

WHAT DEFINES

# Thoughtful Leadership

in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

By Rolf Pöhler

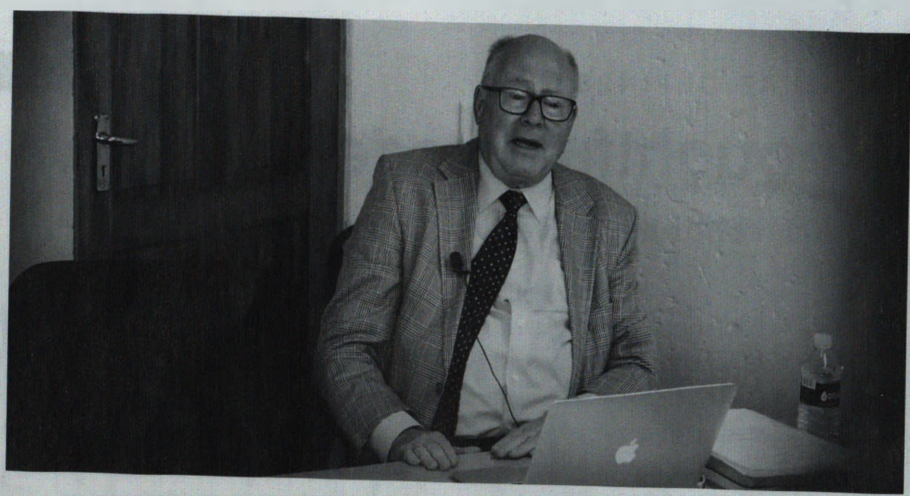
**W**hat makes a good leader? Countless books have been written on this topic, and many more will yet come out. I am not going to add another sample to an impressive array of good advice and best practice. I just want to share my personal top-three leadership traits, which I consider vital for those in leading positions, including in the Church. I am not talking of professional competencies and social skills, which are indispensable prerequisites for any leader. Rather, what I have in mind are certain personal attitudes that become apparent, especially when a leader is faced with challenges and pushbacks.

**No. 1: Congruity between the inner and outer self** - I vividly remember a conversation with a seasoned elder and experienced conference committee member who advised me to hold back on sharing unfamiliar views to avoid criticism. "Wait until you have made some headway; then you can speak more freely." Was this the prompting of the Spirit or the voice of the tempter? In any case, I consider authenticity and candor crucial character traits—all the more if there is pressure to conform to strong leaders and weak committees. Some of my international students have made me aware of the severity of this problem.

**No. 2: Standing up for one's convictions** - Good leaders have a backbone—they do not need a corset. Nor do they let others squeeze them into one. Balanced education, intellectual acumen, personal faith, a mature conscience, and a portion of courage enable them to stand up for what they believe to be right and true. If we admire Martin Luther for his courageous demeanor at the Diet of Worms, we must not reprimand and sanction leaders who take a stand for biblically grounded convictions and values. Submission to the Church does not trump intellectual honesty and conscientious objection.

**No. 3: Balancing loyalty and criticism** - Leaders owe loyalty to the organization they serve. This does not mean condoning misconduct and maldevelopment or relinquishing the right to call things as they are. In fact, criticism is an expression of loyalty when the good of the Church is in view. On the other hand, criticism without constructive participation is disloyal. Good leaders display both critical loyalty and loyal criticism. This same approach also applies to the doctrinal heritage of the Church. Holding the faith of our fathers in high esteem and reviewing it in the light of Scripture and the present go hand in hand.

Reinder Bruinsma has long embodied these attitudes. Having served the Church in many capacities for many years, he has managed to remain authentic, stand up for his convictions, and stay loyal, while speaking frankly on debated issues. Inevitably, he suffered some bruises along the way, which did not deter him from his course. His perseverance far beyond retirement and his unabated fervor for the Church he loves and suffers from is admirable and worth emulating. The Church needs more people like him on all levels and in all age groups—people who deeply care with heart and mind.



Dr. Reinder Bruinsma presents "Dangers and Blessings of Postmodernism" in a YouTube video posted in 2018.

By Laurence Turner

“Thoughtful leadership in the Adventist Church needs to identify what is worth preserving from the past and what is not.”

Reinder Bruinsma has spent decades as a leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He has done so with distinction in a tradition that operates with a task-based theology and mission—to take the gospel to the world so that Christ may return. This stance runs the risk of emphasizing doing (quantifiable performance) rather than being (spiritual depth). Reinder’s leadership style, research, and publications have provided a wholesome corrective to that, and a model worthy of emulation. Like the Book of Psalms, thoughtful and relevant Church leadership needs to encompass diversity in thought, life situation, spiritual experience, and expression—from doubting and questioning, through honest differences of opinion and reassessments of tradition, to affirmation and celebration. We find evidence of these virtues in Reinder’s contributions, such as *Facing Doubt: A Book for Adventist Believers “on the Margins”*; *Matters of Life and Death*; and *I Have a Future: Christ’s Resurrection and Mine*.

Thoughtful leadership in the Adventist Church needs to identify what is worth preserving from the past and what is not. Also, it needs to recognize what is worthwhile adopting from the present and what is not. The wisdom to tell the difference is nurtured by responsible biblical exegesis, serious theology, and reflective movement from theory to practice. Without these commitments, the Church becomes increasingly marginalised in the contemporary world, a trend gathering pace in some demographics. No Adventist doubts the significance of our Reformation heritage nor the contribution of our 19th-century pioneers. But if these become fossilised and immovable commitments in every detail, then in the 21st-century we will find ourselves providing 19th-century answers to 16th-century questions. Examples could be given.

Thoughtful Church leadership is also aware of how to foster a healthy relationship between leaders and the Church at large. Too frequently, and perhaps increasingly in recent years, some leadership can aim to produce a compliant Church. But a greater virtue than compliance to a system or institution is faithfulness to the radical demands and joys of the gospel, which do not always sit comfortably with bureaucracy. Being primarily faithful, rather than compliant, results in a Church membership encouraged to constructively challenge leadership, leading to a greater sense of ownership and partnership.

Reinder’s leadership style and his thoughtful publications reveal a mind that moves beyond administrative pragmatism. If the Adventism of the present and future is to flourish in a gospel-oriented manner, his is a voice worth listening to.

**W**hat kind of thoughtful leader is Reinder Bruinsma? What are the ideal characteristics of a Seventh-day Adventist scholar for the 21st century? The answer to those questions lies in Reinder's bibliography. From the tremendous variety of books he has published and public presentations he has made in Europe, America, and beyond, significant features emerge.

**This scholar is highly responsive and sensitive.**

Reinder finds that the Seventh-day Adventist traditional interpretation of Bible prophecies is challenging, so then comes his study in which he reconsiders the role and place of Catholicism in Christian history and in Adventist eschatology.<sup>1</sup>

Reinder finds that many church members are desperate when discovering that the Bible writers did not address present-day questions such as euthanasia, capital punishment, cloning, abortion, and contraception. Reinder is bold enough to tackle these difficult issues in a balanced way.<sup>2</sup>

Reinder discovers that a significant group of Seventh-day Adventist believers are facing doubts, so he starts a conversation with them, acknowledging that doubts are part of his own faith. He is honest to the point that he admits he could have left the boat, but he stayed onboard: "If I remain, it is for you."<sup>3</sup>

When postmodernism started to raise fears among Church leaders, Reinder took on the challenge of teaching a class on the risks and opportunities this new trend of thought could bring to the Church. Hundreds of Newboldians benefited from this class.

Regarding COVID-19, Reinder could not remain silent. See his presentation "The Eschatology of Pandemics & Pestilence" and his article in a recent issue of *Spes Christiana*.<sup>4</sup>

The list could go on and on ...

**He approaches issues with humility.**

In one of his recent publications, Reinder addressed the hot topic of Last Generation Theology. The full title of the book is telling: *In All Humility, Saying No to Last Generation Theology*.<sup>5</sup> It is clear from the title what Reinder's position is. The author does not claim he alone has the truth and that if you do not accept his views, you do not deserve to be called a Seventh-day Adventist. Reinder is never bombastic or pontificating. Rather, he puts all arguments on the table and then trusts your wisdom will lead you to make informed choices.

**He is always sharing knowledge.**

When Reinder reads a book not initially published either in English or in Dutch, his concern is to make it available for the largest possible audience. Translation is another gift he has been granted.<sup>6</sup> When he reads a good book, he will let you know that you should read it as well.

To sum up, not an egocentric or boasting author, not an outdated scholar with a 16th-century bibliography, not an old man with irrelevant or meaningless concerns, but a curious scholar, knowledgeable, sensitive to human beings, with an alert mind, always on the go, and, in addition, a 21st-century citizen of the world.

Luther's *Tishreden* ("table talk") are famous, but it is not known whether coffee was part of the meals. When Reinder misses a friend, he sometimes ends his email with the following: "I hope we will soon have the opportunity to share a cup of coffee." If this happens, don't expect a trivial conversation. The topics are always the same: the Church, its hermeneutics, its future, and books or articles aimed to enlighten, to inform, to open new tracks.

**Endnotes**

1. Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism, 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994).
2. Reinder Bruinsma, *Matters of Life and Death* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2000).
3. Reinder Bruinsma, *Facing Doubt: A Book for Adventist Believers 'on the Margins'* (London: Flankó Press, 2016).
4. Reinder Bruinsma, "The Eschatology of Pandemics & Pestilence" (presentation, Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar, online, April 17, 2021), <https://atoday.org/atss-04-17-2021/>; Reinder Bruinsma, "God and Pandemics: The Impact of 'Pestilences' on Christian Believers in General and, in Particular, on Seventh-day Adventists," *Spes Christiana* 33, no. 1 (July 2022): 7-30, <https://doi.org/10.17613/q228-7r14>.
5. Reinder Bruinsma, *In All Humility: Saying No to Last Generation Theology* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak & Acorn, 2018).
6. See one of his major works of English translation: *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* by Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van den Brink (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017). Dutch original published in 2012.



Photo Credit: Erno Miller

Reinder Bruinsma (second from left) was one of four recipients of the 2020 Charles Weniger Award.