

WHEN IMMIGRANTS TAKE OVER

THE CHANGING FACE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

IN METROPOLITAN NEW YORK

By Ronald Lawson



Seventh-day Adventism in metropolitan New York has changed dramatically over the past thirty years because it has been transformed from a Church primarily of Caucasians and Afro-Americans, each dominating separate conferences, to a Church 90 percent immigrant. The Church in New York is currently drawn out of a multiplicity of racial and ethnic groups from different parts of the globe, but especially the Caribbean.

The research reported here is part of a large study of international Adventism that has included well over 3,000 in-depth interviews in fifty-five countries of all divisions of the world Church. As an Adventist who has lived in New York since 1971, I was well aware of both the demographic changes taking place and the internal tensions flowing therefrom, and ultimately decided that these warranted focused study. In 1996, when I approached the two conferences headquartered in metropolitan New York seeking

data on the racial/ethnic breakdown of their membership, I found they had nothing reliable. I then approached the pastor of every English speaking congregation (these are the racially mixed ones) and was then usually referred to the church clerks, who went through membership rolls and placed all active members in a racial/ethnic category. I received a 100 percent response rate. I had them omit the missing members. I sampled the congregations that spoke other languages, and found that I could count all members of Korean-speaking churches as Koreans, and similarly for the other languages, and applied the proportion of missing members found there to all congregations of that particular language group. The result of this enterprise was statistics for 1996-97, which I judge to be very reliable.

1996, and are expected to become a minority—47 percent—by 2000.³

The Changing Face of Adventism in Metropolitan New York

The extent of the transformation can be seen most clearly when membership figures for 1945 are used as a baseline. In that year, the Adventist Church in most of the United States was reorganized along racial lines. Until the end of 1944, Adventism was organized geographically, so that the nation was subdivided into local conferences. Although Adventism had grown steadily among Afro-Americans up to that point, none of their pastors had been promoted to administrative positions within what remained an all-Caucasian church bureaucracy. By World War II, black demands for such opportunities had become so strident that church leaders chose in 1944 to defuse the discontent—not by opening positions in the existing structure, but by creating separate conferences for Afro-American churches, which could then elect leaders of their own. The new black, or “regional” conferences overlapped geographically with what became white conferences.

Until reorganization, all Adventists in the New York metropolitan area fell under the Greater New York Conference (GNYC), which had 4,499 members at the end of 1944. However, when the new racially based structure came into being at the beginning of 1945, the Afro-American congregations were removed from GNYC and placed in the new Northeastern Conference (NEC), which then elected Afro-American leaders. The GNYC retained the Caucasian congregations. Because congregations were highly segregated along racial lines, the separation was complete. A total of 1,817 members were transferred from the GNYC to the new NEC. Almost all of these would have been Afro-Americans because few black immigrants had entered from anywhere else up to that time. The GNYC was left with 2,682 members, the vast majority of whom were Caucasians. The “black” conference had taken just over two-fifths of the Adventists in the region (Table 2).

By the end of June 1996, the official membership of the GNYC in the metropolitan area had increased to 15,164, and that of the NEC to 29,369. The combined




Table 1.
Racial/Ethnic Background of North American Adventists 1980 and 1990

| Year | Membership and Percentage of Total | | Hispanic | Asian | Total |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------|
| | African | Caucasian | | | |
| 1980 | 436,485 (72.2) | 127,541 (21.1) | 28,404 (4.7%) | 12,000 (2.0) | 604,430 |
| 1990 | 457,971 (60.2) | 218,189 (28.7) | 64,502 (8.5) | 19,486 (2.6) | 760,148 |
| Growth rate 1980-90 | 4.9% | 71.1% | 127.1% | 62.4% | 125.8% |

Source: General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics

Although New York may be unusual in its high proportion of immigrant Adventists, its experience points to a trend. In the North American Division (NAD) of the Church, which includes the United States and Canada, the cities of Los Angeles, Toronto, Montreal, and Miami also have large immigrant majorities¹. In recent years, 75 percent of the new members added to the Adventist Church in the division have been immigrants from countries in the developing world.² According to the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics, the number of Hispanic members in the NAD increased by 127.1 percent between 1980 and 1990, Asians by 62.4 percent, those of African Descent (a category that does not distinguish between Afro-Americans, West Indians, and Haitians) by 71.1 percent, and Caucasians by only 4.9 percent (Table 1). The proportion of Caucasians in the division declined from 72.2 percent in 1980 to 60.2 percent in 1990. They were estimated as 52 percent in

membership stood at 44,533, almost ten times that of fifty-one years earlier. However, the membership of both conferences was exaggerated because missing members remained on the rolls. After excluding the latter, my estimate of the real membership of the conferences in 1996 is 20,870 in the NEC and 13,683 in the GNYC, a total of 34,480. Table 3 shows how the total membership subdivided racially and ethnically in 1996.

The most striking factors revealed in Table 3 are the withering away of the white membership to only half the numbers in 1945 and to a tiny percentage of the whole; the small growth in the total number of Afro-Americans since 1945 and their decline to less than one-twelfth of the total; and the enormous growth of three immigrant groups in particular, all of which were drawn totally or mostly from the Caribbean. These groups were: English-speaking West Indians, Hispanics, and Haitians.

Adventism in Metropolitan New York has become an immigrant Church, and the Caucasian and Afro-American groups dominant in 1945 have diminished dramatically. Indeed, all the formerly English-speaking "white" congregations became very mixed racially, and only three of the fifty-six English-speaking congregations in the NEC, where Afro-Americans were previously dominant, had Afro-American majorities in 1996. All three of those congregations were small, with memberships of less than one hundred.

The Decline of Caucasians and Afro-Americans

The decline of the two main "American" groups has been much more dramatic than statistics of 1945 and 1996 suggest because both groups grew substantially during the first twenty-five years after 1945, and then declined numerically. In 1970, there were 3,500 Caucasians in the GNYC, but in 1996 there were fewer than 1,000. In the mid-1970s, the number of Afro-



Table 2.
Seventh-day Adventist Membership in the Two Metropolitan New York Conferences, January 1945

| Conference | Membership | Percent |
|--|------------|---------|
| Greater New York (Caucasians and a few Hispanics) | 2,682 | 59.6 |
| Northeastern (Afro-Americans) | 1,817 | 40.4 |
| Totals | 4,499 | 100 |

Source: General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics



Table 3.
Seventh-day Adventist Membership Breakdown Metropolitan New York, 1996

| Race/Ethnicity | Number | Percent |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------|
| West Indian (English speaking) | 16,122 | 46.8 |
| Hispanics | 6,523 | 18.9 |
| Haitians | 5,884 | 17.1 |
| Afro-Americans | 2,761 | 8.0 |
| Caucasians | 947 | 2.7 |
| Africans | 668 | 1.9 |
| Black Central Americans | 572 | 1.7 |
| Koreans | 430 | 1.2 |
| Brazilians | 233 | 0.7 |
| Filipinos | 170 | 0.5 |
| Southern Asians | 82 | 0.2 |
| Chinese | 75 | 0.2 |
| Other | 13 | 0.0 |
| Total | 34,480 | 99.9 |

Source: Collected by Author

Americans in the metropolitan region of the NEC equaled the number of English-speaking West Indians, but today they are barely one-fifth the number of the latter.⁴

Membership growth or decline depends on three factors: losses from migration, apostasy, and deaths, natural increase, and gains through evangelism and migration.

Losses: There have been considerable losses among Caucasian and Afro-American youth in New York. I estimate that the rate approaches 75 percent of youth who grow up as Adventists.⁵ New York has two special problems that increase such losses. First, the network of Adventist colleges funnels many youth out of the metropolitan area and they often make careers

elsewhere. Second, none of the major Adventist hospitals or schools are located in New York. Such institutions are typically intellectual centers of Adventism and their absence in a sophisticated center like New York leaves a gaping hole.⁶

Another source of loss has been the flight of whites and Afro-Americans from churches where they no longer form the majority of members. This phenomenon is compounded by the tendency among the elderly of both groups to move south because retired Caucasians follow the trend to move to a warmer climate and older blacks, who came from the South, choose to return "home" now that racial tensions there have eased.⁷ The reverse flow—of American Adventists to the New York region—is much smaller than the outflow, partly because of an ingrained fear of cities created by Church teachings, and partly because of the absence of a magnet that Church-run institutions, the attendant infrastructure, and career opportunities could have provided.

Natural Increase: If a religious movement does not maintain a level of fertility sufficient to at least offset member mortality, the net losses can negate even a substantial rate of conversion. Fertility is closely related to age distribution—especially that of women.

Caucasian members in the NAD are currently disproportionately elderly, with couples who have no children ("empty nesters") the largest category. Caucasian members are no longer reproducing themselves. This is even more true of New York Caucasians. The GNYC congregations that were formerly Caucasian—but now racially mixed—have very few Caucasian children eligible to attend the Church's schools. The pattern among Adventist Afro-Americans in New York is similar: they, too, are graying and no longer reproducing themselves.⁸

Gains: Additions to membership through migration or evangelism can make up for a situation where losses from exits and deaths exceed gains through natural increase. Additions can also improve the fertility rate by adding younger families. However, there are practically no conversions of Caucasians and Afro-Americans in New York and migration patterns among these groups of Adventists have produced a net loss in recent years.

Evangelism Fails to Bolster Numbers

Why has Adventist outreach to Americans in the New York region proved so ineffective in recent years? Afro-American and Caucasian New Yorkers are showing

increasing sophistication, which renders them less responsive to the typically apocalyptic Adventist evangelistic message and less likely than immigrants to be attracted to Adventist methods. Adventists have been even less successful in the suburbs of New York. Indeed, they have invested relatively little there, realizing that their traditional methods are out of sync with what could strike a responsive chord.

To complicate matters, Afro-American and Caucasian non-Adventists are highly unlikely to be attracted to evangelistic meetings where the speaker comes from a different racial or ethnic group. These two groups have also proven less comfortable than immigrants when they unexpectedly find themselves in an ethnically or racially mixed audience. I have heard several accounts of crusades by Caucasian or Afro-American evangelists in neighborhoods populated primarily by Americans where American attendees failed to return after the initial meeting because the great majority of attendees were immigrants. Attempting to pursue a different audience, the NEC spent a large part of its annual evangelism budget during one recent year renting a college auditorium for an evangelistic series. It succeeded in attracting and baptizing people from a higher status group—including lower and higher professionals—but almost all were West Indians.

Adventists are relatively few in number in New York and largely unknown in their communities because their congregations are not community churches that espouse local issues. Their pastors are moved from congregation to congregation too frequently to establish a presence in the community and, in metropolitan New York, they rarely live near their churches. Although New York City contains most Adventist churches in the region, almost all the pastors have chosen to live in the suburbs. Most of the laity also commute to church. Consequently, Adventists lack a local presence to draw traditional Americans to Adventist churches.

Black Adventist churches lost an opportunity to gain visibility when they avoided becoming involved in the civil rights struggle. Moreover, unlike many black churches of other denominations, they are not regarded as bulwarks of their communities and Adventism is not seen as a "black denomination." When Adventist church buildings are located in predominantly Caucasian or Afro-American communities—as they often are—they have become even less of a presence because both groups have become minorities in their congregations and such modes of worship as music and preaching styles have shifted from the norm for those communities.

The evidence suggests that Caucasians and Afro-

Americans are typically reluctant to throw in their lot with such mixed congregations. For example, when the Church sold its evangelistic center in the late-1970s, the racially mixed congregation that had been meeting in its auditorium bought a former synagogue in a prosperous section of Manhattan's Upper West Side, hoping to create a strong Caucasian bulwark. However, this segment of its members atrophied while the West Indian segment experienced strong growth from outside the neighborhood. The congregation eventually felt so out of place in its environment that it sold the building at an excellent profit and moved to a more diverse location.

The Growth of Immigrant Groups

Although Adventism has become an immigrant church in metropolitan New York, it has not drawn proportionately from all immigrant groups. In 1996, three groups together made up almost 83 percent of the total Adventist membership: English-speaking West Indians, Hispanics, and Haitians. In recent years, New York as a whole has received strong flows of immigrants from points of origin for those groups: Jamaica, Guyana, and other English-speaking islands of the Caribbean; the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, parts of Central and South America; and Haiti. In addition, the city has drawn large numbers from such other regions as China, the former U.S.S.R., and Southern Asia, very few of whom are represented among Adventists (Table 4).

Six factors bear on the growth patterns of the various immigrant groups.

(1) The strength of Adventism in the regions from which immigrants are drawn. Adventists have done well among immigrants from the Caribbean, where Adventism is strong. It has large numbers of members there and is often well known among the population-at-large. This is not the case in China, countries of the former Soviet Union, and Southern Asia, where Adventism has a much weaker presence. Because Adventism is already strong in regions such as the Caribbean, it is not surprising that Church members are among those who immigrate to New York. However, it appears that the rate of Adventist immigration is higher than it would

be if immigrants self-selected at random. Caribbean Adventists are more inclined to immigrate because Adventism focuses them on upward mobility, and migration from these poor countries to the United States is seen as a way to improve their circumstances.

(2) The extent to which Adventist Church members in New York expend effort to contact, welcome, and help fellow members arriving as immigrants. Adventism solidifies ties the immigrants previously felt to their Church to the extent that it does this well in their new land. If it fails, the ties may be broken.

The Adventist Church in New York does not have a comprehensive program to reach out to Adventist immigrants as they arrive. It assumes they will find a church and contact it, often through Adventist relatives



Table 4.

Flow of Immigrants to New York from Selected Countries/Regions 1983-1993

| | |
|---------------------|---------|
| West Indies, Guyana | 174,111 |
| Dominican Republic | 165,124 |
| China | 91,566 |
| South America | 61,018 |
| Former USSR | 46,175 |
| Haiti | 42,155 |
| Southern Asia | 40,745 |
| Central America | 22,932 |
| Korea | 21,877 |
| Philippines | 21,723 |
| Eastern Europe | 20,421 |
| Western Europe | 17,666 |

Source: Abstracted from U.S. Census Statistics

or friends already in New York. It is clear that such networks are important in helping immigrants establish ties to American Adventism. However, the absence of an organized program to contact Adventist newcomers raises the question of how many are shaken loose from Adventism by the transition, a process that Adventist evangelists exploit when it occurs among immigrants who belong to other churches.

(3) The effort expended by the Adventist Church and its members to evangelize new immigrants who are not Adventists. Immigrant members are often eager to reach out to non-Adventist newcomers in friendship and with evangelistic goals. The conferences have awarded the members increasing resources for this purpose. Because new immigrants are frequently shaken loose from networks that bind them to their religious commu-

nities just as they face the culture shock and alienation of a frightening new society, they are more receptive to proselytization.⁹ If they were well acquainted with Adventism because of its high visibility “back home”—which is the case in much of the Caribbean—they are likely to view it more favorably than do Americans, for whom Adventism is usually considered a peculiar sect.

Hispanic and Haitian immigrants are drawn to Adventism because its crusades and services are conducted in their language. They are also disposed to appreciate the close community of Adventists from their homeland. West Indians, for their part, have flocked to hear Afro-American and Caucasian evangelists and have eagerly responded to invitations to be baptized—a situation that their American counterparts do not reciprocate. In addition, West Indians have proven comfortable with either Afro-Americans or Caucasians in mixed English-speaking churches.

Those interviewed agreed that, although growth initially came primarily through immigration of members, evangelism later became an important factor. As a result, membership among the three numerically predominant immigrant groups is now drawn in approximately equal numbers from the immigration of Adventists and the evangelization of nonmember newcomers.

(4) Fertility. Immigrants tend to be young and have more children than typical for America. For example, Edwin Hernandez has found that 76 percent of Hispanic members in the NAD were 41 years old or younger in 1995.¹⁰ This figure omits younger children because they have not been added to membership rolls. High fertility and low death rates contrast sharply with those of aging Caucasians and Afro-Americans. These immigrant groups should be poised for further growth from natural increase to the extent that they retain their youth.

(5) Losses. However, the hemorrhage in membership from these youth is often considerable. Unlike their children, parents continue to look toward their homelands and cultures, so that cultural tensions between generations are often high. Several pastors have told of having to mediate with police after the children of immigrants, who had learned from peers that corporal punishment is considered child-abuse in New York, called the police after being beaten by parents. The latter had been taught “back home,” where corporal punishment was used frequently, that the Bible endorses such methods of discipline.

Problems with youth are exacerbated among Hispanics and Haitians because of language differences between generations. Yet there has been little attempt in these churches to create worship services that the youth

can understand clearly. Parents have rationalized this decision on the ground that services in their own languages are necessary if they expect to attract non-Adventist immigrants to their churches. It seems as though retention of West Indian youth is higher than among Hispanics and Haitians because of the absence of a language problem between generations.¹¹ This may be a key to the higher West Indian growth rate.

(6) Evangelization of second-generation immigrants. Adventists have had very little success evangelizing second-generation immigrants because they have become Americanized, their Adventist peers reach out to them much less, they have usually established strong ties to existing networks, and the Adventist message does not appear relevant to them. There is an additional barrier in the case of second-generation Hispanics and Haitians, who are usually not proficient with the language used in the churches. Adventist failure to reach second-generation immigrants indicates that maintaining the current growth rates of these ethnic groups will depend on whether the flow of immigrants continues.

The Impact of Racial/Ethnic Diversity on the Adventist Polity

What has been the impact of the emergence of such racial/ethnic diversity on the polity of Adventism in metropolitan New York? The experiences of the two conferences have varied from one another because of their racial/ethnic profiles. Thus, the balance of the competing racial/ethnic groups differs (Table 5).

Diversity Challenges the (Black) Northeastern Conference

The Northeastern Conference has had a clear and increasing West Indian majority for nearly two decades. During this time, it has faced two foci of conflict. When the West Indians first gained a majority in congregations, there was competition for leadership positions and bitterness when Afro-Americans were displaced. One West Indian pastor who had presided over an especially difficult transition later analyzed it in a dissertation, which was eventually published as a book. He noted that the experience had been “alarmingly stressful” to Afro-Americans, who had lost control and leadership of their congregations and had subsequently been obliged to

adapt to new ways of worship and church management. The result had been "divisiveness and suspicion, . . . strife and ill-will."¹² Because West Indians had finally gained a majority, they had "almost total control," as had Afro-Americans before. His appeal for the two groups to work together generated a storm, which included publication of a "critical" review of the book by an Afro-American pastor, who angrily accused the West Indians of organizing to gain power and control and of neglecting evangelism among Afro-Americans.¹³ The tension and conflict were most overt during the period in which the West Indians gained power within their congregations.

Tension in the regional conference over the paucity of West Indian pastors gave the GNYC (the "white" conference) its opportunity to expand into West Indian communities. Because Adventist West Indians were not accustomed to organizational segregation and did not share the bitterness toward Caucasians that Afro-Americans often held, a minority of these immigrants had already joined GNYC congregations. Realizing that growth among this community was possible, the GNYC hired pastors from among the ranks of West Indians who had migrated in hopes of finding positions within the United States.

The GNYC began tentatively with a single such pastor, then, because he successfully attracted Adventist West Indians and evangelized others, added more West Indian pastors until it currently has twenty-two. The success of this strategy and the threat it presented to the NEC forced the latter to follow suit.¹⁴ However, West Indian pastors remained a small minority among pastors in the conference for a considerable time. Their numbers were bolstered when some unemployed immigrant pastors proved themselves through self-sponsored evangelism, then offered themselves and the congregations they had raised to the conference.

However, after West Indians achieved a majority among the NEC membership, they found it difficult to achieve the next step: political dominance.



Table 5.

Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Seventh-day Adventist Membership Within the Two Conferences in Metropolitan New York, 1996

| Race/Ethnicity | GNYC (%) | NEC (%) | Total (%) |
|------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| West Indian | 3,816 (28.1) | 12,306 (58.9) | 16,122 (46.8) |
| Hispanic | 5,804 (42.8) | 719 (3.4) | 6,523 (18.9) |
| Haitian | 1,538 (11.3) | 4,346 (20.8) | 5,884 (17.1) |
| Afro-American | 122 (0.9) | 2,639 (12.6) | 2,761 (8.0) |
| Caucasian | 933 (6.9) | 14 (0.1) | 947 (2.7) |
| African | 391 (2.90) | 277 (1.3) | 668 (1.9) |
| Black Central American | 0 (0) | 572 (2.7) | 572 (1.7) |
| Korean | 430 (3.2) | 0 (0) | 430 (1.2) |
| Brazilian | 232 (1.7) | 1 (0) | 233 (0.7) |
| Filipino | 146 (1.1) | 24 (0.1) | 170 (0.5) |
| Southern Asian | 73 (0.5) | 9 (0) | 82 (0.2) |
| Chinese | 75 (0.6) | 0 (0) | 75 (0.2) |
| Other | 12 (0.1) | 1 (0) | 13 (0) |
| Total | 13,572 | 20,908 | 34,480 |

Source: Collected by Author

The political frustration of the West Indians peaked when another Afro-American succeeded the long-term president of the NEC. Afro-Americans argued that the conference had been created to give them opportunities to occupy leadership positions. Thus, the position "rightly" belonged to one of them. The new president held office for only one term. He was defeated in 1988 after insensitive remarks galvanized opposition, allowing him to be dubbed as anti-West Indian. West Indians on the nominating committee then declared that it was "time to elect one of our own," and proceeded to do so.¹⁵

Meanwhile, growth among Haitians in the NEC had resulted in their numbers surpassing those of the Afro-Americans also. However, they remained politically impotent. One segment of Haitians felt so neglected that it switched to the GNYC at a time when that

conference was so desperate about declining numbers that it welcomed all comers. The Haitians within the NEC continue to feel left out because the Haitian coordinator is their only representative in the conference office. They have no more representation than the Hispanic group, which has fewer than one-sixth as many members in the NEC. Haitians have pressed recently for formation of their own conference because of poor opportunities for advancement.

Diversity Challenges the (White) Greater New York Conference

The GNYC has faced less overt conflict at the congregational level. This is true, in part, because its non-English speaking segment is larger and such congregations are usually spawned as new groups rather than competing for control of existing structures. When English-speaking West Indians moved into some Caucasian congregations, they were usually welcomed because the latter were already in decline. As the proportion of West Indians in these congregations increased, they took control fairly easily.

There was major conflict in one congregation, however, the oldest in Brooklyn. It had originally been mostly Scandinavian and had then become predominantly Italian. When an influx of West Indians resulted eventually in a transfer of leadership, a large segment of the Caucasian minority reacted negatively, broke away, and formed a new congregation, which has also become very diverse. Members of other formerly Caucasian churches watch nervously whenever an influx of minorities from evangelism or immigration changes the balance of power. In contrast, several new West Indian congregations were spawned when their mother churches in the Bronx became overcrowded. The new churches avoided the discomfort often associated with changing racial/ethnic balances in existing congregations because they had to find their own buildings.

The extent of the GNYC's racial/ethnic diversity has created high tension in conference politics. Because the conference has no majority group, Hispanics and West Indians, the two largest segments, have increasingly vied with each other for power and influence. Caucasians, who have always regarded the conference as theirs, have sought to hold onto power. Now fourth in size, Caucasians retained the presidency until 1997 by playing the two largest groups against one another with

help from NAD leaders, who saw retention of the presidency by Caucasians as the best way to avoid civil war in the conference and to reach out to white New Yorkers. However, the cost was creation of subconferences that evolved out of the battles between the competing ethnic groups.

Subconferences Inserted into the Bylaws

After one particularly bitter struggle, ethnic coordinators were given departmental status in the conference's bylaws as directors of ethnic ministry. Independence of the ethnic groups also strengthened when changes in the bylaws abandoned the previous system, which had divided the conference into geographic districts with a variety of ethnic churches, and replaced it with subconferences based on race, which governed much of the distribution of funds and had the power to select new pastors.

This system raised racial tensions because it threw the racial groups into direct competition with one another. Caucasian pastors felt shortchanged because their multiethnic congregations lacked political clout due to low membership, even though their members earned higher salaries and sent larger per capita contributions to the conference. They also resented being forced into a politically weak "multicultural" subconference because there were no Caucasian churches as such. This subconference included Chinese and Ghanaian congregations as well as mixed English-speaking congregations.

Hispanic Conference Proposed

Hispanic pastors remained discontented despite the establishment of subconferences based on ethnic groups. They eventually persuaded the GNYC to approve a feasibility study of a plan to create a separate Hispanic conference. They justified the proposal in terms of the missiological principle that self-governing churches are also self-propagating and argued that a Hispanic conference would be able to focus better on the needs of the Spanish-speaking churches and foster growth among Hispanics more effectively. In addition, they argued that the membership and tithe income of a Hispanic regional conference within the Atlantic Union would be greater than those of three of its existing conferences.

Hispanic Elected President

The GNYC had responded to the growth of Hispanics and their demands for inclusion by electing a Dominican as secretary-treasurer in 1980. When the position was divided in 1988, a Puerto Rican became secretary and a Caucasian treasurer. The West Indian growth was recognized by the election of one of their pastors to head a department in 1985.

The growing rivalry between these two groups was demonstrated dramatically at the 1991 constituency meeting, when the Hispanic secretary challenged the long-term Caucasian president. Because this was to be his last term, the result was a battle royal over the election of secretary. When the nominating committee submitted the name of a West Indian, which was ultimately rejected, the atmosphere became so tense that the chairperson frequently called delegates to prayer in attempts to calm their passions. The session deadlocked, forcing two adjournments to allow cooling-off, first for thirty days and then six months. Ultimately, another West Indian was elected.

A Hispanic-Caucasian coalition, engineered with the help of the Hispanic vice president of the NAD, was successful in electing a new Spanish-speaking Caucasian from outside the conference as president in 1994. However, he rapidly alienated both Hispanics and West Indians, thus preparing the way for a coalition between these two groups.

As the GNYC constituency meeting of June 1997 approached, the president of the Hispanic Ministers' Association contacted his West Indian counterpart to create an alliance between the conference's two largest communities. The West Indian and Hispanic pastors agreed to cooperate in an attempt to depose the incumbent Caucasian president, to nominate their own local candidates, and to give joint support to whomever won.

The Hispanics caucused in advance of the session and coalesced around one candidate, the bilingual director of the conference's youth department. The president of the Black Ministerial Association refused to discuss a West Indian slate, and as a result two West Indian names were put forward. Two Caucasians were also nominated—including the incumbent—but both did poorly. The final run-off in the nominating committee was between the Hispanic and a West Indian. The former, a Dominican, won narrowly by two votes. When the nominee's name came to the floor, there was an attempt to send it back to the committee, which failed by a wide margin. The Hispanics on the nominating

committee then joined with the West Indians to elect the runner-up in the presidential vote as secretary, in place of the incumbent West Indian. The Hispanic treasurer was then reelected, which left Caucasians out of the GNYC's leadership triumvirate for the first time. Less than one month later, the neighboring New Jersey Conference also elected a Hispanic president, this time a Puerto Rican.

The political coup and sudden transfer of power in the GNYC heightened tensions among the various ethnic groups because some lost power while others gained. The new president therefore announced that his first priority would be to foster peace and harmony among the constituency, especially the clergy. However, shortly after the election, every Caucasian working in the conference office—departmental leaders, the attorney, camp manager, and receptionist, as well as the former president—either left the conference or resigned from church employment. Three of the Caucasian pastors also accepted calls to other conferences and others sought to follow suit. Although some had personal reasons independent of the transition in leadership, the total effect of the exodus was dramatic.

Hispanic pastors now find themselves divided over whether to push ahead with plans to secede and create a separate Hispanic conference, or to consolidate gains within the GNYC. Some argue that the conference will become Hispanic by default if they bide their time because growth of their segment is likely to spurt under Hispanic leadership. Moreover, they already hold two of the officer positions and eleven of the twenty-three at the conference.

One major figure in the thrust for a separate conference has stated that if Hispanics gain the appointment of a full-time Spanish-speaking evangelist—thus freeing the Spanish coordinator to concentrate on administration of the Hispanic subconference—they might be willing to abandon the goal of separation. Others are concerned about losing momentum, however. They argue that other minorities might find it easier to win their own conferences if Hispanics prevail.

Continued growth may indeed allow larger immigrant groups to become self-governing and self-propagating, but who is to govern declining groups such as Caucasians and Afro-Americans and save them from oblivion?

Conclusion

Adventism in metropolitan New York has experienced more internal turmoil than other denominations as

a result of the influx of "new immigrants" since 1968. There are two reasons for this. First, the face of Adventism has been transformed to a greater extent than that of any other denomination. This is the one denomination whose membership now contains a substantial majority of new immigrants.¹⁶ Moreover, because of the extent of Adventism's transformation, this has also been more rapid than that of others. This dynamic inevitably heightened levels of internal tension, because almost every congregation and both conferences faced dramatic changes.

Second, Adventism's complex structure has exacerbated the turmoil. Centralized and hierarchical, it has experienced more tensions than it would have if its structure had been congregational because all racial/ethnic groups are thrown into the conference polity. Its pot is also very mixed because it has retained its unity: Pentecostals, taken collectively, are proving even more successful among the immigrants than Adventists. However, Pentecostals are heavily fragmented, and continue to subdivide along racial/ethnic lines. Moreover, Adventism's representative system makes its tensions more visible than they would be in an authoritarian system such as those of the Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons: Adventism's annual election of officers within congregations and its triennial conference constituency meetings provide forums where competition for power and resources become overt.

The influx of new immigrants in recent years has reshaped the face of Adventist congregations and polity in New York. The extent to which this impact will be lasting will depend on several factors: future migration patterns, the extent to which second-generation immigrants become rooted in Adventism, and the extent to which the latter retain their ethnic identity.

Researchers focusing on immigrants in other denominations have found that the American-born and bred children of immigrants are typically more fluent in English than in the language spoken at home, and that, in their urgency to accommodate to their new society, many turn away from the churches of their parents. My research indicates that this pattern is being repeated among the children of new immigrant Adventists.¹⁷ Consequently, although the impact of the recent immigrants has made a dramatic change in Adventism in the New York region, it is too early to claim that this is permanently reshaping its face.

Notes and References

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15. Ibid.

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