



Reviving an Adventist Peace Witness

By Douglas Morgan

Photo: Ryan Beiller

Baptists and Buddhists would probably find it difficult to identify many points held in common—besides being religions that begin with the letter “B” and other superficial generalities. Add Adventists, and even the “B” is gone. But then throw in Catholics, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, Orthodox, and Presbyterians, and identifying specific features shared by all becomes quite a bit more complicated.

However, one feature—particularly relevant when the winds of war blow—links this disparate lot: an organized “peace fellowship” exists within the ranks of each. In the case of Quakers and Mennonites, for whom pacifism stands out distinctively, no “peace fellowship” is needed. Their entire churches are peace fellowships. In the other churches, “peace” commitments have had an important place, but to some degree at different times and in different places they have been crowded out or even seriously violated.

When the Adventist Peace Fellowship began to coalesce in 2001, it was with an eye toward a somewhat neglected and misapprehended heritage, as well as toward world events. At that time, Ron was office administrator of the Center for Law and Public Policy at Columbia Union College, which shares an office suite with the History and Political Studies Department, where I work. Through our conversations we discovered that we shared two convictions: (1) that a great deal in the Adventist heritage points toward a much more radical, social witness for peace than now generally manifest in the Church; and (2) that our reading of authors

Adventist Peace Fellowship members and others from the Seventh-day Adventist community joined approximately three thousand worshipers at the Washington National Cathedral for a prayer service on January 20.

such as Richard Hays, N. T. Wright, and John Howard Yoder was stirring us to envision ways some of what we regarded as the best elements in the Adventist tradition could be developed and applied today, as, for example, with the social implications of Sabbath and jubilee, a nonresistant ethic, witness, and action on public issues like slavery and imperialism.

I mentioned the possibility of starting an Adventist Peace Fellowship, an idea that had first occurred to me

- Study groups held in cooperation with the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church.
- Establishment of a Web site and an e-mail newsletter.
- Enthusiastic agreement on the part of a diverse, stellar group of twenty Adventists from throughout the United States to be on the organization's advisory committee.

Adventist Peace Fellowship remains rather a grandiose, even presumptuous appellation when one considers a world church of twelve million members.

in the late 1980s when I read about the Baptist Peace Fellowship, as a way of doing something about these convictions. Ron drafted and circulated statements of vision and covenant (read them on our Web site, <www.adventistpeace.org>). Then escalation of tensions after 9-11 and the jingoistic excesses too often associated with Christians spurred interest and a greater sense of urgency.

Through e-mail, Charles Scriven, whose work had greatly influenced both of us, helped us toward greater clarity on what we meant by "peace"—not only nonviolence, but also commitment to shalom—well-being, wholeness, justice for the human community (see also documents by him—"A Peacemaking Remnant" and "Instead of War-Making: Adventist Witness to the Human Community"—in the "Adventist Voices" section of the fellowship's Web site).

Jonathan Scriven, a history teacher at Takoma Academy, then joined us for weekly meetings as we tried to sort out how to proceed. Working next to Roy Branson, director of the Center for Law and Public Policy, was a huge benefit as well. Not only is he the embodiment and primary source for a revival of the social meaning of Adventism begun in the 1960s, he also provided us a platform for sharing our views in the large Sabbath School class he leads at Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church. The response in Roy's class, and subsequently from many in the broader Adventist community, encouraged us to think there was a role for such an organization in galvanizing a renewed Adventist peace witness.

What has happened since then? On the one hand, it is possible to tick off a few tangibles:

- Favorable responses from others, not only in the United States, but also in England, Germany, the Netherlands, South Africa, Canada, and Australia.
- Participation in a peace march and vigil in Washington, D.C., on January 20, 2003.

On the other hand, one must candidly say that in some quantitative terms, the achievements are not particularly impressive. The number of names on our e-mail list is quite small—fewer than two hundred. Although we might claim modest success in setting up the Web site and its contents, little has been done to make people aware of its existence, so the number of hits is also quite small. Almost nothing has been achieved toward creating a framework for actually involving people (other than me) in the work of the Adventist Peace Fellowship, though several have expressed willingness. No funds have been raised.

Thus, Adventist Peace Fellowship remains rather a grandiose, even presumptuous appellation when one considers a world church of twelve million members. And yet, there are signs that somehow the Spirit can work through the fellowship to encourage Adventists to bolder public witness in the cause of the Prince of Peace, and to create connections between those who are responding to that call in a myriad of different ways around the globe. Here's what some of them are saying:

- "As an Adventist and a peace activist, I had no idea this site, or this group, existed until someone sent me the link today. Way to go!!" (Canada)
- "Very heartened to see this happening." (New York)
- "I appreciate the work you are doing with the



During the months before the Iraq War, a daily prayer vigil was held at the Isaiah Wall across from the United Nations in New York City. Each day a different religious organization (Christian and non-Christian) led in noon prayers. On March 4, 2003, the Metro New York Adventist Forum Chapter took its turn at the wall. Chapter president Ron Lawson says that twelve people participated. They began by reading Isaiah 2:4 (“They shall beat their swords into plowshares”) and a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. They followed with prayer and appropriate lessons from the Old Testament, the Psalms, and the Epistles. Several offered individual prayers and the group recited the Lord’s Prayer. To close, they sang two songs: “Donna Nobis Pacem” (Give us peace) and “Nunc Dimittis” (Lord now let your servant depart in peace).

PEACE MESSENGER. I read each issue with much interest, and have been surprised at the breadth of material you have been able to draw together—from current issues to N. T. Wright.” (Michigan).

- “Thank you very much for helping organize this. Let me know how I can help further its goals—particularly focusing on the needs to address the underlying causes of hatred and intolerance, e.g. poverty, environmental mismanagement, cultural intolerance, etc.” (Maryland)
- “Isolation can be painful but solidarity is liberating. Just to let you know that a similar group was formed last November down under in Sydney, Australia.”
- “I would like to inform people in Holland of your activities, etc.”

It is impossible to know just what direction and

form the Adventist Peace Fellowship will take from here. My hope and prayer is that it can at least be one means through which some Adventists find new clarity and commitment for living as citizens of Christ’s peaceable kingdom in the midst of the pain and tragedy of a warring world, and find new ways of working together as his nonviolent disciples until that day when his victory shall be completed and his reign realized on earth as it is in heaven.

Douglas Morgan chairs of the Department of History and Political Science at Columbia Union College.