



## Leadership from Elsewhere | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**A**dventist Christianity is *not* the same as the General Conference hierarchy. As always, we can look elsewhere, not just there, for leadership. And living memory can recall no time when this point has been more important, more worth celebrating.

A few weekends ago I heard a children's choir—sixth-to-eighth graders—sing before a Spanish-speaking congregation in Tennessee. The sound was elegant, the words uplifting, and every listener seemed alive with Sabbath joy. The effort that had gone into that moment was paying off, and I marveled at how local passion persists despite troubles in Silver Spring.

This fall I witnessed at close hand how a tiny congregation in Arizona responded when a childless and deeply vulnerable older couple seemed no longer able to manage in their own place: how key members arranged and followed through on a delicate intervention; how the man and his wife ended up for several weeks in separate and widely distant places of care; how amazing members took turns bringing them each week to Sabbath worship, and making sure they had Sabbath afternoon time together; and how the initiative of members helped unite them again under a single roof. The effort that went into all of this was both difficult and humane—a small wonder of the world. Efforts like it occur again and again where groups of as few as two or three band together in shared devotion to Christ. Local passion still shows the way.

A congregation I often visit—the Church of the Advent Hope in New York City—inspires me for its energy, diversity and ready welcome to

Holy Spirit innovation. Brook Pierce, the church's Communications Coordinator, recently wrote, on the Spectrum website, about its response to *Hacksaw Ridge*, the feature film about Desmond Doss. In preparation for its release, members got in touch with Terry Benedict, one of the film's producers and the maker, earlier, of a documentary about Doss. Benedict visited the church for a screening of the documentary and discussion afterward. His hope for both films, Brook Pierce reported, was that viewers would come away reflecting on "where they are (and are not) willing to compromise themselves"; and on how they might (or might not) consider changing. The congregation thinks of itself as an "Adventist Peace Church," and the theme carried through to November 5 when Ron Osborn, the Adventist author and peace advocate, preached the morning sermon. Members met that evening to see *Hacksaw Ridge* together, and further discussion took place on November 12.

If I were a member of the Church of the Advent Hope I would be acquainted with its flaws. Communities, like individuals, fall short. But this church is still a place to look for leadership. Only one of Jesus' Beatitudes addresses church mission, and it is the blessing pronounced upon "peacemakers." This theme, this call to redemptive action, occupies no place at all in the conventional account of who we are and what we're for, but local passion offers the reminder that it should. It's another example of leadership from elsewhere.

So far I've said nothing of pastors, but good stories about local churches often, or even usually, reflect the good work of local pastors. It's

**Only one  
of Jesus'  
Beatitudes  
addresses  
church mission,  
and it is  
the blessing  
pronounced  
upon "peace-  
makers."**

too often assumed that success for a pastor is escape to a desk job and a travel schedule. But the sharpening of the church's cutting edge occurs locally, so if the pastor's work is enhancement of the local congregation by preaching, caring, and organizing, no other job in the church can matter more.

One man who lost his entire family during the Rwandan genocide was Pastor Isaac Ndwaniye. The church's *Mission Quarterly* reported that immediately afterward he sought to reestablish Adventist communities, first in a refugee camp, then back in Kigali, and then elsewhere in Rwanda. Eventually he was called into service among people who had actually participated in the killing of his wife, children, and other relatives. Sometimes, it turns out, pastors lead by the character they display. We know that they also lead by pooling their insight and energy, as when pastors from several large congregations in the United States dreamed up the Jesus-focused One Project and gave it what appears to be long life. One Project "gatherings," on several continents, continue to inspire many Adventists.

Pastors know members—know their interactions with one another, know their dreams and their discouragements. And that is why pastors, when they are good, just *get* more than the rest of us. That's why their leadership matters so much. When the church's most visible leaders seem more obsessed with themselves and their power than with women and scientists and others who suffer under their regime, leadership from elsewhere matters the way breath matters.

We have a unity problem, a discord that puts many of us at odds with leaders who, in other circles of our community, seem deeply revered. This discord is alarming. According to John 17:21, Jesus prayed that those who believe in him "may all be one," just as he and the Father are one. In just this spirit, Ephesians 4:3 challenges us "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." If, as Reformer John Calvin said, the "only true knowledge of God is that born of obedience,"<sup>1</sup> then effort, right now, toward a renewal of unity is an urgent task.

But how can we renew unity? How, by God's grace, can we make ourselves whole again? One stream of Radical Reformation thought—thought that belongs precisely to our Adventist heritage—puts the stress, in fact, on local congregations. When there is discord in the larger community, you don't try to sweep away differences through overarching bureaucracy or lockstep uniformity.

Bureaucratic shortcuts can only mislead and fall short. The better approach, as James McClendon puts it, is this: "Let us all, congregation by congregation, local church by local church, Christian group by Christian group, seek to embody the completeness that is found in Christ Jesus. . . . When we do that we shall of necessity come closer to one another."<sup>2</sup>

We share a commitment to being international, a church, that is, of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. So, when discord happens on a worldwide level, and officials at the top seem baffled and inept in addressing it, we may be grateful for leadership from elsewhere. Local churches and their pastors sharpen the church's cutting edge.

Two things I am *not* saying. I'm not saying local congregations are all healthy. Many are not, and some pastors fall short of the passion and imagination necessary for good preaching, caring, and organizing. Nor am I saying that Adventist administrators have all let us down. Many are innovative; many are resisting our drift into prejudice and corrosive control.

On Sabbath, November 19, I heard David Weigley, the president of the Columbia Union, preach the sermon. His theme was "Embracing Grace, Empowering All." All listeners knew that the Union he leads has defied higher-level authority by continuing to support full gender-equality in pastoral ministry; everyone knew that recent Annual Council discussion involved the threat of reprisal against him and his Union. Still, appealing both to Scripture and to Adventist stories such as the burgeoning of woman-led congregations in China, Weigley declared that "the Columbia Union will not turn back." It was bracing to hear.

But as Weigley, I am sure, would be first to acknowledge, when administrators take courageous or innovative stands, usually it's because local congregations, with their pastors, stand behind them. So, let me say again: local churches and their pastors sharpen the church's cutting edge. That means our denomination must become irrelevant except as local churches and local pastors receive our support and appreciation. ■

---

**Charles Scriven** chairs Adventist Forum.

## References

1. John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.6.2
2. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Witness*, 336.