

# Political Challenges the Church Cannot Afford to Ignore

by Tihomir Kukolja

“There is no place for racism, elitism, and nationalism within the family of faith. They don’t belong in the church,” General Conference president Jan Paulsen said during his Sabbath sermon at the Adventist World Session in Toronto, Canada.<sup>1</sup> Because there was no discussion of these issues during the session, his statement only hinted at a growing problem for an expanding worldwide church. Adventists can no longer claim political innocence or indifference when their countries are plunged into political turmoil. In some places Adventists are involved in the conflict, and in others church leaders are being asked to assist with the resolution. During the past ten years, the church response to political conflict has varied greatly from one division to another, which raises the question, What is the appropriate church response to ethnic political conflicts?

## Adventists and Unrest in the South Pacific

At the same time Paulsen was preaching in Toronto, in Fiji a coup was under way. Andrews University graduate George Speight, a rebel leader and indigenous Fijian with an Adventist upbringing, was holding hostage



twenty-seven members of the Fijian Parliament with a group of armed civilians, some of them current and former Adventists. The hostages included Mahendra Chaudhry, the democratically elected prime minister of Indian descent.

Throughout the coup, which began in May and lasted until July 13, Speight frequently referred to his faith in God’s providence. “Rumors in Fiji had linked the church to the coup,” according to the South Pacific Division *Record*. “On June 5, the mission ran a full page advertisement in the *Fiji Times*, the country’s largest newspaper stating the Seventh-day Adventist church opposes Mr. Speight’s actions and upholds the separation of church and state.” Adventist leaders in the region also

joined other leading churches in condemnation of the coup.

Still there were some Fijian church members who gave their support to Speight’s pro-indigenous cause. “Sympathy with the coup leader’s nationalistic objectives appears to have overridden Christian and biblical principles as they relate to our government leaders,” stated a denominational report released by the Central

Pacific Union Mission.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Adventists were leaders of another armed coup in the South Pacific, this time in the neighboring Solomon Islands, where Adventists comprise 10 percent of the country's population. There Malaitan rebels, the Malaitan Eagle Force, seized control of the capital Honiara and placed Solomon Islands prime minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu under house arrest. Adventist lawyer Andrew Nori was the spokesperson for the Eagle Force. Some church members supported the Malaitan cause, whereas others sided with the Isatabu Freedom Movement, the rival indigenous armed group. Lawrence Tanabose, secretary of the Western Pacific Union Mission was asked by the Australian High Commission and Prime Minister Ulufa'alu to act as a mediator between the two warring factions, according to the South Pacific Division *Record*. In a matter of days, the coup was brought to an end.

However, the crisis in the South Pacific is far from over. After agreement had been reached in the Solomon Island's parliament, Nori and his group dropped its demand for Ulufa'alu's resignation, but Nori later gave warning: "This is a war that will continue for some time." The Statement on Ethnic and Political Tensions in the South Pacific, released by the division on June 14, 2000, shared the concerns of the regional politicians, namely that the recent events in Fiji and Solomon Islands have "the potential for further crisis in the South Pacific."<sup>3</sup>



and hospital complex."<sup>4</sup>

In March 2000, at the time of Ntakirutimana's extradition from the United States to the United Nations detention facility in Arusha, Northern Tanzania, another Rwanda murder caught the attention of international media. Assiel Kabera, an Adventist adviser to the former Rwandan president Pasteur Bizimunga, was shot dead by an unidentified gunman in the Rwandan capital of Kigali. Kabera's father was one of the seven Tutsi ministers who had pleaded for the lives of their people in a moving letter submitted to pastor Ntakirutimana one day before the Mugonero massacre. According to well-informed sources, Kabera was shot because he spoke frankly and openly about the events in 1994.<sup>5</sup>

## The Rwandan Massacres

The unprecedented genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994, when members of the Hutu tribe slaughtered almost a million Tutsi people, remains current news within Adventism. At present, the International War Tribunal in Rwanda is pursuing the case against an alleged war criminal, former pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, a Hutu Adventist and a denominational leader at the time of the Rwandan massacres.

The tribunal is charging Ntakirutimana and his son Gerard, also a denominational employee at that time, with genocide and crimes against humanity. According to the charges, both of the men "participated in an attack on the men, women and children"<sup>4</sup> that resulted in the massacre of between five thousand and ten thousand Tutsis—fellow believers and non-Adventists alike—who had sought sanctuary in the denominational compound at the Mugonero church

## Tensions Among Adventists in the Balkans

In Europe, the violent breakdown of the former Yugoslavia ten years ago eventually led to reorganization of the Adventist Church structure because of disagreements between Croatian and Serbian members.<sup>6</sup> The issue became so tense that in 1992 the executive committee of the Croatian-Slovenian Conference delivered a strong statement in a document prepared for the Trans-European Division:

Belgrade has exploited its international connections too much in spreading its points [of view] concerning the leaders, church administrators and pastors of the Croatian-Slovenian Conference by presenting them as nationalists, separatists, politically minded, pro-Catholics, and sympathiz-

ers of the leading political party in Croatia. . . . It is not acceptable [any more] that Belgrade, with its interpretations and attitude towards us, [should] be considered as our spokesman and representative before the higher church structures.<sup>7</sup>

In mid-1992 the Church in Croatia became a separate administrative entity directly attached to the Trans-European Division and known in its initial stage as the Croatian-Slovenian Conference.

One of the issues that proved divisive was how specific to be in presenting facts about the war in Croatia. Official reporting by Yugoslavian Union leaders never addressed issues about who killed or wounded over a dozen Adventists, or damaged and destroyed a number of Adventist churches, or bombed entire villages and cities in Croatia.

Furthermore, Serbian church leaders were quick to remind colleagues in Croatia: "Brethren, this is not our war! We should not take sides!" However, when in March 1999 the NATO Allegiance launched its military campaign against Yugoslavia, the Serbian Adventists



immediately reported the conflict in their own homeland. "Our church was among the first to publish its statement against the war destructions that had fallen upon us," wrote pastor Miodrag Zivanovic, the Yugoslavian Union Conference secretary in Serbia.<sup>8</sup>

The actions of Serbian Adventist leaders in Yugoslavia on this count seem to be inconsistent. Furthermore, although denominational reporting that originated in Serbia had produced one story after another about civilian suffering that NATO attacks caused, reports from Kosovo were reduced to dry statistical data about the amount of humanitarian help processed by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

## Issues the Church Cannot Afford to Ignore

The succession of racially motivated political upheavals that have involved or affected Adventists has presented a special challenge to the worldwide church. By tradition, it has always claimed its political indifference, innocence, and neutrality. However, the worldwide Adventist Church can no longer afford to ignore the fact that Adventists in different parts of the world no longer remain indifferent when their own countries are plunged into political turmoil.

In his observation about the current situation in the South Pacific, Raymond Coombe, the public affairs and religious liberty director for the South Pacific Division has highlighted the extent of the problem. "It's a sad fact that extreme elements of nationalism, racism, and retaliation infect even those who fellowship within our church," he wrote in the division's *Record*.<sup>9</sup>

The situations in the South Pacific, the Balkans, and Rwanda, plus a number of other situations in which many Adventists have become involved politically and racially make it increasingly uncomfortable for the Church to remain silent. Furthermore, repeating the well-worn statement at each new crisis that the Church is not involved in politics, although technically correct, ignores the fact that issues that provoke regional and global national tensions are often not only political in nature, but can also involve ethics.

If, for example, a number of Adventists support an oppressive dictatorial regime, side with terrorists who pursue political or nationalistic agendas by holding hostages, or become involved with mobs that commit genocide against those of another national or tribal minority—including members of their own church—such circumstances should move the worldwide church to do something other than simply publish moralizing and doctrinal pamphlets about its commitment to pacifism and peace. The Church has an obligation to voice its moral concern—even outrage when necessary—in a clear, unbiased, and fair way during times of political crisis, times when its own people might be confused about issues of nationalism and racism. The Church should not spare constituencies of its own that might be caught up in political turmoil.

The South Pacific Division statements that

address the recent crisis in Fiji and the Solomon Islands probably come closest to this goal. The statements are probably the clearest that the Church has ever issued on any political crisis. The Central Pacific Union Mission Report, for example, condemns "violence, racism and the undemocratic actions of the coup leaders," and states with precision that "the Church does not in any way support the armed, illegal and unconstitutional takeover of a government elected in good faith, under constitutional guidelines." The statement also makes clear that the Church was not at all happy that "a number of Adventist church members, currently 'in good and regular standing', have been involved."<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, the follow-up document, South-Pacific Division Statement on Ethnic and Political Tensions in the South Pacific, states: "Seventh-day Adventists do not support the overthrow of governments by force. The Church upholds the rule of law in a peaceful society." The statement also addresses the involvement of Adventists in the coups: "With sadness and regret the Church acknowledges that in recent ethnic and political conflicts and coups in the Pacific, some former Seventh-day Adventists and current members have been involved" (see page 66, below). Both documents make it clear that the Church did not support the coup's leaders, their supporters, or the means by which the political ambitions of both were executed. A church that is morally aware could not have done otherwise, even if the clarity of its statements meant rebuking and offending some of its own members.

On the other hand, the official denominational response to the Kosovo Crisis more than a year ago was anything but clear. The Seventh-day Adventist Church Statement on Crisis in Kosovo, released by the Adventist Church World Headquarters on April 6, 1999, contains vague generalities about the denominational humanitarian work, "concern for human rights, religious freedom and rights of minorities," the need to foster "a deeper understanding of and a greater respect for non-discrimination," appreciation for "crying human needs," and hope "for reconciliation" and improvement in the "worsening humanitarian situation in Kosovo and elsewhere in the region." The only recognizable reference to the actual crisis stated that "the Church rejected the use of violence as a method for conflict resolution, be it ethnic cleansing or bombing" (see page 66, below). Such a statement could have easily been interpreted as criticism of both the Yugoslavian regime under Slobodan Milosevic and NATO. Although credit should be given to the Church

for daring to say anything at all about the sensitive Balkan issue, it was disappointing that the Church's statement was so limited.

How could one compare the effort to stop the escalation of national tragedies in the Serbian neighborhood with a regime that had for almost a decade terrorized not only Kosovo but also the entire region, including Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina? How could one ignore the ruined economies, destroyed towns and villages, and hundreds of thousands killed, wounded, displaced, and homeless people? Such diplomatic vagueness would seem questionable even if formulated out of concern for the safety of Serbian Adventists.

However, most discomfiting was the lack of any official denominational response at the time of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Not until two years afterward was anything said. At that point, General Conference president Robert S. Folkenberg delivered a sermon in the Rwandan capital of Kigali in which he addressed the issues of a Christian's responsibility for forgiveness and reconciliation within the context of the Rwandan tragedy. "What makes this worse than all the others is that this is a nation in which 95 percent of the population claimed the name of Christ," he said. "Ninety-five percent . . . was not sufficient to stop the genocide."<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the Church should have been more deliberate even before the indictment of pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutima and Folkenberg's visit. Specifically, it should have asked a question that has probably haunted many Adventists outside Rwanda since 1994: What were at least 200,000 Hutu Adventists doing while their tribesmen massacred Tutsi civilians? Calls for forgiveness and reconciliation make sense only after an honest answer is provided. Otherwise it could appear that in the eyes of the Church the crimes committed by its own members are less atrocious than those committed by other people, or that calls to forgiveness and reconciliation should override the need for accountability among those who have committed atrocities.

## The Way Ahead—Acquiring the Christian Mind

The days ahead will not lessen the challenges of nationalism among the members of the global and ethnically diverse Adventist community. "We are no

longer a small church. In more and more countries Adventists will come to prominence in shaping society on a multitude of fronts, including the political," stated *Adventist Review* editor William Johnsson in a recent editorial.<sup>12</sup>

Adventists around the world will have plenty of opportunities to be caught up in whirlwinds of local issues. Church leaders will need adequate information to distinguish the victims from the perpetrators of crimes in such conflicts. Given the international political climate, it would be wise for the Church to consider the best ways to handle issues of nationalism that affect its own international community. One is surprised that among the number of resolutions discussed and accepted at the recent General Conference Session in Toronto there was no room for a serious discussion of nationalism, racism, and elitism, particularly in consideration of past General Conference sessions that have considered such issues.

If the Church is to grow in maturity, as well as in numbers, it needs to consider itself as more than an undertaker that buries the dead and expresses condolences to survivors. Unless accompanied with a clear call to accountability, measured or calculated expressions of sorrow and sympathy, calls to forgiveness and reconciliation, or expressions of unfocused condemnation may seem offensive to victims who have felt the cold and brutal hands of oppressors.

One way for the Church to demonstrate its commitment to peace would be to offer assistance in the processes of mediation and reconciliation, especially in those regions where the denomination has more apparent influence. However, the most important challenge for the Church lies within its own membership. How does the Church intend to pursue the serious task of educating its own community about the implications and applications of the gospel within all spheres of human interaction?

Harry Blamires, a Christian sociologist, suggests that churches need to help their communities acquire the "Christian mind—a mind trained, informed, equipped to handle data of secular controversy within a framework of reference which is constructed of Christian presuppositions."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the most important task of the Church is to help its members to develop Christian minds transformed and educated by the gospel. Perhaps we have assumed too long that the correct doctrine and dry logic of our truth would by itself change people. However, the values of the Kingdom—justice, fairness, love, compassion, neighborliness, peace, freedom, equality, integrity, humility,

respect for human rights and dignity, and the right to be different—all of these need to be cultivated. As President Paulsen said, "racism, elitism and nationalism have no place in the family of God."

## Notes and References

1. Jan Paulsen, "Steady as You Go!", *Adventist Review*, July 13, 2000.
2. Kingsley Wood, "Fiji Update," *Record*, June 2, 2000.
3. Statement on Ethnic and Political Tensions in the South Pacific, South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, June 14, 2000.
4. The International Tribunal for Rwanda, Indictment of Elizaphan Ntakirutimana and Gerard Ntakirutimana, Case No: ICTR-06-19-1, Kigali, Rwanda, Sept. 7, 1996.
5. The author has made several contacts with people closely related to events in Rwanda since 1994. They have provided him with valuable information, but have requested that their identities remain undisclosed for the time being. For additional information about the Rwanda massacre, see Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
6. The author lived in Croatia between 1990 and 1995 and has personal knowledge about events that affected Croatian society and the Church during that period.
7. Summary Representing Discussions with the Croatian-Slovenian Conference Workers about the Future Status of the Croatian-Slovenian Conference, Zagreb, Croatia, Feb. 7, 1992.
8. Miodrag Zivanovic, "General Wesley Clark is Not an Adventist," statement for the Serbian media presented by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Serbia, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, Apr. 18, 1999.
9. "On Lawlessness and Liberty," *Record*, June 24, 2000.
10. Wood, "Fiji Update."
11. "GC President Speaks Out About Rwanda Atrocities," *Adventist Review*, Mar. 1996, 6.
12. "On the Cusp of Change," *Adventist Review*, online edition, June 2000.
13. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963).

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