

Discussed: Richard Hammill, divided congregations, reduced tithes, Keith Parmenter, cleansing the church, hunting expedition, creed, test of fellowship, deep apostasy, progressive truth

# Glacier View and the Australasian Ministers

By Arthur Patrick

The words *Glacier View* are well known among older Seventh-day Adventists. They are particularly poignant for Adventists who live in Australia, earth's driest continent. Rather than conjuring mental images of an ice river that issues from snow-covered mountains, for many the two words evoke vivid memories of years darkened by career crises for ministers and teachers, exits, "failed expectations, loss of commitment, and the erosion of faith."<sup>1</sup>

This article acknowledges the harsh reality that, for many Australians and others, a sense of trauma and unresolved grief are still bewildering realities regarding developments related to Glacier View. However, it also seeks to move beyond the struggle and its immediate outcomes by contending that twenty-five years after Glacier View there is evidence of growth, vitality, and increased understanding.

## Defining Glacier View

For five days in August 1980, some 125 Seventh-day Adventist administrators and scholars assembled at a youth facility in the foothills of Colorado's Rocky Mountains to consider the content of the Church's Fundamental Belief 23, Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary.

Of the invitees, 115 arrived at Glacier View to constitute the Sanctuary Review Committee (SRC), participate in discussion, and approve consensus statements. Reports

of the conclave applauded the quality of the fellowship, the constructive stimulation the attendees derived from collective Bible study, and satisfaction with the dialogue and the resulting consensus documents.

Richard Hammill was the principal organizer of the SRC, under the direction of General Conference president Neal Wilson. Hammill's autobiography summarizes positive aspects of Glacier View, but also lists problematic features: "a serious mistake in tactics"; official reporting at times "the opposite of the discussion on the committee"; the way in which crucial pieces of evidence were ignored; "hasty" action "due to the ineptitude of the Australasian Division officers," and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Hammill's diverse career as a pastor, scholar, educator, and administrator made him one of twentieth-century Adventism's best-known leaders. Since his testimony indicates that Glacier View incorporates significant elements of profit and loss, it would seem worthwhile for the Church to construct a comprehensive balance sheet of its own now that enough time has elapsed to facilitate effective historical analysis.

## Assets

By 1980, Adventism was established in 190 nations and had three million members. In August of that year, the SRC represented this geographical diversity quite adequately. It convened on United States soil to diagnose and treat an Australian cancer that was metastasizing rapidly to other parts of the Adventist body.

The SRC was the largest assembly ever to give significant consideration to Adventism's most distinctive and controversial fundamental belief. Coming out of Glacier View, it created a comprehensive and potentially unifying description of Christ's high priestly ministry. In doing so, it addressed a cluster of issues constantly simmering and boiling over about once each generation since 1844, usually with significant loss of one or more valued employees.

Glacier View's two relatively succinct consensus statements were voted unanimously and applauded by many, including Desmond Ford, the pastor/educator/scholar whose October 27, 1979, address at the Pacific Union College chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums highlighted an immediate need for the SRC.

It is obvious now that the SRC made outstanding progress toward clarifying divisive theological issues long under debate. Perhaps it achieved as much clarification in five days as the Church had managed in fifty years.

President Wilson and his colleagues deserve positive recognition for their "conciliar" initiatives within Adventism, and the SRC merits particular attention. The SRC stands out as a constructive illustration of healthy, creative tension between continuity and change in Adventist thought. It laid a useful foundation for Consultation I, which began on the evening of August 15, 1980, confirming the essentiality of a working partnership through face-to-face dialogue between thought leaders and elected leaders.

The SRC underscored the value of serious Bible study that embraces disputed aspects of a fundamental belief and the potential for consensus statements to offer a path for disputants to walk together in enhanced fellowship and intentional engagement with the Church's mission.

In short, any serious analysis of Glacier View in terms of Adventist conferences is likely to rate at least part of it as a success.

## Liabilities

Why has Glacier View become Adventist shorthand for contention, pain, and division? On the afternoon of August 15, 1980, after the close of SRC and the departure of many conferees, nine church leaders met with Desmond Ford, initiating an administrative process employed in the trials of scores of ministers, teachers, and members in Australia.

Some of the outcomes can be documented in detail. They include divided congregations, alienated families, blighted evangelism, reduced tithes and offerings, the loss of a major part of a generation of potential leaders, and virulent distrust of church administrators.

One relevant doctoral dissertation that came out of that era is that of Peter Ballis. A sociological study, it became a major book in the *Religion in the Age of Transformation* series.<sup>3</sup> Ballis began his professional career as an effective pastor, demonstrating early in his ministry a passion for understanding Adventism via historical research. His published writings and unpublished papers document a strong Adventist commitment and scholarly maturity.

However, Ballis observed with increasing angst the decimation of the Australian church after Glacier View. He finally decided that he could not risk his family to the tensions that engulfed so many ministerial families. Leave of absence from pastoral ministry for doctoral study in sociology brought an unexpected outcome: the loss of his ministerial credentials. However, Monash University in Victoria welcomed his scholarship and administrative potential and he found employment there.

Ballis's dissertation "compiled a list of 182 ministers who left the Adventist ministry between 1980 and 1988" in Australia and New Zealand, "an astonishing 40 percent of the total ministerial work force." Although the exact number of exits and the precise reasons for some are elusive or disputed, Ballis observes: "Theology has consistently featured in exits, although it would be both incorrect and simplistic to attribute fallout exclusively to one set of theological issues or to assume that the conflicts occurred in a social vacuum."<sup>4</sup>

Ballis uses a range of descriptors—"complex," "subtle," and "difficult" among them—and he contends that "social factors and organizational processes interacted with sectarian beliefs to generate loss of confidence in Adventist bureaucracy, disillusionment with sect



ideology, and loss of commitment in ministry, which have contributed to the most rapid and massive exit of Adventist pastors in the movement's 150-year history."<sup>5</sup>

These factors deeply affected a far larger number of people than the ministers who exited. They included employees who soldiered on, wounded members determined to remain, members ejected forcefully, those who left of their own volition, and others. It is difficult to quantify the effects of the conflict on the quality of the fellowship within the Church and the effectiveness of its outreach to the wider society.

Many of these developments can be traced to the administration of Keith Parmenter, who held office as the division's president from 1976 to 1983. Earlier, he had had observed tensions growing in Australia and New Zealand during his tenure as the division's secretary.

Parmenter understood the potential of such bodies as the Biblical Research Committee to clarify issues and recommend responses. But once in the president's chair, he chose to handle such matters administratively rather than turning to such bodies for advice. In fact, he deemed as insubordination a request to call together and consult with the Biblical Research Committee.

During Parmenter's tenure as division president, the role of Ellen White in the Adventist Church was under increasing discussion. He declined to engage with new data related to her life and writings; fostered administrative procedures that disallowed the flow of information to ministers, teachers, and churches; and refused to acknowledge or correct disinformation.

Furthermore, Parmenter failed to grasp the significance of righteousness by faith as the core issue of the 1970s. He focused anxiously on the peril posed by Robert Brinsmead, whose ideas, activities, and agitation in relation to theological issues that surrounded the theology of the sanctuary was climaxing in 1979.

The picture that Ballis paints emerged from the actions of church leaders who felt themselves at bay. After the closure of the SRC, on August 15, 1980, administrative leaders conferred with Desmond Ford, whose nine-hundred-page position paper was a key part of material supplied to the conferees. The administrators parried Ford's enthusiasm for the conference's consensus statement on the sanctuary and dismissed the significance of his written commitment to teach and preach within its parameters.

In one afternoon, nine leaders from Australia created a template in the form of a ten-point statement whereby the Australasian church would measure its employees and members. The resignations and dismissals Ballis documents came for complex reasons, but the most prominent was the decision

of administrators to opt for difference rather than consensus, for traditional belief rather than the evidence of Scripture and history that renewal was essential and achievable.

## Another Ten-Point Statement

In the aftermath of Glacier View, the interpretation of Adventism fostered by the unofficial but vigorous GROF (Get Rid of Ford) party prevailed and administrators adopted it as normative for the South Pacific church. The theological benchmark of this group was not so much the Bible as the concept of truth carried in the minds of a trusted group of vocal leaders composed mainly of retired ministers, evangelists, missionaries, and administrators, plus some prominent lay members. Desmond Ford's dismissal was merely one early step in a pervasive process designed to cleanse the Church.

Ultraconservative members in numerous congregations welcomed a virtual charter to hold ministers for ransom. Pastors became vulnerable for what they read and said—and for what they did not say. The attitude of the ten-point statement created a way to assess the theological reliability of anyone who appeared enthusiastic about righteousness by faith or was impressed by the relevance of new data about Ellen White's life and writings.

This costly night of Australian Adventism is now far spent as new leaders have striven to lead from the center rather than from the right. Perhaps the Church is ready and able to consider issues of profit and loss with the aid of an alternative ten-point statement along the following lines.

1. *Adventist doctrine has developed in constructive ways over time.* One chief contention of the Australian "winners" after Glacier View was that Adventism's "truth" was unchanged and unchanging. Since then, a plethora of books and dissertations, such as that by Rolf Poehler (Andrews University, 1995), offer realistic correctives for this view.
2. *Adventists can participate constructively in the development of their teachings.* As early as 1980, Fritz Guy outlined how "the activity of theological reflection and construction" might proceed coherently, a process now well-described in his book, *Thinking Theologically* (Andrews University Press, 1999).
3. *The Adventist sanctuary doctrine as it was in the mid-twentieth century needed development.* Ford's concern over concepts presented in Adventist books motivated a quest of his that started in 1945 and culminated

in Glacier View. There is now widespread agreement that some earlier formulations negated Christian assurance, or were stilted or inadequate.

4. *Serious mistakes were made in the way the Glacier View event was interpreted.* This matter, introduced in Hammill's autobiography, can be explored effectively with the help of primary and secondary sources readily available.
5. *The general treatment of Adventist ministers in Australia and New Zealand during the 1980s crisis was inadequate.* President Wilson wrote in 1980: "We do not believe it is Christian nor morally just to condemn or assign guilt by association." He also declared: "The church is not embarking on a hunting expedition to find pastors who teach variant doctrines."<sup>6</sup> However, such wise and reasonable comments did not deter the Australian church from a hunting expedition, followed by actions that were unchristian and unjust.
6. *Although Hammill warned that the "official" reports of Glacier View were flawed, a trustworthy account of Glacier View is available online.* F. E. J. Harder, Raymond Cottrell, and *Spectrum* "are to be congratulated for providing what must be regarded as the normative description of that unprecedented and historic session for the Seventh-day Adventist Church."<sup>7</sup>
7. *Australasian Adventism in the 1970s and beyond implemented a creed in terms of Loughborough's definition.* He said: "The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth is to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And, fifth, to commence persecution against such."<sup>8</sup>

This creed was *not* the Twenty-seven Fundamental Beliefs voted at the 1980 General Conference Session; it was the concept of Adventism carried in the minds of an earnest but misguided pressure group.
8. *Adventism is tempted to choose tradition over Scripture in a time of crisis.* According to Raymond Cottrell, "In the thinking of the majority at Glacier View, Adventist tradition was the norm for interpreting the Bible, rather than the Bible for tradition."<sup>9</sup> The problem of putting tradition above Scripture was the fatal flaw in the approach that the Australasian Division took.
9. *Currently, a vigorous reversionist stance continues to elevate tradition above Scripture.* Perhaps nineteen of the books written by Colin Standish and Russell Standish illustrate this observation, as does their periodical, the *Remnant Herald*. In their view, Adventism is in deep apostasy, as argued in their recent volumes on

Ellen White and Adventist fundamentals.

10. *There is a single major solution for conflicts like that of the era that followed Glacier View: the dialogue and dialectic of a community.* This pattern does not exclude members who ask questions, nor does it reject Adventism. Rather, it transforms Adventist faith and practice through attention to Scripture by a community that values each member and invites every one of them to participate in understanding, expressing, and sharing its message.

Ellen White claimed that ours is a "progressive truth" that challenges us to "walk in the increasing light." She also declared "we having nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teachings in our past history."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the supreme lesson of Glacier View is that vigilante parties who demand dismissals should never control the Church's agenda when the clear voice of a properly constituted council (like the Sanctuary Review Committee) offers realistic consensus.

## Notes and References

1. Peter H. Ballis, *Leaving the Adventist Ministry: A Study of the Process of Exiting* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999), 1.
2. Richard Hammill, "The Sanctuary Review Committee and Desmond Ford," in *Pilgrimage: Memoirs of an Adventist Administrator* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1992), 183–98.
3. Ballis, *Leaving the Adventist Ministry*.
4. *Ibid.*, 17.
5. *Ibid.*, 22, 27.
6. See Neal Wilson, "Wilson Responds," *Spectrum* 11.2 (Nov. 1980): 65–67, available online under the archives section at <[www.spectrummagazine.org](http://www.spectrummagazine.org)>.
7. Desmond Ford, "Ford Responds," *Spectrum* 12.2 (Dec. 1981): 64.
8. *Review and Herald*, Oct. 8, 1861, 148.
9. Raymond F. Cottrell, "The Sanctuary Review Committee and its New Consensus," *Spectrum* 11.2 (Nov. 1980): 18.
10. Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1915), 196; *Signs of the Times*, May 16, 1881; and *Manuscript Releases* (n.p. [1981?]), 3:386.

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