

Adventists and Ecumenical Conversation

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not exist in isolation from other Christian communities. Social and religious trends in the Christian world impact us; they force us to decide how we should relate to those trends and changes. The Christian concern about the unity of the church, voiced particularly through the World Council of Churches, forces us to define where we stand on this important subject. Certainly, “no Adventist can be opposed to the unity Christ Himself prayed for.”¹

This article looks at the nature of Seventh-day Adventist involvement in the search for unity among Christians, as well as the doctrinal and theological parameters within which we operate in that search. It also briefly discusses the risks and benefits present in the conversations with other Christian bodies.

Our hope is that the ideas expressed here will be useful to Adventist ministers who interact with non-Adventist clergy at a more personal level, as well as a help to our pastors as they answer some of the concerns that church members might have regarding these conversations.

Adventist identity and ecumenical dialogues The Adventist Church has occasionally had conversations with other Christian communities and even participated with them in special activities (such as the matter of the promotion of religious liberty throughout the world). We have entered into those conversations with some apprehension, while at the same time acknowledging their need, usefulness, and importance.

What are our concerns as we deal with interfaith relations and dialogues? The church has not been quiet about that question. Adventists are concerned about the nature of the unity that is being sought and the methods that are employed in the attempts to accomplish it.²

There is much debate in the ecumenical movement about church unity. Traditionally that unity has been understood as “agreement in the confession of the faith and mutuality in the sacraments and in the ecclesiastical office (ministry), common worship life in prayer, common witness and common service to all human beings, the ability to act and speak together in view of the concrete tasks and challenges, the local as well as the universal dimension of the ecclesiastical unity, unity as well as diversity.”³

This far-reaching understanding of unity is incompatible with Adventist self-understanding, especially as Adventists see themselves called into being to be a reformation movement based on a particular prophetic role. The kind of unity expressed in the above statement ignores the damage that apostasy has inflicted on Christianity and, consequently, does not attempt to remedy it.

Hence Adventists are reluctant to be officially involved in the organized ecumenical movement.

Three ecumenical models for unity

Three specific models for unity have been proposed in ecumenical circles.⁴

The *first* one, the Cooperative-Federal Model, is considered the most elemental type in that it does not address topics like communion of faith, worship, sacraments, and ministry. These are issues of great concern in the ecumenical movement (which is why some people refuse to call it a model of Christian unity).⁵

This “model” consists in the development of a confederation or alliance of churches in order to work together on common interests. The identity and autonomy of each church is preserved and respected. Adventists have remained open to possible involvement in such a federation because it does not threaten the church’s message and mission. This is particularly the case in France, with our participation in the French Protestant Federation.

The *second* model is called the Model of Mutual Recognition. One of the key goals of ecumenical dialogue is the mutual acknowledgment of by participating churches that they are all a genuine expression of the One Church of Christ in its fullness.⁶

Among Catholics the situation is quite different. In Catholic theology, the One Church of Christ subsists in its fullness only in the Catholic Church, that is to say, “the one Church of Jesus Christ is concretely real and present in the Roman Catholic Church, in communion with the pope, and the bishops in communion with him. In this statement lies the nerve of the ecumenical dialogue . . . ,” and consequent debate has shown that “the nerve here is raw, and the pain threshold correspondingly low.”⁷

According to Adventist theology, the One Church of Christ does not subsist in any particular church or denomination. This fundamental ecclesiological stance makes it practically impossible for us to be a true partner in any dialogue aiming at unity with another Christian body.

We believe that the One Church of Christ is fundamentally invisible, diffused throughout the different Christian bodies. While ready to acknowledge that the apostolic church was fully visible, we also recognize that it soon became largely invisible as a result of apostasy. In Adventist thinking, the goal of true ecumenism is the restoration of biblical truth rejected or ignored by different Christian bodies.

Consequently Adventists see themselves as a reform movement, calling Christians back to the Scriptures as the sole foundation of faith and practice, and to the restoration of a true apostolic faith. One could suggest that Seventh-day Adventists see their God-given “ecumenical” mission as instrumental in making the invisible church visible again before the parousia, toward the close of the cosmic conflict on earth.

The *final* model of ecclesiastical unity is the Model of Organic Unity. Although it is possibly the ultimate goal of ecumenical dialogue, it appears to be an ideal that will never be fully realized. “In contrast to both the cooperative-federal and the mutual-recognition models, the model of organic union strictly rules out the possibility of institutionally independent churches with special—including confessional—form and identity within the accomplished unity. This is the real pathos of this model. When hitherto divided churches that live ‘in the same territory’ enter into organic union, they cease to exist as institutionally identifiable entities. What comes into being is a single church with its own new identity, The undivided loyalty of its members belongs to this single church and no longer to the churches from which they came and from which the union has been formed.”⁸

This model of unity is problematic for most Christian communities because it requires radical changes and the loss, to a large extent, of ecclesiastical identity. This model, of course, is incompatible with the message and mission of the Adventist Church. Besides this, it does not seem to be prevailing in ecumenical circles, even if it remains an ideal. It has largely been replaced by the search for “visible unity.”

The “Model of Church Fellowship”

There is now an interest in what could be called the Model of Church Fellowship (*koinonia*), based on the model of mutual recognition.⁹

Churches possessing different confessions could enjoy the unity of fellowship with or without organic unity. Under this model, confessional identity does not have to be surrendered but recognized and accepted as an expression of apostolic faith and church life. What has to be eliminated is “divisive sharpness and depth.”¹⁰

Following this model, fellowship is based on “a common understanding of the gospel and its correct transmission in the proclamation of the Word and the sacraments.”¹¹ This concept of fellowship is very similar to the Catholic concept of *communio*, as the Catholic ecumenical vision.¹²

In their bilateral dialogues, Catholics have noticed that the dialogues usually “define the visible unity of all Christians as *communion*-unity, and agree in understanding it—in analogy with the original Trinitarian model—not as uniformity but as unity in diversity and diversity in unity.”¹³

Seventh-day Adventists, however, would still find this model unacceptable. There are understandings of the apostolic faith that are distortions of that faith. In Adventist thinking it is practically impossible to separate the understanding of the gospel from other doctrinal statements. Adventist doctrines are not independent units but a body that expresses a whole system of truth that centers in Jesus. When the doctrines are viewed as a totality, they convey a theology that is larger than its individual parts.

Risks

The Adventist involvement in interfaith conversations has never had the purpose of seeking unity with other ecclesiastical bodies. We have used such conversations as a means of sharing our true identity and mission with others, and as a way of eliminating misunderstanding and prejudices against us.

In that task the Council on Interchurch/Faith Relations of the General Conference has performed a significant role; it has been of great service to the Adventist Church and has represented it with dignity and respect.¹⁴

All conversations, formal or informal, contain risks as well as benefits. Below are some risks:

1. *Compromising the Unity of the Church:* We live in an age of suspicion and the fear of conspiracy. There are church members, some on the fringes, who consistently see conspiracies in everything our church leaders and theologians do. They hear that the church is in conversation with another church and they immediately suspect that our beliefs are being altered or compromised.

In other cases they may perceive the church’s involvement in any kind of interfaith conversation as a threat to our mission, particularly in the context of last-day events. This risk could be minimized if there were better communication from church leaders to church members about the reasons for such meetings.

2. *Compromising beliefs:* Those involved in conversations with other Christian bodies can be tempted to de-emphasize the differences while they emphasize similarities. In fact, this seems to be part of the psychology of interfaith dialogue involving the World Council of Churches.

There is always the risk of misrepresenting differences in order to make them more palatable to the partner in conversation. It is therefore extremely important for the church to make sure that the individuals selected to participate in conversations know well what we believe, are personally committed to our message, and are not ashamed of it. They should not go to the meetings to compromise or negotiate what we believe, but to represent us to the best of their ability.

3. *Compromising evangelism*: Coming too close to other religious communities could hamper our mission to them. It is tempting to conclude that since believers in those communities are good Christians, we have little or nothing to offer to them. Why should we invite them to become Adventists? Would we feel free to tell the members of those religious communities that the gospel and the law are not in opposition to each other, or that what their pastor is telling them about the Sabbath and the return of Christ is false?

Therefore it is important for us, when dialoguing with other religious communities, to emphasize not only our doctrines and message but also our *mission*. They have to understand that we have a particular role within the Christian world, and that our target is not any particular religious community but the whole world.

Our mission is that our message is to go to every people, language, and nation. We should make it clear that proselytism is not wrong but is an intrinsic aspect of the freedom with which God endowed the human race, and a healthy way of retaining the balance of diversity that is critical to the search for truth.

It is critical to note that when confronted with different doctrinal options in the market of religious conviction, we all have the right to consider and to reconsider what we have and even to give up cherished ideas.

Benefits

Despite the potential dangers, meetings with other Christians also come with potential benefits. Therefore we should not discourage, formally or informally, approaching other Christians and even non-Christian religions.

1. *Share our message with non-Adventist church leaders*: Conversations with other people outside the Adventist circle should be viewed as part of our evangelistic outreach; not that we are making overt attempts to convert them, but that we are sharing our beliefs. It is our responsibility to inform the Christian world of the reason for our existence as a religious community.

Our emphasis on end-time concerns requires that our message be well known throughout the Christian world. We should take every opportunity to make known to others what we proclaim as end-time truth.

2. *Present truth in a winsome way*: Possibly one of the main benefits derived from conversations with other Christians is that we are challenged to examine our teachings and to seek ways to express them in a nonconfrontational way. Aware that what we offer will be carefully scrutinized and evaluated, we must present it in a persuasive and cogent way.

In conversations with other Christians, confrontation of diverse and irreconcilable ideas is unavoidable, but these ideas must be presented in a nonthreatening, even winsome, way. The proclamation of a particular truth should have as its purpose making friends, not enemies.

This does not mean that we should sacrifice truth for *friendship*, but that every effort should be made to present *truth* in an attractive package. This will require packaging our message in a way that will facilitate its understanding and that will lead others to acknowledge that, even though they may still disagree with us, what we say makes sense and has a biblical basis.

3. *Clarify issues in an informal way*: Apart from the papers presented in the meetings dealing with our message and mission, there are many opportunities for informal conversation. Those important moments provide the opportunity to speak more freely than in an open meeting. Usually our partners have many questions that they feel free to ask only while walking together during a break, or while having a meal together.

At such meetings we come to know each other much better and occasionally sensitive questions are asked behind the scenes, on the basis of the developing friendship. It is safe to say that these important questions would almost certainly not be asked in the more formal setting of the main meetings. Here witnessing takes a personal dimension at a moment when confrontation is at its lowest point.

4. *Eliminate prejudices*: Closely related to our previous comments, conversations are very useful in providing reliable information about our church that will help to eliminate prejudice. In some cases the prejudice has been so strong that it has been difficult for our counterparts to accept what we were in fact telling them about our true position on a particular theological issue. Their preconceived ideas have not allowed them to listen.

On the other hand, we as Adventists can also have false or inaccurate information regarding other churches or faith-groups. Only the truth is most effective in dealing with others. False stereotypes and the lack of correct information weaken witness. It is precisely the purpose of the conversation to create an environment in which we are willing to listen to each other in a Christian spirit of love and cordiality.

Conclusion

Adventists have not isolated themselves from the Christian world and its search for unity. We have been selectively involved in conversations with other religious communities, not because we want to pursue unity on their terms, but because we want to make ourselves known and, at the same time, eliminate misconception.

1 Walter Raymond Beach and Bert Beverly Beach, *Pattern for Progress: The Role and Function of Church Organization* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1985), 100. See also, *Statements, Guidelines and Other Documents: A Compilation* (Silver Spring, Md.: GC Communication Department, 2000), 122.

2 Among many materials on the topic of ecumenism and the Adventist Church see, Bert Beverly Beach, *Vatican II: Bridging the Abyss* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1968), 259-266; Walter R. Beach, "SDA Relations to the National and World Councils of Churches," *Review and Herald*, October 9, 1969, 6, 7; *Idem.*, "Why we Stand Apart," *Review and Herald*, October 16, 1969, 6, 7; Bert B. Beach, "The World Council of Churches: Seventh-day Adventist Conversations and Their Significance," *Ministry*, May 1970, 13-15; June 1970, 59-61; Jean Zucher, "Why Adventists Don't Join the WCC," *Ministry*, March 1979, 10-12; May 1979, 6-8, "Ecumenism," in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. A-L, edited by Don E. Neufeld (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1996), 491-493.

3 Harding Meyer, *That All May Be One: Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 43.

4 For a discussion of these three models see Meyer, *One*, 81-100, to whom I am indebted.

5 Meyer, *One*, 83-86.

6 See, for instance, the affirmation of the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra: "The Goal of the search for full communion is realized when all churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in its fullness" (*Official Report of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 173).

7 Walter Kasper, "Present Situation and Future of the Ecumenical Movement," in *The Catholic Church in Ecumenical Dialogue 2000: Articles by Members of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002), 9.

8 Meyer, *One*, 97.

9 *Ibid.*, 107, 108.

10 *Ibid.*, 109.

11 *Ibid.*, 111.

12 See Kasper, "Ecumenical Movement," 6-11 He considers "full communion in the complete sense . . . only an eschatological hope" (11).

13 Ibid., 6.

14 I must recognize, at least in a footnote, the excellent job that Bert B. Beach, former Director of the Office of Inter-church Relations, performed for the church in his involvement in ecumenical circles as observer for over 40 years, and as secretary of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions for 32 years. He is well known and respected in those circles and has been a genuine ambassador of the church.

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