussed issue is control. Should local churches be able to control some of their tithe dollars? Similarly, should local churches be able to hire staff paid by the church instead of the conference? Another important issue, though often de-emphasized, is theology. For example, several of these pastors do not believe that the visible Adventist Church should be defined as the "remnant." All claim to be completely gospel-centered. A third issue is worship. All the congregations employ innovative techniques, reaching out to people they feel have been neglected by traditional Adventist worship.

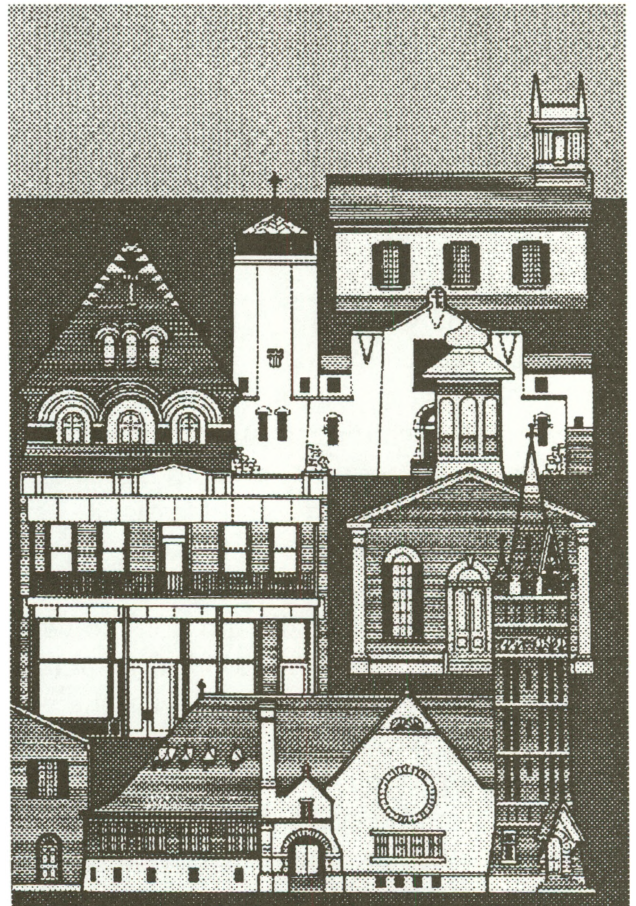
### The New Life Christian Fellowship: Woodinville, Washington

The New Life Christian Fellowship of Congregational Seventh-day Adventists in Woodinville, Washington, is the only church of the five to separate from the denomination and retain the Seventh-day Adventist name. "We are definitely evangelical in theology," says Eric Bahme, the pastor, "but we still fit within the Adventist parameters." According to Bahme, theology was never mentioned as a reason for his termination. Problems with the conference included the style of worship service, led by a non-Adventist worship leader, and the fact that not all tithe dollars were going to the conference.

The New Life Christian Fellowship currently has 60 members, with a total of 180 associated with the ministry. They sponsor many events, such as concerts, and run a Christian resource

and book center. The congregation has also made a commitment to fully subsidize the education of members' children. "We're in it for the long haul," says Bahme. "We are creating a lasting ministry."

According to Bahme, he receives several E-mail messages every day from all over North America and around the world from people wanting to make a similar transition to congregational independence. Bahme says he knows of 15 to 18 senior pastors (in addition to the five discussed in this article) "who will most likely be terminated or quit to start new churches. In the beginning they were mostly fired. Now they are seeing a better option and leaving." Bahme admits that the movement of independent Adventist congregations is still relatively small, but claims that it is also primarily composed of middle- to upper-class Anglo-Saxons—the segment of the population with the most money and resources.



## Bridge City Community Church: Portland, Oregon

Bob Bretsch, after serving as the senior pastor of the Union College church, was senior pastor, from 1992 to 1997, of the 1,450-member Sunnyside church in Portland, Oregon, the largest congregation in the largest conference of the North Pacific Union. On May 29, 1997, the Oregon Conference fired him. A little more than one month later, on July 1, 1997, Bretsch was asked to become the pastor of the newly formed Bridge City Community Church. Duff Gorle and Marc Schelske, associate pastors at Sunnyside with Bretsch, also joined the pastoral team of the new congregation.

When Bretsch came in 1992, Sunnyside was known as a church with a "culturally educated base" and had a formal, traditional church service. According to George Gainer, the associate pastor of Sunnyside who remained, "This was the 'classical music church' of the Northwest." Bretsch brought several innovations, including a strong youth program, a contemporary worship service, a downstairs espresso bar, and Messianic Jewish dancing. According to Bretsch, though many members appreciated the changes, a "Group of 60," who "really did not like what we were doing, used the political resources available to them to undermine what the will of the church was."

The "Group of 60" brought a document of concerns about Bretsch and his ministry to the conference officials. They questioned his tithing practices and philosophy, as well as his

leadership style and attitudes. Bretsch twice diverted his tithe to help needy situations, and once sent his tithe to the Montana Conference. He also revealed to the conference administration that he paid tithe from net, not gross income. The conference declared such a practice unacceptable, whereupon Bretsch apologized and offered to comply with North American Division policy, which states that tithing is a requirement of church employment and is expected of local church officers (NAD Working Policy, D 55 20 and T 05). Though tithing practices were a major concern, Bretsch's defenders emphasize that Sunnyside's tithe went

up every year Bretsch was senior pastor.

According to Bretsch, another concern of the Oregon Conference was that Sunnyside, in order to facilitate its various ministries, was employing the equivalent of four pastors and paying them out of the local church budget. According to Bretsch, this was "portrayed as an open invitation to congregationalism."

The situation at Sunnyside differed from most of the other churches. Instead of only an external split between a congregation and the conference, the congregation split internally. Some members formed a new church, while others remained in the old church facility and returned the worship service to what it was prior to Bretsch's arrival.

Currently, the new Bridge City Community Church is operating successfully. "It is all about reaching lost people," Bretsch says. "Our purpose-driven ministry is so exciting that a Sunday-keeping congregation is coming to worship with us. We have approximately

---

*The most frequently discussed issue is control. Another important issue is theology. For example, many of these pastors do not believe that the visible Adventist Church should be defined as the "remnant." A third issue is worship. All the congregations employ innovative worship techniques.*



600 attending." The Sunnyside church, on the other hand, no longer has a contemporary worship service and voted to suspend the Saturday night "seeker service," according to Gainer. "The battle is still raging. It's not over," Gainer says. "This is the saddest thing I've seen in ministry."

## Set Free Christian Fellowship: Medford, Oregon

The independent fellowship began July 5, 1997, although its guiding spirit, Chad McComas, had already been replaced as pastor of the 600-member Medford, Oregon, church in December 1996. According to McComas, the Oregon Conference told him he could no longer pastor because his wife had a prescription drug addiction. Five months later, on May 30, 1997, he officially resigned as a pastor in the conference. "I knew my future [as a pastor in the Oregon Conference] was over. I was labeled," McComas said.

McComas had been hired 20 years before by the Oregon Conference. He had served as senior pastor of the Medford church for six years. He had also served for six years on the conference executive committee.

McComas and his wife were very open about the addiction problem. Although this was an issue, other issues also contributed to his departure as senior pastor. Some members of the congregation were unhappy with his leadership, and, according to McComas, one member allegedly withheld \$180,000 in tithe from the conference until such time as the conference would remove McComas as senior pastor. For McComas, the most important issues were control, money, and power.

Though McComas is still a credentialed, ordained Seventh-day Adventist pastor, he says, "I don't trust the church anymore. . . . There's a witch hunt going on in the Adventist Church. So many of my friends have been

fired across the country. If you don't fit the mold, [the denomination] doesn't have a place for you. . . . Five people in my family, all pastors, have been pushed out of the church."

After resigning his position as pastor in the Oregon Conference, McComas decided to stay in Medford and start a center concerned with addiction and fellowship, since "the Adventist Church doesn't know how to deal with addictive people." July 5, 1997, was the first Sabbath of Set Free Christian Fellowship—as close to Independence Day as possible. More than 60 people attended the first service.

Set Free Christian Fellowship is directed by a board of volunteer consultants and envisions future branches, such as a recovery center for in-house treatment, and a resource center. They organize many Christian 12-step support groups that help people in recovery from all sorts of addictions.

McComas says, "It's more fun working for God than the denomination. We're reaching all kinds of people the [Adventist] Church could never reach. . . . We are not trying to compete, only trying to reach the people they can't."

## Damascus Road Community Church: Damascus, Maryland

Richard Fredericks, senior pastor of the Damascus Road Community Church, and Bob Fournier, associate pastor, together with the majority of their congregation in Damascus, Maryland, became a congregational church independent of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination on October 27, 1997. Those who remained behind continue to meet in the Damascus church building, which is owned by the Potomac Conference. They comprise the Damascus Grace Fellowship Church, a new congregation that is part of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. The pastor is David Newman, a former editor of *Ministry* magazine. He delivered his first ser-

mon at the church November 1, 1997.

In 1992, Fredericks left his position as associate professor of religion at Columbia Union College to become pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Damascus, Maryland, a congregation of about 100 members. Fredericks introduced an innovative worship style, including drama and contemporary live music, and organized a variety of small outreach groups. In five years, the membership grew to 600.

In 1995, with conference committee support, the congregation voted to change the church name to the Damascus Road Community Church. When they outgrew their church building, they began holding Sabbath services in an auditorium at the local high school. They began making plans to build a larger worship center and to purchase land through their newly formed non-profit organization, Damascus Road Community Church, Inc. (DRCC, Inc.).

Throughout this growth in ministry, problems between the Damascus church and the conference escalated. Early in 1997, at a church business meeting, Fredericks announced that it was his intent and practice to give 60 percent of his personal tithe to the local church, while sending 40 percent to the conference. Potomac Conference president Herbert Broeckel, who was in attendance, replied that it was "non-negotiable" that pastors pay 10 percent of their income to the conference, and that property be held by the conference corporation.

Eventually, Fredericks complied with church policy and began giving 10 percent of his income to the conference, while still attempt-

ing to give nearly the same amount locally. According to Fredericks, his congregation wanted him to pay tithe to the conference, because "they didn't want me fired over that. It wasn't worth it."

But the issue of who held title to property was more difficult. In October 1997, Fredericks was asked to speak to the Potomac Conference Executive Committee. Fredericks addressed the issue of a local congregation holding land, as well as the conviction of the pastors that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination should not be simply equated with God's remnant. "The gospel, not our law-

keeping," said Fredericks, "defines all who constitute God's 'remnant' people."

After discussing Fredericks' remarks, the Potomac Conference Executive Committee concluded that Fredericks must dissolve DRCC, Inc., and set October 27 as a deadline. When Fredericks did not comply, his credentials were revoked.

—William Johnsson

During all these proceedings, DRCC, Inc. continued to negotiate the purchase of 225 acres which, in addition to a new worship facility, may someday include a day-care center, school, auditorium, athletic fields, Christian arts center, non-alcoholic bar and lounge, and Christian cemetery. The owner of the land agreed to sell 56 acres to the church for \$620,000 and donate the remaining 169 acres, but asked for half the money by November 5. Fredericks and his wife took out a home equity loan to help reach this goal, and the November 1 Sabbath offering amounted to more than \$65,000. Previous offerings had been comparable. DRCC, Inc. made the payment.

---

*"This is definitely a trend.  
There is no turning back."*

—Clay Peck

*"Nor does the church at large  
face an imminent threat of  
fragmentation into independent  
congregations. . . . I see  
no evidence of a trend in this  
direction."*

Fredericks says that he, too, has been inundated with inquiries from pastors and congregations interested in following similar courses of action. Pastors, he says, are deeply discouraged by the stagnation all around them. He says that this new trend of congregationalism is a growing one that Adventist administrators can either recognize and benefit from, or disregard and continue to commit slow suicide by cutting off thriving congregations.

For Broeckel, the issue is a simple one: adherence to policy. While Fredericks' theological views have been questioned, Broeckel said in an interview that Fredericks' style of worship was not being challenged. Indeed, according to Broeckel, the newly formed Damascus Grace Fellowship Church, under Newman's leadership, will continue the innovative outreach ministry that Fredericks started. "I admire [Fredericks'] honesty," Broeckel said in a recent interview. "He is a man of strong convictions." Conference officials, however, agree that he is following a course of action unacceptable within the context of the Adventist denomination. "If Fredericks [should] dissolve his corporation," Broeckel said, "and adhere to the rules and regulations of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I would be happy to hire him tomorrow."

## Grace Place: Berthoud, Colorado

Fredericks has referred to Damascus Road Community Church and Grace Place, in Berthoud, Colorado, pastored by Clay Peck, as "sympiotic twins." Indeed, Peck, before beginning Grace Place, worked with Fredericks as an associate pastor at Damascus. The two pastors talk weekly.

"My time at Damascus left an indelible impact on my life," says Peck. "Grace Place is not a clone of Damascus, but there are many similarities." Peck founded his non-profit or-

ganization to hold assets in case it became necessary for the congregation to act as an independent ministry. He took the step before Damascus Road Community Church became incorporated, and this helped Fredericks to take similar action later. Peck was fired only two weeks after Fredericks' employment was terminated, and Peck believes the developments at Damascus served as a catalyst for his own termination.

Grace Place was the weekend outreach of Christ Advent Fellowship, a ministry conceived by Peck and other like-minded individuals. They began meeting in September 1996. Christ Advent Fellowship began as an organization within the Rocky Mountain Conference. Its special mission was to reach those who had left the Adventist Church, didn't know the gospel, or needed a contemporary worship style.

According to Peck, generally 90 percent of financial giving was local and 10 percent went to the conference. Local giving was greater than they expected, so Grace Place began using some of that money to pay the staff of the Adventist church in Berthoud, instead of their salaries coming from the conference, as is customary.

Although tithe was often mentioned as an issue, the Rocky Mountain Conference president, James Brauer, insists that, "Clay has indicated to me that he was willing to return tithe to the conference. This action is not about tithe, and his personal commitment. . . . This action is not about where the members give their tithe, either."

"Although we were not put out over theology," Peck says, "they have started talking about that *since* they decided to sever ties." At the request of the conference, Peck did go to Andrews University in the spring of 1997 so the theologians there could examine his beliefs. "There were no clear conclusions," Peck said in an interview. "My theological views are largely a matter of emphasis and are shared by

many thought leaders at all levels of this denomination." The biggest concern was simply the non-profit organization giving the congregation ownership and control of its assets. Indeed, on October 30, 1997, in a series on Adventist worship services across the United States, the *Adventist Review* published a very positive story on Grace Place.

Days later, on November 2, 1997, the Rocky Mountain Conference Executive Committee voted to suspend Christ Advent Fellowship as a company and to release Peck from employment as a Rocky Mountain Conference pastor.

Three days after Peck's credentials were withdrawn, on November 8, Grace Place met for the first time as a congregation independent of the denomination. According to Peck, about 400 people attended and gave about \$22,000 in offerings.

The president of the Rocky Mountain Conference feels that Adventism "must have new, creative worshiping congregations," and has come up with several options that he hopes can perhaps help new congregations and experiments like Grace Place in the future: Create a conference fund to hold all of a new congregation's tithe to help with initial expenses and to create a pool of money to help

pay for the next church building; or create a completely new conference to hold new church buildings for five years, after which time they will be turned over to the regular conference.

The five pastors agree that the recent events surrounding the creation of the new, independent congregations will have a definite effect on Adventism.

"This is definitely a trend," says Peck. "There is no turning back."

Bahme concurs. "I believe Adventism is in for its largest split if denominational leadership does not begin to open to specific change. This is the largest threat Adventism faces."

This view of events is challenged by others. In his November 1997 article discussing the Damascus Road split, William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, wrote, "Nor does the church at large face an imminent threat of fragmentation into independent congregations. It's true that a couple other congregations [in addition to Damascus] have moved out during the past few years—six months ago the large Sunnyside church in Portland, Oregon, split—but I see no evidence of a trend in this direction."