

“DRINKING TEA AND KEEPING THINGS TOGETHER”:

Putting the Newbold Events in a Larger Context

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

When Job Cohen, the mayor of Amsterdam from 2001 to 2010, was asked about the essential activities of a leader, he told the journalist: “Drinking tea with the people.” And he further defined his mayoral task as “Trying to keep things together.” These words brought him a lot of criticism. Leadership, it was said, was surely more than drinking cups of tea with the public and just keeping things together. It is about having a vision, about developing strategies, and leading an organization into the future. But I have always had a high regard for the leadership qualities of Mr. Cohen, and I agree with him that the ability to “drink cups of tea” and to “keep people together” is perhaps the most important characteristic of a true leader.

It is with this thought in mind that I write this second article about events at Newbold College. The first article, entitled “Shrinking to Grow” first appeared on the *Spectrum* website on June 23 and is found in this issue of *Spectrum*’s print edition. It would be quite an overstatement to say that all readers were happy with the content of my piece. In fact, many were not, and I was especially criticized for not having shown enough empathy with the Newbold College

staff. I realize that I could have said more about the way in which the decisions regarding the “reorientation” of Newbold came about and were communicated. Perhaps at heart I still think too much as an administrator to fully shed my administrative bias. As I mentioned, for quite some time I was a member of the board of governors of Newbold College, and I must admit that in those days I often thought that Newbold’s future was far from secure. I do apologize to the members of the Newbold staff if they have felt that I left an important part of the story unwritten. It is good to see that the reporting in this print issue of *Spectrum* is more complete.

The Complexity of European Adventism

I mentioned in the first article that I reluctantly accepted the request of the *Spectrum* editor to write about recent developments at Newbold College. And it is with at least as much reluctance that I promised her to follow-up with this second article. The events at Newbold—dramatic as they certainly are—are not taking place in a vacuum and it seems important to explain how they are connected with various recent developments and current trends in European Adventism. In this age of ever more

polarization and increasing complexity, “keeping things together” is the constant challenge for secular as well as spiritual leaders in our society. There must at least be a fair degree of coherence in a group of people—be it a secular organization or a church—and of pursuing common goals, if anything positive is going to happen. Perhaps the biggest challenge for today’s church leaders at any level of our denominational organization is, indeed, “keeping things together.” And “drinking more tea with the people” seems to be a fitting metaphor for the need to remain in close touch with all segments of the church.

Looking at a globe or a map of the earth, one realizes that Europe, even when including the European section of the former Soviet-Union, is a relatively small part of the world. With its four million square miles (just over ten million square kilometers) Europe accounts for less than 7% of the total land area of the planet. But Europe’s smallness belies its complexity. There are fifty-one independent nations in Europe, in which some 200 different languages are spoken. The European Union operates its huge organization with documents in twenty-four different official languages. Parts of Europe have, in addition to their enormous linguistic and cultural diversity, very different political backgrounds, while there is also a great disparity in religions and all the tensions that tend to flow from this.

The Adventist Church in Europe is quite small. If Russia and the neighboring former Soviet states east of the Ural Mountains are included, the membership amounts to about 380,000 members. The church is administered by three divisions, the Trans-European Division (TED), the Inter-European Division (EUD), and the Euro-Asia Division (ESD). Our focus will be on the TED, with headquarters in St. Albans (United Kingdom) and the

EUD, with its headquarters office in Berne, Switzerland. Looking at the maps of these divisions, one may wonder at the logic of how the countries were allocated. Some countries in Central and Eastern Europe are part of the TED (Poland, Hungary, the Baltics, and the Balkans), while next-door neighbors (Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) belong to the EUD. The Netherlands and Scandinavia belong, together with Great Britain to the TED, but Belgium and Germany (which has borders with the Netherlands) are part of the EUD. Historical reasons mostly explain this situation.

The TED and EUD have 90,000 and 180,000 members, respectively. This means that these divisions have fewer members than many unions or even some conferences have elsewhere in the world. Each of these divisions has eleven unions and a few “attached” fields. National, cultural and language barriers are responsible for having so many small organizational entities. The complexity, however, does not stop here, but also characterizes many of the unions and conferences. Take the Belgian-Luxemburg Conference, with around 3,000 members, as an example. Until a few decades ago, the membership in Belgium could be divided into French-speaking and Flemish (Dutch)-speaking members. Today there are also Romanian, Spanish, and Portuguese churches, and congregations where the worship is in Twi (Ghanaian) or Kinyarwanda (Rwandese), and there are churches that use English and congregations with Russian-speaking groups. The two congregations in Luxembourg have members who speak Luxembourgish, German, French, Portuguese, and about ten other languages.

The linguistic complexity is closely linked to extensive migration. Some unions in Europe have seen significant membership growth in past decades, while elsewhere

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membership has remained static or has even declined. The main difference has been migration. Both Britain and France have seen large numbers of immigrants from former colonies coming into their countries—among them significant numbers of Adventists. This has totally changed the composition of many local churches—in particular in the large cities. Moreover, there have been substantial other shifts in membership. Significant numbers of German Russians have been allowed to move to Germany. Among them were sizable groups of Adventists, whose arrival has had a major impact on many congregations in the two German unions. And then there is the migration of Romanian Adventists to other parts of Europe. As a result, there are today more Romanian-speaking Adventists in Spain than there are members who have Spanish as their first language.

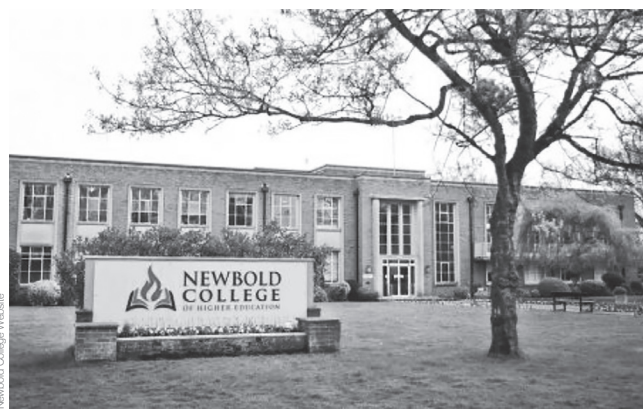
Some Major Challenges

I believe it is helpful to be aware of some of the complexities that I just sketched, if one wants to see how things concerning Newbold College fit into a larger picture. After all, it is in this changing environment that the college must seek to fulfil its mission. The context in which Newbold and other educational institutions in Europe must provide training for our pastors differs dramatically from that of a few decades ago, and it continues to change.

One important factor, in addition to those mentioned above, is that today far fewer pastors are employed by the church than in the not-too-distant past. When I started my ministry in the Netherlands, the church had less than 4,000 members. Yet, it was able to recruit, employ, and pay for almost fifty pastors. Today, in a much more complex linguistic and cultural landscape, the church has 6,000-plus members, but has great difficulty in finding even twenty pastors (and paying for more if they could be found). This has reduced the number of Dutch theology students at Newbold, and the same can be said for students from a number of other fields in the TED.

Church income in most countries in Europe may over time have risen in absolute figures, but if inflation is taken into account, per capita giving in tithe has seriously declined. This naturally has greatly affected the church's employment possibilities.

At the same time, the ministry has become a much less attractive career option. There are a number of



reasons why this is so. Pastors do not have the status and prestige they once enjoyed. And although pastors' salaries in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in most European countries are comparable (and sometimes even a little higher) than what their colleagues in other denominations earn, being a minister does not translate into financial abundance. Moreover, in the small administrative entities in Europe, with all the cultural and language barriers, career possibilities are quite limited.

It may well be, however, that the most important reason why fewer people feel a calling to prepare for the ministry is a sense of frustration and despondency. Is the church in Europe going anywhere? Does it have a future, or are we steadily getting nearer to the moment when the last pastor will switch off the lights? I do not know under what circumstances some theological students at Newbold allegedly "lose their faith." It is something that may need serious attention. But I venture to say that in many cases the opposite has also been true and the faith of many has been strengthened and matured by their Newbold experience. In addition, I do know for certain that there are also pastors who graduated with enthusiasm from Newbold but who, after having worked for some time in the ministry, lost their zeal and passion for their work, and decided they could not be happy and feel satisfied in the kind of suffocating spiritual climate they experienced in their work

The Roles of Administrators and Academics

Apart from the (in my opinion) quite convincing arguments why a restructuring of Newbold College became inevitable, the question whether Newbold delivers the kind of ministers that the church needs is quite legitimate. In many places the church has become so

diverse, and the needs of congregations are so dissimilar, that church leaders must ask whether the profile of future pastors must perhaps be adjusted, or whether different kinds of ministers may be needed for different places and assignments. There is nothing wrong with suggesting that Newbold—or for that matter any other educational institution—must from time to time take a critical look at its program. Is there a need for change, for pursuing other priorities? Can we still assume that “one size fits all,” or is there a need for different types of ministers? Should the curriculum make provision for this? And if so, how?

This is where we touch on a fundamental issue, and it seems that at this point the process of transforming the Department of Theological Studies into the Centre for Ministry and Mission has been seriously flawed. For, who are the most suitable persons to find the answers to these and similar questions? Should we look for these answers first and foremost from the administrative leaders of the church, or rather from those who have theological expertise. [And let’s not muddy the waters by suggesting that many of the church’s theologians do not have much practical experience as pastors, since in actual fact, many of today’s church administrators themselves have never worked as a local pastor.] The members of the college staff have felt they were largely left out of the discussion about the college’s future. Having spoken to several of the staff members, I cannot escape this conclusion. But this unfortunate fact also demands to be put in a larger perspective.

There is a growing tendency among key leaders in the denominational hierarchy to think that they must safeguard the church’s doctrinal heritage and must ensure that the membership gets the kind of spiritual diet that will produce “revival and reformation,” and is equipped

to witness in contemporary terms of their faith. There is often on the part of church administrators a definite mistrust towards at least some of the theologians who are employed in our educational institutions, and a greater confidence in the orthodoxy of a number of independent ministries and their leaders. There is a fear that the traditional doctrinal package is not safe in the hands of the theological faculties of some of our colleges and universities, and that the administrators therefore have the duty to steer, and, where needed, to correct the theological conversations. It would seem that at least some administrators at the union and conference level (and perhaps also in the division administration) in the TED share in a fair degree of mistrust toward the now defunct Department of Theological Studies at Newbold. One might well ask what basis there was for such mistrust. Was it founded on facts or mostly on rumor? Do all these leaders themselves have the background to come to a balanced assessment? And/or do they feel the pressure from (ultra-)conservative segments of their constituency, and possibly also from “on high”?

Understandably, one of the key concerns of leadership at all levels is to avoid controversies that endanger the peace in the Church and may cause rifts, either in the left or in the right segments. Church leaders want to keep the Church together. They tend to strive for unity on the basis of a strong measure of uniformity, both in doctrinal expressions and in lifestyle matters. In the process, we often notice an alarming mix of theology and politics. The goal of resisting alleged theological heresies is at times pursued by dubious political tactics. To give one recent example: When less than a decade ago the top leadership of the church was eager to revise and reword some of the Fundamental Beliefs, only a handful of trusted

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theologians was involved. Top administrators played a key role in ensuring that the changes they wanted to see were adopted. Unfortunately, in the recent events at Newbold College, administrators called the tune in the discussions about the kind of ministry the Church in Europe will need in the years to come, without “drinking enough tea” with all the parties concerned.

Keeping the church together is a lofty ideal but more needs to be said. The question is whether this can be done in a superficial way, with an eye on *the near future*—at least securing the peace during the watch of the current administrations—or whether conditions can be created that will keep the church together *also in the longer term*. Another question is how the term “together” is defined. Does it allow for space and openness for different viewpoints, or is it on the basis of enforced uniformity? At present it may seem as if the church’s administration succeeds to a reasonable extent in keeping the church together, but is the cost of this short term “success” not too high? Has it not been one of the reasons for the dramatic exodus of many church members—often including our best and brightest young people? Has it not silenced too many of the creative voices of those who were eager to reconsider our theological and cultural heritage in ways that would keep our “truths” relevant in our secular and postmodern times? Have not too many of the challenging discussions gone underground? And has all of this not created an atmosphere in which many of our theologians and other thought leaders feel unsafe, and will often remain silent for fear of losing their employment or their ability to function in the church? Do the church’s leaders sufficiently take this into consideration in their long-term planning?

Together

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On the one hand, administrators must always recognize that the church is more than a social organization that must be managed on the basis of solid business principles. Organizational strength and unity are extremely important aspects but cannot be secured at any cost. In their strenuous attempts to hold things together, leaders must not just keep an eye on those who have remained but must also be painfully aware of all those who have left. Success must not be primarily defined in terms of defending our doctrinal traditions, but first of all in terms of how this doctrinal framework can become relevant in the lives of twenty-first century people.

On the other hand, educators—in particular those who have a role in the preparation of our ministers—must act responsibly in the theological guidance they

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offer to the church. They are expected to take a critical look at traditional viewpoints, and to offer fresh ideas and new expressions, but they must do so in a responsible manner and in loyalty to the organization that employs them. And, at the same time, they must never lose sight of the practical side of things. Organizations like Newbold College must, after all, be able to pay their bills, and there are limits to the amount the parent organizations can subsidize. Educational institutions that pride themselves on being

“progressive” in their theological and spiritual approach must keep in mind that the subsidies that enable them to operate are to a large extent available because of the loyal financial support of the “conservative” segment of the Church’s membership.

The Way Forward

Adventist education in the western world faces enormous hurdles, and this applies in particular to Adventist higher education in Europe. The question will

continue to be asked how much advanced education the church in Europe can afford to provide. A more centralized approach inevitably raises the issue of major language barriers. Moreover, Adventist education is expensive—for many European Adventists, far too expensive—while in most European countries, public advanced education is free or relatively cheap.

But what about theological education in Europe? Presently, too many Adventist institutions seem to be competing for a diminishing number of theological students. Could one university—perhaps with more than one campus—cater for this? This frequently asked question will not go away and, at some point, sooner rather than later, it may become even more pressing than it already is today. And the related question of whether some of the unions can (and should) in the long term continue to operate colleges which offer a masters' degree in theology, cannot be ignored.

Questions about the “product” of the theological training can be legitimate. How can we best serve the diverse membership in our European fields? Is putting more emphasis on practical theology in the curriculum the solution? And if so, who has the expertise to determine what this practical element in the pastoral training should consist of? How does this relate to the recent and current developments at Newbold?

The questions that have arisen, and many other issues that need consideration, are not solely in the domain of administrators of the TED administration and of the fields that constitute the TED. And neither are they exclusively in the domain of the board of governors of the college, the theology professors, and other specialists in education at Newbold. Both groups have responsibilities and insights that the other group does not have, but that need to be taken into account. Working at new models is a shared task. It demands “drinking lots of tea: together.” This, I think, has not sufficiently happened, but it is not too late to reach out to each other, make concerted efforts to rebuild trust and come to solutions that are not just workable, but that may enthuse and inspire the board of governors, the Newbold staff, and present and future students.

Looking beyond Newbold, I believe the church more than ever needs inspiring and innovative leaders at the local, regional, national, and supranational levels: competent and spiritual women and men who can indeed

hold things together. We need leaders who can think beyond national borders, and even beyond the separations between divisions, and can create an atmosphere of openness, tolerance, and respect in which varieties of Adventism can flourish, convinced that, in spite of all our diversity, we have enough in common in order to stay united. We need leaders who will focus on keeping the church together amid the challenges of an ever-changing society, and who will do so by “drinking tea” with all segments of the church, and by listening to the entire chorus of different voices. We need leaders who are experienced managers, but who, at the same time, never forget that the church is more than a human association. The essence of the church is first of all about theology—about who God is and what He does for us. It is about constantly finding new words and fresh metaphors. Our theologians must help the leaders as well as the “ordinary” church members to do so, as together we seek a deeper understanding of what God has revealed, and as we try to equip people to effectively witness of their faith, and struggle to formulate twenty-first answers to twenty-first century questions.

This type of leadership requires openness to change. There may be times of “shrinking” in order to be able to move forward. I fervently hope that Newbold College will not only survive, but that its “shrinking” and “going forward” can become an inspiring example of how a crisis can be overcome and how it, though a process of listening to each other and respecting each other's expertise, can lead to creative solutions and “keeping things together” as the church moves into the future.



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