CHURCH-SPONSORED INJUSTICE: The Seventh-day Adventist Church and Polygamous Converts.

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Polygamy has been the most complex, perplexing and persistent marriage-related problem encountered by churches in their missionary enterprise. The most intense and resistant problems were encountered in Africa, where these forms of marriage, and especially polygyny,[1] were most widespread: it was estimated in 1970 that more than 20% of the families were polygynous in 75% of African societies, and that the mean number of wives per 100 married males in Sub-Saharan Africa was 150 [Clignet 1970: 17, cited in Staples 1981: 1]. The prime, and recurring, issue has been how to relate to converts who are already involved in pluralistic marriages.

Although economic and social changes are reducing the incidence of the formation of such marriages, polygamy remains a central concern to the churches in Africa. Because it is intrinsic to a traditional society's total way of life, it has economic, social, political, as well as religious ramifications, and is surrounded by a variety of supporting ancillary institutions.

This paper focuses on the evolution of the policies of the Seventh-day Adventist Church towards African polygamy and of the practices it adopted. Although missionaries from Asia also had input to the creation of policies towards polygamous converts, Africa was always central to the issue. It has also been the focus of the continuing debate. My data suggest that the churches in Southeast Asia and Papua-New Guinea (the main other regions where polygamy is practiced today) have been more inclined to merely implement policy.

Adventist missionaries did not enter Africa until 1887, which was relatively late in the history of Christian missionary endeavor there: the major missions had by that time largely established their policies and procedures concerning polygamy. Moreover, since Adventists held themselves aloof from the mission conferences, such as that in Edinburgh in 1910, and saw and were treated by the other missions as rivals and competitors, they had greater freedom to chart their own course. The factors shaping their policies are explored. These are placed primarily within a context of church-sect theory, which was developed and has normally been applied to a single society within the Developed World, but is here applied to a region of the Developing World within global, hierarchically organized Adventism.

The development of the policies of the major African missions towards polygamy is first summarized. The paper then focuses on the evolution of Adventist policy and practices, and

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[1] The form of polygamy where one man has multiple wives; polyandry is the form where one woman has multiple husbands.

culminates in an analysis of recent debates and attempts to alter policies, together with an assessment of the current situation.

Research Methods

The research reported here is part of a large study of international Seventh-day Adventism, which has included over 3,000 in-depth interviews with church administrators, teachers, hospital administrators and medical personnel, pastors, students, and leading laypersons in 55 countries in all twelve of the Adventist "divisions" of the world. A total of 395 of these were completed in Africa during two research visits in 1986 and 1989 or with persons visiting the U.S. from Africa more recently. The research effort has also gathered questionnaires from respondents and students at Adventist colleges around the world and from a sample of church members in North America. This paper relies mostly on secondary sources for its historical segments, and on interviews for its analysis of current practices and of recent attempts at change. The convention adopted by this study is to refrain from citing the names of interviewees when they are quoted except when they are major figures in the church.[2]

The Development of the Policies of the Major African Missions

Christianity grew up in what was basically a monogamous world. The Catholic Church did not face an extensively polygamous society until missionaries entered Asia and America in the sixteenth century, and Protestants not until the nineteenth century--first, to a more limited extent, in parts of Asia and then, much more widespread, in Africa [Hastings 1971: 196].

The first recorded official Christian statement on polygamy dates from 1201, when the Bishop of Tiberius asked Pope Innocent III if polygamous converts should keep all wives or only one, and if the latter, which one. The Pope insisted on strict monogamy, calling polygamous unions adultery, and refused baptism to any parties to such a marriage [Kofon 1992: 70]. Although it confirmed this position in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church has found the issue to be a persistent problem ever since.

Kofon suggests that if the issue had been left to the early missionaries to decide, their solutions would probably have been very different from those sent out by Rome, which could not comprehend the lives of those it labeled as "barbarians." It did not admit the existence of cultural pluralism until Vatican II [1992: 94].

A Protestant missionary conference in northern India early in the nineteenth century, in which Anglicans played a major role, arrived at a position very different from that held by Catholics. It agreed that people who had been polygamously married before converting to Christianity could

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[2] I wish to thank the persons whose interviews contributed to this paper for their considerable generosity with their time, the librarians of Andrews University, Union Theological Seminary, and the Maryknoll Seminary for their assistance with locating secondary sources, and Dr Russell Staples for his help in gaining an understanding of polygyny and the issues surrounding it as Christian churches have come to see them.

be baptized and their families remain intact, but that they would not be eligible for church office. However, this decision was not well received by the mission boards in the homelands, nor was it implemented widely [Hastings 1973: 11, 12].

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Anglican Church addressed the issue in West Africa, the tide was running in the reverse direction. Missionaries at that time had little theology of marriage, and little understanding of the relativity of social patterns (anthropologists, for example, had not yet studied marriage). Their concept of Christian marriage was what they had known at home [Hastings 1971: 196]. Hastings surveys their considerable writings, and concludes that "predominantly they appear as moralists, come to preach a strongly moral gospel and with a very clear idea as to how that gospel has to be worked out in the life of individual and group" [1971: 194]. They regarded much of African life as immoral and condemnable, especially the marriage customs, and here most notably polygamy and bride wealth. Missionaries often "presupposed that lust was the real reason for polygamy" [Saayman 1990: 315]. Since polygamous unions were viewed as adulterous, the missions had little hesitation in ruling that these marriages must come to an abrupt end if the partners wished to become Christians. They thus "turned the good news of the gospel into bad news..." [Saayman 1990: 314]. A meeting in Nigeria resolved

> ...that while the wives of a polygamist, if believed to be true converts, might be received to baptism, since they were usually the involuntary victims of the custom, no man could be admitted who retained more than one wife [Stock 1899, II: 111].

Shortly after this, in 1857, Henry Venn, secretary of the Church Missionary Society, drew up a memorandum which was to influence the debate for the next century: "a polygamist cannot be lawfully admitted by baptism into the Church of Christ" [Staples 1981: 16].

However, some individual missionaries "came to understand the human situation better and to have doubts" [Hastings 1971: 194]. Prime among these was John Colenso, Anglican Bishop of Natal, who in 1862 challenged the refusal of his church to accept polygamists for baptism. When he lost out, South Africa became very rigid on the issue.

So much turmoil surrounded the issue by 1888 that it was brought to the Lambeth Conference. The bishops voted that male polygynists should not be baptized as Christians, but kept under instruction until they were in a position to conform to the law of Christ. This position had great and continuing influence not only among Anglicans in Africa but also over other Protestants there, even though several churches continued to baptize polygamists in Asia, especially China. Church policy thus, in effect, "made polygamy THE unforgivable sin." Only divorce could "qualify reformed polygamists for entrance and fellowship in the kingdom of God" [Mann 1989: 12]. The Lambeth document was again less adamant concerning polygamous wives, allowing their baptism in some circumstances, these being left to local decision [Hastings 1971: 195; 1973: 14].

Nevertheless, when, shortly before World War I, the editor of the *International Review of Missions* surveyed missionaries throughout the world concerning their most pressing problems, those from Africa chose those related to marriage. He reported a great diversity of opinion, even within the same mission [Oldham 1914]. This was so in spite of the fact that the International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 had confirmed the approach of the Lambeth document [Hastings 1973: 196].

The prevailing policies generally presented polygynous male converts with one of two choices. The first, which was initially the most common practice, was that he should put away all but one of his wives before being baptized (there was further variation here, for while some insisted that the first wife be the one retained, others allowed him to choose any of his wives). This choice was wrenching to the kinship system, often separated the cast out wives from their children (since in patrilineal societies they belonged to their father's lineage), and left some discarded wives so destitute that they were forced into prostitution in order to survive. Although cast out wives were eligible for baptism, the end result of the policy was that they were usually alienated from Christianity.

With the passing of time, Protestants came to view polygamous unions not as adultery but as an inferior form of marriage which, if divorce was demanded, was likely to result in unacceptable dislocation. Many concluded that it was therefore better to maintain them, even though they represented an insurmountable impediment to baptism. Consequently, the pendulum swung increasingly towards the second alternative, under which all wives were eligible for baptism, but the polygynous male was kept waiting, without baptism, on the periphery of the church until the death of a wife or wives left him with only one spouse [Hastings 1973: 195].

Catholics, for their part, were more firmly convinced that polygamous relationships were adulterous, and therefore not marriages. Consequently, their traditional solution was akin to the first choice listed above—the polygynist must send away all but one of his wives before he could be baptized:

> The official documents laying down the policy show little or no preoccupation with the wives. Not only were they abandoned to their fate, treated like things that could be cast away at any time, the question of the possibility of baptizing them, and under what conditions, was not ever raised. The concern was with the man, with his baptism [Kofon 1992: 127].

Catholic practice, as it evolved in Africa, was that the first wife could be baptized, even if other wives were in place, because she was the only one recognized by the church as a wife; but the others had to leave the man in order to be accepted by the church. This policy overlooked the consequences of separation for these wives--they were the victims, left with no husbands [Kofon 1992: 128].

During the twentieth century, the argument moved north from South Africa to East and West Africa, especially once many independent African churches accepting polygamous members began to emerge in West Africa [Hastings 1971: 197]. In 1938 African delegates to the International Missionary Council in Madras asked unanimously for a study of a group of social problems, the first of these being Christian marriage in a polygamous society [Hastings 1971: 199]. This indicated that disquiet concerning the handling of polygamists persisted in the field in spite of the consensus statements issued by missionary conferences.

Policy and practice began to change in the decades after World War II--slowly at first, then with increasing pace. The first mission-connected church to decide to baptize male polygamists was the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Liberia in 1951. An All-Africa Seminar on the Christian Home and Family in 1963 recommended that whole polygamous families could be baptized and admitted to communion. This led to a period of intense discussion, and to several of the smaller missions acting on the recommendation [Hastings 1973: 22]; however, the larger missions did not yet do so. New articles and books urging the baptism of polygamists began to appear more frequently, now in Catholic [see below] as well as Protestant circles [Hastings 1971: 200].

Meanwhile, anthropological studies had shown great differences between patrilineal and matrilineal societies in both the stability of marriages and the incidence of polygamy, which helped to show why the observations and views of missionaries in different parts of the continent had differed so much. (Marriages in patrilineal societies, which are the most common, tend to be both more stable and more frequently polygamous [Hastings 1973: 32].) Studies revealed the interdependence of the marriage system and the fabric of traditional society: polygamy was a means of strengthening the lineage, creating a network of alliances for the kinship group, and securing the labor needed to farm the land; it provided for the needs of women in a society in which, because of tribal wars, they heavily outnumbered men, where it was unthinkable that single women and widows would live alone, where divorce was often not tolerated since marriages were contracted by groups of kinsmen rather than individuals, where procreation was valued most highly and was the main object of marriage, and the burden of childlessness was heavily felt. The system protected the needy and ensured that no child was illegitimate by allowing for the most privileged men to take the surplus women and establish polygamous homes [Lantrum 1982: 13-20].

Consequently, "when missionaries interfere with the marriage pattern they threaten something that is tied to all the social life of the community, its economic stability and its personal relationships" [Tippet 1987: 337]. Kinship groups often refuse to permit the divorces churches demand, and efforts to have a husband support his wife and children without having a sexual relationship create enormous strains and likely failure [Tanner 1967: 95-96]. When a church refuses to allow a member to enter a leviratic marriage with the widow of his brother, this destroys the social mechanisms which provide for the widow and orphans [Tippet 1987: 339].

Recent studies had shown that the traditional family was disintegrating in the mushrooming urban areas. The Christian policy towards polygamy was held partially responsible for this: it had taught many societies the possibility of divorce [Hastings 1973: 35-39; 1971, 199]. "With the breakdown of the family on every hand it no longer appears so self-evident to the churches that polygamous families should be separated" [Staples 1981: 20]. Instead, a number of churches began to see it as their primary responsibility to promote marital fidelity and stability. They therefore began to rethink the whole issue in the light of contemporary circumstances.

In 1970 the Anglican Archbishops of Africa commissioned a report on Christian marriage in Africa. This defined polygamous marriage as "not a number of loose sexual relationships, but of simultaneous stable unions contracted under a form of law, recognized as marriage by the people of the country, entered upon with a lifetime intention, and providing both a permanent home and a legitimate status for offspring" [Hastings 1973:73]. The study found that Anglican dioceses in Africa mostly admit polygynously married women to baptism and communion, but that the ban on males is nearly absolute. It found that the growing instability of African marriages, including polygamous marriages, and the revolt of the increasingly better educated women against the structured inferiority of the past made the situation more complex: the Gospel must witness to the dignity of women and the value of Christian monogamy [76]. However, to reject and destabilize existing polygamous marriages was to be unjust and to bring misery to women and children. "To end a polygamous marriage in the name of Christ, who said nothing explicitly to condemn it, at the expense of effecting a divorce, which Christ explicitly forbade, is to pay too high a price to achieve a theoretical conformity with one part of the Christian marriage pattern" [77]. The study therefore urged the baptism of polygamous families that existed prior to conversion, depending on the true state of the marriage, the likely public consequences of the baptisms, and the agreement of the local Christian community.

The fruits of this study were harvested at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, which, at the initiative of the East African bishops, reversed the ban on baptizing polygamists unless they retained only one wife. The bishops argued that the existing policy resulted either in women and children being abandoned or the loss of converts to other faiths. The resolution voted by the Conference upholds monogamy as the ideal, and forbids converted polygamists from taking additional wives. It says nothing about polygamists not being able to hold church office. The decision underlined the new weight of the churches in the Developing World within Christianity [Steinfels 1988; Nkwoka, 1990].

Meanwhile, others among the larger mission-connected churches had made modifications to their policies which attempted to overcome the problems, but which thereby revealed the complexity of the whole issue. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Cameroon tolerated polygamous families converted in areas untouched by the gospel, but excluded converts in more evangelized areas from the new rules--so that the same problems continued there [Mann 1989: 11]. Consequently, Christian men felt obliged to divorce a barren wife rather than merely add another, thus learning the American practice of serial monogamy. And the rejection of polygamy

resulted in much more adultery, venereal disease and, no doubt, AIDS [Mann 1989: 13, 17, 20]. While a change of policy would probably have led many to give Christianity a second hearing, it would be opposed by many of the church leaders:

> There are old childless pastors who never took a second wife in order to be in good standing with the church. They are now more adamant about enforcing a monogamy rule that the present missionaries whose predecessors introduced it. Monogamy has come to represent for some the cross to bear in following Jesus [Mann 1989: 22].

This ferment among Protestant missions had bypassed the Catholic Church. The latter continued to withhold any legitimacy from polygamous relationships, and to demand that a polygynous convert put away all but his first "real" wife before receiving baptism. However, with the independence of the former African colonies and the concern for mission voiced by Vatican II, a renewed discussion of the issue in Catholic circles became inevitable. In 1967 a paper advocating baptizing polygynous persons--real baptism rather than the earlier talk of being baptized with desire--was presented to the Catholic bishops of East Africa, where it drew heated discussion. After publication the next year it attracted attention from a broader audience [Hillman 1968]. A survey of Catholic leaders in East Africa in 1969 found that one of the most serious pastoral problems was "the constant confrontation between African marriage customs and the Christian marriage customs taught by Western missionaries" [Kirwen 1979: 1]. In 1970 an African priest requested permission of the Vatican to baptize a polygynous man and his second wife [Kofon 1992: 96]. At a meeting of 65 East African Catholic bishops in Nairobi in 1973, the Bishop of Elderet called for a rethinking of the church's position. In spite of frantic attempts by the Apostolic Nuncio to cut off discussion, the majority of bishops agreed that the issue needed further study. However, when the proceedings of the meeting were published, they omitted reference to this discussion [Hillman 1975: 38].

The Catholic Church is facing increasing demands that it alter its position. Kirwen's data give a devastating critique of the failure of its position to understand and deal with leviratic marriage in particular and, by implication, the whole of customary marriage [1979]. According to Kofon, two alternatives are being pressed by theologians. The first, which would allow a polygynous man to retain his wives and keep him as an unbaptized catechumen for life, would move the Catholic Church to the long-held Protestant practice. Kofon finds this realistic, for it admits that it is very difficult to separate the man from his wives, and it finds a place in the church for the whole family (even if this be a second-class place for the man)[1992: 129]. The second alternative is much more radical, for it would make baptism available to practicing polygamists. The solution urged by Kofon is merely a (probably unrealistic) variant on current policy: all the spouses would officially remain married, but those beyond the first coupling must promise to refrain from sex with one another [1992: 139]. The ongoing debate within the Catholic Church has led it to participate in the broader search for solutions among Christians during the past 20 years [Hastings 1971: 203].

The traditional position adopted by the Christian churches towards polygamy has proved to be an obstruction to their missionary enterprise. Animists in Africa, and especially in West Africa, are frequently confronted with an option between Islam and Christianity. Muslims argue that their religion is valid for Africans because it permits polygamy [Tippet 1987: 340; Babalola 1991]. Christianity, on the other hand, appeared foreign in its failure to understand the traditional family system and imposed rules which presented polygamists with almost insurmountable obstacles.

Moreover, in communal societies it is appropriate that people become Christians within their extended family groups. But these cannot be won without the elders, who are most likely to be polygamists. Tippet sees this as an "urgent situation" [1987: 341].

The 1963 All African Seminar on Christian Home and Family Life had been the first forum to raise with some sympathy the question of how to respond to baptized church members who later choose to enter polygamous relationships [Hastings 1973: 24]. The Hastings report a decade later clung to the traditional position here: "It is not open for a baptized Christian to choose anything but a monogamous marriage." However, it showed sympathy with those who married a widow because of kinship obligations or who added a wife because the first was childless [Hastings 1973: 78].

To summarize, widespread unity of thought concerning polygamy and in practice concerning how to treat polygamously married converts emerged quickly among the Christian missions that entered Africa in the nineteenth century. Missionaries were almost universally repulsed by the institution, interpreting it in terms of excesses in sexual desire and, at least initially, adulterous behavior. Although Protestants came fairly quickly to see it as a form of marriage rather than adultery, this was a form incompatible with Christianity; Catholics continue to view it officially as adultery. However, since both interpretations regarded it as unacceptable, they responded similarly to male converts, typically giving them a choice between putting away all but one of their wives in order to be baptized and remaining with their complete families on the fringe of the church as unbaptized catechumens. The practice concerning the wives who remained polygamously married was more varied, ranging from baptizing none of them, through baptizing only the first married (since she was deemed to be the only one legitimately married), to baptizing them all on the grounds that each had only one husband and, as the victims of arranged marriages from which extrication was at best very difficult, they could not be held responsible for their status. This general approach was ratified by the Anglicans at the 1888 Lambeth Conference, a formulation which had considerable influence on the positions of the other mission-related churches.

The first break in this unified facade came with the founding of the first of the independent African churches in West Africa in the 1890s. Although, individual missionaries expressed disquiet with the social problems caused by breaking up families and with the unsatisfactory second class unbaptized status accorded to men who remained with their wives, the balance shifted over time from a determination to rid converts of their wives to acquiescing with

decisions to retain intact families, the general approach held among the mission churches until the approach of decolonization. It was then that dissatisfaction with the prevailing practices was voiced increasingly, and smaller missions began gradually to baptize polygamists. Among the major bodies, the Anglicans formally led the way, taking a decision to allow the baptism of intact families at its 1988 Lambeth Conference, and thus reversing the practice endorsed a century earlier. The Catholic Church found it much more difficult to make an official change in its position, but it has been shaken increasingly by controversy concerning the issue.

These changes took place against a background where the situation was becoming increasingly more complex, as traditional kinship and marriage systems deteriorated--a breakdown which anthropologists blamed in part on mission policy towards polygamous families. These undesirable social changes have made it increasingly difficult to accommodate a policy that is rooted in the failure to contextualize the Christian message for the cultures of Africa.

Seventh-day Adventism: Background

The Seventh-day Adventist Church traces its roots to the Millerite movement in the American Northeast during the 1840s. For its first several decades the members of the small religious movement were remarkably homogeneous: white, English-speaking, rather poor, rural Americans. However, evangelistic and missionary zeal has transformed Adventism into a global denomination active in 204 countries. Its membership, which now exceeds nine million, has doubled in the last twelve years and is concentrated increasingly in developing countries: North America now contains only 10.6% of the world membership. In contrast, 31.2% of its membership is now located in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region whose membership has increased by 173.2% in the ten years since 1983.

The history of the Adventist Church in the U.S. is, in many ways, a case study illustrating the transformation of a religious group from a "sect" into a "denomination." Stark and Bainbridge have suggested that the utility of church-sect theory is enhanced if one key variable--the religious group's tension with society--is used as the indicator rather than the usual confusing array of variables. They define a sect as a religious group having high tension with society--tension which flows from different behavioral characteristics that are scorned or punished by powerful elites in society. In contrast, a denomination has low tension with society [1985: 49- 51]. Over time, some sects compromise with the world, reducing the tension between themselves and society, and move towards denominational status. This usually occurs as there is some level of participation in the wider society and as influential members experience upward mobility and then find that the tension between their religious group and society is inconsistent with their interests [134, 99, 103].

This has been the experience of Seventh-day Adventists in the land where they originated. Several decades ago American Adventism, as measured by the Stark and Bainbridge criteria, was highly sectarian. Marked differences from society, such as its insistence on observing a Saturday

Sabbath in a society where a six-day work week was almost universal, its focus on an ongoing judgment, the imminent return of Christ and end of the world as we know it, diet restrictions (vegetarianism, no coffee, tea, or alcohol), social life-style prohibitions (no theater, dancing, gambling, card playing, smoking, or reading of fiction), a commitment to "dress reform" and abstinence from jewelry and makeup, and a refusal to bear arms if conscripted, all set Adventists apart. Adventism's view of itself, as the true church bearing God's final message in the last days, its declarations that other religious groups were "apostate," its brazen challenges to clergy of other denominations in its evangelistic meetings, and its expectation of persecution from other churches in collaboration with the state, all tended to create bitter antagonisms. These barriers were reinforced by the close ties that developed among Adventists, whose lives usually centered around their church, the subculture it created, and its mission, who attended church schools, often worked for church institutions, and were frequently drawn by educational opportunities and economic and social ties to live in what became known colloquially as "Adventist Ghettos." They were also strengthened by rules, such as endogamy, and practices, such as their dietary and social prohibitions, that made it extremely difficult to associate with others. Not only did Adventist differences attract scorn, but their Sabbath observance caused problems with employers and their refusal to bear arms had legal repercussions.

However, the level of tension between American Adventists and society has lowered markedly and at an increasing pace in recent decades. The chief engine of change has been the development of large church-sponsored educational and health-care systems. These have encouraged ever-increasing participation in society, such as accreditation and public funds for institutions, higher education at major universities for faculty, and, most recently, alliances with other hospitals in order to survive in a competitive market. They have also resulted in considerable upward mobility among members, especially those raised as Adventists. Meanwhile, the coming of the five-day work week removed most of the major problems surrounding Sabbath observance, and Adventist dietary and smoking prohibitions have won increasing credibility as a result of medical research. At the same time, Adventist leaders have self-consciously lowered levels of antagonism toward others: they have sought good relations with governments, switched their position on military service, allowed expectations of persecution to diminish, and begun to build better relations with mainline churches [Lawson 1992a; Lawson 1991]. This experience has been repeated, though usually less dramatically, in other parts of the Developed World.

As the American church has gone through this process of transformation from despised sect towards legitimate denomination, both its leaders and the leaders of the world church[3] have become extraordinarily sensitive to the reputation of their church and its image with significant others, be they governments, other influential organizations, or the communications media. While, in their yearning for recognition, they have courted governments and influential churches, in their insecurity they live in fear of being bracketed with undesirable company, of being

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[3] Both of these groups are located in the same building in suburban Washington D.C.

subjected to negative publicity. Consequently, when it appeared that the image of Adventism was in danger of being tarnished by association in the media with the Branch Davidians--because David Koresh had been raised as an Adventist and had recruited his followers from Adventist ranks--church leaders were prepared to spend whatever it took to hire media consultants to try to minimize such coverage [Lawson 1994].

Meanwhile, the Adventist tendency to be legalistic and judgmental, which flows from their emphasis on keeping the Ten Commandments (and so Sabbath observance) and many other peculiar behavioral norms, together with their belief in a judgment that is already in progress, has been joined together with their concern for having a positive reputation. One consequence of this is an unwillingness to admit the presence of stigmatized categories of persons within their ranks--they fear that somehow that stigma could spread to the whole church and besmirch the upright, healthy, likable image that they have cultivated so carefully. For example, church leaders were so frustrated to see banners bearing the inscription "Seventh-day Adventist Kinship" in TV film of gay pride processions that they sued the organization in an attempt to prevent it from using the denomination's name as part of its own [Lawson 1992b]. A generation ago the prime concern was maintaining the purity of the elect, so that homosexual members, when discovered, were cast out from the Adventist community. The emphasis today has switched much more to image, so gay Adventists in America rarely find their church membership threatened but a panic is created when the church name is linked to that of a gay organization.

The rapid growth of Adventism in the Developing World has raised fears among church leaders that the unity of the global church could fracture, greatly increasing the pluralism of belief and practice or perhaps even resulting in the formation of independent regional or national churches. Consequently, in recent years they have placed considerable emphasis on maintaining unity, which often turns out to mean uniformity. Meanwhile, Adventism's centralized hierarchical structure has made it difficult for it to contextualize its message in developing countries. The result has usually been the imposition of Western values on the church in these societies.

It was shown above that Adventism in the US has traveled a considerable distance from sect towards denomination. How does Adventism in Africa fit with this model? We would expect it to be much more sectarian because it is newer, its membership is generally quite poor, its growth has been so fast in recent years that a considerable majority of its members are still first-generation converts, and these were often attracted because of eschatological preaching. However, the data suggest a picture which is more complex. The missionaries who planted Adventism in Africa came from the U.S. and Europe--that is, from the Developed World. They had experienced the process of transformation from sect towards denomination, and inevitably brought many of the new values and concerns with them. Moreover, the rapid growth in recent years is happening in a situation where Adventism has already created relationships with governments, established colleges and hospitals, and developed a small but influential educated elite among the laity. The data suggest that in many countries of the Developing World converts are attracted not only by the hope of a pie in the sky, but also by the prospect of a slice of pie

here and now. That is, many of the African members of influence are attuned to denomination-like values. As we have seen, these include a concern for the reputation and image of their church.

Adventism and Polygamy

Seventh-day Adventists entered Africa when the Christian mission enterprise there was already well established. The first Adventist missionaries were sent to South Africa in 1887, and from there they spread north into Southern and then Northern Rhodesia (what is now Zimbabwe and Zambia) during the next 15 years. They entered English West Africa, beginning with the Gold Coast (Ghana), in 1894, German East Africa (Tanzania) in 1903, Kenya in 1906, and Ethiopia in 1907. The French and Belgian colonies were not entered until after World War I [SDA Encyclopedia].

Adventists thought of themselves as bringing God's last message to the world, and therefore kept their mission efforts quite separate from those of other churches. For example, they did not participate in major mission conferences such as that in Edinburgh in 1910. Consequently, they developed their own responses to polygamy. However, because their missionaries were also drawn from Europe and America, and they were often very conscious of their reputations with the major religious bodies, their policies often reflected the practices of other missions, they developed much better communications with other missions in the Developing World than Adventists had with other churches in the Developed World.

Adventists steered a very erratic course on polygamy for several decades. Their first attempt to reach consensus on a policy towards polygamous converts was made in 1913, when the missionaries present at church headquarters in Washington, D.C., were called to a "round table conference" to discuss a recommendation drafted by a "committee on the question of polygamy in heathen lands" [Bouit 1982, 118]. Their discussion revealed considerable variation in practice. While most Adventist missions refused baptism to polygamists, Adventists in India followed the practice among other missions there, baptizing converted polygamists but not allowing them to hold prominent church offices. There were wide differences in how the wives involved in a polygynous marriage were treated. While most missions encouraged polygynists to put away their additional wives, those in Korea and South Africa required the man to support all his wives while living with only one of them [Bouit 1982: 119-120]. Missionaries from China and Java found fault with their policy of insisting on divorce as being unfair to the women and children [Bouit 1982, 119, 121]. Those present at the conference felt it was important to arrive at some consensus, which should be in the form of guidelines rather than legislation. There was considerable concern for how other missions treated the problem, lest the standard adopted by Adventists invite criticism for being too low [Bouit 1982: 122].

The group eventually recommended that when a polygynous man became a Christian "he be accepted into the church on condition that he support all his wives and children, but that he lives

only with his first lawful wife as husband and wife"; he would not be eligible to hold church office. Similarly, a plural wife would need to separate from her husband before being granted membership [Bouit 1982: 123]. That is, no would-be convert who continued to live polygamously could be baptized. Although the original recommendation coming to the group had allowed wives who could not obtain a divorce from their husbands to be accepted as members, this was rejected when missionaries reported that other mission churches would not tolerate this [Bouit 1982: 118, 123]. These recommendations were then voted by the General Conference as guidelines for missionaries in the field.

Most of the missionaries taking part in the conference showed sensitivity to the situation of the polygamous convert and to the problems of breaking up a polygamous household. The recommendation made was not "the consensus of the missionaries...but rather, the most conservative common denominator of the group" [Maberly 1975: 34].

However, the 1913 guidelines failed to achieve uniform practice among Adventist missions. The extent of diversity in practice was revealed by a second missionary round table conference held in 1926. The main difference was between two of the church's "divisions," each of which had a Western-dominated home base and responsibility for a "mission field" in Africa. This conference was called shortly after the African Division, which was based in South Africa with a mission field that extended as far north as the Congo, had adopted a liberal Working Policy towards polygamous converts. This had been done after the president of the division had realized the weight of opposition among some peoples to the imposition of divorce on polygamous families and had discovered the variety of responses to polygamy within his socially diverse territory. Since the division included both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, in some parts divorce was easy and in other parts it was impossible: "For that reason we agreed to compromise somewhat, and we agree to baptize those who come to the knowledge of the church straight from heathenism;" however, "according to the Scriptures," such members were not eligible to hold church office [Round Table Minutes, 1926, quoted by Bouit 1982: 127]. In contrast, the European Division, whose mission field encompassed most of East and West Africa, which was mostly patrilineal and highly polygamous, abided strictly by the 1913 statement, and therefore baptized no practicing polygamists. Although it was sensitive to the human and social problems caused by requiring people to break up their polygamous unions--its spokesperson referred to "the necessity of having to refuse baptism to genuinely converted polygamists as one of his saddest experiences in Africa"--they felt that compromise was too dangerous in this "stronghold of heathenism" and that it was imperative that Adventism have a united stand [Bouit 1982: 125-126, 130]. Church practice on the issue was also divided in Asia, where polygamists were baptized in India but not in most of the Far Eastern and China Divisions [Bouit 1982: 126, 130].

The 1926 conference revealed such a divergence of opinion and practice that church leaders decided to appoint a committee "to give careful study to the question of polygamy, and the stand that should be taken with regard to it" [Bouit 1982: 131]. This drafted a conservative resolution, countermanding the new policy of the African Division, which was given highest authority when

it was passed by the General Conference in session:[4] in no case should a man living in polygamy be admitted into the fellowship of the church" [Staples 1982: 53].

The same committee and General Conference Session dealt with another marriage-related issue, the problem of de facto but illegal marriages created in some Latin countries where divorce was not legal. Large numbers of such couples, who had often been together for years and had children, wished to become Adventists, but were not legally eligible for marriage. The session voted that members of such families, if they were deemed worthy, could be baptized without the benefit of either divorce or remarriage.

> Thus the session sanctioned liaisons that were not legal marriages, while at the same time denying membership to men who were legally married and living in faithfulness to their wives. Here, in striking juxtaposition within the same minutes, is a resounding triumph of grace over law, in the one case, and the withholding of grace, in the other [Staples 1982: 48].

The 1926 decision on polygamy caused upset in the African Division. For example, one of the missionaries there sent to church headquarters a manuscript arguing forcefully against the policy of breaking up families, stressing the "hardships and the degrading consequences that the Native women endure who are forced to give up their homes, and often times their children, when they are put way by their husbands because of his having accepted the Christian faith" [J.I.Robison 1928, quoted by Boiut 1982: 135]. The Division's appeal was successful in having a committee appointed to study "Polygamy among Primitive Tribes," with its president as one of the three committee members. This committee's report was treated with such urgency that it was taken to the annual meeting of the leaders of the world church in 1930 rather than waiting until 1932 for the next General Conference Session. The resolution voted there dramatically reversed the 1926 decision, permitting the baptism of polygamous converts in those cultures where tribal customs would result in "great injustice" to innocent castoff wives and their children. However, where separation could be arranged without injustice to innocent parties, only one wife should be retained, with the husband allowed the choice of which one [Staples 1982: 48, 53]. This gave the Adventist church a policy that was much more liberal than those of the major mission churches in Africa, and remarkably independent of their views.

However, the European divisions rejected this policy on the ground that a decision made by the highest church authority had been overturned by a lower body, and continued to adhere to the more restrictive 1926 decision [Bouit 1982: 137-139]. When the former president of the African Division, who had been the prime mover in the 1930 decision, was placed in charge of the German African colonies for the Central European Division in 1938 and immediately implemented the 1930 policy in Tanganyika, the result was a storm of protest from the Northern European Division [Bouit 1982: 137-140]. The latter claimed that its conservative policy in

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[4] That is, by the convocation of the world Church.

neighboring Kenya would be undermined thereby, and laid out what it saw to be the danger to the Adventist reputation:

> ...in Kenya considerable work has been done by various large missionary societies, and these societies have stood against any recognition of polygamy... If Seventh-day Adventists come to be known in these territories as divided, or unsound in their stand against polygamy, that would be the greatest disaster to our cause and the greatest triumph our enemies could possibly enjoy. They would accuse us of fatal compromise with the common foe of Christianity [Bouit 1982: 196].

It was easy for hard-liners to arouse opposition to a liberal policy towards polygamy in the US and Europe. Church leaders, moved by this barrage, established yet another study committee, which resulted in the voting of new resolutions at the 1941 General Conference Session. These had the effect of overturning the 1930 policy:

> A man found living in a state of polygamy when the gospel reaches him, shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one, before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church membership [General Conference policy, voted June 4, 1941, cited by Staples 1982: 53].

 The resolutions required such men, as far as possible, to provide support or their former wives and their children. Moreover, converted polygamous wives who could not gain release from their husbands because of tribal custom were declared eligible for baptism. In order to enforce unity and overcome the previous situation where two rival policies existed, the resolutions declared that the new policy "supersedes all previous policies on polygamy."

The Adventist church thus settled on a conservative stance only a few years before such rules came under close critical scrutiny within the broader Christian community in Africa. This policy is still the official position of the Adventist church.

Current Practice

Almost everywhere the first (and, in some parts, the only) option mentioned by interviewees is for the polygynous man to divorce all wives except one before baptism is permitted; some referred to an additional waiting period before baptism to ensure that such a man is sticking to his decision. In some areas he is expected to continue to support the cast out wives.

Because the experience in most of Africa has been that husbands are unwilling or unable to divorce their wives, a second option is usually listed. Under this, those wives who are converted are baptized (they are usually not regarded as polygamous because they have only one husband), but their husband is kept on the periphery of the church, without baptism or access to communion, usually as a Sabbath School member. It is this second option which has increasingly become most used. Indeed, in Nigeria it has become the only practice, with no attempt being

made to persuade the husband to divorce his wives. In Zimbabwe the policy is interpreted more strictly: if the second option is chosen, only the first wife is baptized, on the grounds that she is the only innocent party.

Beneath this pattern lies another level of diversity, which has appeared throughout Adventist history in Africa. This is the degree of flexibility allowed or encouraged by influential church figures—initially missionaries, later more frequently administrators--in different areas. One missionary reported that "we always tried to not disrupt a family if children were small," another told of a division president who had often said to baptize everyone if people were going to be hurt badly--but who never put it in writing. While some administrators have tried to enforce the policy to the letter, others, noting the human disasters such actions have caused, have learned to back off.

When respondents were asked to assess the policy as implemented, their evaluations differed considerably. Although administrators were divided, they were on the whole more positive. Pastors were also deeply divided, often according to age. However, the leading laity, and especially teachers at all levels, were negative. Assessments differed most, to the point of being polar opposites, on how well the castoff wives were provided for and how frequently wives being supported by their former husbands become pregnant to them: administrators generally tended to give favorable reports, while pastors, who are much closer to how the system is put into practice, cited many examples of former wives becoming pregnant if their former husbands agreed to support them and of abandoned wives being separated from their children, since these belong to their father's kinship group in a patrilineal society, and being left so destitute that they are forced into prostitution.

When divorce is imposed or chosen, Adventists usually allow the husband free choice in which wife will be retained, and this is often the youngest. The wives have no choice here--in the words of a former union president, "wives must submit to what their husband chooses." It is very sad for a woman to be cast out in old age, yet for a young woman to be considered no longer a wife, especially where she is not eligible for remarriage, must be devastating.

It is often the more conscientious husband who refuses the divorce option. While his wives are eligible to be baptized, become church members, and to partake of communion, he must remain at best on the fringe of the church so long as his plural marriage continues. He is always a second-class citizen: his tithes and offerings are expected, but he must leave when it is time for communion. Since he is not baptized, he has doubts about his salvation and worries that he may be eternally lost. The practice leaves him in spiritual limbo, marginalized from the community of faith--an almost impossible situation for a member of a communal society. Communities can never be "one in Christ" when there are two such distinct statuses.

It is not surprising, then, that many husbands tire of their ambiguous situation and disappear from the church, and that cast-out wives lose their conversion experience and often become

embittered with the church. Consequently, the children are also often lost to the church. The progress of Adventism is slow among polygynists, whether animists or Muslims. Potential converts frequently reject the Adventist invitation once the rules concerning polygamy are explained to them and turn instead to the indigenous African churches or to Islam, where polygynous families are accommodated without problems. This leaves Adventist churches often so short of men that women have to provide leadership--a most surprising situation in societies where women are traditionally seen as very inferior. It also renders the Adventist church in Africa, although growing rapidly overall, economically poor since women can usually only give if their husbands are generous to the cause and the policy on polygamy tends to exclude those men who are most wealthy [interviews].

Divisions, Debates, and Demands for Change

The deep divisions among African Adventists revealed in these questions reflected a bitter debate in progress since the 1970s. The clearest divide was between the older and younger pastors; this was strengthened by the fact that the older pastors had received much less formal education. The latter tended to see the policy which keeps practicing polygamists from membership in the church as a litmus test, without which the church could not have a pure and noble profile. Since they have a stake in the traditional policy--their own marriage options were shaped by it--they would feel deeply humiliated and betrayed if it were now abandoned. Moreover, enforcing the policy has given them great authority, which would be undermined if it were changed. A majority of church administrators and one or two educators also supported the policy, being unwilling to admit the magnitude of its problems, arguing that "it is known, biblical and Christian," and that since the practice is weakening before social change there is no need to shift position. "We want to keep the standard, unlike the record of the American church on divorce" [interviews].

Younger pastors, on the other hand, tended to regard the policy as doing more harm than good, as fatally flawed and morally bankrupt:

> In my church we have a polygamous man who is faithful in tithing, etc. He asks how could we insist that he put his wives away, how could we ask him to act in this non-Christian way [interview].

These pastors talk about the problems with the policy a great deal among themselves, critiquing it for its lack of compassion and its negative impact on the church's economy. Their sentiments are shared by educated laypersons, who write frequently on the issue to church papers, by a number of church administrators, most of the vocal missionaries, and prominent educators. For example, the D. Min. thesis completed by the president of the Adventist college in Nigeria was an impassioned call for change:

> Is the proclamation of the gospel supposed to threaten family stability, disrupt social covenants, and even separate mothers from their children?...Is it not possible, at the very

least, for the church to permit the baptism of a repentant, holy and consecrated polygamist and his wives, if the gospel has reached them in this situation? [Alalade 1981: 113]

Some students at Adventist colleges voiced a more challenging position, arguing that foreigners had imposed monogamy on them, and that as Africans they should revert to their polygamous cultural heritage. They insisted that the new positions being adopted by other churches proved that this was not antithetical to the teachings of the scriptures: the Adventist church should follow suit [interviews].

Attempts to Change the Policy

The vigorous debate among African Adventists during the 1970s and early 1980s prepared the way for attempts to change policy. The most dramatic of these was triggered in part by an administrative change which separated the African divisions from their dominating "home bases" in Europe and South Africa and, in the process, realigned the division boundaries within Africa. When what had previously been parts of three divisions were combined into the Africa-Indian Ocean Division [AID] in 1980, it was found that the varying degrees of flexibility allowed by the former administrations had created considerable diversity in practice. The need to clarify the policy in the new situation joined together with the discontent that was being expressed with it. This was articulated initially by the other major African division, the East African Division [EAD], which had elected its first African president, Bekele Heye from Ethiopia, in 1980. He later told me that

> The policy was wrong--the church was forcing divorce, women were left derelict, deprived of their homes and legal husbands. This was not in harmony with the Bible! We should have accepted polygamists as we found them, with multiple wives, and merely insisted that they add no more. So I brought it to the attention of the General Conference, at Annual Council [interview].

The missionary president of AID, Robert Kloosterhuis, joined in the enterprise because of the problems he had found in his new territory, and the president of the General Conference, Neal Wilson, added his support. Wilson knew, from spending years in the Middle East, that the Adventist policy on polygamy was a major problem among Muslims, who were only likely to convert as family units. Moreover, since he had made a concerted push for international growth the hallmark of his administration, he was frustrated by a policy that declared large numbers of converts ineligible for baptism. He was therefore interested in searching for an alternative policy. This search was made the more appropriate by the fact that other Christian churches were beginning to look again at the issue. Adventists showed considerable interest in their policies and in what changes they had made in them or were contemplating. Consequently, a new committee was activated in the fall of 1981 to consider the requirements which Adventism makes of new converts who have already entered polygamous marriages [Staples 1982: 44].

The committee discussed a paper prepared by a professor of missions and anthropology at the Adventist Seminary who had spent many years in Africa [Staples 1981]. Wilson distributed a questionnaire both before and after the presentation, and the latter showed a considerable shift from the traditional position. However, the committee was unable to come to consensus, and there were repeated calls for further study. Staples advocated a cautious approach, experimenting with changes in a limited area. Wilson, however, insisted on a global approach, which then ran into strong opposition on several fronts. The committee continued for several years, during which its polarization deepened.

Few Americans and Europeans understood the issue, they found the thought of polygamy distasteful, and the prospect of admitting polygamous members made them fear for the reputation of their church. However, when Africans charged that they had been willing to countenance serial monogamy in the form of widespread divorce and remarriage in their own divisions, even though this clearly contravened statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, but they were now unwilling to support existing polygamous families in Africa merely because these were so foreign to their culture, even though there was some biblical support for this familial form, they softened their opposition.

The strongest opposition to the proposed change came from Adventist leaders in Latin America, even though polygamy was not an issue affecting the church there directly. However, they had been subject, over the years, to considerable criticism from Catholics for "lowering standards" because of their practice of baptizing converts in legally de facto relationships, and did not want to give the critics another ground for attack. The issue was considered too volatile in the region for it to be placed on the agenda of the Annual Council of world leaders in 1986, which was held in Rio de Janeiro.

The prospects for a new policy collapsed when African unity eroded. Jacob Nortey, a Ghanaian who, since he came from the matrilineal Ashanti tribe, lacked empathy with polygynists, was elected president of AID in 1985. His negative inclinations were encouraged by some conservative members of the faculty of the Adventist Seminary in the US, with whom he developed close ties, and he subsequently declared himself as opposed to changing the policy on polygamy. He argued that the issue was diminishing with economic change. Furthermore, since polygamy was illegal in Rwanda, Burundi, and northeastern Zaire, a change of Adventist policy risked losing credibility: "We already have to prove we are not a sect--this would be one more nail in our coffin with these governments." Moreover, in West and Central Africa the mainline churches, apart from the Anglicans, continued to regard polygamy as of the Devil: "Can we afford to go out on one more tangent among Christian churches" [interview]? Even the EAD, which now found itself standing alone, allowed its effort to subside. Its president, Bekele Heye, explained that:

> Some of our conservative pastors disagreed with our stand, so it became impossible to bring about this change. I supported the change at Annual Council--I am sure our practice

is wrong, for I have seen the agony and the bitterness--but a survey of pastors showed opposition to it [interview].

Amidst a situation where large numbers of baptized Adventists were being disfellowshipped because they had chosen to marry a second wife, there was increasing fear that a change allowing the baptism of polygamous converts would encourage more of the church members to follow their example. Many African pastors also expressed fear that an about-face on one issue would encourage lay members to question other positions held by the church, and the result might be so many changes that the Adventist church would no longer be recognizable. Committee members from other divisions then voiced the same fear. Many therefore opposed the suggested policy change on the ground of the need for unity of practice (that is, uniformity in monogamy).

The modern forces in Africa proved too weak to win the debate because opportunities for Adventist higher education there have been very limited, becoming available only relatively recently. Because of the rapid growth of the Adventist Church in recent years, these opportunities are still available only to a small proportion of the membership. As a result of this opposition, the issue was shelved after discussion at the 1987 Annual Council.

Meanwhile, however, Adventist practice concerning polygamy is changing gradually in spite of the earlier failure to update policy. Increasing numbers of pastors and evangelists are quietly changing their practice, and are extending the current flexibility with which the policy is implemented in different parts of Africa. For example, American evangelists have conducted large crusades resulting in baptisms that were so large that it was impossible to check whether the converts were polygamously married: "American evangelists are after numbers, not saints" [interview]. Perplexed administrators explained that it was impossible to disfellowship such converts for situations that were in place earlier once they had been baptized. Increasing numbers of local pastors, who have also been under pressure to meet higher goals for converts, have also chosen to baptize entire families. Some pastors reported to me that they have allowed polygamists to hold office in their churches. A number of pastors reported that they had chosen to baptize polygamous men who had been long-term Sabbath School members when it seemed that their deaths were approaching. Some added that they did this without informing administrators, others that when they did tell them the latter chose to look the other way. The gap between the official policy and actual practice continues to widen.

Interpretation

In spite of Adventism's separation from other Protestant missions, its policies towards polygamous converts have usually been influenced strongly by the prevailing consensus among them. There were two periods when this pattern did not hold. The first was 1930-1941, when the official Adventist policy was more compassionate and flexible than those of the major missions, although not all divisions chose to follow that policy. In 1941, Adventists retreated from this

independent position and adopted the more rigid position commonly held at that time by the mission churches in Africa. The second period when Adventism has been out of step with the major missions is the present, especially since the 1988 Lambeth Conference decision. Other missions have been adopting more caring policies, but the Adventist endeavor to follow suit failed.

What factors shaped Adventist policy and practice? Several, which interact with one another, emerge from the analysis:

1. As American Adventism moved from sect towards denomination, church leaders often wanted to speed the process, and became greatly concerned with the image and reputation of their church--with how it was received by others. This concern was always an ingredient shaping policy on this issue--not wanting to appear lax, feeling comfortable when Adventist policies were aligned with those of significant others. When Adventists did choose to adopt a "lax" position during the 1930s, criticism from other missions was important in leading them to abandon it and to get back into line. However, this factor resulted in the image of the church being accorded priority over the needs of people.

2. Americans viewed polygamists as being stigmatized--they were both sinful and perverse, rather like the way the majority regarded homosexuals. Since Adventism was centered in America, its leaders were undoubtedly aware of the disrepute which Mormon polygamy had engendered there--indeed, when the negative attitude of Ellen White, the Adventist prophet, towards Old Testament polygamy was raised on the Polygamy Committee during the 1980s, Staples argued that the prevailing hysteria concerning the Mormons had led her to misunderstand the Biblical text and the practice. Adventists did not want to abet a sinful practice, nor did they wish to share in the stigma of having polygamous members. Therefore many Adventist leaders, especially those who were far away from the human suffering caused by their policy, took a hard line. In this they placed their concern for rules ahead of the needs of people.

3. Many, especially some of the decision makers most closely involved, were moved by compassion for the human victims of the policy. While this was the motivation behind the policy changes in the African Division in 1926 and at the General Conference in 1930, it was usually expressed individually more than organizationally. The generally lower priority afforded this factor is confirmed by the fact that although the church was pressuring polygamous men to cast out their additional wives, the church did little to help the outcast. Indeed, a schismatic movement broke from Adventism in Zimbabwe in the 1950s because its leader was so disappointed with the failure of the church to support its widows, who would have been married polygamously to kin of their husbands if the church had not outlawed leviratic marriage.

4. When Adventists failed to understand the functions of polygamous unions, and instead labeled them adulterous, when they responded with revulsion to the thought of polygamy and

demanded that a husband cast out his wives, they were failing to contextualize the Christian message and imposing Western values on Africans.

5. The history of this issue shows an astonishing number of committees inquiring into the Adventist policy and coming to differing conclusions. It also shows a remarkable amount of individual flexibility within a centralized, hierarchical system. However, with the enormous growth of Adventism in the Developing World, and demands from all over for representation in the highest decision-making circles, church leaders have begun to fear that the unity of the church is being undermined. The need for unity in belief, in practice, in policy, has become a continuing theme. In this instance it was invoked most frequently by North Americans, for whom the problems caused by the policy towards polygamous converts were distant ones. Fears that it would cause disunity were significant in the decision not to change the policy that was tearing apart the families of polygamous converts and to replace this policy with a mechanism allowing them to become church members.

The fear of disunity was soon to be turned against American Adventists. In 1990 delegates to the General Conference Session from the Developing World were central to the defeat of a proposal to permit the ordination of women pastors. In 1995 the North American Division took a proposal to the session that would have allowed it to ordain women without forcing other divisions to do likewise. However, this too was voted down on the ground that uniformity of practice was essential and the church in the Developing World was not ready to follow suit. That is, the African delegates were able to turn the North American argument against them.

The Adventist policy towards polygamous converts in Africa has, overall, not been notably worse than that of the main missions there, and indeed for eleven years it was more humane than average. Nevertheless, the story is, in general, one of church-sponsored injustice--an injustice which has not yet been corrected.

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