



## Media Moves and Mergers

### “The Minds of Men Differ”:

*Adventism and the Temptation of Consolidation*

BY TOMPAUL WHEELER

In 1984, the Adventist Church merged two of its outreach magazines, *Signs of the Times* and *These Times*. *These Times* magazine had a loyal and fervent readership (a reader survey a year before its end received tens of thousands of responses) and a distinctive editorial flavor, but church leaders believed that merging the two periodicals would reach twice as many people for half the cost. Instead, within a year, the merged version of *Signs of the Times* had no more subscribers than either magazine had previously enjoyed on its own. The mash-up of the two magazines’ styles had pleased neither periodical’s readers.

I’m reminded of that attempted shortcut to evangelism success by news of the merger of Adventism’s two North American publishing houses, the Review and Herald Publishing Association (in Hagerstown, Maryland), and the Pacific Press Publishing Association (in Boise, Idaho). It seems to be the same story, umpteenth verse. As Adventist Church co-founder Ellen White wrote when people urged that the two houses be merged 120 years ago, “In cooperation they can exert a healthful influence upon each other, but not in consolidation. These institutions are not to become merged into one...the light that I have had for years is that these institutions must stand separate, each preserving its own individuality. A nearer relation than this will tend to the injury of both.”

In the 1970s, under the leadership of Neal Wilson (father of current General Conference president, Ted N. C. Wilson), the Adventist Church in North America experienced a round of “merger mania.” Conferences consolidated. The Central and Northern Unions merged into the Mid-America Union. And in 1980, North America’s then-

### Recent Media Announcements About the Church’s Media

#### Merger Talks Cancelled

The taskforce studying a possible consolidation of the Pacific Press and Review and Herald publishing associations has been asked to cease its work, the General Conference and North American Division announced on July 31, 2013.

#### Publishing House Boards Asked to Consider Merger

On June 19, 2013, the General Conference and North American Division administrations forwarded to the boards of the Pacific Press and Review and Herald publishing associations a request for the two organizations to consider a merger in the near future.

#### Media Center Recommends Its Own Closure

The board of the Simi Valley Adventist Media Center, which is operated by the North American Division, decided on April 29, 2013, that it would recommend a proposal to the division that includes a call for its six media ministries to relocate and a sale of the property. Still unclear, according to the report by the Adventist News Network, is what the division’s future plans are regarding media.

third publishing house, Nashville-based Southern Publishing Association (*These Times*’ initial publisher), was merged into the Review and Herald Publishing Association. All was done under the name of costs and effectiveness.

Perhaps the most ambitious consolidation, however, was the Adventist Media Center. Though each ministry was to continue to operate independently, the AMC brought together such disparate programs as *It Is Written*,

*Breath of Life*, and the once-independent radio ministry *Voice of Prophecy*. The original Thousand Oaks, California, location proved too costly to maintain, so in 1995 the AMC moved to Simi Valley, California. Now, among renewed concerns over cost and effectiveness, the Adventist Media Center's various ministries are considering splitting off.

Will we ever learn the lesson of Battle Creek?



As Ellen White kept busy in Australia in the 1890s, the church “back home” was getting comfortable—much too comfortable, in White’s opinion. It concerned her that, instead of spreading out to establish the church in new places, more and more Adventists were flocking to the bustling Michigan city, home to the church’s headquarters and top college, publishing house, and hospital. At the same time, critical decisions were being made by fewer and fewer people. Ellen White decried such “kingly power.” She wrote: “Our people are in constant danger of centering too many interests in one locality; but it is not in the Lord’s order that this should be.”<sup>2</sup> When “propositions which appeared to their authors to be very wise” were made to “enable the office of publication there to swallow up everything in the publishing line among us,” she counseled, “This is not God’s wisdom, but human wisdom. Those matters have been coming up again and again in different aspects, but this policy of consolidation would, if adopted, result in marring the work. God would have His work move firmly and solidly, but no one branch is to interfere with or absorb other branches of the same great work.... At times it has been urged that the interests of the cause would be furthered by a consolidation of our publishing houses, bringing them virtually under one management. But this, the Lord has shown, should not be. It is not His

plan to centralize power in the hands of a few persons or to bring one institution under the control of another.”<sup>3</sup>

It wasn’t just the temptation to the power-hungry that bothered Ellen White, but the intellectual stagnation that results when too few people have input. Centralization stifles innovation. She wrote, “The work of publication is to be developed in new lines.”<sup>4</sup> God likes variety, she insisted, and it takes a variety of approaches to reach many kinds of people. Such diversity, she noted, was right there in the Bible. “Why do we need,” she wrote, “a Matthew, a Mark, a John, a Paul, and all the writers who have borne testimony in regard to the life and ministry of the Savior? Why could not one of the disciples have written a complete record and thus have given us a connected account of Christ’s early life? Why does one writer bring in points that another does not mention? Why, if these points are essential, did not all these writers mention them? It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way.”<sup>5</sup>

It took two all-consuming fires in 1902—one at the publishing house, the other at the hospital—to convince the Adventist Church to break up the Battle Creek monopoly. Battle Creek College moved to Berrien Springs, Michigan, and is today Andrews University. The church headquarters and publishing house moved to Takoma Park, Maryland, and the church founded what is today Washington Adventist University. And though the soon-to-be-disfellowshipped John Harvey Kellogg rebuilt the Battle Creek Sanitarium, it was no longer under church control. Instead, while the sanitarium went bankrupt in the 1930s, Adventists had already founded a new hospital and medical school in Loma Linda, California, in 1905.

Of course, the world of media today is vastly different than that of a hundred years ago, or even than in 1984, when *These Times* was cannibalized. When I started as a student worker at the *Review and Herald* in 1990, a long row of offices served its publications’ typographic needs. Within roughly fifteen years, the office space was empty, as desktop publishing made it possible for a single designer to quickly lay out an entire magazine on a single computer.

Still, I do not believe that Ellen White would have viewed the challenges that publishing faces in the world of websites and digital downloads as justification for consolidation. While she may have seen the wisdom in consolidating manufacturing processes (we are, after all, all using the same Internet), it is clear that she would have

found in today's push-button publishing an opportunity for a greater number of independent editorial entities, not less. I think she would have been thrilled that more energy could go to developing content rather than maintaining infrastructure.

With over 150 years of history, book and magazine publishing has been somewhat slower to adapt. We still need gatekeepers and editorial quality control, yet Adventist publishing is as perplexed as anyone as to how to best respond to the changing world of websites, e-books, and infinite entertainment choices.

Though there is a need to coordinate the various media in our church, we must keep the system open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to new perspectives and approaches. Today's challenges demand fresh voices, energy, and innovation to develop new products and revitalize old ones. That just doesn't come from a top-down, centralized system, dominated by a limited number of viewpoints. It requires a wide variety of media providers—just like the much smaller, much less complicated world Ellen White addressed. ■

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Nashville, Tennessee. He directed the feature-length documentary *Leap of Faith: The Ultimate Workout Story*, and served as editor for the 2007 edition of *Bible Readings*, published by the Review

and Herald Publishing Association. He is the author of *GodSpace* and *Things They Never Taught Me*.

## References

1. Ellen G. White, *The Publishing Ministry* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1983), 158.
2. *Ibid.*, 143.
3. *Ibid.*, 144.
4. *Ibid.*, 147.
5. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943), 432.

**Note:** This article was originally published June 25, 2013, on *Spectrum's* website, and has been updated. The original article can be found at [http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2013/06/25/"-minds-men-differ"](http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2013/06/25/) -adventism-and-temptation-consolidation.

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