



World Church News

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Proclaiming Faith by Art in Mjøndalen Church, Norway

BY TOR TJERANSEN | TED NEWS

A little bit up. Straight forward." With a steady hand, Tor Magne Eilertsen maneuvered a large forklift in the main sanctuary of the Mjøndalen Seventh-day Adventist church, Norway. There were shouts from excited members of the decoration committee as large, wooden elements were mounted on the church walls. When completed, four panels make up a red, circular installation with religious symbols and quotes from the Book of Revelation. This is just one-

third of a larger installation depicting biblical themes.

The installation marked the completion of eighteen months of skilled work. More importantly, it is an expression of the personal faith of Adventist artist, Dag T. Hansen. For the Mjøndalen congregation it is also a desire to convey their faith through sight, not just through words and music.

Hansen has always been an artist, but not always an Adventist. While at art college in the 1980s, he developed a specialty in wood carving, but also fell in love with another student, Gry Shjøll, who happened to be an Adventist. With Gry as a spiritual coach, biblical faith became an ever more important part of Dag's life until, during a long mountain trek, Dag was baptized by an Adventist pastor. That fitted well with his longing to live close to nature and the God of nature. Dag and Gry married and, since 1995, have worked together on Haaberget Farm, where he has his studio.

The decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist was not an easy choice. However, for Hansen it was not good

enough to go with the flow. He has brought that experience into his artwork by depicting a fish swimming against the current.

"The fish is an ancient symbol for Christ," he says. "You must have the courage to stand for what is right and true. As a young Adventist you may encounter great pressure. Daring to be a Christian may not be easy, but we must have the courage to stand by our convictions."

Hansen is secure in his faith, but he is not a man who talks if he has nothing important to say. However, through his art, he is proclaiming faith. The new artwork in the Mjøndalen church is definitely proclaiming Adventist faith, even if the messages contained in it are not always obvious. Large pieces of art are not easily ignored. "The art is there in the church. Everyone who enters the sanctuary must see it," Dag states.

That is why he uses clear symbols without wanting to be too forward. He wants Adventists who look at the art to recognize central tenets of their faith. At the same time, he hopes that those with no

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Adventist background will be inspired to reflect on the large themes of life.

Near the entrance to the sanctuary, three squares in tones of red with a golden rim represent the Word of God, the Fall and the Sabbath. On the south wall, a rectangular, deep-blue group of panels depict a bright light with strong rays, reminding worshippers that Christ is the

light of the world. Along the rays are flower petals of different sizes and shapes. "I think the flowers represent the members of the congregation," Hansen says. "We are so different. Some are lonely, others are bruised in various ways, but we all belong to the fellowship of believers." The symbol of the flowers is carried over into the group of red panels—a reminder of the

new earth where we will experience a perfect world with God.

One of the rays in the blue group of panels turns into the hand of a large clock. The time is five to twelve, a timely reminder that the second coming of Christ is near. "We must make a choice before it is too late," says the artist.

Hansen did not want to give the artwork a specific



From left: Pine staves are glued together; sketch is transferred to wood panels; rough carving; artwork is ready.



title. He did not want a title to limit viewers' thinking. However, it is not difficult to understand why the working title of the artwork is *From Eternity to Eternity*. The observant viewer will recognize elements present in all three groups of panels. The apple with one bite taken in the first group of panels becomes just the core after human greed eats it away in the blue group. Thankfully, in the last group that symbolizes the new earth, the apple is once again whole.

The most prominent part of the last group of panels is the Scripture reference to Revelation, Chapter 21. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.... Behold, I am making all things new.... Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 21:4-5).

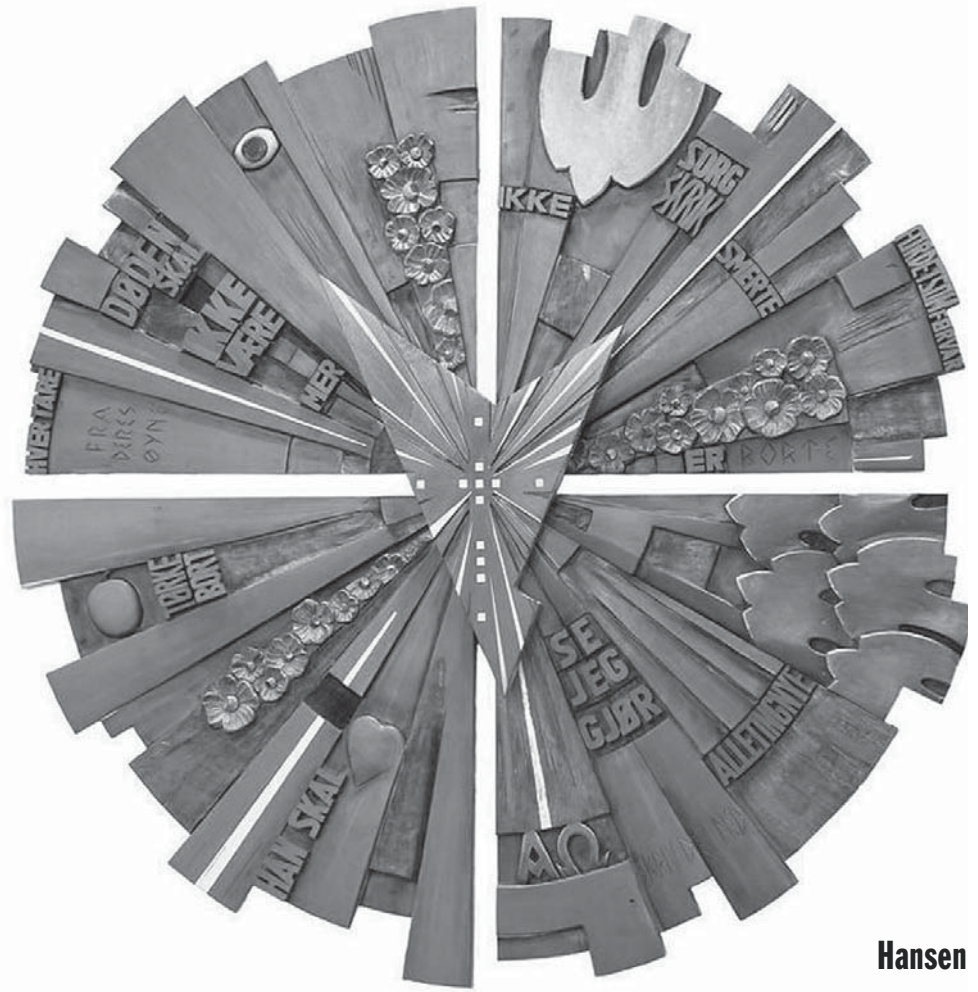
Hansen recognizes that

there will be varying opinions regarding the installation. He wants to provoke thought. "People must not only find the art beautiful. They must be provoked into thinking," he concludes.

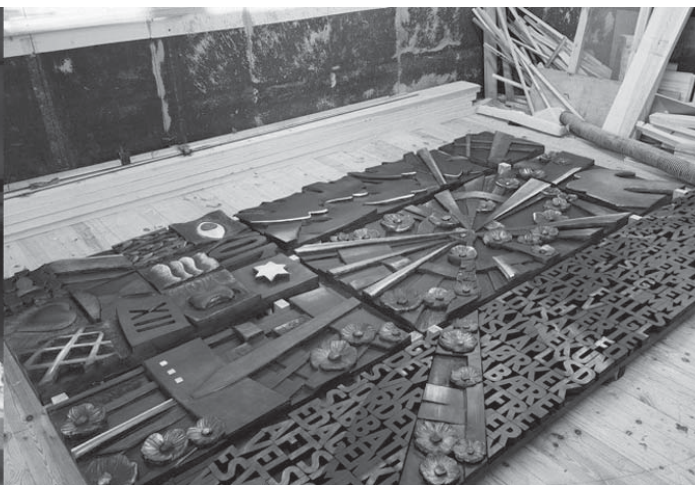
Certainly those who visit

the Mjøndalen church will have food for thought as they ponder the artwork. They will also recognize that the Bible is central to the faith of Seventh-day Adventists and that the Second Coming of Christ is our great hope. ■

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The Importance of Being Endorsed

BY BONNIE DWYER AND CHARLES SCRIVEN

For religion teachers at Adventist colleges and universities, an official endorsement process by the General Conference is part of the plan spelled out in the Handbook of the International Board for Ministerial and Theological Education (IBMTE). But many are resisting the idea, and the discussion about how to reshape the process has included not only the faculties of the universities and colleges, but also the leadership of the North American Division. In October, the Handbook will be on the agenda for the IBMTE Committee, which will forward their recommendations to the General Conference Executive Committee for approval at Annual Council.

Created by the General Conference during Robert Folkenberg's administration, IBMTE "focuses on ministry throughout its life cycle, from formation to hiring, to continuing education," according to Lisa Bearsley-Hardy, director of the General Conference Department of Education.

In 2015, a Taskforce led by General Conference Vice President Ben Schoun was created to review and rewrite, where necessary, the Handbook for

the Board. The draft revisions have been shared widely within the academic community. As the commenting period came to an end in July, a lively e-mail exchange among faculty members documented the feelings of many religion teachers.

Maury Jackson launched a lively "Independence Weekend" conversation when he suggested that the IBMTE "scrap the whole project" of requiring regular General Conference/Division endorsement of theology faculty upon hiring and every five years thereafter, as outlined in a chapter of the Handbook.

The preface to Jackson's concluding statement about scrapping the whole project was a quotation from Ellen G. White's *Manuscript Releases* Vol. 17, "Every Person Has God-Given Talents Which Should Bear Fruit; Church Leaders Not to Exercise Control Over Others," (pages 196–201):

... To handle men as if they were machinery, binding their freedom by methods and terms, is an offense which God will not tolerate. ... Some have been very ready to pronounce judgment upon the work of their fellow men, because it did not exactly represent their ideas. But has God pronounced them infallible? The spirit they have manifested in pronouncing judgment upon God's messengers shows their fallibility and their ignorance, both of the Scriptures and of the power of God. These men {and women} are counterworking the work

of God. They have felt at liberty to make decisions and laws which would bring talent under their jurisdiction. They have placed themselves in the judgment seat, to control their fellow men. But has God appointed them to do this work? He would say of them, "What dost thou here? Who sent you on this journey? Who gave you this errand to perform? Who made you a critic and judge on matters of doctrine? Who appointed you to pick and to choose the words and expressions which My servants shall use?"

Jackson hit "reply all" when sending his comment to Teresa Reeves, associate dean of the Theological Seminary at Andrews University and president of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies, as well as the person chosen by the General Conference Department of Education to assist with the documents in this latest IBMTE process. So Jackson's e-mail went to all 350 people on the ASRS mailing list, and it struck a chord. Soon others were chiming in to support Jackson's statement and to elaborate.

Stanley Patterson, also of Andrews University, prefaced his comment with an affirmation for any and all initiatives that promote excellence and quality in teaching. "Most of the IBMTE Handbook does that with the exception of the endorsement chapter," he wrote. "The endorsement chapter reflects a trend that can be tracked by actions over the last

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37 years in the model constitution and bylaws embedded in the GC Working Policy. The gradual process since 1980 of marking sections in bold face type that are mandatory rather than recommendations reflects a move away from relational trust and cooperation to a legislated model that assumes control as an acceptable model for compliance and unity." He added that, "Every move that we make under control mandate is a confession that the relational trust that held our church together for the past century is no longer reliable."

In his six reasons why the church should not pursue an endorsement process, Skip Bell, Andrews University, noted that the practice would contradict biblical teaching of the nature of the church. "It is ironic that we as a church would seek to assure faithfulness in the teaching of our faculty through a means that contradicts biblical teaching regarding the church." He noted the policy would "move us further to centralization of power in a single person or group. Where power narrows to committees or positional leaders the ministering body withdraws. Or worse, they become critical."

Robert Johnston, retired professor of New Testament at Andrews University Theological Seminary, made three points in his response:

1. Those who have made a study of church history will recognize that they have seen this story before, and it did not turn out well, from an Adventist perspective. It resulted in what we have called the "falling away" (2 Thes 2:3). It was a gradual process of ever increasing creedalism and hierarchicalism,

beginning with Ignatius of Antioch, proceeding on to Cyprian, then to Leo, and on into the ripened papacy. The creeds progressively tightened and narrowed doctrinal standards so as to eliminate many excellent believers because they were Monothelites, Single Processionists, and so forth, even though the scriptural basis for such close definition was indefinite or equivocal. This ultimately weakened Christendom and prepared the way for the triumph of Islam.

2. The proposed endorsement procedure requires that candidates assent to five documents, which therefore now function as normative creeds. All of them are demonstrably the products of political processes, some of which were unseemly. When I was baptized, Adventists had only twenty-two fundamental beliefs. That is what was on my baptismal certificate. When we make additions or modifications that many believers and ministers did not sign up for, that is like taking a mortgage that I have already signed and changing the numbers on it. In commercial language it could be called "bait and switch." I have no objection to revising our statements of belief if we keep strictly to their original nature and purpose. Our spiritual forebears were adamantly opposed to creeds. When lists of beliefs were first put forth they were done so as "descriptions of what Adventists generally believe," information for inquirers. They were not intended to have any normative or prescriptive force. As soon as you make such documents a test they become creeds.

3. Until 1915 The Adventist Church had a check and balance. Ellen White could rebuke a General Conference President, and she often did. We have struggled to find a substitute. God's people need this. David needed Nathan, and Herod Antipas needed John the Baptist. A major function of prophets is to speak truth to power, however unwelcome rulers may find this. In the Adventist Church today the nearest thing we have to a prophetic voice is the theological faculties of our universities and seminaries. But when the speakers of truth owe their positions to the rulers they must please the rulers, which makes it unlikely that they will speak the truth to them. They become like the court prophets of 1 Kings 22. The devil looks upon this endorsement procedure and laughs, because if it is approved and implemented he wins.

There was an occasional voice in support of IBMTE. Lester Merkil, Andrews University, wrote that there are good aspects to the committee. "Without an IBMTE committee which has a majority membership of theological educators, our field would not be properly represented in the education decisions of the church. It needs to be!" But even he said, "I think we are fairly unanimous in our understanding that a certification process is harmful. In fact, I find it hard to understand how it has remained this far in the new process."

John Matthews asked Teresa "to present to the committee a process that is more biblical than what is presented in the current IBMTE draft."

From Friedensau Adventist Univer-

sity in Germany, Stefan Hoschele wrote that his institution suggests any procedure of endorsement or other type of certification should be done in a different way, which builds on (1) trust in faculty, (2) trust in institutional boards, and (3) actual ministry (teaching, research, and ministry to the church and society). He said this related to observations previously made to the IBMTE Revision Committee that apparently had no impact on the final version. "We deplore that the suggested handbook sows seeds of distrust, and we desire to work for a church in which we can cooperate without casting doubt on each other's true Adventist Christianity."

Two dozen individual faculty members from several of the universities in North America joined the e-mail response conversation over the weekend. The faculty of the School of Theology at Walla Walla University sent the unanimous position of their entire faculty: "We would also like to add our voices to the many who have grave concerns about IBMTE's proposed endorsement process and resonate with many of the specific critiques that have already been offered. We hope IBMTE can be a resource and an encouragement rather than a centralized oversight committee. We love our church and wish to continue to minister in a climate of mutual respect, trust and familial charity as we have done for many decades."

This latest outcry over the control element of the endorsement process is not new. It has been voiced at various times during the life of IBMTE. Asked why the provision remains in the Handbook, Bearsley-Hardy says, "Because the Seventh-day Adventist church is los-

ing a large part of its young people."

Just as faculty objections to the proposed "endorsement process" were accumulating, North American Division leaders were themselves working on a proposal for an "alternative" to the process. The Division's college presidents, although aligned with IBMTE's goal of accountability in the teaching of religion, objected earlier to the "endorsement" provision as compromising college-board responsibility and introducing risk with respect to institutional accreditation. On Tuesday, July 5, NAD administrators and Ministerial Department leaders joined college presidents and academic deans in support of a proposal that would jettison that provision.

The group's "alternative procedures" document begins with recognition of the church's "obligation" to "provide guidance" with respect to ministerial training by Adventist institutions of higher education. Although some Christian colleges require all employees to sign a "faith statement," the document says our own church has "wisely refrained" from this, out of respect both for the idea of "present truth" and for the final authority of the Bible. Compliance by faith statement, it suggests, would run counter to these convictions.

Still, constituents can and do influence ministerial training. One pathway for such influence is through institutional boards that include "conference and union church leaders." Another is through the NAD Ministerial Association, which "works closely with the Schools and Departments of religion to inform and influence" curricula related to the training of ministers. Still another is through the hiring

process by which local conferences effectively assess graduates of programs for ministerial training.

These pathways assume basic trust among those involved. The IBMTE's "endorsement process" would require every religion teacher to receive (at five-year intervals) an "endorsement certificate" from a centralized authority outside of college or university structures of governance. The NAD's "alternative procedures document" objects not only to the accreditation risk this would entail but also to the implied "lack of trust of the institutions of higher education as well as of their administrators and the conference and union leaders who serve on their boards of trustees."

The document at the same time embraces IBMTE determination to "foster dynamic theological unity," "promote professional excellence," and "energize" Adventist spiritual life "through committed faculty." Although the "endorsement process" would be "counterproductive," such purposes matter. The document promises collaboration with the NAD Ministerial Association on development of a "process to assure the faithfulness of the NAD religion faculty," one "appropriate to" all North American colleges and universities, including, as is pointedly said, both Loma Linda University and Andrews University.

Under the provisions of the draft IBMTE document, proposed "alternative procedures" must receive IBMTE approval "before they are implemented." NAD leaders declare at the end of their proposal that the "best chance" for meeting agreed-upon goals for ministerial education will come through such "collaborative efforts" as they envision in their statement. ■