Reflections on Adventism in Europe, 2014

Ronald Lawson
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Intro: I was invited to speak at a symposium in May 2014 at Friedensau University on the impact of World War I on Adventism. Since it was some years since I had done systematic interviews in Europe, I took this as an opportunity to update my data, and completed close to 100 interviews in eight countries in six weeks. I hope that you will be interested in some reflections on what I learned. Perhaps I should mention in case there are some who are not aware of this is that I am engaged in a very ambitious sociological study of Global Adventism that has taken me, at least once, to 61 countries in all of the Divisions of the World Adventist Church, where I have interviewed about 4,000 people.

Adventists are a small religious group in most of Europe: for example, in 2009 there were over 1.5 million JWs in Europe, 500,000 Mormons, but less than 387,000 Adventists. Ludwig Conradi, who originally oversaw the growth to Adventism there, was especially successful in Germany and among the Germans who had migrated to Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe, so that the numbers became higher there, but the early momentum there was not maintained (in 2009 there were almost 163k Witnesses in Germany, but only 35k Adventists). Adventism is larger than Witnesses and Mormons in only two countries, one of which is Iceland, where all are small, but Adventists listed almost 67k members in Romania in 2012.

Growth has ceased among people of European background almost everywhere, because of the impact of secularization, post-modernism, materialism, and an anti-Christian popular culture. Other Christian groups are reeling under the impact of these forces, with steep declines in church attendance over several decades, and Witnesses, Mormons, and Pentecostals are finding themselves not growing and, in some countries, declining in numbers. Europeans are no longer attracted to evangelistic meetings, and Adventist leaders are at their wits' end as they try to find ways to create interest among others. The main outreach strategy currently involves small groups designed to foster friendship and trust, where it can take a decade to convert any who become involved. Indeed, severe losses among youth have caused membership to decline in some countries, especially in Scandinavia. The membership in several countries is so small that the GC introduced a new structural form, called a Union of Churches, which means that there is no conference, so that the local churches are plugged directly into the union at the national level. The only countries experiencing growth are those where immigrants who include Adventists or are open to Adventism are arriving.

Europe has few Adventist academies and primary schools, and because university education is usually free for those who qualify, the Adventist colleges are mostly just seminaries, training pastors and struggling to survive economically. This creates another important difference between Adventism here and there. It also means that no Adventist college there has a science department, and those studying science do so at universities. The limited availability of Adventist education may help explain why the loss among youth is high, but since the same is true here, this suggests that the impact of secularism and the other cultural changes I mentioned are probably more important factors. In general, Adventism is aging is most of the Developed World.

The two Divisions in Europe have small membership compared with those in many other continents, but the reason for maintaining both is the difficulty of administering areas containing so many languages,

cultures, and historical antipathies. The division headquartered in Switzerland stretches from Portugal to Bulgaria, and contains most of Southern Europe; it also inherited Germany after the German-centered Central European Division was dismantled after World War II. While being quite liberal in tone—e.g. its report to the commission on women's ordination, was positive--it is not as liberal as the Division headquartered in England. The latter division stretches from Ireland through Britain, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia to the Baltic states, and then hop-steps from Poland to the former Yugoslavian states, where each of the divisions was awarded every-second country during the Communist era. The linking of the liberal countries of Western Europe to those in the East, which were then, especially, much more conservative, has required sensitive administration. However, as the economies of such countries as the Czech Republic and Hungary have blossomed, Adventists there have become more similar to those in Western Europe.

The differences between the two divisions became clearest when I asked about current social issues. For example, the report prepared for TOSC, the commission addressing the ordination of women, by the TED, the division concentrated in Northern Europe, was the strongest, most theologically profound of all the world divisions. The Secretary of that division is a highly-respected woman, a Swede, the first woman to hold such a position within Adventism, and still the only one. Within the Division, the Dutch have already ordained a woman, and the Scandinavian unions have made it clear that they are only waiting for the debate at the 2015 GC Session, but will then ordain their women pastors even if the vote is negative. Several of the TED unions accept the fact that most couples live together for a few years before marrying, and are also openly accepting of gay and lesbian members. Indeed, the Dutch responded to a sudden, last-minute vote taken at the GC's Spring Council this year that encouraged churches to disfellowship gay members, by voting that all their churches should be welcoming congregations of all members of disparaged groups, especially gays and lesbians. They had already voted to regard heterosexual couples who had cohabited for a certain time as if they were married. In contrast, the Inter-European Division, which is concentrated in Southern Europe, is at a "don't ask/don't tell" phase concerning cohabiting heterosexual and gay couples, and their language concerning the ordination of women, though clearly favorable, has been more muted. It is clear, however, that both divisions are in general moving along similar trajectories on social issues. There are greater differences between Adventists in Eastern and Western Europe than there are between the two divisions. Poland, Romania, and the countries of the former Yugoslavia have yet to employ a woman pastor. The Eastern European countries with fragile economies are still baptizing some non-Adventists, but they are not growing because their economic situation has encouraged citizens, including Adventists, to move to Western Europe in the hope of finding better jobs.

I will now comment individually on Adventism in each of the countries I visited. German Adventism has been transformed since the Nazi era, when church leaders embraced Hitler. Union and most conference leaders, and its theology teachers at Friedensau University, are much more open than almost any administrators or colleges in North America, as are most of its churches. For example, the unions decided many years ago that the regular Sabbath School Quarterly is just not interesting, and decided to write their own on the same topics. As a result, attendance at SS in Germany is much higher than in any other European country, and the Germans persist with their program in spite of objections from GC personnel. To give another example, the Germans in East Germany during the Communist era chose to join an ecumenical organization as the best way of gaining leverage with the government. However, they also came to appreciate their association with the personnel from other denominations, and as a result they persuaded the restructured German church after the Fall of Communism to become involved in the ecumenical movement. The German church has become very committed to this as result of its experience with the other churches since that time. It has also gained Adventists status as a "free

church"—that is, a recognized denomination with the legal privileges, though separate from Catholics and Lutherans, the two established churches with considerable political influence--rather than being branded a sect, without legal status, which was their former situation.

Friedensau, the German seminary, which gained university status as a result of a close relationship between a president of the then East German Union and the Communist regime there—a status that is unique in Europe among Adventist colleges—is set in an isolated location in a forest. It has an open, intellectually lively and refreshingly outspoken faculty who are not shy about questioning traditional Adventist beliefs, but struggle to attract sufficient students. They also struggle to maintain both their quality and intellectual coherence because there are few such German Adventists to choose from and because the Division, which is wary of controversy, has recently been reluctant to appoint some of their choices: they were dispirited while I was there when it signaled that it would reject their choice to replace the retiring New Testament scholar, and their Dean has since been poached by La Sierra. Friedensau is economically viable only because of large subsidies from the Division and a thriving and unique social science program that attracts non-Adventist tuition-paying students in a country where university education is free.

However, while the general tone of the German Adventist church is open and quite liberal, there is far from unanimity in this, with divisions within and between congregations, and between one conference and the rest. An influx of Adventists with German roots from the former Soviet Union after the fall of Communism helped swell the number of conservative Adventists in Germany, so that one dimension of friction between churches is between those speaking German and those Russian. Tensions within some congregations are especially bitter: for example, I overheard one conversation between administrators where one told of a group in one congregation that had labelled other church members "Babylon", which, he commented, had the effect of making communications between them impossible. When Germany was politically divided prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were three Adventist unions: East, West and South. Political reunification was followed by the joining of the East and West German Unions, and the renaming of the new entity the North German Union. Recently, the leaders of the two remaining unions have urged that they now unite in order to give Adventists a voice that can speak for the whole German church. However, this is opposed by the Baden-Wuerttemburg Conference, whose headquarters are in Stuttgart, although the conservative churches tend to be rural. This area is, in general, a conservative Protestant one, the home of German Pietism. This conference has bitterly opposed Adventist involvement in the ecumenical movement, and after the move to join the two unions together, which it has been successful in blocking, it voted in 2012 to endeavor to become independent from the South German Union by gaining recognition as a union of churches. While this move is likely to fail, since the organizational category was created to allow countries without sufficient members to have more than a single organizational unit to function as unions, it does illustrate how different that conference feels from the rest of its German fellows. The conference also favors hiring graduates of Bogenhofen, the theologically conservative Austrian seminary, rather than those from Friedensau.

The Austrian Church, though also German-speaking, is much more conservative than its German counterpart; this mirrors the political contrast between the two countries. The Austrian Union insists on using the official Sabbath School Quarterly, and consequently it must make its own translation of it; it has finally hired its first woman pastoral intern, a new graduate from Bogenhofen. When Ted Wilson visited Austria for a youth congress, he praised Austria for its faithfulness to Adventism, by which he meant to the traditional beliefs and behavioral norms. The contrast between Austrian and German Adventism is perhaps best exemplified by the differences between their seminaries. Bogenhofen proudly claims to teach only the doctrines endorsed by the GC—that is, those listed in the 28

"fundamental beliefs." It does attract a lot of the more conservative German would-be pastors, who it sorely needs to survive because of the limited number of students available from Austria and German Switzerland. However, this reduces the number of theology students attending Friedensau. Because Bogenhofen gives only a BA degree and the German unions insist that all new pastors have an MA, it encourages its graduates to take that degree at conservative seminaries such as those in Romania or the Philippines rather than Friedensau, which it regards as heretical; it is interesting to note that it also endorses the Adventist Seminary at Andrews University for graduates who can afford the cost: it correctly regards the theology taught there as similar to its own. The closest town to Bogenhofen, where college families do their shopping, is the town where Hitler was born. However, the seminary was not founded until after World War II.

France has experienced a large influx of immigrants from its colonies and former colonies in the Caribbean, Northern Africa, and Black Africa over the past three or four decades, and more recently from parts of Eastern Europe, especially Romania and the former Yugoslavia. Since Adventists were included in all groups except the North African Muslims, these have expanded and changed the face of the Adventist church, especially in metropolitan Paris, causing considerable conflict and white flight. Conference and Union business sessions have been bitter, with leadership changing back and forth between whites and Caribbean immigrants. The result has been such disillusionment that at the last round of business sessions members of other ethnic groups were elected to all presidential positions: a Portuguese was imported to lead the Franco-Belgian Union, a Romanian was elected in the North France Conference, an Italian in South France, while Belgium imported its leader from the Netherlands.

Collonges, the college supported by the Division that was designed to train pastors for the Romance-language countries, is situated in a stunning location at the foot of an escarpment just over the French border from Geneva, Switzerland. It too is struggling because of lack of accreditation, competition from union-run seminaries in almost every country in the division, and a changed student body. The flow of white students has largely stopped, and these have been replaced by students from the French Caribbean and former African colonies who are hoping to find pastoral positions in France. These openly acknowledged to me that it would be difficult for them to return to pastor in their homelands after receiving an education at Collonges that their home churches would find unacceptably liberal. Collonges survives because of Division subsidies and its academy. Its faculty may not be as outspoken as those at Fredensau, but theologically they seem to hold similar positions, and the two institutions use each other's teachers as they endeavor to stretch resources.

I also did interviews in Belgium, where immigrants have made the church very diverse, and Switzerland, which has its own diversity of language groups. The church is small in both countries, which both face a problem because their flows of ministerial students have dried up.

From Belgium I crossed an Adventist boundary and into the TED. England became the magnet for immigrants from its colonies in the Caribbean starting in the 1950s. These moved into the existing churches, first in London and then spreading to the other cities. Many of the white members fled to Australia and New Zealand, of simply ceased attending churches where they did not recognize the new style of worship. The result was churches with members who were almost all immigrants pastored by white British pastors. This ultimately resulted in a well-orchestrated movement demanding that pastors be imported from the Caribbean, which became so ugly that ultimately GC President Robert Pierson intervened and imposed what became known as the "Pierson Package", under which pastors were imported, one of whom was appointed Secretary of the South England Conference. When he was elected president of the conference, this began a pattern where immigrants took over the presidency of

both the English conferences and eventually also the British Union. In each case the Secretary has usually been white, but the white membership is confined mostly to the institutional churches at the academy and the college, to rural areas, and to the tiny churches in Ireland and Scotland. In recent years the immigrant membership has become more diverse, as the flow from the Caribbean has slowed but many Africans, especially from Ghana and Zimbabwe, and Eastern Europeans have arrived. The immigrants have also been more successful in outreach to their own than to the English, both because of the widespread secularization of the British population and the British view of Adventism as being a foreign group for foreigners.

Newbold College, which was designed to serve the whole division and to have a curriculum that made it more than a seminary, is facing serious problems. Because it is without British accreditation, and it awards degrees from Andrews and Friedensau Universities as a stop-gap, its students are not eligible for the subsidies available to most British students. Also, since the faculty are almost all white, the black British membership has some difficulty identifying with it, and many prefer to attend Oakwood University in the US or Adventist colleges in the Caribbean. Situated on an amazing old estate, the upkeep and modernization bill for the crumbling buildings is huge, and cannot be afforded given the low enrolment. Some of the non-theological programs have been closed, and while the Division will certainly maintain the seminary, it may not survive on the present campus, although the fact that that has been used to guarantee the pension scheme of the British church makes it difficult to sell. The theology faculty cooperate and exchange with those of Friedensau and Collonges, and are, in general, just as liberal and open as are those of the other two colleges. The student body comes from all over the division, for Newbold faces much less competition from local union-operated colleges than do Friedensau and Collonges.

Given the fact that both Newbold and Collonges wrestle with accreditation problems, and that Friedensau in contrast has recognition as a university, the most obvious solution is to combine everything at or under Friedensau, whose buildings could probably accommodate all. However, language problems, the unavailability of government funds from elsewhere to study there, and lingering antagonisms towards Germans and Germany, make this an unlikely solution. Meanwhile, the array of educational institutions whose student bodies are small because they serve small churches, limps along.
In the year 2000 I was invited by the Dutch Union to take a seminar on race relations because at that time the flow of immigrants, mostly from the Netherlands' colonies in the Caribbean but also from Ghana had resulted then in a membership that was about 50% Dutch and 50% immigrants. (The weak Ghanaian economy seems to propel Adventist Ghanaians all over the world—there are strong congregations is so many cities!) The Dutch church leaders were determined to cope with this trend differently, and thus to avoid the problems encountered in Britain and France. The immigrant proportion has now climbed to 55% of the total, though most of the leaders continue to be Dutch. The Dutch set out to create good relations between the groups, and to recruit pastors among the local immigrants and train them at Newbold, so that they would be socialized to the liberal theology and behavioral norms of the Dutch church, rather than import much more conservative foreign pastors.

When I was in the Netherlands in 2000 the Union youth leader explained to me that there were three groups of rooms at the youth camp—one designed for men, another for women, and the third for couples. They had already opened the rooms for couples to unmarried people living together, both heterosexual and homosexual. He had explained that if they refused them, the church would lose them, whereas if they accepted them they would become further rooted and active in the church. As noted above, they have built further on these attitudes since then, and they also chose to go out on a limb

concerning women's ordination, ordaining the first woman in Europe, whose roots were in the Dutch Caribbean.

My last stop in Europe was in Istanbul. When I attended church there I discovered that none of the members were Turks, but Adventists who had moved there for better jobs from other parts of Eastern Europe, especially Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. After decades of having an Adventist presence in Turkey, where there are now three churches, we have baptized almost no Turks. Similarly, I was told in Germany, which has received 6 million Turkish settlers, that the church has baptized none of them. It is my sense that Adventists assume that it is impossible to reach Muslims, and do not try—the Muslim culture is too strong and encompassing, and converts face being expelled from it. However, you will recall that 2 or 3 years ago, Dr Whitehouse, who was then head of the GC-sponsored Muslim Institute, showed us that his "Hanifa" plan to reach Muslims within Islam, where converts to Christ remain within their communities as Muslim Christians, attending prayers and Friday services at their mosque, but also meeting with the Jesus-followers for Sabbath worship, had really taken off. The result has been a movement that has resulted in the conversion, in this way, of tens of thousands of Muslims from Asia through the Middle East to Africa. However, when Ted Wilson discovered that these converts did not realize that they were Adventists and that their names were not added to the church rolls, the program was closed and the official program for Muslims returned to the unsuccessful attempts to extract Muslims from their communities. However, the Hanifa movement continues with a momentum of its own. One of the leaders of that movement, who worked closely with Dr Whitehouse, will be our speaker next May, and I have asked him to bring us up to date with what is happening with that movement. It is sure to be more encouraging than what I saw and was told about in Turkey.