

## Holy Discontent at Willow Creek

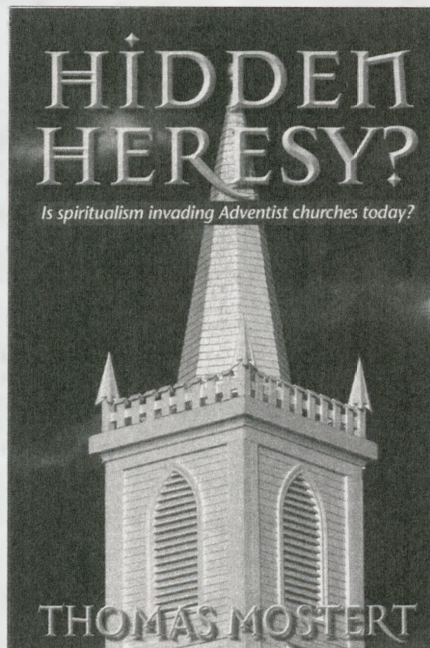
By Bonnie Dwyer

It begins with drums, an extended vibrant drum solo. Acts 2:42–47 appears on the video screens throughout the auditorium, but it is not read aloud. Instead an ethereal voice soars above the drums, scenic landscape images roll across video screens, then slides of churches, and finally people. Dancers fill the stage. “Shout into the darkness,” the singers say, “calling out that there is hope.”

As the music ascends in a final measure, a lectern is lifted to the stage. Jim Mellado, president of the Willow Creek Association, walks out to welcome the seven thousand people clapping in the auditorium, as well as the ones who are watching via satellite in one hundred cities. The tenth annual Willow Creek Leadership Summit is underway.

Mellado makes a point of saying that Willow Creek is dedicated to serving the local church, but by now people in business and industry are benefiting from the leadership summit, too. And the lineup of speakers reflects the cross-over.

In addition to two of the best-known preachers in America today—Bill Hybels and Rick Warren—the conference participants will hear Colleen Barrett, president of



Southwest Airlines; Ken Blanchard, author of the *One Minute Manager*; and Dr. Jack Groppel, a nutritionist and tennis trainer, among others.

Hybels receives a standing ovation as he takes the stage to give the opening presentation. He begins by affirming pastors, telling them he knows the dark nights of the soul that come with pastoral work, as well as the grand visions. “Church work is a forever game; you’re never just a pastor,” he says. “You’re at the helm of the most important ship on earth.”

Then he asks the key question of the day, of the seminar: what precedes the vision that is so often talked about in leadership books? What gives birth to it? Hybels first turns to the story of Moses in Egypt watching one of the

Hebrews being beaten. That incident drove Moses to kill the Egyptian and then into the desert where he at last agreed to work with God.

Next Hybels uses an example from the world of cartoons—Popeye. In the midst of the crisis central to each episode Popeye always exploded: “I can’t take it no more, that’s all I can stand,” and the audience chimes in with Hybels for the last line, “I’m Popeye the sailor man.”

So, Hybels asks the audience, “What is it that you can’t stand? What is your holy discontent? What is your Popeye moment?”

For the Adventist pastors in attendance from the Pacific Union Conference, part of their discontent could conceivably concern the recently published book by their union conference president, Thomas Mostert, called *Hidden Heresies*.

In it, Mostert strings together quotes from the writings of Ellen White to call into question the teachings of Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Robert Schuller, and Joel Osteen. Mostert suggests that because they do not emphasize God’s law, hidden within their teachings is heresy that represents modern spiritualism.

The pastors from the Northern California Conference recently heard a presentation by Mostert at their camp meeting in which he suggested that a couple groups of pastors will have problems with his book’s mes-



sage. On the one hand, said Mostert, are the pastors who don't believe in the Spirit of Prophecy.

With that, he launched into an explanation of what pastors should do if they have disagreements with Ellen White. He told them to go to the ministerial director in their conference and work through this problem, but that it was not something that should drive them from the ministry.

By the time Mostert had finished addressing that issue the meeting had ended. The pastors disbursed and made comments about how disagreement with Mostert about Willow Creek indicated that you must not believe in the Spirit of Prophecy, because he never got around to the other part of his original point.

Many pastors would disagree with Mostert on his assertion that there are heresies hidden in the Willow Creek materials. Forty-five Seventh-day Adventist churches and organizations belong to the Willow Creek Association. The Adventist members include the Southern Union, the Washington Conference, the Center for Creative Ministries, and churches from Maine, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Ohio, Michigan, Colorado, California, Nebraska, Virginia, Maryland, Arizona, and Washington.

"It is no doubt impossible to fully know which religious leaders God is using and which may be unknowingly following a plan created by His enemy," Mostert writes. "The fruitage of most Christian leaders and churches today seems positive. Large numbers of lives are changed from a secular focus to a commitment to Jesus. . . ."

"If God is leading Sunday churches to save people for the kingdom, are they not doing a work that is beyond the reach of Adventists? Shouldn't we thank God for what is

happening, use whatever good methods of theirs we can, and wait until the end-time events mature fully to worry about any dangers?"

"We could. But remember, Satan never uses a strategy that is too obvious. He is not only planning to use Sunday churches as part of his final great deception; he will also seek to sidetrack and neutralize the work of God's remnant church," Mostert says (28, 29).

The Adventist pastors at the Leadership Summit do not seem to let Mostert's comments sidetrack them. As they discuss the presentations they heard, they comment on how the nutritionist Dr. Groppe sounds like an Adventist in his advocacy of rest when he repeats the words about Sabbath from Genesis 2. They find Warren's advice practical, not heretical.

Warren continues the story of Moses that Hybels started and describes how God used what was in Moses' hand to accomplish his work. Moses' rod became the rod of God. "What is in your hand?" Warren asks.

"What is in your heart, what is in your hand?" That is what Sunset Oaks Seventh-day Adventist Church pastor Walt Groff says he is taking away from the leadership conference—that and batteries recharged for ministry in the local church.

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Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.

## A "Sistah's" Guide to Opera

By Nancy Lecourt

An Idaho afternoon in August: A thunderhead shadows creep across sage hills. A large white tent breathes lightly in the dry air. A thousand readers are gathered to hear the likes of Amy Tan, Thomas Cahill, Mitch Albom, Thomas

Keneally, and Dave Barry at the eleventh annual Sun Valley Writers' Conference. The audience is mostly white, privileged (Dave Barry: "Attention—there is a non-luxury car in the parking lot. It will be towed soon; in the meantime, please avert your eyes.")

The stage is Hemingway chic: large leather sofas, heavy tables, mission-style lamps, huge oak bookcases, horse blankets, a grand piano. The talk has been good, great even: poetry read by Billy Collins; comments on speaking "American" from Robert MacNeil; Michael Chabon's inspiring tale of writing his first novel.

The theme of the conference is "Writing in Unpredictable Times." W. S. Merwin has looked into the distance and recited recent poems about a black dog, about picking blueberries after dark—that is, about death. Firoozeh Dumas has told funny stories about her experience growing up Iranian in California in the 1970s. (The repairman arrives with an "I Play Cowboys and Iranians" bumper sticker; her mother promptly informs him that they are from "Toorkey.") David Macauley has talked in great detail about doing the drawings for his new book, *Mosque*—his response to the events of September 2001. ("I worked hard to get this right. I didn't want to have to change our dog's name from Faux Pas to Fatwah...")

There have been ideas, feelings, laughter, tears. Nothing seems to be missing. Still, when Angela Brown begins to sing on Sunday afternoon, the audience is stunned. Her grace and spirit are as welcome as the moist  
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wind that runs before a thunderstorm.

The program tells the audience that Angela is “one of the leading Verdi sopranos performing today...” It quotes the *New York Times*: “At last an Aida,” and the *Opera News*: “the best Met Aida since Leontyne Price’s farewell performances.” It tells them she will sing Wagner, Puccini, and traditional spirituals. It tells them she will be accompanied by pianist Joseph Joubert.

The introduction tells them that she attended Oakwood College, that she studied to be a Bible worker. (There are a few small titters.) That her CD of spirituals, *Mosaic*, is for sale in the back.

No one tells them that she will break their hearts.

“How many of you have never been to an opera?” she asks. A few hands are raised. “Well, this is for you, honey. This is a sistah’s guide to opera.” The audience laughs—the mix of high culture and hip Blackness takes them by surprise.

And then the heart breaking begins. “O Mio Babbino Caro” lilts through the tent with piercing sweetness. The audience is transported by Verdi and Puccini to a land where emotions are larger than life.

Next, Gershwin—Porgy and Bess. After a solo by Joubert comes the familiar introduction to “Summertime.” A longing for the vast summers of childhood flows over them. The present moment spreads into forever: they are ten years old, and the fish really are jumping. The tent blooms with warm August light.

Finally, the spirituals. “Walk together, children, don’t you get weary—there’s a great camp meetin’ on the other side,” she sings. And to their infinite surprise, the great white tent is transformed, and they are there—at camp meeting—listening to the songs of hope and despair. “Come down angels, trouble the waters!”

Anything can happen now.

“This next song is so sad,” she tells them. “I picture a woman, alone, far from home, in a dirt-floored cabin. They kidnapped her, they beat her, and now they have sold her children.” The silence is broken only by the breeze flapping the canvas. She sings a capella in the richest, most sorrowful voice they can imagine: “Lord, how come me here?” she sings. “They sold my children away, Lord. I wish I never was born.”

The parents in the audience think of their own children. White, privileged—yes. But still vulnerable, traveling the roads of this dangerous, unpredictable

PHOTO: MAREY SOHLE/METROPOLITAN OPERA



Angela M. Brown in the title role of Verdi’s *Aida*.

world. Few under the tent are untouched. All have sorrows, losses, disappointments. The trials of this lone slave woman seem to fill the whole world.

And then there is comfort. “He’s got the whole world in his hand,” she sings. “He’s got you and me, brother, sister, in his hand.” Terrorism, famine, flood. Accident, disease, war. The overwhelming unpredictability of life on planet earth washes over them. Yet they are in his hand. Whether they believe or not, grace abounds to them, and to the whole world.

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Nancy Lecourt is a professor of English at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.