Can Fresh Expressions be Adventist?
Reflections on Adventist Identity in the Context of Fresh Expressions!

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1. Introduction

If Seventh-day Adventism is defined by its message and mission, fresh expressions of church can be Adventist. However, when Adventism is also defined by its expectations, symbols and institutionalism, there are challenges.¹ This is a complex issue. This paper offers some reflections and explores a possible way forward.

As with other evangelicals Adventism² flourished in its evangelistic success in the last decade of the nineteenth century and through to the Menzies' era. However, the 1960s saw great social change and since then, the arrival of more diverse cultures and religions on our shores. The times of the Billy Graham evangelistic programs in 1959 and 1969 also marked the decades of the most successful Adventist evangelistic activity. However, the downward trend in regular church attendance in Australia was already evident.³

It was hoped that church growth principles, introduced to Australia in the 1970s and influencing Adventism by the late 1980s, would reverse these trends by making the church more appealing. However, there is no evidence that seeker-sensitive and purpose-driven approaches have reversed the decline or aging of the church – although the essence of church has been redefined for

¹ Institutionalism is not the same as owning, operating or having institutions.
² While differences exist with some precise definitions its commitment to inspiration, the gospel, salvation by faith and mission certainly qualifies the Seventh-day Adventist Church as evangelical.
³ Unless otherwise indicated statistics in this introduction are extrapolated from ABS, Cultural Diversity, Table 14.39: June 2010. A monthly attendance of 44% in 1950 dropped to 17% in 2007 – and is only that due to the migration of Catholic and Orthodox affiliates. By the mid-1970s there were clear shifts in the religious affiliation of Australians – and by the 2006 census only 63.9% identified themselves as Christian. It is also important to note that 'The shape of Australia’s religious profile is primarily a function of migration history and only secondarily a function of conversion or changing religious identification.' (Bouma 1997: 1)
many. By the early 2000s some mission networks, and even denominational observers, were saying church growth and established church models were both flawed and ineffective; that entirely fresh expressions of church were needed to reach Australian society. (Frost and Hirsch 2003: ix)

Denominational leaders are painfully aware of the evangelistic ineffectiveness of the Australian church and what Alan Hirsch calls ‘a massive long-trended decline.’ (Hirsch 2006: 16) While the population grew by 1,086,100 between 2001 and 2006, the number of Australians affiliated to Christian denominations declined by 78,800. The fastest growing category of ‘religious identification’ in Australia is ‘no religion.’4 In the 2006 census 18.7% of Australians chose not to identify with any religion. That is, 3,706,600 people! And, among Generation Y 48% do not identify with any religion. (Mason, Singleton and Webber 2007: 78, 138)5

In the past we spoke of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a movement. It can still be considered as such in parts of Africa, India and China – but this descriptor is hardly valid in Australia. In 2009 the Adventist church in Australia grew by 837 people (less than 2 for every local Adventist church) – or a growth of 1.55% over the numbers in 2008.6

This can only be considered growth if compared to the losses of some other denominations.7 And with 55,010 (2009) members in Australia, Sabbath School

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4 When this category was introduced in 1971 there was more than an eight-fold increase in the proportion of Australians stating they had no religion. This increase may also reflect some who had not adequately stated their religion previously, for the category ‘Not stated/inadequately described’ declined from 10.3% in 1966 to 6.2% in 1971. See ABS, Cultural Diversity, Table 14.38: June 2010.

5 The age profile of affiliates further highlights the problem for churches. In 2006, 80% of persons aged 65 years and over identified themselves as Christian, compared with 55% of 18-24 year olds. (ABS June 2007) The average age of the church attendee is 53 years. (Powell 2009: 3)

6 These figures are from the SPD Statistical Report 2009 – the latest available. This growth represents one-half a person per employee with a minister or missionary credential or licence in Australia. In Papua New Guinea where many think growth is happening, the Adventist church grew by 9,082 members or 3.78% in 2009 – hardly a ‘movement’!

7 Losses suffered by the Salvation Army (-10.1%) and Churches of Christ (-10.6%) represented 13,700 members leaving; and the increase of 2.4% by Baptists meant an increase of 7,500. The seemingly healthy 12.9% growth for
membership was only 28,551 (or 51.9% of church membership) – and this includes all un-baptized children, teens, youth and visitors that the membership figures don't record!

All of this suggests that fresh expressions of church are needed for the future of Australian evangelicalism generally and Adventism in particular. But caution is needed. Pragmatism is hardly the best basis for welcoming such expressions.

To explore the question ‘Can fresh expressions be Adventist?’ I will consider the inherent challenges to any synergy between Adventist identity and fresh expressions by exploring two propositions: (1) Fresh expressions don’t like being defined by doctrine – but they are; and (2) Adventism is not only defined by beliefs – but by expectations! These highlight the critical issue: What is church? On the basis of these considerations a way forward will be explored in a concluding section entitled Adventist Fresh Expressions.

1.1 Fresh expressions don’t like being defined by doctrine – but they are!

Most involved in cultivating fresh expressions of church shy away from being defined by doctrinal statements. They have a message, yes, but there are no creeds or statements of agreed fundamentals. However, doctrinal or theological frames and models are foundational to their thinking. The essentials are Christology, the trinity, mission and ecclesiology –

1. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God. He died and rose for us, and is present by his Holy Spirit. He is coming – and we are preparing people to meet him!
2. The Trinity is a relational community – and through the sacrifice of himself God has reconciled us to himself and the fellowship of his Trinitarian community.

Pentecostals represented an actual increase of only 25,100, and the 9.3% for those called ‘other Christians’ signaled 46,400 more affiliates.
3. Mission is the heart of God (missio Dei). It is defined by his crucifixion – the ultimate declaration of God’s character, love and sacrifice for the salvation of humanity.

4. Church is a gathering of disciples. It takes different forms in various settings, but it cannot exist in a locality until there are disciples gathering who are actively making other disciples. (Matt 16:13-28; 18:15-20)

The essential questions are: What is mission and what is church? A very high view of Scripture is held. It is the inspired Word of God – the basis of experiencing God and the text for understanding God’s covenant, the gospel, discipleship, the shape of church and movements. The book of Acts, the Gospels and the Epistles are studied intently to understand church and church movements.

Covenant and kingdom theology also attract considerable attention. At the 2006 Forge Australia Conference in Melbourne one workshop surveyed the salvation story from the time of creation – the story of the fall, the promise of a Saviour prefigured in sacrifices, the covenants, the journey of Israel, the sanctuary symbolism, the coming of the Messiah, the destruction of Jerusalem, the ‘fall’ of the church, restoration of biblical truth, the return of Jesus; right through to paradise restored. For some Adventists present it seemed déjà vu! But, while it was presented as an amazing fresh discovery – it was not seen as a modernist mega-story. It was a discovery of meta-stories of God’s kingdom come ‘on earth as it is in haven.’ (Matt 6:10) In this context the social-gospel is considered a priority along with personal salvation.

Pre-Constantine, post-Constantine, Christendom and post-Christendom forms of church are regular discussion points at forums where fresh expressions of church and movements are fostered. It is generally felt that the word church has gotten such a bad reputation that alternatives must be found! Cruciform ecclesiology is gaining attention. That is, if God in his very being is mutually subordinate – or cruciform within his Triune self, then ‘his body’ the church will display the same attitude. (Phil 2:1-11) The implications of such for ecclesiology

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8 Within Adventism this survey has been called the great controversy theme.
are vast – as also are those flowing from the acceptance of the biblical teaching of ‘every believer a minister’ for ministry, ordination and church governance.

My intention here is to illustrate that fresh expressions of church are indeed defined by doctrinal and theological frames – and to highlight some of those that are foundational. But there are two important observations to make concerning these frames of missional fresh expressions of church:

**First, the focus is upon life and mission, not truth in doctrinal statements!** This is an environment of exploration and fresh discovery. The Bible is being read – books at a time! In this context, with the latest sociological, linguistic, textual, historical and archaeological tools readily available, groups are rediscovering the essence of mission, discipleship and church. If Adventism is part of the conversation – trusted in the social streams in which fresh expression of church are being planted, it can play a role in contributing to the Biblical understandings of this movement!

There are however two provisos, both difficult for denominational Christians to understand: (1) doctrinal statements or creeds do not influence those cultivating fresh expressions – they are influenced by conversations in trusted social relationships; and (2) those cultivating fresh expressions of church will not surrender their biblical convictions for the expediency of denominational support or connections.

**Second, Adventist themes are welcome in this stream!** This can be illustrated with a distinctive doctrine like Sabbath. At a recent summit for evangelical leaders of new communities, time was spent discussing the seventh-day Sabbath as a sanctuary in time; a weekly reminder that Jesus Christ has done everything necessary for salvation – that, no works we do can save! With its rich heritage in the creation stories, a symbol of God’s grace to Israel, a flashpoint between Jesus’ claims to divinity and his critics, Sabbath-keeping was a non-controversial part of early church life. When they met, they met on that day.

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9 Genesis 1:1-2:3  
10 Ezekiel 20:1-20  
11 John 5:1-47; 9:1-41  
12 Acts 15:19-21  
13 For example: Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2
Not only is Sabbath clearly part of pre-Constantine and pre-Christendom church, the Sabbath makes sense and resonates with the hearts of some involved in fresh expressions. It appeals for it comes from the hand of God, it runs counter to culture and society, it speaks of status-reversal and a cruciform relational ecclesiology. It is no more works for salvation than being baptized into Christ or sharing the Lord’s Supper. Well-known scholars contributing much to fresh expressions refer to Sabbath. Robert Banks, in *Going to Church in the First Century*, notes the invitation for friends to the home of Aquila and Prisca ‘every seventh day for a meal.’ (Banks 1980: 7) Ray Anderson (Anderson 2006: 121-122) and Jürgen Moltmann (Moltmann 1993: 267-272) explore the ecclesiological implications of Sabbath. It represents the freedom of a centered-set faith and celebration around the Creator-Redeemer. However, when Sabbath becomes a mark of exclusivity, representing the only ones saved – rather than a mark of grace; those cultivating fresh expressions of church balk.

It is a surprise to many to learn that where fresh expressions of church and movements are being cultivated the discussions and initiatives are so clearly defined by doctrinal and theological frames. But Adventists are little known in these circles and the Adventist church not recognized as a denomination interested in missional church planting in Australia;\(^\text{14}\) consequently little attention is given to either the message or mission of Adventism. Most Adventists are entirely unaware that their insights are welcome – not as statements of doctrine, but as expressions of God’s heart and mission.

So, can fresh expressions of church be Adventist?

1.2 Adventism is not only defined by beliefs – but by expectations!

Seventh-day Adventism is a very complex faith system. Just as it is simplistic to think that fresh expressions are new forms and styles without theological frames, so it is naïve to think that mission and message define Adventism. For many years I have been planting new Adventist churches – and in

\(^\text{14}\) Apart from Western Australia where the vision is for Adventism to once again be a movement, there is general resistance, towards church planting. Anecdotal evidence suggests most involved in missional church planting movements have never met Seventh-day Adventists.
both my preaching (in hundreds of evangelistic campaigns) and equipping (in hundreds of church planting training events) I have explored and emphasized the message and mission of Adventism as the basis for Adventist identity. However, it has been a serious error of judgment to not pay much greater attention to how Adventism is today defined perhaps more by its expectations, symbols and institutionalism than by any set of fundamental beliefs. It is this that makes the relationship of Adventism with fresh expressions very complex, and these raise the major point of divide over the question: What is church?

I grew up in the Adventist church; was mentored by Pastors Clive Barritt, Bill Otto and Ray Kent; and taught Adventist doctrine and mission at college level. My activism for the message and mission of Adventism led to the preaching of thousands of evangelistic messages and the planting of dozens of Adventist churches. But perhaps in all of this I have not wanted to acknowledge a growing awareness that Adventism today may be more about its expectations – symbols, institutionalism and structures – than about its message or mission!

For 40 years I have been saying Adventists find identity in –

- Relationship with Jesus Christ
- Fellowship and empowerment by the Spirit of Elijah
- Being ‘streams of living water’ in local communities (John 7:37-39)
- Elijah’s message contextualized for these times (Rev 12-14)
- Being faithful to biblical themes – salvation, human destiny, Sabbath, etc
- Being a prophetic voice – proactively confronting societal injustices
- Being a church planting movement (rather than a maintenance institution)

For me Adventism has been about a mission to proactively share ‘the everlasting gospel’ (Rev 14:6-12), preparing the world for ‘the harvest’ (Rev 14:14-20). For me it has been about being a movement – the Adventist movement. And, that does not happen through maintenance. Nor does it happen through the Mission Station Approach to evangelism – where we satisfy ourselves that while we are not leading many to Jesus Christ we provide education, health, aid, communication and media systems, and employment for so many believers. Maintaining the Mission Station Approach costs millions but, more than that, it
redefines identity. Ineffectiveness in evangelism as well as ambivalence towards the message or mission shifts the focus of identity to the systems and structures – with their internal expectations, symbols and institutionalism. The ‘mission station’ becomes the source of identity instead of God!

This proposition can be explored, noting illustrations of particular relevance to missional fresh expressions –

**First, expectations define church for Adventism.** It is an expectation that each local church will be led by an ordained and remunerated pastor appointed by the Conference. This expectation defines a distinct clergy-laity divide and hierarchy within Adventism. While pastors today lead established churches – and interns give evidence of their calling by their preaching ability, Bible studies and evangelistic work within established local churches (SPD Internship 2007: 4); this was not how Adventism began. In the first decades a person demonstrated calling to be a pastor by first planting new churches, equipping members to lead those churches, and then moving on to plant again. (Burrill 1999: 47-79) The monthly activity reports that pastors as employees still submit to their Conference administrators also underscore the expectation that pastors will be aligned to local churches and do the ministry rather than equip believers.\(^{15}\)

These centralized systems define Adventism today. They are perceived as necessary to ensure uniform doctrinal belief, proper order and control. But these expectations also raise questions as to whether the priesthood of all believers is honored (Mustard 2008: 18) and compete with Raoul Dederen assertion that, ‘The local visible *ekklēsia* is the whole church expressed locally in a particular time and space.’ (Dederen 2000: 542)\(^{16}\)

This is a flash point between fresh expressions and Adventist identity. Those starting fresh initiative to reach their friends with the gospel simply do

\(^{15}\) The activity reports used in Australia focus upon numbers of visits, Bible studies, school appointments, preparation hours, sermons preached and groups conducted. There is only one question about the ministry activities of members – that of how many small groups there are in a local church.

\(^{16}\) ‘The decisive ecclesiological passages in the undisputed Pauline Letters speak for the priority of the individual congregation over the whole worldwide church.’ (Gehring 2004: 296)
not think of seeking approval from their pastor or a Conference. They talk with friends (Adventist and others – including Muslims, Buddhists, gays and agnostics), absorb their Bible, attend missional summits (FORGE, Über, Oikos or others); read Robert Banks, Mark Strom, Paul Stevens, Frank Viola, Roger Gehring, Wolfgang Simpson, Tony and Felicity Dale, David Bosch, Neil Cole, Kevin Giles, Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, Steve Addison, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, Jürgen Moltmann, Michael Gorman, Stuart Murray, Mark Noll, etc;17 gather ideas online – and start. When pastors and Conference officers first learn of this, the response can be, ‘No one asked for permission to do this. This is not Adventist!’ In some cases, without any dialogue with participants, decisions will be made that such initiatives must be stopped – for they threaten the attendance, membership and tithe contribution of existing churches; the key Conference indicators of church health and a pastor’s effectiveness. For a modernist system such ‘ splits’ – as they are often labeled, represent an increased workload and more churches to ‘look after’! But those involved neither want nor expect ‘to be looked after’ – and word that church committees or officials oppose them confirms their negativity towards Christendom.

Then, the symbols of Adventism act as boundary markers for church. Boundary markers define who is in and who is out, what is pure and what is polluted. (Neyrey 1990: 54-55) Anthropologist Paul Hiebert used mathematical theory to identify the variables and boundaries essential to defining categories, exploring what that means for church. (Hiebert 1994: 110-133) Bruce Bauer observes that Adventism is a bounded-set. (Bauer 2007: 2)

Boundary symbols or terms categorize people. They form an internal language that real Adventists understand – and that constitute identity. For example –

- **Camp meetings** for annual regional conventions.
- **Workers** for pastors.
- **Sessions** for the general business meetings of the church.
- **28 fundamentals** for beliefs voted by the General Conference in Session.18

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17 See the Bibliography for books by these authors.
18 Most Adventists would not be able to list these beliefs, but whatever they are they know they are their church’s beliefs!
• **Sabbath School Lessons** for groups that gather on Saturday mornings to discuss the teachings of a worldwide church curriculum.

• **President** for the leading church officials at each level. This title, coupled with only male pastors being ordained,\(^\text{19}\) represents male headship and clearly defines Adventist ecclesiology and identity.\(^\text{20}\)

Apocalyptic ‘motifs and figures of speech’ (Mustard 2008: 18) are also used to categorize and identify. These include –

• **The remnant church**: While Hans LaRondelle argues that this term should not be seen in an exclusive way (LaRondelle 2000: 888), its use and interpretation underscore exclusivity.

• **The message** – a term used to refer to all the Adventist church represents.

• **The three angels’ messages** – referring specifically to the messages of Revelation 14:6-12, but also used to refer to the Adventist church generally.

While most symbols are triumphal, the church of Laodicea is a self-deprecating motif highlighting apathy in the church.\(^\text{21}\) Others are stark as boundary markers – insiders, outsiders, backsliders and non-Adventists. And there are also the unwritten beliefs that define Adventism, such as: it is not Adventist to pray enthusiastically, to show emotion in singing, to raise hands in worship, to speak or pray in tongues! Those who cross the boundaries will be quickly informed that they are not Adventists.

Seventh-day Sabbath keeping is one of the most visible boundary symbols of Adventism.\(^\text{22}\) For Adventists, Saturday represents the authority of Scripture and a commitment to a creation-redemption worldview. It is a weekly reminder of Christ’s work as Creator-Redeemer, with both creation and redemption completed

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\(^{19}\) The North American Division recently voted that their leaders of Conferences and Unions can be female.

\(^{20}\) Mustard postulates that if Adventism had started in another country, another term than president would have been chosen. (Mustard 2008: 11)

\(^{21}\) James and Ellen White first used this motif in 1856, to draw attention to the spiritually lukewarm condition of Sabbatarian Adventists. (Mustard 2008: 18)

\(^{22}\) Others are abstaining from drinking alcohol, tea or coffee; and eating only ‘clean’ meats.
on a sixth day and followed by his rest. (Genesis 1:1-2:3; Luke 23:44-56) The Sabbath is so significant it could represent an Adventist ecclesiology – Trinitarian, Christological and eschatological.

However, the weakness of Sabbath as a symbol of Adventism is found in human pride and works. It can become a mark of being different and right rather than a mark of grace. It can come to represent who is in and who is out rather than a relationship to be experienced and enjoyed – another institutionalized boundary marker that categorizes people. The same is true of the health message – and what is called, ‘Adventist lifestyle’.

Finally, church structure defines the mission and message of Adventism. Church structure has become integral to its message. (Mustard 2008:17) The proverb, ‘what you do speaks louder than what you say’ is true of church. When a pragmatically chosen structure is perceived as divinely ordained, that structure represent’s kingdom values. When it involves ‘the body of Christ’, hierarchical institutionalism becomes a theological statement – a visible public statement about the nature and character of God. The stakes are very high.

Adventism is not just a denomination with a mission and message – it has become an institution that gains its identity from its institutionalism. Institutional uniformity is highly valued, with worldwide structures and forms clearly defining who are Adventists and who are not! If expectations are not met, if the symbols and boundary markers are not respected, and if the defined structures are not honored – it is not Adventist. This is further exacerbated by a lack of policies giving church plants or fresh expressions any place within official structures.

It is almost impossible for those involved in missional fresh expressions and dedicated to movements to understand the complex hierarchical systems of Adventism. And, for church officials, it is frustrating to find that people do not understand the system (they are certainly outsiders!) – or worse, do not care about the system (they must be backsliders or non-Adventists!).

23 The church company classification is not a satisfactory categorization. Companies are gatherings of isolated believers without adequate leadership. The Conference Executive Committee is their Board and the Conference president their pastor. Most fresh expressions of church – and almost all church plants, are far beyond these definitions in leadership maturity and mission by the time many become aware of their presence!
1.3  Understanding the Divergence – ‘What is Church?’

The big question is: 'What is church?' Adventism’s development as a denomination was pragmatic – and consistent with the models observed for the development from sect, to church, to denomination. When buying property our pioneers quickly found the rationale for a centralized system of control and governance, a possibility totally inconceivable and previously condemned as unbiblical. Ordination of a clergy-class accompanied this development. These pragmatic first-steps have then shaped our limited excursions into ecclesiology.

On the other hand those cultivating fresh expressions of church give focused attention to questions such as: What is church? When can we say a church has been planted? How did Jesus use the term – and why did he say almost nothing about church? What was church to Paul? Was church based upon the synagogue model – or the oikos? In what way was church counter-cultural? How is church to represent God? Does church have a mission – or is it the mission agency for God’s kingdom?

It is not simply a modernist-postmodernist divide. Reinder Bruinsma’s depiction of this was most helpful, and critical for a modernist church with modernist administrators. But most of the next generations are postmodern. They read the New Testament through postmodern eyes. For them it is not even ‘what is church?’ for the word ‘church’ has been so corrupted. While for Adventism ‘church’ is defined by its expectations, symbols and structures; fresh expressions may be defined by their discomfort with the word ‘church’ – sensing that whatever it is, it may be described as conversation, service, justice, relationships, acceptance, food, status reversal, missional; but definitely not structures and hierarchies.

In considering a way forward, it is important to survey some key areas of divergence over this question, ‘What is church?’ –

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1. **Bounded-set versus centered-set church!** Adventism is a bounded-set system; whereas those fostering fresh expressions find New Testament faith and communities were centered set. In bounded-set systems individuals and churches are seen as in or out by their relationship to the boundary expectations, symbols and regulations (Figure 1); while in centered-set systems, a person or church plant is in or out on the basis of their relationship with Jesus Christ – his message and mission. (Figure 2)

**Figure 1.** Bounded-set church systems are defined by institutional expectations

![Figure 1]

**Figure 2.** Centered-set church is defined in relation to the crucified Christ

![Figure 2]

2. **Hierarchical versus cruciform church!** Being so tightly structured and hierarchical (not to mention male dominated), one must ask, ‘What type of God is portrayed by Adventist structures and systems?’ Australian Anglican theologian
Kevin Giles vigorously argues that Sydney Anglicanism’s redefinition of the Trinity as hierarchical – with the Son subordinate; reflects a recent aberration within evangelicalism to support a male dominated hierarchical ecclesiology. Male headship of home and church! On the other hand fresh expressions of church focus upon the implications for relational church and flat, conversational models of leadership reflective of the mutual subordination of the Triune community – the cruciform nature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Figure 3 depicts the cruciform nature of God in Jesus – and his body, the church.

**Figure 3.** The cruciform life of God is the frame for a cruciform church

3. **Ecclesial decisions versus Holy Spirit Praxis!** Adventism is a hierarchical committee based system. Decisions are passed ‘down the line’ – to be put into action, to accomplish important initiatives; while in movements the will and activity of the Holy Spirit reshapes the structures and systems.

*Holy Spirit Praxis* is a model, based on the story of God’s activity in the home of Cornelius – and repeated three times in Acts (chapters 10, 11 and 15); in which

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25 Reflected in the writings of Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Gorman, and Harris. See the Bibliography.
an obedient response to the missionary activity of the Holy Spirit redefines the movement of Christian faith. (See Figure 4)

**Figure 4.** A model of *Holy Spirit Praxis* developed from Acts 10, 11 and 15

This is closely related to another contrast –

4. **Contextualization versus missio Dei.** Missiologists have affirmed the need to contextualize – and debated over acceptable models of contextualization. Within the last two years Adventism has taken a defining position in its *Roadmap* document, and withdrawn support for some innovative insider movements. But perhaps Daniel Shaw’s recent article ‘Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first-Century Model for Enabling Mission’ (*International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Oct 2010) will prove to be a watershed. It is certainly stirring discussions – including among Adventists.

Shaw moves the discussion into new realms that resonate with fresh expressions. He shifts the focus from the missionary to God – who has already communicated to the people before we arrive. He places the spotlight on God (not on us as the missionary) who was ‘there and here’ first.

Mission flows from the heart of God. He is the missionary. Because He was ‘there and here’ there is a common denominator when we meet people to share faith, and that is: God’s presence with both the missionary and the receptor. Even
though God’s missionary presence may look different in both, he is the missionary. This model moves from a purely ‘communicator / passive receptor’ to one of dynamic mutual searching and challenge. There is mutual learning and growth through the exchange of indigenous with inherited theologies – African and Asian with European and American, in the context of globalization and the migration of southern Christians to the global north. Initial concerns over syncretism within southern theologies will quickly be leveled to reasonable and biblical discussion by the recognition that modernist and institutional forms of church are highly syncretistic. In this frame, Gabriela Phillips wrote recently, ‘God communicates, we ALL receive!’

There are other related contrasts that could be explored in more depth –

5. **Complex and highly structured versus simple and organic church!** Adventism is a complex institutionalized system – difficult to negotiate or change. Fresh expressions seek simple, reproducible forms. Figure 5 represents this contrast. One may seem to be more strategic and the other more spontaneous – but simplicity and reproducibility is the strategy of movements.

**Figure 5.** Structured versus organic church

![Structured vs Organic Church Diagram]

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structured</th>
<th>Organic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(more strategic)</td>
<td>(more spontaneous)</td>
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<tr>
<td>appears strong</td>
<td>appears weak</td>
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<td>determined</td>
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<tr>
<td>strong programs</td>
<td>strong networks</td>
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<td>‘come to us’</td>
<td>‘we’ll come to you’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional loyalty</td>
<td>Missional heart</td>
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<tr>
<td>More likely to be complex</td>
<td>More likely to be simple</td>
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<td>(bounded-set)</td>
<td>(centered-set)</td>
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When Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey wrote *Church Next* in 2001 they identified nine transitions that were needed as the church entered the twenty-first century.

26 Gabriela Philips email (13 Jan, 2011). See also Jeremiah 31:33-34.
Two they identified were – (1) the needed transition from bureaucratic hierarchies to apostolic networks, and (2) a shift from generic congregations to incarnational communities. Fresh expressions have made this move; Adventism finds it difficult to initiate the conversation. Even that which is simple is made complex – for example, Milton Adam’s *Simple Church* is being surrounded with complex policies to ensure it is Adventist!

6. **Clergy-lay versus ‘every believer a minister’!** Magisterial protestant churches were well aware of the priesthood of all believers, but it seems neither Luther nor Calvin knew how to affirm this provision of the gospel. Like early Adventism, they were products of their time – and once systems reflecting a Greco-Roman cosmology and Christendom models had been accepted it was difficult to embrace the ordination of all believers and an all-encompassing non-hierarchical ministry.

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**Figure 6.** Greco-Roman cosmology in contrast to ‘the priesthood of all believers’

- **Greek-Roman cosmos**
  - One supreme
  - Many deities
  - Emperor – savior & lord
  - *kleros* = ministers / politicians / philosophers
  - Clergy … ‘ones in the know’
  - *laos* = common people / slaves / ignorant
  - Laity … ‘ignorant ones’

- **Paul’s communities**
  - All believers are *diakonos* (not kleros)
  - All know Jesus (ministers)
  - All believers are *laos*
  - All are fools for Jesus (laity)

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Figure 6 depicts the contrast between Greco-Roman cosmology and ‘the priesthood of all believers’ established by Jesus and articulated by Paul. For fresh expressions and church planters, this is foundational. It is sometimes said, five
hundred years ago God gave the Bible back to the people and now he is returning the church to his people!

7. **The Mission Station Approach versus Relational Streams Approach.** The Mission Station Approach (Figure 7) – perceived to be a modernist, isolationist nineteenth century model of mission that extracts people from their relationships, thus weakening the effectiveness of evangelism; is contrasted with the Relational Streams Approach. (Figure 8)

**Figure 7.** The Mission Station Approach – preferred by Christendom churches

![The Mission Station Approach](image)

Donald McGavran was sure this approach was not working. (McGavran 1955) And, the practitioners and proponents of fresh expressions are convinced of the same. They find their frame in what I call the Relational Streams Approach – affirmed in the stories of the Gospels and Acts.

**Figure 8.** The Relational Streams Approach – preferred by fresh expressions
The relational streams in every society is where life is lived, support is found, families are formed and decisions are made. This is where Christian faith also streams – and multiplies. Jesus identified the ‘person of peace’ (pp) (Luke 10:5) as key in each social stream – in each new town (Luke 10:1), *ethne* (Matt 28:19) or *oikos* (Acts 16:15, 31). New believers from the same social stream, but not necessarily of the same rank or background or ethnicity, gather around this person. This is church. The ‘bridges of God’ are those with relationships into un-entered streams. This frame is foundational to fresh expressions today.

These contrasts identify foundational issues, for the method is the message. In the light of this divergence, can fresh expressions of church and movements be Adventist? Is there a way forward – that will honor God and maintain unity?

1.4 **Adventist Fresh Expressions – a way forward!**

First, Adventism needs a biblical ecclesiology – one not simply shaped by inherited institutionalism. Reinder Bruinsma’s *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of Church* (2009) has provided a much needed serious attempt at an integrated ecclesiology – with stand out chapters on the theology of church, a
historic survey of church, the marks of church, unity, the remnant concept, and
dialogue with other believers. It doesn’t pursue the postmodern interest in
ecclesiological implications of social Trinity to the extent that I would like to see,
but it is a refreshing must-read for moving forward.

Second, not all needs to be deconstructed – but the disinherited, those
neither recognized nor affirmed by the system (within Adventism, the youth and
women) will always agitate to find more biblical models. Richard Niebuhr
attributes all Christian movements to the vision and activity of the disinherited.
(Niebuhr 1929: 26)27 Timothy Tennent argues, they initiate the transitions that
have given new life to failing church systems. (Tennent 2007: 2) Agitation and
fresh expressions need to be welcomed by institutional systems, for they provide
the next generation of church. (It would be interesting to do a sociological study to
ascertain whether the Adventist pioneers – young and including a charismatic
teenage girl,28 were motivated by biblical and apocalyptic truths or by their sense
disinheritance from the established revivalist movements of the time!)

But third, Adventism should not trade any biblical convictions concerning its
message or mission to meet the expectations of fresh generations of church. Those
fostering fresh expressions are not attracted by compromise. However, nor should
Adventism expect all fresh expressions to necessarily come on board – nor
condemn them, although this may be a vain hope!

Then, in spite of the complexity of twenty-first century Adventism and the
hesitancy to foster anything new, there are places where fresh expressions of the
church have been affirmed as Adventist. In some places church planting has been
tolerated or even approved – as long as the plants are clones of existing models.
And there are fresh expressions that operate outside or in a tenuous relationship
with the system. However, in some regions fresh expressions have been
proactively fostered – some of the best examples being the Ohio Conference, the
Netherlands Union Conference, the South France Federation, and the Western
Australian Conference. In these Conferences and Unions the leaders have
proactively provided environments that affirm and defend fresh expressions

27 H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York,
    Meridian Books, 1929), ch. 2 is entitled ‘The Churches of the Disinherited.’
28 Ellen Gould (Harmon) White was a teenager, with most other Adventist pioneers.
initiated. Affirmation, encouragement, trust and local adaptations of policy have been rewarded with fresh expressions of church that have cultivated a movement mentality within those fields – with these news forms being welcomed into the Adventist ‘sisterhood’ of church.

From this we have learnt that it is important – as a fifth point, to hold the areas of divergence in constructive tension. Fresh expressions offer to the established and inherited church opportunities for growth, the multiplication of the next generation of churches, low-risk and low-cost models of church. They provide one of the best opportunities to hand on faith to our young people. This is one of the main reasons why I have been planting churches for 39 years! They also provide a frame for the other most disinherit group within Adventism – women. Hierarchical male dominated structures are no small hindrance to the acceptance of the gospel in today’s egalitarian world in which women and men expect shared relationships and decision making – particularly in the light of the freedom of the gospel, the biblical affirmation of woman, and the priesthood of all believers.29

It is felt that the organizational structure of Adventism facilitates an international mission. And this is true to some extent. However, it is also time to assess inherent weaknesses – in leadership development, handing on faith to next generations, and representing the nature of God. Perhaps it would be well for Adventism to explore more openly its desired ecclesiology and then intentionally restructure and review policies to honor a high view of the local church, the headship of Christ and every-believer-a-minister. While ‘we can’t go back and simply imitate what the earliest Christians did,’ (Banks 1980: preface) an appropriation of the essential character of what church was to them may appeal to those who have given up on church – or those searching but alienated by modernist, enlightenment forms. A line of advance for Adventists may be found in the diversity and ‘spirit of the Primitive Church.’ (Loosley 1935: foreword) That is a motif that awakens the hearts of established Adventists – as well as those spiritual revolutionaries seeking to be part of movements of fresh expressions.

Finally, a story! In early 2009 I was in Western Australia for their annual Church Planting Summit. The night I arrived in Perth I stayed in a pretty average but entirely acceptable motel, not far from the Conference office. Early in the morning I went for breakfast – a basic, serve yourself arrangement: Weetbix, milk, bread for toast – with marmalade jam, tea or coffee – again, make your own.

There was one other person there, an old fellow. We greeted each other, and I suggested we eat together. I asked where he came from. ‘Out in the country,’ was his reply. I persisted, ‘But from where?’ He made it clear that a city person from ‘the eastern states’ would never have heard of the place! ‘Try me’ I said. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘Out near Narrogin – little places!’ He named the sidings and areas. ‘Did you know the Borgas and Lang families in the past?’ I asked. Well that got his attention. Some had farmed as his neighbors – when we were kids in the area 55 years ago.

Then this 96 year old farmer, who had brought his wife to the city for medical treatment that day – told me in brief the story of his life!

‘When I was in my mid fifties,’ he told me. ‘It was time to hand on the farm to the boys. They were young. They had the energy – and the vision. I had shared all I knew.’

‘But’, he continued, ‘It was pretty hard. I mean – they did things so differently. They would talk to me – but I learnt it was best not to say too much, not to give too much advice, even when they asked for it! Bloody fools they were, they even sold much of the farm! I mean they looked after me well – always. But can you imagine! They sold off a lot of what I had built up. Had to do it different!’

I paused – waiting in silence, for I sensed there was another line or two after he had finished his coffee!

‘Pretty smart though – those boys. They did it so different. They sold the farm, bought better properties – more property, better harvests. I could never have done what they do! It is really something!’

And I remembered the words of Jesus, ‘The farmer went forth …’ I sensed it was perhaps a prophetic moment. It is time to hand on the farm. The next generations will cultivate fresh expressions of church! They might sell-off what we have built up! But, that ultimately may be what the Father desires for what we are currently doing is not really working in Australia!
Bibliography


