

# Recapturing the Dream

*Adventists and the Future* | BY WILLIAM G. JOHANSSON

**T**he organizers of this event suggested that in my remarks today I address the future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I am happy to do so; I love this church, even though at times it disappoints and frustrates me. If I have any quarrel with the Seventh-day Adventist Church—and I do—I think of it as a lover’s quarrel.<sup>1</sup>

Now, it has often been said that it is dangerous to prophesy, especially about the future. So I will resist the temptation to predict the future of the church. Instead I will confine my remarks to what I would like that future to look like.

The Adventist Church—where does one begin? So diverse, so far-flung, so fractured and yet so unified, so wonderful but so flawed: how to talk about what lies ahead?

I will focus on only one aspect, but it is one that I think crucial: the Adventist dream: *Can we still dream? Or have we become too cynical, too jaded, too disappointed?*

Then, if we can still dream, if in fact we *must* dream, what *might* be, what *should* be the Adventist dream as we move into the future?

And along with that, how does the dream arise? What factors, what conditions encourage it?

## Can we still dream?

Some 170 years ago a group of men and women in America banded together in quest of a dream. They believed that they would see Jesus Christ coming in the clouds. They were absolutely sure that they were correct. Some abandoned all plans for the future, some left their crops to rot in the ground, all were convinced that the world was about to end.

They were wrong.

Out of that band of broken men and women arose the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Seventh-day

Adventist Church—no longer setting a date for Jesus to appear, but convinced that the big event would take place soon, during their lifetime.

It did not.

Not in their lifetime.

Not in their children’s lifetime.

Not in their grandchildren’s lifetime.

Not in their great-grandchildren’s lifetime.

Can we still dream the dream of Jesus’ soon return? Or has the cognitive dissonance reached a degree where we must, in all honesty, step back and reevaluate?

This church, springing from a dream, has grown and flourished on dreams. In this respect it is by no means unique: back of every enterprise that has left its mark on the world—be it a business, university, a hospital, a church—search and you will find that someone or some group had a dream.

So Adventists, dreaming the impossible dream of the imminent Parousia, dreamed other dreams, related dreams:

- of the gospel going to all the world
- of clinics and hospitals and medical and dental schools
- of elementary schools, and academies, and colleges and universities.

We were, we are, the doers. We are, as H. Richard Monroe, former chair of Time Inc., described us, the over-achievers. We have never had enough money to start up, never enough to keep going, but we do anyway. We have brought into being a global network of educational and health-care institutions.

What dreamers we have been!

- John Harvey Kellogg, eccentric genius
- Fernando and Ana Stahl, changing the society for the Altiplano peoples of Peru
- Harry Miller, physician extraordinary, establishing

hospital after hospital in China and developing life-saving soy milk

- Ellen White, recognized by *Smithsonian* magazine as one of the hundred most significant Americans of all time
- W. W. Prescott, educator extraordinary, founding Union College and Walla Walla College, and serving as president of both simultaneously, along with Battle Creek College as well
- Barry Black, former rear admiral of the United States Navy, shattering racial stereotypes, chaplain of the US Senate.

And so on and on. Women and men of courage, of determination, of vision.

Dreamers all.

Like John Burden and Anna Knight and Ben Carson and Leonard Bailey, H. M. S. Richards, and Bill Loveless.

And Charles Weniger.

But can we still dream?

"We are all of us dreamers of dreams;

On visions our childhood is fed;

And the heart of the child is unhaunted, it seems,

By the ghosts of dreams that are dead.

From childhood to youth's but a span

And the years of our life are soon sped;

But the youth is no longer a youth, but a man,

When the first of his dreams is dead. . . .

He may live on by compact and plan

When the fine bloom of living is shed,

But God pity the little that's left of a man

When the last of his dreams is dead.

Let him show a brave face if he can,

Let him woo fame or fortune instead,

Yet there's not much to do but bury a man

When the last of his dreams is dead.<sup>2</sup>

And there's not much to do but to bury a church when the last of its dreams is dead.

As churches age, the dreams of the founders leak away. Gradually the conviction and the passion die. More and more churches lose their edge as they blend into the world around them.

Would John Wesley today recognize the Methodist Church he founded? Would Martin Luther, his movement?

Would James and Ellen recognize today's Seventh-day Adventist Church?

The second tendency as churches age is a rearguard action, an attempt to lock history and doctrine into a fortress where they will be safe from the corrosive influence of the world.

And the Adventist Church? We see both of these developments: a loss of conviction, a loss of certainty. The relentless passage of the years has caused us, I think, to lose our nerve. On the other hand, we see a tendency to play it safe by building an ever-growing bureaucracy and a network of committees; by distrust of new ideas and labeling others as "safe" or "unsafe," by the subtle inroads of groupthink and "groupspeak."

For 24 years I was part of the General Conference structure. As editor of *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World*, my boss was the president of the world church; I reported directly to, first, Neal C. Wilson, and later to Robert S. Folkenberg, then finally to Jan Paulsen. It was a heady, fulfilling, privileged position. I was at the very heart of the Adventist Church, able to observe its inner workings, able to impact decisions.

The General Conference is a place where the men and women work hard, travel much, and love the Adventist Church. It is a place of ideas and programs—but, for the most part, not a place of dreams.

Life at the General Conference revolves around travel and committees. I was a member of 40 committees—others in the building served on many more. We didn't have time to dream.

So, as we lean into the future, can Adventists still dream? And if so, what would those dreams be like?

## The Adventist dream today

In his book *Under the Mercy*,<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Vanauken describes why, as a teenager, he abandoned Christianity. The formal religion he grew up with was too dull, too petty, too divorced from the real world, too stifling. "Who could believe that here in this stuffiness, with all the beauty and laughter and pain of life held at bay outside the church—who could believe that here were the truths of life and death? I could not and I doubted whether anyone else did," he wrote. "I turned away from this religion and declared for

atheism.” Later, of course, at Oxford University, under the influence of C. S. Lewis, he and his wife found faith again.

Many former Adventists would echo Vanauken’s words. They don’t want to belong to a church that expects them to check their minds at the door or that acts as though it is the only body through whom the Lord is working.

If we are to retain our brightest and best, the Adventist Church must again be a place where they can dream big dreams, exciting dreams, dreams connected with this wonderful, broken world.

What about the really big dream, the primary dream, the dream that gave birth to this movement, the dream that Jesus will come back? Is that passé, ruled out of court by the relentless passage of the years?

Not at all. We must not, cannot abandon that dream.

Without it, where will we turn to find hope? It alone is “the blessed hope,” and it becomes more precious and more needed than ever before in human history.

One month ago—on January 22, 2015—scientists moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock two minutes closer to midnight. That puts us at three minutes before the stroke of doom. At a news conference in Washington, D.C., Kennette Benedict, executive director and publisher of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, cited the unchecked climate change and the ongoing threat of nuclear weapons, and said at a news conference: “The probability of global catastrophe is very high. This is about the end of civilization as we know it.”<sup>4</sup>

When I think how much is messed up in our world—the pain and poverty, the greed and gross wealth, the starving children, the orphans and refugees, ISIS and the scourges of Ebola and new resistant bacteria, the breakdown of government and the breakdown of society—I can only cling with hope to the prayer: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

But, let me be clear, this will not be simply a return to William Miller. He emphasized the

*when* of the Second Coming rather than *Who* is coming. For most of our history we have done the same. We have raided the news to find clues that enable us to tell the world that Jesus’ coming is about to happen. We have made unwise predictions that have been falsified by the passing of time, such as the assertion that God would not permit humans to walk on the surface of the moon because He wouldn’t permit sin to be transferred beyond this planet. The editor of a leading Adventist magazine confidently made this assertion. I read it, and then Neal Armstrong walked on the moon. I waited to see how the editor would respond. I waited for a correction, an apology. I waited in vain.

Along with preoccupation with signs of the end came a rash of “explanations” as to why Jesus hasn’t come back, why His coming has been “delayed.” Often these theological attempts have put a guilt trip on us all: it’s because we haven’t done our job of preaching the gospel to the world, or because of our failure to attain perfection.

Enough of these guilt trips! The Lord has given us a task to do, and part of it involves telling others about Jesus and personal preparation for eternity, but in the final analysis the Second Coming is *His* event, not something to be put at risk by our failure to perform.

Throughout the Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, God takes the initiative. Human beings may choose to cooperate with His purposes or they may not; but they cannot frustrate them. So it is with the return of Jesus: the Bible tells us that “God will bring [it] about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (1 Tim. 6:15, NIV).

So, resting in the assurance that our times are in God’s hand, there is a life to live, a work to do. We are called to live in such a way that “whatever we do, whether in word or deed, [we] do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17, NIV).

My friends, I give you my dream for the

**This church,  
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future of the church.

God in Jesus gave us His best; surely we can return to Him nothing less. That means that each of us in our chosen sphere must strive for a life of excellence and compassion. Let everything that bears the Adventist brand—be it an individual or an institution—be marked by two qualities—*integrity and grace*.

**It is**

Let every Adventist church, every school, every institution be a place of bigness of spirit, a place of generosity, a place of acceptance, a place of love.

**time to give**

Let every classroom be a dream factory, where young minds catch a glimpse of greatness, where the impossible suddenly becomes doable.

**Adventist**

**scholars fresh**

Has not Ellen White, Ellen White the visionary, called us to such dreams?

**air to do**

“Are you ambitious for education that you may have a name and position in the world?” she wrote to young people.

**constructive**

*Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day stand upon the summit of intellectual greatness; that you may sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations. You may every one of you make your mark. You should be content with no mean attainments. Aim high, and spare no pains to reach the standard.<sup>5</sup>*

**work.**

One day we may have an Adventist at the highest levels of government in the United States (and I am not making any prediction for 2016!). That has already happened in other countries, where Adventists serve as prime ministers, governors general, and cabinet members. It is likely to happen here also.

Now let me focus for a moment on two groups where the cold wind of suspicion has an especially chilling effect—Adventist scientists and Adventist theologians.

Some Adventists harbor doubts about the scientific enterprise. They forget that our heritage teaches that God reveals Himself

through two principal means—the Scriptures and the book of nature. We should welcome knowledge, from whatever source, without fearing or denying it.

We ought to affirm Adventist scientists, not be suspicious of them. We should encourage them to stretch for the highest. That means a Nobel Prize. I am confident that one day a Seventh-day Adventist will be awarded a Nobel Prize for their research. That day may be much nearer than we expect. Already an Adventist is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a Fellow of the European Academy of Sciences. In the United States, two Adventists are members of the prestigious Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences.

Theology: The church now can count several hundred men and women who have obtained from respectable universities doctoral degrees in theology, ethics, Biblical studies, philosophy, and church history. What will the church do with this resource? Will we welcome their contribution to the life of the community and beyond it, or will we continually be on guard to determine whether they have been “contaminated” by their advanced studies?

Listen again to the words of Ellen White:

*We must not think, “Well, we have all the truth, we understand the main pillars of our faith, and we may rest on this knowledge.” The truth is an advancing truth. And we must walk in the increasing light. . . .*

*We have many lessons to learn, and many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed.*

It is time to give Adventist scholars fresh air—oxygen—to do constructive work, not only for the church but for the larger society. In the Sabbath. In ethics, where already we have had significant impact. In the sanctuary doctrine. In the nature of man, in life and death—to name but a few areas.

When Jesus is at the center of our thinking, we grasp that to ease the pain of a suffering soul or to teach a child to read, or to give a teen's "buried flower a dream" (wrote Robert Frost) is more important than to serve as President of the United States.

Despite our oft-times foolishness, narrowness, pettiness, and small-mindedness, the Lord has given to Adventists a magnificent dream. It is to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ in all its aspects, not only preaching the good news about God and salvation but—where Jesus spent most of His time—in bringing relief to suffering men and women.

Jesus calls us to a ministry of hope and healing. He calls us, in the words of this great institution, Loma Linda University and Medical Center, to make man whole.

## A dream to serve

Far from the city lights, far from a paved road, far from plumbing and power lines, a young Adventist couple run a 100-bed hospital. The country is Chad, and it is desperately poor and backward. It has been

*named the most corrupt country in the world, the worst place in the world to be a woman, the worst place in the world for a child to fall ill, the country with the shortest life expectancy, the worst maternal mortality rate, the worst neonatal mortality rate, and the worst under-five mortality rate. Only 10 percent of Chadians are literate, 85 percent live hand-to-mouth as farmers and 65 percent live on less than a dollar a day.*<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Olen Netteburg and Dr. Danae Netteburg are recent graduates of Loma Linda University. They have three young children. They could have embarked on medical careers in America that would have brought them prestige and wealth. Instead they went to the end of the earth to bring hope and healing to those who are indeed "the least of these my brethren."

In a recent interview they said,

*"Honestly, though we work hard, we still have time for family, we still have a roof over our heads and food [beans and rice!] on our table, and we know we are exactly where God wants us to be right now. What more could we ask for? That, and our medical cases are insanely cool. Practicing medicine in America will be extremely boring after this."*<sup>8</sup>

This, my friends, is the spirit that has propelled the Adventist Church into all the world. This is the Adventist dream today. ■

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dening, travel, writing, teaching occasional classes in the School of Religion at Loma Linda University, and spending lots of time with his wife, Noelene.

## Footnotes

1. This article was originally presented as a speech at the Charles E. Weniger Society for Excellence Fortieth Annual Awards, Loma Linda University Church, Loma Linda, California, February 21, 2015, where Dr. Johnsson was one of three award recipients.

2. William Herbert Carruth, "Ghosts of Dreams," in *Each in His Own Tongue and Other Poems* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), 10, 11.

3. Sheldon Vanauken, *Under the Mercy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985).

4. Eric Krupke, "Climate change and nuclear weapons push Doomsday Clock closer to midnight," *PBS Newshour*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/citing-weapons-modernization-climate-change-scientists-move-doomsday-clock-closer-midnight/>.

5. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, 36.

6. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 33, 37.

7. Charles Scriven, "The Ear: A Physician Couple Living an Amazing Mission," *Spectrum* online, 9 January 2015, <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/01/09/ear-physician-couple-living-amazing-mission>.

8. Ibid.

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