

The Adventist Civil Rights Movement: *A Prophetic Voice for LGBT Adventists* | BY JUAN O. PERLA

In the 1980s, an Adventist pastor reneged on his promise to marry an interracial couple.¹ His decision enraged the couple's Canadian community. News reports of the incident reached E.E. Cleveland, a black Adventist pastor and civil rights leader in the United States. He shared the story with Neal Wilson Jr., then president of the Adventist Church's General Conference (GC). Wilson called a meeting of the GC's Human Relations committee, and the group voted to revoke the credentials of any pastor who refused to marry interracial couples. The GC's action that day did not come easily. Rather, through sustained activism and prayer, black Adventists involved in the civil rights movement won an important victory over racism.

Today, the Adventist civil rights movement delivers a prophetic message of hope to LGBT Adventists fighting homophobia.² Like racial minorities, LGBT persons have also been the object of scorn and oppression. Civil rights leader Coretta Scott King aptly noted, "Homophobia is like racism ... it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood."³ Unlike race, however, sexual orientation is not always apparent. While some gay Adventists speak up for their dignity, many others experience the cruel effects of homophobia in isolation, out of fear of discovery and rejection.⁴ For this reason, the Adventist struggle for LGBT equality has been less public than the Adventist

civil rights movement.

Nevertheless, as was the case with racial minorities and interracial marriage, Adventists are learning to accept LGBT equality and same-sex marriage as well. Already, twenty-five percent of Adventists in the United States favor same-sex marriage and, of the sixty-four percent that oppose it, only twenty-one percent are between eighteen and twenty-nine years old.⁵ Adventist ethicist Gary Chartier affirmed this trend in *The Future of Adventism*. He explains that the Christian community blurs "divisions based on ethnicity, nationality, and class, and increasingly also divisions based on gender and sexual orientation" because "the church, rooted in the inclusive practice of Jesus, is an institutional rejection of the destructive business of boundary-making."⁶ The Adventist civil rights movement is a stark reminder of that important truth. The sooner Adventist leaders embrace that reality with respect to LGBT members, the safer and more welcoming the Church will become for all people of faith.

Racism in the Adventist Church and the Adventist Civil Rights Movement

Some Christians in the nineteenth century defended black slavery on biblical grounds;⁷ early Adventists, however, opposed it as "the darkest and most damning sin." Church visionary Ellen White even encouraged Adventists to *disobey* the Fugitive Slave Law, a federal



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mandate that required returning runaway slaves to their masters.

Despite White's opposition to slavery, her earlier writings incorporate pseudo-scientific beliefs about race popular in her time, such as claims that “certain races of men” were the product of mixing between humans and animals (known as “amalgamation” or the “polygenesis theory”).⁹ Such statements stirred controversy among early Adventists “with critics charging that she believed Negroes were not human and defenders insisting she meant no such thing.”¹⁰ Eventually she distanced herself from such views and declared: “Birth ... or color cannot elevate or degrade men.”¹¹

When it came to race relations, White also expressed some ambivalence. After the American Civil War, she rejected segregation and lamented that “sin rests upon us as a church” when prejudice got in the way of building an inclusive faith community.¹² As Adventism expanded into the South, however, missionaries confronted violent prejudice from southerners who disliked the church's Sabbath beliefs and integrationist values.¹³ Motivated by safety concerns and a desire to evangelize white and black southerners in spite of the racial divide, White compromised her integrationist values and endorsed segregation “until the Lord shows us a better way.”¹⁴

Against that background, many Adventist institutions in the United States barred black members on account of their race well into the twentieth century.¹⁵ As late as the 1960s, some Adventist pastors justified these exclusionary practices with dated interpretations of biblical texts such as the Curse of Ham, suggesting that Ham's son Canaan turned black after Noah cursed him to be a servant to his brothers.¹⁶ According to these pastors, black Adventists could not hold positions of authority or even enter certain facilities because, as descendants of Canaan, blacks were also cursed.¹⁷ Other church leaders used more subtle Adventist teachings to discourage political activism,

effectively endorsing segregation.¹⁸

The number of black Adventists grew sharply in the twentieth century, putting pressure on the denomination to confront its prejudices. The North American church initially accommodated the growth in black membership by creating separate institutions for African Americans.¹⁹ But this approach proved unsustainable as black members enlisted in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and demanded equal treatment in the church as well.²⁰ Black students and their friends amplified the demands for change through public protests across Adventist colleges.²¹ Black Adventist theologians supported these efforts through liberationist interpretations of the Bible,²² and a renewed emphasis on Ellen White's integrationist commitments.²³

Other black Adventists, such as Frank Hale Jr., formed the Laymen's Leadership Conference (LLC) with the purpose of ending racial discrimination in the Adventist Church. In 1961, the LLC adopted a platform with several recommendations urging the GC to re-articulate Adventism's position on race “in light of social changes,” to require diversity training for pastors, and to remove racial barriers to church membership, employment and access.²⁴ Five days after receiving these proposals, the GC issued a statement rejecting segregation as incompatible with Christian teaching.²⁵ Still, the church changed little in practice.

The GC finally resolved to desegregate four years later, in 1965, at the apex of the civil rights movement.²⁶ The 1965 resolution did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it followed two important events: the landmark 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawing racial segregation in schools, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banning racial discrimination in public facilities.

Relying on these new anti-discrimination laws, black members of the church's South Central Conference (SCC) sued the denomination because many Adventist academies continued to deny admission to black stu-

dents.²⁷ United States Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach joined the lawsuit on the side of black Adventists, and pressured the GC to end segregation or risk losing federal government subsidies such as tax exemptions. The GC gave in to these demands and, shortly thereafter, adopted the 1965 resolution.

Charles Dudley, a black civil rights activist and SCC leader, chided the GC for letting the federal government play the role of the Good Samaritan.²⁸ In Dudley's view, the church should have acted out of its own initiative rather than legal compulsion.

Two years later, in 1967, the United States Supreme Court struck down state laws prohibiting interracial marriage in *Loving v. Virginia*. The following year, the church's North American Division (NAD) resisted these changes and issued guidelines advising against interracial marriage on religious grounds.²⁹ Indeed, the Adventist Church had consistently opposed interracial marriage for more than a century.³⁰ The NAD's guidelines invoked the counsel of Ellen White who, at one time, directed that "there should be no intermarriage between the white and the colored race."³¹ The GC published the NAD's guidelines in the *Church Manual* in 1977, and did not remove them until fifteen years later in 1992.³² In that context, the story of the Adventist pastor who refused to marry an interracial couple as late as the 1980s is less surprising.

Although efforts to combat racism continue, the GC formally shifted the tone on race relations in 1985 when, at the insistence of black Adventists, it condemned racism as "one of the odious evils of our day."³³ That statement also declared that "Scripture plainly teaches that every person was created in the image of God" and "made of one blood," refuting any lingering doubts about the Curse of Ham and the polygenesis theory in Adventism. Here, the prophetic voice of the Adventist civil rights movement sounds all the louder for LGBT Adventists today.

Homophobia in the Adventist Church and the Adventist Struggle for LGBT Equality

Societies have treated same-sex love differently over time. While some cultures have accommodated same-sex relationships, others have criminalized them and even enforced castration or death as the punishment.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, psychologists in Europe started to study same-sex love and labeled it "homosexuality" and "inversion."³⁴ Some of them followed the so-called "degeneracy theory" prevalent at that time, and cast homosexuals, along with "Jews, Negroes, rapists, murderers and incest abusers as the most dangerous of social 'degenerates.'"³⁵ Proponents of degeneracy theory feared that biological and moral degeneration in certain groups of people threatened the established social order. Other psychologists, however, found homosexuality to be an innate, morally-neutral characteristic and, on that basis, advocated for the decriminalization of consensual homosexual acts.³⁶

Early Adventists stayed aloof from these developments in the study of homosexuality, in contrast to issues of race, which remained an important social concern in the United States. Ellen White, for example, wrote nothing directly on homosexuality or inversion.³⁷ By contrast, the degeneracy theory influenced Adventist teachings on health and sexuality generally.³⁸ For instance, White attributed the "sad degeneracy" of the human race to a failure to observe the "laws of health," such as eating meat, drinking stimulants or indulging in sex.³⁹ Her health reform protégé, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, took those concerns further and dedicated his life's work to combatting "race degeneration" by promoting dietary cures, sexual abstinence, and selective breeding (known as "eugenics").⁴⁰

Ultimately, Ellen White and the Adventist Church rejected many of Kellogg's theories, but his medical views still reverberate in certain Adventist circles.⁴¹ An extreme example of the degeneracy theory's effects on Adventism occurred in Germany in the years leading up

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to World War II, when some Adventist church officials there endorsed the Nazi's efforts to sterilize "all physical and mental degenerates"⁴² and supported "the extermination of ... Homosexuals, Jews and people with physical infirmities."⁴³

In the shadow of that uneasy past, the Adventist Church has been engaged for decades in an ideological debate over the proper medical and theological understanding of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. The first explicit reference to homosexuality in Adventist literature appeared in 1951.⁴⁴ The author warned that homosexual acts often involve an older man and an "innocent victim," invoking the sorts of anxieties promoted by the degeneracy theory. Two years later, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* lent biblical support to this negative view of homosexuality by repeating unchallenged interpretations of biblical verses that seem to condemn certain homosexual acts.⁴⁵

Today, Adventism is still dusting off traces of the degeneracy theory, which in retrospect sounds more like nineteenth century folktales about "certain races of men" than well-researched science.⁴⁶ For instance, the church's Fundamental Beliefs presents homosexuality as a "disorder" and "homosexual practice" as a "dis-

ortion of the image of God."⁴⁷ And the GC's official statement on same-sex unions indiscriminately characterizes all same-sex relations as a "lowering of the heavenly ideal" and a "manifestation of the disturbance and brokenness in human inclinations and relations."⁴⁸ The authors of these documents cite biblical verses such as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to support their claims, without considering the real-life impact of their views on faithful gay Adventists. Such uncritical and offensive use of the Bible harkens back to a time when some pastors used the Curse of Ham to brand blacks as less worthy than whites.

The GC's "official statements" also obscure a rich history of LGBT activism and dialogue in the Adventist Church. Much as the civil rights movement of the 1960s precipitated desegregation in Adventist institutions, the gay liberation movement triggered a more robust discussion on homosexuality as well. After the 1969 Stonewall riots launched the United States, and much of the western world, into a debate over LGBT rights, Adventist commentators wrote a flurry of articles on homosexuality throughout the 1970s. For the most part, these authors believed something was terribly wrong with the way homosexuals were abused in society, yet those same authors failed to consider how their

religious views might be fanning the flames of fear and prejudice.⁴⁹ Instead, they fell back on the soon-to-be-discredited medical notion that homosexuality was an illness that could be “cured” through therapy and prayer.⁵⁰ In response, some gay Adventists wrote letters to the editors of these publications and offered their positive stories, providing the earliest murmurings of an Adventist gay voice.⁵¹

Towards the end of the 1970s, a gay Adventist ran a magazine ad inquiring whether other gay Adventists existed.⁵² To his surprise, several individuals responded and they started to meet in small groups across the United States and abroad. Eventually, they formed Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International (“SDA Kinship”) to support gay Adventists and their families.⁵³ At last, gay Adventists had succeeded in creating a safe space to worship and socialize without reprisal, producing *de facto* segregation between openly gay Adventists and unwelcoming congregations. The segregation was not a problem for Adventists who feared gay members. As an Adventist layman exclaimed at the time: “Let them (homosexuals) worship somewhere else. We don’t want them here.”⁵⁴

Like the LLC, which had been established during the civil rights movement to end racial discrimination in the Adventist Church, SDA Kinship desired to rid the church of its prejudice towards gay members as well. In 1980, SDA Kinship invited church leaders to speak at its first spiritual retreat. Three theology professors from Andrews University and two pastors attended the gathering with the GC’s approval. The guest speakers presented papers on homosexuality and faith, and concluded that a “simplistic” reading of the few references to homosexual acts in the Bible was insufficient to discern God’s will for gay Adventists today.⁵⁵ After listening to the stories of the retreat’s gay attendees, the guest speakers returned to the GC with a three-page written report (“SDA Kinship report”).

Similar to the LLC platform presented to the GC in 1961, the SDA Kinship report offered

specific recommendations, including proposals for the church to study the question of homosexuality holistically and to publish balanced and responsible articles on issues of concern to gay Adventists.⁵⁶ The report also suggested that pastors, teachers and administrators undergo sensitivity training to help them minister to gay members under their care. And it asked the church to create closer ties to SDA Kinship and to become more inclusive of gay members. The GC initially accepted most of these proposals, but then quickly and quietly retracted its approval under pressure from right-wing conservatives who began questioning the denomination’s *bona fide* Christian credentials.⁵⁷ Fear and prejudice had reared its ugly head once again. In short, to appease conservative members uncomfortable with change, gay Adventists like black Adventists would have to wait for equality “until the Lord shows us a better way.”

The story of gay Adventists did not end, however, with the GC’s dismissal of the SDA Kinship report. Just as the civil rights movement improved the situation of black Adventists, gay Adventists found cause for hope as the gay rights movement gained momentum in the 1990s. By 2003, the wind started to shift in favor of LGBT equality in the United States when the Supreme Court decriminalized consensual homosexual acts in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Around the same time, certain states started to recognize same-sex unions. Similar developments around the world prompted negative responses from church officials, although Adventist leaders in some countries, such as the Netherlands, remained relatively undisturbed.⁵⁸

The most public display of support for gay Adventists came in 2008, in the form of Adventist opposition to Proposition 8, a highly contested California law prohibiting same-sex marriage. In a campaign called “Adventists against Prop 8,” more than 1,300 Adventists and their friends expressed their disapproval of the law by signing a public petition.⁵⁹ Filmmakers contributed to these efforts with a trailblazing documentary, “Seventh-Gay Adventists,”

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which chronicled the story of three Adventist same-sex couples making sense of their faith and sexuality in a church that was often hostile towards them.⁶⁰

Like Adventist theologians who offered liberationist interpretations of scripture to support desegregation, Adventist scholars began to publish theological perspectives that prioritized the wellbeing of gay Adventists over dogma.⁶¹ These scholars understood that faithful gay Adventists were not seeking to undermine God's authority. On the contrary, gay Adventists desiring the same covenantal relationship available to heterosexual couples were merely affirming the church's teaching on marriage and family. Still, church officials seemed unwilling to engage in open dialogue.

The church's most blatant act of exclusion occurred in March 2014, when, in response to gains by LGBT activists around the world, the GC sponsored an international conference in South Africa "to gain a greater understanding of the issues surrounding alternative sexualities."⁶² Conference organizers made it "clear that they intend[ed] no redefinition of the Church's historic opposition to all sexual expression other than heterosexual marriage."⁶³ And they ensured such a result by inviting only gay Adventists that claimed to be "redeemed out of homosexual behavior,"⁶⁴ while excluding SDA Kinship and other LGBT Adventists who wished to share their positive stories.⁶⁵ The irony of hosting the conference in Africa did not escape commentators in and outside the church. They pointed out that, two years earlier, Adventist pastor Blasius Ruguri of the church's East Central Africa Division had publicly supported Uganda's anti-gay legislation that, in some cases, would have sentenced homosexuals to death.⁶⁶

Even more unnerving is the church's silence on homophobia, which echoes the church's prolonged silence on racism. In response to Ruguri's political statements, the GC issued a press release, which stated: "The Seventh-day Adventist Church subscribes to the biblical

teaching that the practice of homosexuality is condemned by God and is forbidden. At the same time the church is strongly opposed to acts of violence, hatred and discrimination against a person because of his or her sexual orientation."⁶⁷ This statement failed to appreciate that for many LGBT Adventists the church's one-sided, disparaging view of same-sex relationships feels like an act of "violence, hatred and discrimination," designed arbitrarily to dehumanize an entire class of people. Black Adventist lawyer and religious liberty scholar, Jason Hines, challenged the church's "milquetoast" response: "How can we expect a pastor in Africa to care about the rights of homosexuals when the Adventist rhetoric in America is at the very least tinged (and more often saturated) with homophobia and hate?"⁶⁸

A sea change took place when countries around the world started legalizing same-sex marriage. In 2015, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry. Repeating its reactionary response against interracial marriage after the *Loving v. Virginia* decision in 1968, the NAD again issued guidelines, this time opposing same-sex marriage on religious grounds.⁶⁹ The Andrews University Seminary also issued a white paper condemning "homosexual practice," while conceding that an innate homosexual orientation is not morally culpable.⁷⁰ An Adventist satirist wittily captured the tension in that position with a blog post titled, "Adventist church cool with gay people as long as they're not gay about it."⁷¹

Despite the church's resistance to LGBT equality, a new wave of Adventist students is breathing life into the type of activism last seen at the height of the Adventist civil rights movement. One example is Andrews University graduate Eliel Cruz, a self-identified bisexual Adventist and news commentator, who founded the school's unofficial gay-straight alliance. As a student, Cruz led a widely publicized social media fundraising campaign to benefit LGBT homeless youth in Chicago, after school admin-

istrators rejected his club's plans to raise the funds through a bake sale on campus.⁷² Other students like Cruz are starting gay-straight alliances across Adventist colleges in the hopes of making these campuses more welcoming of LGBT persons.⁷³

With time, gay Adventists at all levels of the church will feel more comfortable coming out of the shadows. Same-sex couples that marry outside the church will start bringing their children to Sabbath school and sending them to Adventist academies and colleges. Like the SCC's black members in the 1960s, gay Adventists will be able to hold their faith community legally accountable for any discriminatory responses.⁷⁴ And, as was the case with segregation, the church will find itself once again in a losing battle against social change unless it learns from its past mistakes. Ellen White's counsel on this point is compelling: "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us ... in our past."⁷⁵

Perhaps this time the GC will not wait for the government to act as the Good Samaritan to point out that "sin rests upon us as a church" when it fails to create an inclusive faith community, and instead heed the prophetic message of its troubled history with racism. Regardless of the church's current stance on homosexuality, an easy place to start is to condemn homophobia, like racism, as "one of the odious evils of our day." Starting from this premise, the church's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage should look very different. ■

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72. Jared Wright, “Andrews University LGBT Bake Sale Dustup Reveals Adventism’s Issues with Homosexuality,” *Spectrum*, (Mar. 10, 2015), <http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/03/10/andrews-university-lgbt-bake-sale-dustup-reveals-adventisms-issues-homosexuality>. (Accessed May 8, 2016)

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74. See, e.g., Lawson, *Christianity and Homosexuality*, 3:53–54, note 4

75. Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, 196.

**Towards the end
of the 1970s,
a gay Adventist
ran a magazine
ad inquiring
whether other
gay Adventists
existed.**