

## Special Issue: The Adventist Unity Conference

# UNITY 2017

### Editorial: Unions Unite for Unity | BY BONNIE DWYER

When Adventist leaders from ten union conferences in four world divisions called a meeting to discuss unity, they did so in the spirit of the Sabbath Conferences of the 1840s. Enthused by God's spirit, they suggested coming together to explore the important subjects of church structure and authority, unity, and liberty of conscience. They chose the United Kingdom as a central meeting place, and set the event for 15–17 June, at the Crowne Plaza, Heathrow, London.

As news about the conference spread, there were scholars who enthusiastically volunteered to speak at the meeting only to change their mind after phone calls from General Conference leaders questioned the legitimacy of the event, given that it had not gone through normal channels of approval for the worldwide church calendar. Without that approval, official church media also shied away.

At *Spectrum*, we saw the outline of the program and realized that the papers to be presented would be of interest to our readers, so we volunteered to publish the material from the conference in written form. The conference organizers considered our proposal and accepted it. Thus, this double issue of *Spectrum* contains all the papers that were presented in London, plus a bonus peer-reviewed historical article about church attitudes toward women's ordination in the 1930's, when church leaders decided they wanted to be the most "fundamental of the fundamentalists."

As the event in London unfolded, it was intriguing to me that, despite the political situation which prompted the gathering, church politics were not the focus of the conversation. While the speakers did not shy away from the current situation, they addressed the biblical and historical assignments that they had been given. Round-table conversations after each of the presentations stayed on those topics, too.

It was time for such discussions that motivated the initial calling for the conference. Brad Kemp, the president



On Friday afternoon, Barry Oliver chaired a discussion session on Unity in the Church that touched on several aspects of recent church discussions about unity. Seated left to right: Roy Adams, Olive Hemmings, John Brunt, Reinder Bruinsma, Barry Oliver, Geroge Knight, Wendy Jackson, Lowell Cooper, and Ray Roennfeldt.

of the New Zealand Union Conference and chair of the London organizing committee, noted at the opening of the session the limited time for discussion of agenda items at the Annual Council meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee. While all the union conference presidents are members of that committee, it is the division officers and General Conference personnel who extensively review and prepare the Annual Council items. By the time the union conference personnel arrive, the expectation is often for them to just quickly ratify what the divisions recommend. When a few hours are set aside for a controversial issue, individuals are limited to comments of two minutes, and then a vote is taken. Union and conference level personnel often leave the meetings feeling that their viewpoints have not been adequately heard or considered.

You could feel the hunger for conversation in the room in London. You could hear it in the animated presentations that made even church policy dynamic and interesting. At the round tables there was great interest in views from other parts of the world. The significance of the London Unity Conference thus grew out of the original presentations and conversations.

One attendee commented to me that it was important

to note what the meeting was not, because that is what he found himself telling friends. It was not a political discussion. It was not a review of the General Conference Secretariat document "A Study of Church Governance and Unity" that set in motion the unusual events of Annual Council 2016. It was not a new set of papers on Women's Ordination.

It was a biblical, historical examination of church authority, structure, unity, and liberty of conscience. A master class on those topics, really. An unforgettable experience. An important meeting in the history of Adventism, much like the 1919 Bible Conference. A privilege to attend.

Talking with Olive Hemmings after her masterful presentation on liberty and justice, I expressed my appreciation for her work. "You are welcome," she said, "It was a labor of love."

That love permeated the meeting. It made us all feel, as Roy Adams suggested, that as a church we are really not as separated on issues as it might seem. There is love for one another, love that is the beginning of unity. ■

---

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.



DENNIS MEER