



Who Will Reinvent Adventism? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Within homeland Adventism, insecurity abounds. Too many institutions are at risk or on the brink. Too few second- and third-generation members—and fewer still of their children—are passionate about the Church. Converts too often become members without embracing the culture and sticking with it, or passing it on to their kids.

After a vivid Revelation Seminar, some people fall in love with Adventism. But it's one thing to fall in love, another to sustain the marriage. In the time-honored metaphor, the revolving door still revolves.

Only more so.

Or maybe it's that nowadays so many younger Adventists live in the foyer of the Church and hardly ever come inside. In any case, everyone—including every church administrator—has the sense that in North America (and also in the older strongholds overseas) much of what is good and beautiful about our community hangs on the razor edge of danger.

At least since the 1970s, a few theologians have wanted to reinvent the Adventist vision. They have both embraced and questioned our heritage, and have tried, using a biblical frame, to set our sights on more galvanizing goals. Usually, however, they have been at the margin. Though some are fairly well-known, only rarely, I think, have they made an impact on the camp-meeting circuit, or at the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute, or at the Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. When they've taught in Adventist colleges, they've sometimes met with distrust, and had to worry about, or even lose, their jobs.

Now more than ever, the need for new vision is plain. Many church leaders know this well, and wonder themselves about how to ignite passion across a wider range of members, not least among the young.

Perhaps it's time to lay out the welcome mat for Adventist visionaries.

In late September, at the annual conference of the Adventist Forum in Santa Rosa, California, an extraordinary conversation took place. The catalyst was the second edition of *Seeking a Sanctuary*, the endlessly provocative rendering of the Adventist story by cultural historians Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart.

This writing duo, one a lecturer at Oxford University and the other a London journalist, argue that the Adventist experience is thoroughly, yet deviantly, American. We Adventists reflect American experience and yet keep our distance from it, sticking to our own little "sanctuary," or refuge from the wider world.

The authors show how Adventist withdrawal from the American mainstream sheds light both on our frame of mind and our record of growth. As for this latter, growth, they say, will continue into the indefinite future, both in the developing world and among blacks and the new wave of immigrants at home. But it will not occur among the Caucasians, who were the Church's backbone to begin. Their vision and ethos produced Adventist medicine and Adventist higher education, but these, say Bull and Lockhart, are likely to decline. They even predict a "de-medicalization" of the Church, with Loma Linda University no longer able to sustain itself as an Adventist institution.

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Some 160 people were spending the weekend together. Most were Caucasian and older. But thanks not only to the cast of a play called *Red Books*, written and performed by students (mostly) of Pacific Union College, but also to a modest influx of other under-forty Adventists, the conversation was decidedly cross-generational.

The play was an exploration of how Adventists have dealt with new knowledge about Ellen White. It was performed on Friday evening, and opened old wounds as well as helping, at least in part, to heal them. As you may guess, the authors of *Seeking a Sanctuary* drew blood, as well. They told us that, on balance, Adventists have never made much of a difference beyond the difference they make for themselves. Except for health and health care, we've been more or less irrelevant to the wider world's goings-on.

If Adventist medicine and Adventist higher education decline, that separatist frame of mind—little interested in changing the world—may harden, or soften into what is merely fashionable or easy. That would make the Adventism of the future, however large, even less able to be the “yeast” and “light” that Jesus hoped for.

So all weekend Bull and Lockhart's 160 conversation

partners were either arguing back, or wondering what could be done, or both.

Among the most insistent voices, especially by Sunday morning, were those of people in their twenties and their thirties. They seemed creative and engaged—clearly capable of... leadership. But mere words—propositional fat—held no interest for them. They wanted a vision for action, a church with a passion for making a difference.

A church that is merely a refuge can grow. But it cannot appeal to those it educates into prophetic, as opposed to merely sectarian, awareness. People who dare to be Daniel or Isaiah—dare to *engage* the world, to *imagine* its betterment and *resist* its evil—want more than a cloistered life, and they will leave us, if they have to, in order to get it.

I therefore issue this challenge:

Let us now lay down the welcome mat for visionaries. Let pastors and older members and church leaders lay it down. Let the welcome extend to every kind and color of Adventist. Let it extend to anyone who cares enough about the Church to venture forth with a fresh idea. Let doctrinal hairsplitting, together with distrust and suspicion, come to a halt. Let holy imagination take flight.

All this is just another way of saying Yes to the Holy Spirit and No to our besetting fears. With God's help, it could set our sights on more galvanizing goals. It could ignite new passion. It could help us defy the sociological determinism that dooms us to being less than yeast and light.

At the conference Kendra Haloviak was herself visionary in her compelling sermon on the *biblical* meaning of sanctuary. It was part of what kept young people engaged in the conversation even Sunday morning. And it showed that reinventing the Adventist vision provides not only insight but also...fizz, that elusive stuff that makes for, well, excitement.

The effect her sermon had can spread. But not unless the welcome mat rolls out to everyone. ■

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