SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PLURALISM: CELEBRATION AND CHALLENGE AT THE GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION IN 2000

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This paper was written at the request of *Christian Century*

Seventh-day Adventists met for their quinquennial General Conference Session in Toronto from June 29-July 8, 2000. Two thousand delegates representing Adventists in 205 countries in all 12 Divisions of the world church gathered, joined by many thousands of other members from near and far who were eager to participate in the festival. For example, during my train trip from New York City to Toronto I talked with some of a group of 29 members from the Western Highlands of Papua-New Guinea who had saved for several years in order to attend. None were delegates. All looked forward to what they expected to be the experience of a lifetime: an opportunity to mingle with Adventists from all over the world, celebrate the progress of their church, be challenged to "finish the task",

and to have a foretaste of heaven. The peak attendance at the Skydome, home of the Toronto Blue Jays baseball team, during the Session was estimated at 62,000.

Adventist Origins

Seventh-day Adventists trace their roots to the Millerite Movement during the early 1840s, which attracted upwards of 50,000 followers in the American Northeast. When the prediction of Baptist lay-preacher, William Miller, that Christ would return on October 22, 1844 proved false, his movement shattered. One fragment, guided by a young visionary, Ellen White, reinterpreted the prophecy: the pre-advent judgment had begun in heaven on that day. However, Christ's return was imminent, and it became their God-given task to warn the world to prepare for that event.

Early Adventism was, to use a descriptive sociological term that does not imply a value judgment, highly sectarian. That is, it was in high tension in many ways with government, other churches, and society in general. Adventists observed Saturday as the Sabbath at a time when it was a regular workday in America, making it difficult for them to secure employment; their expectation of persecution from the US government in collaboration with other Christian churches (which seemed confirmed when members were turned in by neighbors and prosecuted under the prevailing state "blue laws" for working on their farms on Sundays) and of the imminent end of the world meant that they rejected the American Dream; tensions with government were exacerbated when they announced that they were conscientious objectors and refused to serve in the military during the Civil War; and their observance of the Sabbath, their embrace of vegetarianism, and their rejection of most forms of popular entertainment and of the then current women's fashions separated them from others, making them objects of scorn.

Expansion and Bureaucratization.

Adventists sent out their first foreign missionaries in the 1870s, and soon built a network of missions in all continents. Wherever they went they tried, as part of their outreach, to establish schools and "sanitariums", which eventually developed into extensive networks of educational and medical institutions. Unlike the mainstream Protestant denominations, Adventist missionary work did not culminate in the spinning off of independent national churches, but instead helped build a highly centralized, and increasingly bureaucratized, multilayered system. Because tithes were not retained at the congregational level, but were passed up the structure, the hierarchy was able to re-distribute funds from the wealthier parts of the world church to the newer and poorer segments, and thus to orchestrate expansion. Its control over finances and its voice in the

choice of leaders at lower levels also enabled it to exercise considerable control over the operation of the church as a whole, in spite of its representative features.

The result of such influence by an American-based hierarchy was a highly Americanized church. The vast majority of General Conference personnel were Americans, the flow of funds, personnel, and theology was outwards from America, and even the hymnals were almost everywhere dominated by translations of American hymns.

The Lowering of Tension

As Adventism expanded both geographically and in membership, its educational and medical institutions created increasing opportunities for the upward mobility of members. Although most converts were working class and poor, second generation members often gained professional qualifications. The clergy also came to think of themselves as professionals, the administrators as corporate executives. As time passed, Adventists sought positive relationships with governments, for example modifying their stance on military service in order to embrace patriotism, initiated contacts with other churches in which they presented themselves as fellow Christians, and pursued positive public relations. Their image was also helped as many societies adopted a five-day week, thus making Sabbath observance much less of a problem, and as medical research endorsed their rejection of smoking and the value of many of their diet and health-related practices. In short, they became much more comfortable with society, thus moving steadily from sect towards denomination as they closely followed the trajectory outlined by sociological church-sect theory.

Nevertheless, Adventists have remained sufficiently distinct, and therefore retained enough sectarianism to stoke the enthusiasm and commitment that fosters outreach and growth. This is especially so in much of the Developing World, where their members are mostly first generation converts and the process of upward mobility and accommodation to society is still in its early stages.

When sects are fairly new, the high tension between them and society allows them greater independence in their approach to social issues. Some even adopt radical stances on some issues. Thus early Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals embraced racial integration, Mormons espoused polygamy, and Adventists not only followed a woman visionary, like the Christian Scientists and Theosophists, but also appointed many women as pastors, evangelists, and administrators. However, as tension between sects and society begins to drop and they become concerned about their public image, those groups which had earlier held radical positions on certain social issues then often switch to ultraconservative stances. Pentecostals split into racially segregated groups (the Assembly

of God and the Church of God in Christ), Mormons abandoned polygamy and embraced traditional family values, and Adventists adopted segregated churches and later also segregated conferences and removed the opportunities for women to serve their church in nontraditional roles. As tension between a group and society is further reduced over time, it tends to become more concerned with practising social justice and therefore moves to less traditional stances on these social issues and also on others on which its initial position was conservative; however, since it is still somewhat sectarian, it remains two or three decades behind the denominationalized mainline churches in this process. Thus, Adventism has so far taken only relatively small steps to alleviate both racial separation and gender discrimination, and is still loath to permit most Adventist divorcees to remarry or to recognize even the presence of homosexuals among its membership.

The Toronto Session

Celebration

Although it is billed as a business session, a General Conference Session is not designed as a policymaking gathering. Its prime task is to elect the General Conference leaders. It is also the only body with the authority to revise the "Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists," currently 27 statements which in effect form the Adventist creed, or the *Church Manual.* However, the changes proposed in these documents have usually gone through considerable development in committees in advance of the Session, and church leaders usually expect that they will be subject to little amendment. A Session, then, is similar to an American political convention: the delegates anoint the leaders selected by a Nominating Committee and approve the preparatory work done by various committees, but normally have little room to take the initiative.

After the contention and bitterness of the Sessions of 1990 and 1995 over the issue of women's ordination and the shock caused by the unprecedented forced resignation in 1999 of General Conference President Robert Folkenberg because of a scandal related to private business investments, Church leaders were anxious to avoid controversy at the Toronto Session. Apart from the elections, the main business on the agenda was to be a fairly routine updating of the Church Manual. The main focus would therefore fall on the surrounding reports, which are traditionally upbeat In tone: the Session would be primarily a celebration.

Members relished the news of increasingly rapid growth: while, earlier, it had taken a century for Adventists to reach one million members, there had been a net gain of over one million in 1999 alone, bringing the total membership by the time of the Session to 11.2 million, up from 6.4 million in 1990. The increase for the 1989-1999 decade was 76.9%.

Most of the growth continued to be in the Developing World, especially Latin America, Africa, the Philippines, China, and India. Indeed, as growth among the Caucasians in the Developed World has slowed, and in some cases become negative as societies have secularized and Adventism there has become increasingly denomination-like, the upward trajectory of the membership there has often been maintained by an influx of Adventist immigrants from the Developing World
and

successful evangelism among their non-Adventist peers. At the end of 1999 only 8.4% of the world membership was located in North America, where Adventism had originated, compared with 12.0% in 1989 and 51.7% in 1920. However, the concentration of growth among the poor in the nations of the Developing World has accelerated a decline in per capita giving even without adjustment for inflation. This amount, which peaked at $202.32 in 1981, had fallen to $168.32 in 1999, in spite of increased giving in North America.

A Broadening Mission

The celebration of growth in the upbeat multimedia reports of the geographic divisions of the world church was often couched in triumphalist terms, affirming that Adventists were fulfilling their task of taking their message to the whole world. Since they were thus preparing the way for the return of Christ, these reports confirmed the Session motto, "Almost Home."

A major theme of the Session was therefore Mission. In his report, the President of the General Conference, Dr Jan Paulson, declared that "Everything that our church is, has, and does finds its meaning in mission." Several reports told of the impact of new strategies: evangelistic series using Adventism's best speakers beamed internationally via satellite, a technique that has drawn unexpectedly large audiences to watch TV screens in churches and stadiums, and which has established satellite disks as unconventional steeples atop many Adventist churches; and broadcasts by Adventist World Radio transmitted from strategically placed radio stations in 60 languages (about to be expanded to 110) 24 hours per day into areas with few Christians, which have made many contacts and converts. There were also the traditional evangelistic meetings, now increasingly featuring lay evangelists, especially women, Bible correspondence courses, door-to-door sales of books, small group evangelism, and a one-on-one sharing of faith. These presentations frequently featured miracle stories of God's intervention in the evangelistic process. Meanwhile, an

array of booths in the exhibit halls featuring lay initiatives in mission ranging from Independent publishers to organizations sending missionaries and building churches for new congregations demonstrated that the mission enterprise is no longer solely the responsibility of the centralized church organization.

Traditionally, Adventist mission has focused primarily on those with a Christian background, using outreach methods that assume an acceptance of biblical authority. However, a series of reports and seminars on "Global Mission" revealed the extent to which this focus has broadened since 1990 to include a major concern for the "10-40 degrees north longitude window," which reaches from North Africa across the Middle East and mainland Asia to Japan. Adventists have established study centers to dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism and to prepare approaches and materials to reach these peoples for Christ. They have recruited 26,000 mostly youthful lay professionals as "tentmakers" and "pioneers" to move into many such communities, where they have already planted over 16,000 congregations
where

ten years ago

there were no Adventist congregations. Their efforts have often built on contacts made through Adventist World Radio and on the goodwill created by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, which uses mostly government funds in development and disaster relief operations, actions which have been described by church leaders as an "entering wedge" for the church which shares its name.

Work in such areas often forces Adventists to move away from their usual hierarchical and highly institutionalized approach--with results that surprise them. For example, during their first 50 years of work in China Adventists built educational, medical, and publishing institutions and created a multilevel administrative structure, but in 1950 their membership stood at only 23,000. The Communist revolution removed the church structure, institutions, and paid pastors, reducing Adventism to a core group of committed laypersons who witnessed to their faith when this was possible. Today, thanks to that witness, the radio broadcasts, and the activity of recent "tentmakers," the General Conference is aware of 600 congregations worshiping in church buildings and 2,000 house churches with a membership of over 280,000.

Competition in Mission

While the Adventist Church has long issued statements portraying the mission and evangelistic activities of other Christian churches as contributing towards the fulfillment of

the Gospel Commission, it continues to hold that its own special message must go to the world to prepare it for the return of Christ. Since it has typically measured the extent to which that task has been accomplished in terms of the proportion of the world's nations in which its work is active, its members have indeed come to see themselves as "almost home," as recent reports have shown an Adventist presence in almost every country. However, the new focus on the "10-40 window" and a growing realization of the enormity of the remaining task if the Gospel is to be announced to all the people groups there, suggests that more time, a newly contextualized effort, and a much broader lay involvement are needed. Indeed, President Paulson, in a presentation at the Session, declared soberly that the "signs" which have long been used by Adventists as indications that the end of the age is imminent are merely the "birth pangs" of the "last days," as he reminded members that according to Matthew 24 Christ cannot return until the Gospel has been preached to the whole world.

Although Adventists have increasingly sought improved relations with other Christian churches in recent years, their belief in the specialness of their message continues to foster tensions both with these churches and internally. As might be expected of a religious group in transition from sect towards denomination, there is considerable pluralism among the membership concerning this issue. This was demonstrated by two events during the Session. First, during a business meeting devoted to updating the Church Manual, a delegate moved to amend a statement within the baptismal vow where a person about to be baptized affirms that he/she believes that "the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church of Bible prophecy" to "...is part of the remnant church...." This attempt to reduce the Adventist sense of special calling elicited strong opposition and was defeated. Secondly, a statement on Religious Liberty, Evangelism, and Proselytism, issued at a press conference, put the Adventist Church on record as saying that "Terminology should be used which avoids offending other religious communities. Statements which are false or ridicule other religions should not be made." A question at the press conference discovered that one target of the statement was the Adventist evangelists who publicly identify other Protestant churches as "Babylon" and the Roman Catholic Church as the "beast" of the biblical book of Revelation. However, when I tested the statement on a prominent evangelist, he responded that he "must preach the truth as revealed to us" and "give members of [his] audience reasons to leave the other churches."

Pluralism

Diversity

The international growth of Adventism has made its membership extremely diverse--in such areas as nationality and race, educational level and worldly sophistication, and

instances of worship styles, social and political issues, and certain theological questions. This diversity has led to great concern among the church leaders about the need to maintain unity, a concern that was repeated so frequently during the Session that it became its other major theme. Dr Paulson, for example, stressed "the need to maintain the togetherness of this family of faith around the world, with all its cultural diversity," warning that growth and pluralism could fragment the unity, creating in its place "a fraternity of national churches."

Most Adventists in the Developed World have inherited their faith, and many have experienced upward mobility, often through education in Adventist schools and, in a significant number of cases, through careers within the Church. In contrast, most members within the Developing World are converts. Typically young, poor, and uneducated, they were often attracted to Adventism in part by the belief that it offered them opportunities for upward mobility. And indeed, in earlier decades many experienced this through the educational opportunities, freedom from traditional norms, and training in stewardship that Adventism provided. There were few significant threats to church unity during that period, when local leadership was normally provided by missionaries, who typically presided over a westernizing church culture. Church leaders boasted that Adventists everywhere began Sabbath School at 9.30 on Sabbath morning and worship at 11a.m.; the language might not be English, but hymn tunes, the subjects of lessons, and the order of worship were the same.

However, the rise of nationalism and the end of colonialism made it impossible to retain missionary leadership. Adventists were forced to install local leaders and upgrade their educational institutions. Professionals began to emerge among the laity and the local church culture gradually became more indigenous. However, because of its increasingly rapid growth-rate in many parts of the Developing World, Adventism found itself unable to educate most of its members: although 1,055,189 students were in Adventist schools at the end of 1999, this represented only ten students for every 100 members, compared to 26 for every 100 in 1950--and only half of the students today come from Adventist homes. Nevertheless, Adventist culture continues to encourage its members to seek education, so that many of the members in the Developing World are attending non-Adventist schools and universities. These developments collectively sparked fear that the national churches would become increasingly independent. Meanwhile, the changing regional balance within the membership of the world church inevitably led to demands for an internationalization of the leadership of the General Conference and, eventually, to the beginning of that process and the gradual recognition that this was likely to culminate in the choice of someone from the Developing World as President.

It is not always clear how church leaders define unity. One of its pillars seems to be the maintenance of the centralized structure, which is seen as having been designed to secure

unity of action. Since Adventists place considerable emphasis on correct, Bible-based doctrine, unity of faith is another pillar. These two emphases led Church leaders, in their growing fear of disunity, to insist that any changes in rules or practice where it could be said that the Scriptures have a direct bearing could only be approved by a vote of the world church. This decision has exacerbated cultural tensions, for the newly numerically dominant delegates from the Developing World, having experienced North American domination for so long, have proved to have no inclination towards granting their former spiritual masters flexibility when they have asked for it.

In spite of the fears of disunity that were expressed there, there were in fact many striking symbols of unity to be seen at the Session. These included widespread delight over the success of the Church in its mission as demonstrated in the wide variety of ethnic groups and cultures represented in the reports, the music, in the huge, diverse audience, and in the fellowship outside as members mingled between meetings; in the shared prayers, as people prayed together, both in the formal meetings and informally in the prayer room, using their different languages; in the shared joy of Sabbath observance and in the expectation of Christ's return and of going "home" and renewing friendships there. However, there were also signs of conflict over representation in leadership, certain beliefs, and a number of social and behavioral issues, especially as unity is often interpreted to mean uniformity.

Who shall Lead?

It was noted above that the prime business of a Session is to elect the General Conference leaders and department personnel. Americans had traditionally dominated the crucial Nominating Committee, which recommends a single name for each position which is then almost always rubber-stamped by a vote of the delegates. However, this balance has shifted in recent decades as the relative size of the North American church has contracted and indigenous leaders have replaced missionaries throughout the Developing World. This was demonstrated dramatically in 1990, when a coalition of delegates from the Developing World refused to re-elect the incumbent president, first offering the post to the West Indian president of the Inter-American Division, whose territory includes the Latin countries from Mexico to Venezuela and the islands of the Caribbean. Then, when the latter refused the position, delegates from Latin America spearheaded a move to draft Folkenberg, a totally unexpected bridge candidate who, although American-born, had been raised and had spent most of his career in Latin countries.

Nevertheless, although the proportion of North Americans within the world membership is now quite small, their representation among the top leadership has remained relatively high, changing only marginally at this Session from five of the nine officers chosen in 1995

to five of ten. On balance, a Chinese and a Mexican were added to the inner circle, and a West Indian removed from it. The major change was that the President is no longer American. Jan Paulson, a Norwegian who had been the runner-up to Folkenberg in 1990 and had then been chosen to fill the unexpected vacancy in 1999, was re-elected to a full term. He is only the second non-American to hold the post in 137 years, so that this may also be seen as a bridge term; he is also the first president with an earned doctorate, having graduated with a Th.D. from Tubingen University in Germany. The American treasurer was also re-elected, while a Ghanaian replaced the West Indian Secretary who had held that position for 20 years. The seven general Vice-presidents include 3 white North Americans, an Afro-American, a Brazilian, a Mexican, and a Chinese. Several key figures suggested to me that it is likely that in 2005, when Paulson will almost certainly retire, the presidency will not return to a North American but will go for the first time to the Developing World, and thus represent a sea-change. Many are asking how such a leader will be accepted in North America, which is still the major source of church funding, especially if his leadership style is seen there as being more overtly authoritarian.

Beliefs

Given the extent of cultural and educational differences within Adventism, the haste with which large numbers of converts are prepared for baptism and the limited nurture afterwards, and the complexity of some of the 27 fundamental beliefs, unity of belief is inevitably somewhat of a mirage. I tested this by asking focus groups made up of students at Adventist colleges and Adventist students at universities in all divisions of the world church what they saw as the core of Adventist belief, and found that answers differed greatly from one region to another.

This situation was reflected in a resolution on the Session's agenda, which affirmed Adventist reliance on "the gift of prophecy through Ellen White", and encouraged members to read her writings and Adventist institutions to heed her counsel. Adventists have long held that White was a prophet-like figure sent by God to guide Adventists; the authority of her voluminous writings is seen as subsidiary to that of the Bible. Her role was somewhat controversial among Adventists during her lifetime, and this controversy continued after her death, creating wide differences in how she was regarded: while many Americans and Australians took her advice extremely seriously, many Europeans tended to disregard her, rejecting her authority. In recent years, news that scholarly research has shown that she borrowed much of her material from other authors created a crisis for many members who had accepted a high view of her gift. Church leaders have in response sought to protect her status by altering their biblical hermeneutic to embrace biblical scholarship that argues that many of the biblical authors also drew extensively on earlier writings. Nevertheless, there is a sense that White's legacy is under siege: her writings are

read much less than earlier, especially by younger members, many of the better educated members have questions, while in the Developing World, where translations of her books are limited and costly, a large segment of the rapidly growing membership is not personally acquainted with them--as a Nigerian delegate stated during the debate was the case in his country.

While only one European delegate spoke against the resolution, others showed their discomfort with it by asking why this should be on the agenda without a parallel resolution affirming Adventist reliance on the Bible and urging members to study it more assiduously. Consequently, the delegates voted to request a committee to draw up such a resolution, which was brought to the floor at the final business session. The drafters included a statement affirming that "the gift of prophecy manifested through Ellen G. White also points to the supremacy of the Bible."

Social Issues

During the Sessions of 1990 and 1995, a coalition of many of the delegates from the Developing World with a small group of theologically conservative Americans prevented the North American Church from ordaining women pastors, an outcome to which it had become strongly committed. These clashes had deepened tensions along cultural and theological rifts. Church leaders were therefore eager to avoid controversy during this Session. Since they controlled the agenda, they could accomplish that fairly easily—except for the fact that the Session of 1995 had set up a committee representative of the world church to study the potentially controversial issue of divorce and remarriage with a view to making a recommendation to the Church Manual Committee, which then had the responsibility of recommending changes in that crucial document.

Divorce and Remarriage

Those who had initiated the process of change in 1995 were mostly from the North American Division. The issue of divorce and remarriage is especially pertinent there because the rate of divorce among American Adventists is as high as that in society, while surveys show a presence of divorced women that exceeds the rate in society as a whole—in part because more women than men are attracted to Adventism, and the changes this makes in their lives then often cause strains with their husbands. Members going through divorce and their pastors had often found that the existing statement in the *Church Manual* was too inflexible and punitive rather than redemptive in tone. That statement allowed divorce only following adultery/fornication (terms whose meaning have been broadened in recent years to include "homosexual practices", incest, and child sexual

abuse), and remarriage only by a party wronged by an adulterous spouse. Consequently, many of the pastors and churches in North America had chosen to ignore the official statement, adopting instead a "don't ask, don't tell" stance, under which persons divorcing for reasons of incompatibility can usually find a way to remarry within the church.

The report of the study committee, though far from radical, had set out to address these concerns. It broadened the grounds for both divorce and remarriage, and created flexibility in its commitment of the church to be "a reconciling, forgiving, healing community, showing understanding and compassion when brokenness occurs," "forgiv[ing] and accept[ing] those who have failed", recognizing "the possibility of a new beginning"; in its encouragement of those who divorce "to remain within the fellowship of the community of faith"; and in its recommendation that discipline be invoked only in extreme cases and that the term "church discipline" replace all references to disfellowshipping in order to indicate that a range of possibilities was available, including removal from church office for a period, censure, and removal from membership.

However, the change proposed by the Church Manual Committee was more cautious in tone and in its detailed specifics, recommending relatively minor alterations and continuing to prescribe loss of membership in many Instances. It proposed to add, as acceptable grounds for divorce, physical abuse by a spouse and abandonment by an "unbelieving spouse." However, since it did not permit the remarriage of such divorcees, it in effect sentenced them to loveless lives: a General Conference Associate Secretary explained that "the Bible is much more open to divorce than to remarriage." The Communications Office of the General Conference, apparently straight-faced, released the following summary of the proposed new rules: "If your spouse commits adultery (which includes incest, child sexual abuse, and homosexual practices), you may divorce and remarry. If your unbelieving spouse abandons you, you may divorce but not remarry unless your spouse commits adultery. If your believing spouse abandons you, you may not divorce. If your spouse beats you, you can divorce your spouse, but you cannot remarry unless your spouse commits adultery." Divorce for incompatibility was not mentioned. The proposed change thus remained far behind the practice already followed by many churches in North America. Nevertheless, it was somewhat more humanitarian that the existing statement.

The proposed change was clearly a compromise solution, unlikely to satisfy any group completely. However, the course of debate showed that the majority of delegates were unwilling to accept even the proposed changes. The key voice in the debate was that of a Ghanaian biblical scholar employed in Michigan, who had earlier played a major role in opposing the ordination of women. He declared that the proposed changes were unbiblical, and that in their endorsement of equality between marriage partners rather than "God instituted" male headship, they were preparing the way for the acceptance of

women's ordination and of homosexuality and homosexual marriage within the church. His speech encouraged African and other conservative delegates to echo his theme, and also to argue against allowing divorce when a member had been abandoned by an unbelieving spouse. These began to make a series of amendments which would have rendered the document even more rigid, in spite of the fact that the Chair pointed out that the proposed changes had survived the scrutiny of the Church's theologians. The position taken in these speeches was similar to that held by those who had previously opposed the ordination of women: if the Scriptures do not permit something specifically it cannot be allowed--they left no room to ascertain broader principles and then apply them to modern situations. Meanwhile, progressive delegates were trying to broaden the proposed change, following the report of the study committee in questioning why "unfaithfulness to the marriage vow" should be limited to adultery/fornication, but their amendments failed. Given the relevance of the issue to North American Adventist women, it is not surprising that its women delegates were prominent in these debates.

Eventually, as the debate lengthened unduly and changes made the document internally inconsistent, a motion was passed returning it to the Church Manual Committee for reworking, which would have effectively put it on hold until 2005. However, some of the delegates from New Zealand, Australia and Western Europe were determined to gain at least the flawed benefits of the somewhat freer proposal. These used a series of parliamentary maneuvers to reopen the issue on the last business day of the Session, when the document was passed with fewer than one-fifth of the delegates present. African delegates complained about the maneuvering, but the issue was settled for this Session.

The debate on divorce and remarriage had demonstrated the difficulty that Adventism can have arriving at consensus now that it is so large and multicultural. The tensions surrounding the debate and maneuvering had further deepened the cultural cleavages among the diverse church membership. If the church leadership continues to insist that such issues be settled uniformly by the international church body they are likely to continue to exacerbate tensions and undermine the existing sense of unity. It seems as foolish to expect delegates from the Developing World to be able to make informed decisions about divorce and remarriage practices or whether women should be ordained in the Developed World as it has proved in the past to expect delegates and leaders rooted in the cultures of the Developed World or Latin America to make wise decisions about the conditions under which polygamous families in Africa or Papua-New Guinea can be baptized and admitted to church membership. The same applies to such culturally important issues as style of worship and music. Indeed, the Adventist church has become so diverse in countries such as the US that it needs to encourage not uniformity but "niche congregations," offering different kinds of worship and music, if it is to do better at

retaining its own youth and reach out beyond its present narrow range of followers to other segments of pluralistic societies.

Women

After two resounding defeats, the issue of women's ordination was not placed on the agenda of this Session: the North American women preferred to lick their wounds rather than face another inevitable defeat. Although it is estimated that 70% of the members of the world church are women, they comprised only 15.5% of the delegates (301 of 1946) and merely 8.6% of the members of the powerful nominating committee (15 of 174). Since the system of choosing delegates strongly favors sitting administrators, the imbalance in that category reflects the overwhelming male dominance there. The even greater imbalance on the Nominating Committee is largely a product of the networks among males and the difficulty women have had achieving prominence within the system. It was almost inevitable, then, that all the leaders of the General Conference elected at the Session, together with those chosen for most of the elected positions throughout the world church, were again men. Only two departments of the General Conference are headed by women, these being predictably Women's Ministries and Children's Ministries. During his report on the opening night of the Session, President Paulson chose to honor women--but the roles he mentioned were limited to those of wife and mother. He seemed to forget that Adventist colleges prepare women for many other roles and professions, that many women serve as pastors without ordination, and that many laywomen have become successful evangelists, especially in the Developing World. The head of the Department of Women's Ministries, which was created as a sop to women after the defeat of ordination for women pastors in 1990, recognized that in spite of the opening of all positions but those of president at each level of the church structure to persons who have not been ordained, it was still proving slow and difficult for women to achieve church leadership positions. Consequently, she announced during the Session that a task force would be created to find new and creative ways for promoting women to leadership posts throughout the church structure, from their local churches to the General Conference, and that the department was compiling a database of qualified women so that names could be submitted when vacancies occurred rather than leaving the making of suggestions to the very effective "old boys' networks."

Homosexuality:

The Adventist Session, unlike those of the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians in the US this summer, had no debate about the ordination of homosexuals or same gender marriage. The Annual Council of the General Conference in the Fall of 1999 had issued a

position statement on homosexuality: it stated that "Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships," thus sentencing its gay and lesbian members, like those divorced on grounds of brutality, to lives without love if they want to remain within their church. During his Sabbath morning sermon on July 1 on the theme "Knowing the Time," outgoing General Conference Secretary, Ralph Thompson, deeply offended the lesbian and gay Adventists and their parents present when he listed the recent prominence of homosexual issues in society as a sign of the collapse of moral standards and the end of the world. Several walked out, some in tears, feeling public and spiritual rejection yet again. An Adventist columnist in the *Toronto Star*, writing about the Session in his column, commented on the irony of a preacher declaring that homosexuality was a sin "even as a closeted gay member play[ed] heavenly background music to the preacher's thunderings." Meanwhile, however, in a booth in the exhibition halls staffed by three mothers of gay Adventists, where their sign asked how Jesus would have responded to gays and lesbians and they offered the parents and relatives of gay Adventists--and gay and lesbian Adventists themselves--"Someone to Talk to," tears of joy flowed frequently as distressed people finally found someone caring with whom to unburden themselves. The fact that this mothers' organization was able to rent a booth was a breakthrough in Adventism today. At the end of his sermon on the final Sabbath of the Session, President Paulson declared to all members: "I pledge to do all I can to make the church a place to be at home, a place to support each other--to carry each other if necessary--and to arrange our values and lives accordingly." Adventist homosexuals are one of the groups that rarely feel safe, supported, or at home there.

Assessment

It is true, then, that the rapid growth of Adventism, with its juxtaposition of large numbers of poor and uneducated converts in the Developing World with considerable professionalization among second and third generation members in the Developed World, and the changing balance among these regions in the world church have created considerable pluralism and related tensions. The tensions are especially strong when cultural differences shape opposing attitudes towards social and behavioral issues. Church leaders are therefore justified in their fear of disunity. However, they are wisely not attempting to dam the running tides, but are cautiously allowing small changes. The slight broadening of the position on divorce and remarriage and the announced intention to seek ways of propelling women into leadership positions are two of these. The Church is now also allowing more room for cultural differences in such areas as music and forms of worship, where American norms previously held almost universal sway. Only time will tell whether such policies will allow Adventism to develop the flexibility needed to avert fragmentation.

Conclusion

As Adventism has moved from sect towards denomination, lowering its tension with its environment, it has come to relish positive publicity and recognition by officials. Its hunger for these was addressed during this General Conference Session. As the largest convention ever staged in Toronto, it was the subject of media publicity, where special attention was paid to the arrangements for the availability of vegetarian food for visiting Adventists, to warnings to the liquor bars that they should not expect to profit from them, and to reports of medical studies confirming Adventist healthfulness. An array of political and religious dignitaries (for example, the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Mayor of Toronto, cabinet ministers, a senator bearing a message from Prime Minister Chretien, the Under Secretary-General of the United Nations, the President of the American Bible Society, the Anglican Bishop of Toronto, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, and a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches bearing a message from its General Secretary) appeared in the Skydome to offer greetings to Adventists. Church members in prominent positions of public office, usually in countries of the Developing World, such as the Governor-General of Papua-New Guinea, a Filipino ambassador, and the supreme chief of a Cameroon tribe, were also proudly welcomed. The most unusual tribute, however, was the decision by the Canadian Post Office to issue a postage stamp honoring the Adventist Church on the opening day of the Session.

Adventism has become much more comfortable with its environment in most parts of the world than it was a century or more ago. It is heavily involved in society through its schools, colleges, and hospitals that are spread around the world, and its members participate broadly as professionals in their countries, with increasing numbers active as political leaders. Given this, there was perhaps a tension in the Session's adoption of yet another motto proclaiming the imminence of Christ's return and the end of the world as we know it, and of the theme song, "We have this hope, that burns within our hearts, Hope in the coming of the Lord...",which has increasingly assumed the status of church anthem since it was first used at a General Conference Session in 1962. However, such apparent incongruities are the marks of a religious group that is in transition between sect and denomination--a position where it and its members are becoming comfortable with and rooted in society and yet where it retains a great deal of energy and a considerable sense of having a mission to perform.