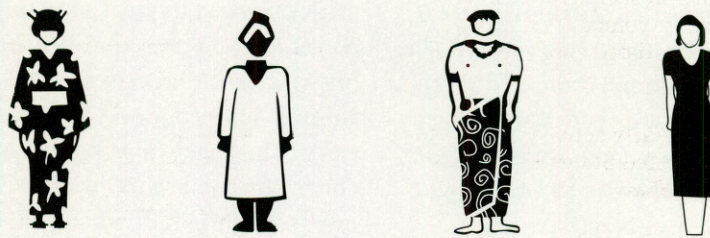


What Are the Ties That Bind?

*Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender
and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion.*

By Laura L. Vance. Urbana-Champaign:

University of Illinois Press, 1999.



*Reviewed by Grace Fields, Ronald Lawson,
Judy Rittenhouse, and Charles I. Stokes*

Submitted as a doctoral dissertation at Simon Fraser University, this is a book whose author purports to deal with the crises that face today's Adventism. Laura Vance, a professor at Georgia Southwestern State University concentrates on a North American Seventh-day Adventist Church that she came to know and, she feels, understand, as a result of her attendance at services, intensive interviews, and literary research. Choosing not to write just one more history of Adventism, Vance uses what she calls "crises" to "explicate" Adventism.

Her first apparent objective is to examine how and why a church whose founding depended so greatly upon a woman came to be male dominated. She wants to understand why Adventism "for decades" has been beset by "contention concerning the propriety of women's public participation in leadership." Her second objective is to master the "dynamic of doctrine" in Adventism as successive waves of conflict over rethinking of the "sanctuary question," justification vs. sanctification, secularization of the Church and its institutions, and even over the effect alleged plagiarism in "Sister" White's foundational "red" books may have had on emergent theology.

Her third objective is to put in critical relief how Adventism handles questions that involve gender and what the preferred structure of the Adventist family is, along with issues of divorce and whether there have been changes in how the Church views appropriate sexuality—including the role of gay and lesbian members. Because in point of fact these matters led her to study Adventism, one gets the impression that she formulated her list of crises before she began writing.

In effect, Vance has written two sets of essays about Adventism. Part one is a set of essays that do not break any new ground as she examines Adventism as a religion. The essays in part two analyze the denomination on a sociological level. This bifurcation is hard to defend, but scant evidence of professional editing in the book worsens matters. At the very least, the dissertation writing style and format need softening. There is

clearly a disconnect between her rather favorable treatment of Adventism as a religion and her opinions about the challenges to Adventist society that her crises limn out.

When Vance wrestles with how to characterize the Adventist "church," she is guided by the familiar sociological categorization of sect and church. One senses her implicit judgement that Adventism is still a sect. To be sure, she recognizes that Adventism is no longer simply North American, and to that extent she is ready to call Adventism a denomination. Although she allows for the possibility that direction setting at the General Conference level may increasingly take place beyond these shores, she chooses to emphasize what she has found around her in North America.

Vance's research methodology involved regular attendance at and participation in the life of at least two local churches for more than six months. She went to and stayed at several camp meetings. She discussed a wide variety of local, conference, and wider issues with her acquaintances. She interviewed pastors, administrators, and educators. She poured over more than a century of *Review and Herald* issues trying to trace the emergence of conflicts and crises. She visited widely the centers of Adventist culture, the so-called "ghettoes." She came to be, she feels, in a position to understand the trappings of "conference" structure, from the local level to the General Conference. Withal, she attempted to immerse herself in an Adventism

whose doctrines and characteristics today had deep roots in a nineteenth-century past.

Vance approaches Adventism as if she has the essence of today's Church after cataloging who does what, where the action is, and how decisions are made. Yet most American Adventists will sense that she doesn't quite get it. To insist that Vance understand what we Adventists feel in our bones, what binds us to each other, and how we respond to the Church as we experience it is probably asking too much. Yet without those feelings and that array of life events, she was likely to mishandle what she calls "crises" and mischaracterize what she calls "doctrines."

Because Vance never quite tells her readers what a crisis is, we do not know her criteria for selecting critical issues. In any case, she does not seem to consider the survival of Adventism to be at stake. If one ventures that crises are those events that tear the Church apart, not one of the issues she asserts to be critical has made any significant difference at the local church or conference level in North America. There are, to be sure, individual churches here and there where the sanctuary question or the ordination of women have been divisive issues, but typically these have been non-issues in most places.

In part, this is true because "as we know" women tend to "dominate" the local church anyway. They constitute the Sabbath School leadership; they are treasurers, church clerks, and the majority of the church boards. For women, the Church has a role for their families that is crucial. Church is where the wife and the husband, mother and father, work together to get things done, from welcoming the stranger to maintaining the church and school facilities. More often than not, it is the woman who pushes her husband forward to leadership.

Ellen White's role has been and remains that of a guide. The local church simply has not believed the attacks on her because she is needed. Indeed, she has had the effect of strengthening the authority system in the local church. By the same token, complex arguments over the sanctuary, righteousness by faith, or the meaning of the divinity of Christ have not reached local congregations. More important have been the issues of vegetarianism, what to eat, and how to keep the Sabbath, and behavioral matters such as dancing, card playing, jewelry, the lottery, theater attendance, smoking, and mind-altering drugs. Who would replace Ellen White on these issues? Pastors come and go after relatively short stays, but families

Women in Their Place— Does God Call Women?

An inspiring book:
where the Holy Spirit enlightens the wise.

Determine the truth about the
work God wants done by women

Available at
ABCs & Teach Services Inc.
(800) 367-1844

Totally revised by U. J. Underwood, M. D. • Quantity limited.



remain and the Church retains its permanence because in large measure the “red” books provide the answers.

Although what Vance calls crises have left little trace in local churches, there are and have been “contemporary issues” that do affect the local church. The recent defenestration of a General Conference president in a plethora of unfavorable publicity is not one of them. This had the potential to be a schismatic event, yet it has passed over as a summer storm now largely forgotten.

Not so easily disposed have been the problems of diversity and ethnicity. Throughout the United States and Canada, the typical city has African-American churches, Haitian churches, Hispanic churches, Portuguese and Brazilian churches, German, Hungarian, Czech, East Indian, Filipino, Korean, and even African churches, along with white or Anglo churches.

Many of these groups have shown themselves impatient with the structure of decision making in the conference system. In Canada, language differences have been divisive and some English-speaking churches in Quebec have become French speaking. These waves of ethnic change have been far more important than doctrinal matters to the structure and viability of the conference organization and the survival of institutions.

Moreover, throughout the world church, there is growing concern with unity. Language, vision, role, ethnicity, culture, and political status are becoming more and more divisive. Witness the problems in the Balkans, Hungary, Fiji, and other South Pacific nations. To say that there is an Adventist culture that one encounters everywhere is no answer to the questions about world church unity.

Though they appreciate what North America has meant to the Church, many members elsewhere argue that they are more true to the “Adventist way” than are North Americans. These members tend to look on the kind of crises that Vance has stressed as typically North American and irrelevant to their experiences. The granting of “independence” to the North American Division raises even more critical issues, such as whether the division’s support of “missions” will

decline as local ethnic problems are faced. What does this portend for world church unity?

The long-term rural ethos in North American Adventism is now being challenged by urbanization in the United States and beyond. The massive growth of the Church in third-world cities and the return of the Church to the central city raise questions of evangelical methodology. Urban churches have adjusted worship services and even liturgy to attract and hold a younger and less traditional membership.

Vance came to the study Adventism from the classroom. There, today’s problems for the Christian church were defined in terms familiar to readers of *Christian Century* or the *New York Times*, for that matter. She must be pardoned for having done what her professors have suggested and approved. She cannot be pardoned for an unenlightened, pedestrian, and irrelevant treatise on Adventism.

Grace Field is retired church worker. Ronald Lawson, a long-time leader of the New York Forum, is a professor of sociology at Queens College of the City University of New York. Judy Rittenhouse was for many years an editor of *Prevention*, in the Rodale Press. She is now a freelance editor and author. Charles J. Stokes was the Charles Anderson Dana Professor of Economics at the University of Bridgeport (Connecticut).