

Discussed: January Workshop, psychiatric issues, pastors, church officials, differences, Kinship Kampmeeting, openness, voices, guidelines, delicious dangers of living out the gospel

The Ontario Experience

By Aubyn Fulton

Something out of the ordinary happened in Ontario, California, over the 2006 Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. It was a workshop held at the Ontario Convention Center (January 12–15), formally titled “Christianity and Homosexuality: SDA Perspectives,” but referred to most often in communications I received as the “January Workshop.” It is too soon to tell if the workshop will make a lasting change or be seen in retrospect as a watershed of any kind, but I suspect that most who attended felt something special occurred.



The workshop was jointly sponsored by the Association of Adventist Forums and SDA Kinship, but both organizations gave unusual autonomy to the Planning Committee, comprised of David Larson from Loma Linda University; David Ferguson, a businessman from Glendale, California; Fritz Guy from La Sierra University; and Bronwen Larson, a businesswoman from Loma Linda. The planners emphasized that the purpose of the workshop was to publish a book on homosexuality and the Adventist Church.

Although the organizers were clearly interested in including a wide range of perspectives, it seemed that at least part of their intent was to explore how far and in what ways the Seventh-day Adventist Church could

I should note that I do not report on this meeting as a neutral observer, believing that the Adventist response to gay and lesbians has for the most part been shameful. I had been to a Kinship Kampmeeting some years before, and had some small idea of what that culture was like, but I had never been to a gathering of more “official” Adventism, which discussed homosexuality openly and with anything other than condescension and censure, if not outright contempt. Just how was this going to work, I wondered?

Each main day of the workshop began with a paper by a gay or lesbian Adventist, or by an Adventist with a close family member who was gay or lesbian. On Sabbath morning, a Southern California pastor told the story of a miraculous outpouring of a powerful spirit of love and

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be encouraged to take a more loving stance toward its homosexual members. The papers presented at what might otherwise have been seen as something of an academic conference were essentially first drafts of chapters for such a book, with ample (though inevitably not enough) time for feedback and discussion.

The workshop was held in a large room on the second floor of the convention center, with a little more than half the room devoted to tables arranged in a rectangle, and about forty chairs at those tables. Each person at the tables had a card in front of them with their name printed on it. Behind the tables was a second row of chairs more-or-less filled throughout the weekend.

By my rough estimate, attendance peaked on Sabbath at something over eighty, and probably averaged around sixty-five over the entire conference. I was told that each Seventh-day Adventist college or university in the United States except two sent at least one representative. The two exceptions were due to conflicts in time and travel problems, not ideological or institutional objections. In attendance, too, were pastors; officials who worked for the General Conference, North American Division, or important affiliated organizations; and a number of gay and straight lay people with particular expertise and/or interests in the subject.

David Larson gave me the assignment of acting as a discussant for one of the papers. Since this really only meant that I got to make the first series of comments and questions for that paper, I did not feel much of a burden as I approached the workshop, but I was full of curiosity.

community that erupted in one of his churches when the members decided to embrace the differences that so often divide us. These personal stories of pain, rejection, and oppression by the Adventist Church—but also of redemption, grace, and hope—set the tone for the weekend.

The rest of the papers focused on psychiatric, psychological, sociological, and historical issues, and theological, biblical, pastoral, legal, and ethical perspectives. Each generated lively and productive discussion. It became clear though, that whatever the differences of opinion on the technical issues in the room, all who attended were committed to reducing stories of pain and oppression, and multiplying stories of redemption and hope.

Although, on the one hand, it might seem that we are long overdue for this kind of basic commitment, on the other hand, it was quite thrilling to see so many mainline church leaders genuinely take this stand.

More than one paper referenced Seventh-day Adventist world church president Jan Paulson's 2005 General Conference mention of the “open door” that God has set before us, which ought not be closed to shut others out, and Paulson's call for the Church to be known as a “compassionate family.” Two of the implicit themes of the workshop seemed to be how this door could be opened in Adventist churches and how the Church could realize the vision of a compassionate family, from which we have often fallen short, particularly in regard to gay and lesbians, but also in matters related to ethnicity and gender.

Notably lacking in the conference were voices articulating the more traditional condemnation and rejection of

homosexuality—partly because several Church leaders who may have shared these views turned down invitations to attend.

Some thought it was appropriate to have the discussion among more supportive voices, since the alternative was already well known, and the most helpful views were likely to come from those willing to engage personally the people and issues involved. Others argued that the primary commitment to diversity and openness expressed at the workshop—and more practical considerations of the credibility of the proposed book in the mainstream church—required inclusion of more traditional perspectives, as well.

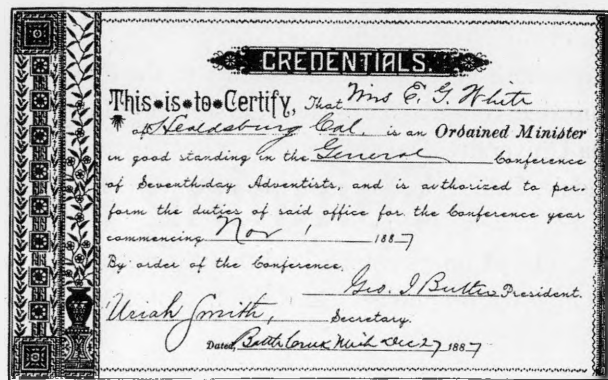
In the end, it was decided that the more traditional voices would be represented, perhaps by inviting some who had chosen not to attend to write responses to specific chapters.

The conference lacked diversity in another way. Although I counted a few African-American, Asian, and Hispanic faces around the table, the overwhelming majority was white. In a church where so much of the growth is in its nonwhite population, and where by most accounts the nonwhite population skews more conservative, it seems that any conversation about homosexuality that hopes to lead to real change will inevitably need to include more nonwhite voices.

The first point in guidelines for the workshop passed out on the opening day was the following statement: “This workshop is not the event.” Publication of the book would be the event; the workshop was a means to that end. As the weekend wore on, it occurred to me that even the book itself might not be the event. The ultimate event may be the conversation ignited at the workshop, which publication of the book may very well fan.

As word spreads that Adventists of good will, who may disagree on the technical issues, can talk openly and honestly about how to make real the grace and love of the Kingdom of God—and risk the delicious dangers of living out the gospel—who knows what might happen? Of course, Christians of all ages have managed to find ways to resist the transforming power of the gospel—but every time we get another chance it is exciting.

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