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Viewpoint: Independent Ministries —Bane or Blessing?

The chapel inside Terminal A of Dulles International Airport attracts hundreds of visitors each year as a quiet place for prayer, reading, or resting. Travelers from foreign nations express surprise and appreciation for the concept of multi-faith use, which is neither practiced or permitted in their country. Multifaith utilization of a religious facility is a unique American value that arose from our early military heritage. Cooperation among distinctly differing faiths requires practice of the three Cs: communication, coordination, and collaboration. Easier said than done; cooperation without compromise requires mutual respect and goodwill.

My first pastorate as an intern presented learning challenges the seminary had not taught. The small rural community had four churches: Catholic, Lutheran, Adventist, and a community Protestant group. Though half of the county's leadership was Adventist and the only doctor for a radius of fifty miles was a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), the church was divided over the teachings of Robert Brinsmead. I knew nothing about the man, his views, or his writings. The first four months after arriving, I was too engaged with visiting members of three churches spread over an area the size of Connecticut, raising an Ingathering goal, and assisting with an evangelistic series to focus on internal clashes. In addition, I had Army Reserve duties with a unit 165 miles away.

Before my tenure, Brinsmead used the district as a refuge for study and writing. He stayed with friendly member families. His influence created differences of perspective among not only the church members, but even between spouses. One family divorced and the split went into the courts for public display and record. These embarrassing facts surfaced during pastoral visits and from non-member residents. Seven outreach programs in three years attracted only eight new members into that confusing quagmire.

My ministry was to reach all residents in the district, rather than take sides or get drawn into endless internal debates. The local newspaper noted that the Adventist pastor was staying for another year in the town. After three years I was ordained and entered the U.S. Army as an active-duty chaplain at Fort Hood, Texas.

While assigned in Germany, I was the only SDA military chaplain and given orders to provide denominational coverage across Europe. In addition to duties for a unit located on five *kasernes* (barracks), I had pastoral responsibilities for 1,100 SDA members meeting in ten military chapels from Berlin to S.H.A.P.E. headquarters. The family and I traveled across Germany almost every weekend to lead Sabbath services. Meanwhile, rumors reached us about difficulties within the denomination over critics of Ellen White, internal financial mismanagement, and a theological crisis at some place in Colorado. I read in the *Review* some brief reports, but in the days before email and cell phones little was heard. My chaplain duties with military alerts, counseling, leading collective Protestant chapel services on Sunday and Adventist services on Sabbaths, resolving Sabbath duty issues, leading retreats, etc., kept me too active trying to retain young members in the church than to be distracted by concerns that proved divisive, destructive, and unending. I remained focused on the good, the positive and important, and refused to major on minors, which I could not resolve anyway.

While in Germany, I was the chaplain resource manager for the command, which entailed scheduling use of three chapels for 14-plus distinctive faith congregations. I noted that four small groups of the same faith took an inordinate amount of time for their style of worship on Sundays and several evenings in one chapel. Their declared beliefs were all the same, so I questioned the leaders of the groups as to why separate meeting times were needed. As suspected, personal egos and semantics proved more of an issue than theological substance. My guidance for them to unite as one congregation and limit meeting times to enable more equitable use of the chapel made me the anti-Christ, and resulted in a vicious, internal squabble among the four leaders for control of the unified group. So much for the concept of unity among brethren, at least in that denomination. Fortunately for Adventists, the chapel was free for use on Saturdays, and we became one of the more stable Protestant congregations.

While serving in the Pentagon, the Potomac Conference President asked me to serve as an interim pastor of several churches in Northern Virginia for periods varying of six to fifteen months. At one district nearly a year had passed without observing communion, so the church board requested that service for the second week I was their interim pastor. A segment of the membership was deeply committed to following the teachings of Elder

Ron Spears, who during his ministry had been a missionary and served in the General Conference but had since founded Hope International. I learned that he had been invited to the church to hold a rally on the Sabbath that church ordinances were scheduled. I called Elder Spears and talked with him about his pending visit and the conflict. He had not been told about the communion and graciously said the church should proceed with its plans; he would not interfere, but also would like to hold meetings in the afternoon and evening for those who had invited him. He apologized for the over-zealous actions of his followers and said he did not endorse such disruptive tactics.

When I arrived early at the church on Sabbath morning, a local Spear leader blocked my entrance and told me other meetings would be held at the church, and that plans for church ordinances were changed. I shared my conversation I had earlier in the week with Elder Spears and advised him to step aside. He grudgingly moved. During Sabbath School visitors from across the region appeared doubling attendance. Church ordinances proceeded as planned. Ron Spears participated; in fact, we shared the ordinance of humility together and had a pleasant fellowship; unfortunately, most of his followers chose not to partake in any part of the Lord's Supper. Following the fellowship luncheon, I stayed by for the afternoon meetings. Ron spoke and almost like magic, recording and video equipment appeared. Excited "amens" responded to many of his statements. As Sabbath ended, the subject drifted from Christ's righteousness into behavioral perfectionism. A very somber mood prevailed, which was made more uncomfortable as children became restless from the long hours of meetings all day and into the night. After that incident, I continued to serve the members until their new pastor arrived six months later.

From its earliest beginnings Adventists have faced challenges of heretical teachings and practices, splinter groups and independent ministries. I have lived through Shepherd's Rod, the Davidians, and spurious prophet impersonators. I have also seen first-hand the impact on other denominations of similar events and movements on the macro level. Satan is the embodiment of lawlessness. He hates Christ and attacks anyone and any church that endeavors to follow Jesus and seeks to preach the gospel.

Organizations evolve alike through four phases, whether they are business, churches (denominations) or government (local and national). An idea, vision, or goal motivates a group that establishes distinctive identity and strives to promote its specialty. As the organization emerges and attracts significant adherents, it either fails or grows. Growth fosters the need to perpetuate the mission and requires institutionalization. A name is chosen, writings distributed, facilities acquired, departments formed, schools for training established, governing policies adopted, etc. The movement

becomes recognized and part of the greater whole. A denomination of several generations becomes accepted as mainstream Christianity. Unfortunately, huge organizations become diverse and often the diversity creates questions about purpose, meaning, and meeting special interests. This leads to fragmentation and splintering, which is very disconcerting and prompts lots of introspection, confusion, and disaffection. Negativity results, but if managed carefully and spiritually for the good of the whole, humble re-evaluation, open discussion, and prayerful inclusion results in a renewed sense of direction and solutions for the future rather than problem fixation on the present and criticism of the past. This is true for all faiths and Adventism. The denomination had weathered phase three and moved into phase four when the pandemic hit and paused further progress.

Today, over 200 major denominations and thousands of smaller ones exist in North America. More than 350,000 places of worship hold religious services. All of that started from roughly three major faiths: Roman Catholic missions primarily to Native Americans, the Pilgrims in New England and the Church of England in Virginia and the southern states. So, what contributed to the rise of religious independence, particularly in North America? First, the pioneer spirit that prevailed in U.S. history. As people moved West, they practiced their faith, but often without trained pastoral leaders. War, immigration, and off-shoots fostered divisions, particularly among Protestants. Even American Catholicism differed from Europe.

Pioneers developed a “rough and tumble, down-to-earth pragmatic” religion that met immediate needs. Second, changes in Western civilization caused by two world wars and constant conflict, dynamic economies, moving populations, and easy international travel also contributed to new faith groups. Third, human dilemmas of poverty, dwindling resources, tragedies, disasters, and disease has blurred the edges of faith differences. Loyalty to traditional religions has declined, and some faiths have reacted to perceived change as a threat by entrenching in the past. However, spiritual interests remain and are necessary and desired. When human and spiritual needs are unmet, the human spirit and quest for good and God will find a way to meet the innate desire for peace with God. If established religion fails to meet that need people will start new groups that are more responsive to the situation.

Allow me a personal life illustration. From childhood I was an avid reader, particularly of biographies, American history, and nature. I enjoyed studies of frontier and military life and found Pathfinders and the Medical Cadet Corps fascinating. I dreamed of becoming a U.S. National Park Ranger. However, church leaders discouraged such a career and of-

ferred no alternatives. I had not heard about chaplaincies until I stumbled on a book by Stanley Anderson about military chaplains who served as spiritual shepherds to 24 million men and women during World War II. He mentioned that seminarians were often chaplain candidates, so I wrote for further information. After twelve years of preparation, I became an Adventist chaplain in the U.S. Army. My independent spirit (deemed rebellious by some faculty who once described me as too stupid and poor to become a doctor and unfit to be a spiritual leader) found a way to fulfill my calling to ministry with my interest in serving God and country. That's the micro or individual level, but the same spirit often works on the macro or organizational level.

In many cases organizations overlook or ignore groups or legitimate concerns that get by-passed and whose needs require attention. They sometimes are closed to dialogue and listening. During my fifty-plus years of pastoral and chaplaincy ministry, some of my experience with independent ministries might be considered negative. I chose to avoid as much as possible being drawn into a "we-they" mentality and tried to consider all people in my circle of influence worthy to receive whatever assistance could help them on their spiritual journey, whether I personally agreed or disagreed with their views. They owed me no answer or defense of their beliefs, because after all is said or done here on earth, they must stand before God; ultimately, he is our Judge. I wish them well as I would hope they did me.

Sometimes, dedication and passion for a cause produces a more focused product than the slow, clumsy machinations of a large organization. My sister and husband spent 23 years of mission service in the Far East and saw first-hand the effectiveness of Adventist Southeast Asia Projects (ASAP). Until he retired, my brother-in-law served on their governing board while working as a professor of missiology at the SDA Theological Seminary. He linked the organization with an independent ministry in furthering essential objectives.

Let us never forget that Jesus' ministry on earth was quite independent from Temple worship in Jerusalem. The Way or early Christians clashed with the Sanhedrin and the Roman empire over who to worship. During the past two millenniums conscientious priests who attempted to reform the Church teachings and practices were ostracized and often became martyrs for their beliefs. The principled stance of the Reformers resulted in Protestantism. The American Civil War divided most denominations and created new ones over the issue of slavery. Today, social issues of abortion and sexual morality have split and further fragmented denominations, some several times.

In this brief experiential review, I have not touched on Adventist self-supporting institutions and ministries, media, etc., nor discussed issues of church authority, stewardship, lack of ethical and professional standards, misuse of the church name, and a host of other relevant concerns. Some groups accuse the denomination hierarchy of arrogance, of being too concerned about authority, power, and sustaining the structure, while being unresponsive to the needs of members. An oft-quoted statement from *The Great Controversy*, is frequently used to show the superiority of less formal groups over the established system, particularly in these last days:

Thus the message of the third angel will be proclaimed. As the time comes for it to be given with greatest power, the Lord will work through humble instruments, leading the minds of those who consecrate themselves to His service. The laborers will be qualified rather by the unction of His Spirit than by the training of literary institutions. Men of faith and prayer will be constrained to go forth with holy zeal, declaring the words which God gives them. (White 1950:606)

Too often the perception exists that those who labor in the systemic organization of God's Church are proud Pharisees who lack humility, do not pray, and rely more on their degrees than faith. Since only those who are humble laity will be used by the Lord, no need exists for educating and preparing ones-self for effective witnessing. Afterall, the Holy Spirit will give you the wisdom necessary without the bother of preparatory training. Is it possible to be prideful of humility and ignorance? Arguments whether perceptions like these are valid or not rarely changes the holder's views, because perceptions are what most people consider reality and few people are willing to change their reality.

In closing, suffice it to say that the Lord works through Peters as well as Pauls. Both are needed. God can use a dull knife as well as a sharp one. Before conversion, both Peter and Paul were full of self-sufficiency. After working in the vineyard, they both became humbly dependent on the Spirit for accomplishing their witness. Plenty of work remains; the harvest is ready, and the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37 and 38; John 4:34-38). There is sufficient need and room for all disciples in whatever capacity, skill-level, and role to humbly serve the Lord, his Church, and his mission. Let us maintain perspective and priorities and not be dissuaded or distracted over things of this earth that are temporary. The Church consists of believers whom Jesus has adopted into his family, redeemed, and will take to heaven to be with him throughout eternity. While important, church facilities, organizations, and institutions of all kinds will not be saved; they will be relics of this sinful world. They do not go to heaven with the saints.

I believe before Jesus comes you and I will stand individually for our faith in Jesus Christ without all the benefits of religious organizations and institutions. Our faith will be tested on what or whom we trust. Let us be certain our faith priorities and relationships are balanced, credible, and reliable. Before committing to any religious group, ask yourself several questions.

1. Is my faith primarily positive, secure, and focused heavenward, or it is mostly critical, judgmental, and negative?
2. Am I an active member of my religious faith, or am I seeking to have my needs met where I might be more valued? What is the purpose in my belonging?
3. Does the group partner and contribute to the overall biblical mission of the church, or is it parasitic in its orientation and mission? How is it viewed outside its organization?
4. Is the focus of the group built around an individual persona or ego that demands certain loyalty, sacrifice, or stewardship? Have these requirements subtly developed over time to the point of spiritual mind control, surrender, and no return?
5. What would happen to my faith if the leader or organization failed, or I chose to dis-associate from it?

I have noticed far too often that those who separate from the Church seldom continue in any other religious faith. Other questions could be asked. There are many distractions and voices in these tumultuous times. Pray for the Holy Spirit's gift of discernment that we may wisely discern the issues and stay focuses on Jesus and the everlasting gospel.

Works Cited

White, Ellen G. 1950. *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.



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