
African Adventism's Quest for Self-reliance

by Zebron M. Ncube

In this paper I present a broad picture of what I consider to be crucial in African Adventism today. It is only as Adventists in Africa focus on the broad issues that they are able to deal with the specific and localized challenges. The African Adventist's relationship to the church must be seen within the framework of the international community of Adventism.

This paper is not designed to discredit the great work the Lord has achieved in Africa through the combined effort of the missionaries and us, the people in Africa. It is, however, a critical response to a general observation that Christians in Africa do not have the means and the committed personnel to make their presence felt in the leadership structure of the world church. Despite the provocative and critical aspects of this paper, my hope is that the reader will focus on the spirit behind the inadequate human language.

Roy Branson, from the Kennedy Institute of Bioethics, addressed the Caribbean and Pan-African clubs at Andrews University in 1986. In two meetings he spoke concerning the "church of the south" versus the "church of the north." His thesis was that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Third World countries ("church of the south") was growing faster in membership than the church in North America, Europe, and other first world countries ("church of the north").

Branson intimated that there seemed to be a considerable degree of fear within the membership of the north that power and leadership of the

world church would soon shift to the Third World. He went further to explain that the high-powered national delegations to the past two General Conference Sessions (Dallas, 1980, and New Orleans, 1985) which came from Third World churches seemed to have created concerns and fears among the churches from the north. The churches from the north were now asking four genuine questions in the event of the Third World churches assuming the leadership of the General Conference:

1.) Will the church of the south tolerate dissent, or will it continue to manifest its traditional dogmatism and authoritarian style of leadership?

2.) Will the church of the south tolerate theology as a discipline in view of the fact that presently it is preoccupied with building churches and clinics and repairing schools?

3.) Will the church of the south not abuse the role of laity by maintaining a hierarchical power through organizational structures?

4.) Will the church of the south financially carry the institutional structures in North America?¹

If Branson's observations are substantial, then we are faced with a situation worth looking into very closely. As a third worlder, I have felt that the churches of the north are basically assessing the self-concept of the churches of the south. They are asking the churches of the south to define themselves in terms of experience, self-awareness, and sense of destiny. The churches of the north are also attempting to feel the pulse of the churches of the south. It would appear that the Adventist Church is indeed at the crossroads of time. Which way will it go, and how will it maintain the balance of power?

It is expected that the church in every region of

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the world will define and perceive the nature of its self-concept in relation to local and global commitments and concerns. Christians of Africa have not been exempt from this requirement. They are being asked by Christians of the West to articulate the purpose of their existence and their sense of destiny. Christians of Africa have the same expectations of those in the West. We all want to know how to relate to one another in view of the mission of the church.

Psychology has contributed immensely to our understanding of the human developmental proc-

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esses. We remain baffled by the complexity of the human creature. Yet we know just enough to appreciate the wisdom of God in designing humanity the way he did. From the school of developmental psychology we are indebted to Erik Erikson who built his stage theory by emphasizing the role of society in the structure of personality.²

Erikson became convinced that if children were to develop a meaningful sense of autonomy, it was necessary for the child to experience over and over again that he was a person allowed to make choices and learn the boundaries of self-determination.³ The child must be given an atmosphere of freedom in order to develop a sense of selfhood. At the same time, the child should realize that freedom has limits.

According to Erikson, every person goes through eight stages of development and each stage is a crisis that must be resolved. The resolution of that crisis is essential for subsequent growth and personality.⁴ For example, if a child develops trust in his mother, he lets her out of his sight with the certainty that she will return. Similarly, this is the way the child measures other

people and also determines whom to trust or mistrust.

Having thus acquired a sense of trust, the child demonstrates reliance and hope as virtues in his life. The child is ready to develop the skill of autonomy, which must yield the crop of a healthy self-concept and self-control. If the conflict at this stage is not positively resolved, the child manifests a low self-concept. These stages build on one another like a chain, allowing the child to achieve reliance, initiative, skills, role in society, commitment, concern for the world, and composure.

With this construction I suggest that what happens to us in our developmental stages naturally reflects in the character of the church we are members of. There is a correlational development between the life of the individual and that of the church. The church consists of people from all walks of life—that is, from all socio-cultural backgrounds and emotional experiences. They all bring their history into the church. This shows up in the way they view themselves and the world.

I suggest that the self-concept of the Adventist Church in Africa today reflects, to a great extent, the nature of its upbringing. Whether Adventism in Africa has the virtues of hope, direction, purpose in life, competence, devotion, and care depends on how the stage conflicts were resolved in the history of its development. The way the children in Sabbath schools, in educational institutions, and in Christian homes were nurtured, reflects in the present character of the church.

Those who are seriously concerned about whether or not the church of the south will be able to carry the burden of world church leadership must first of all ask themselves what kind of foundation was laid at the beginning when the church was born in each area of the mission field. We reap what we sow.

The gospel of Jesus Christ picks us up from where we are, transforms us, and makes us realize anew our worth. However, it is regrettable that one finds it difficult to overlook those experiences in African history that touch our sensitive nerves. It is not possible to clearly understand the attitude, behavior, struggles, and perceptions of African Christians while ignoring their history. The church has shaped human history. Similarly,

history has shaped the church.

An investigation into African exposure to the global mission of the Adventist Church from the 1901 to the 1985 General Conference sessions shows that Christians from Africa were excluded from participating in high levels of decision-making structures of the church. The Adventist message had already taken root in Southern Africa by the 1890s. Yet the first African to attend the General Conference session was James Malinki (Malawi) in 1930. In 1936 Isaac Xiba Nkomo (Zimbabwe) was the second and the only African to attend. No other Africans went to the General Conference sessions until 1954, when the West African, the Congo, the East African, and the Southeast African union missions sent about six African delegates to represent them. There was a turning point, however, during the 1985 General Conference session in New Orleans. Of the total delegates from Africa, about 80 percent were Africans and 20 percent were missionaries.⁵

Russell L. Staples even observed that

... On the international scale the church has entered upon an era of change. At the General Conference session at New Orleans the church became newly aware of her diversity and unity, her selfhood and responsibility, and the relative weight of her delegated presence. If Adventists had thought of themselves previously as a church with a message for "every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6), they now came to see themselves as a church of all nations.⁶

Before New Orleans the Adventist Church was still the church of all nations, but the African Adventists were always in the background. The global mission and affairs of the church were in the hands of the West. For that reason Adventists in Africa have maintained a low profile over the years. I make three observations in this regard:

1.) The leadership of the Adventist Church was slow and sometimes hesitant to provide enough exposure in the global responsibilities to Christians in Africa. This is the reason why much of Africa is still behind in terms of the commitment to the worldwide mission of the church;

2.) The missionaries believed that they were developing nationals for leadership, but in practice they did not find it easy to relinquish leadership in favor of the nationals;

3.) A stigma was often attached to those nationals who sought their identity and self-determination. Because this cry for self-expression was contemporaneous with African nationalism, those nationals who spoke strongly about their self-determination were labelled as politicians. Even at New Orleans, there was misunderstanding regarding the feelings of the African delegates who criticized certain ecclesiastical behaviors. All that the Africans were saying was that they should be given the faith, the trust, and the self-expression that they had never been given before.

Now Africans have come to realize that when they go to world church sessions they do not go as evangelistic souvenirs but as counterparts in the global task of the church. Africans have begun to see themselves as partners with the rest of the

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world and not just a mission field. After all, the whole world has become a mission field.

From the late 1950s to the present, Africa has been going through the process of change—politically, culturally, economically, and religiously. While, on one hand, many African countries have achieved political independence, on the other there is still a struggle for economic survival. There is also a big push for cultural revival. Even Christian theology is being rewritten from an African perspective. In harmony with the tenets of black consciousness, Africans want to build up their own value system and to see themselves as self-defined.⁷

In 1968 John Molesworth Staples, a former Seventh-day Adventist missionary and college lecturer, wrote an article for *Christianity Today* in which he addressed himself to the greatest need for the church in Africa. In that article he presented three areas in which Christianity would meet its greatest test in Africa. One of these was

in the field of race relations. He observed that Africans would have to assume stewardship of the work in their continent.⁸

He went further to suggest ways this could be accomplished: (1) The African church had to be provided with better-trained ministers who could present a message in the "new society"; (2) theological training was to become a matter of

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priority; and (3) there needed to be improvement in colleges and seminaries. Staffs were to be strengthened, libraries expanded, courses realigned to meet needs of present-day Africa, and entrance requirements kept high to attract good students.

John M. Staples was not writing in a vacuum. He had been a missionary himself. He knew the condition of the ministerial training schools. He wanted to see certain changes made in order to enhance a healthy self-concept within the church in Africa.

Russel L. Staples, born and raised in South Africa and a former president of Solusi College in Zimbabwe, has also shared his concern for organizational changes within the Adventist Church in order to accommodate the Third World churches. His observation is that

On the immediate horizon the most powerful constraints for organizational change would appear to be: a) The anticipated straitened financial resources of the Third World churches. b) The delegation strength of the Third World at world sessions. This points toward a world organization that more generally reflects the demographic composition of the church. c) The progressivity of Adventists worldwide and their closeness to political power in many Third World countries. They naturally expect a major voice in the direction of church affairs. d) A feeling in some quarters that we may have reached the point at which centralization begins to hamper local initiative.⁹

Interestingly, Staples recognizes that the demographic weight of the Third World churches requires "expression in the world church leadership." However, his impression is that "balance will be maintained." The necessity for this balance of power, as he sees it, is that whilst the Third World may be numerically strong, the West has the resources of experienced leadership, financial strength, institutions, and personnel with expertise and commitment.

The challenge to the church in Africa is clear. We in Africa may have the numbers of baptisms and membership, but if we do not stand on our own feet financially we will not make an effective impact in our pursuit of self-enhancement and self-fulfillment. We have come to the crossroads of time when we must search for relevance locally and globally.

The church in Africa has come from a long history of dependence. It now must actualize itself and design its future in relation to the claims of the gospel. It will take selfhood, self-acceptance, and self-reliance to achieve this goal. The African church cannot see itself as a counterpart of the world church when it remains dependent, suspicious, confused about its mission, and alienated.

Tokunboh Adeyemo, in defining selfhood, states:

Selfhood means that you do not want to be like anyone else, however nice they may be, but that you want to be yourself, that you want to be you; and when we apply this to the church, it means the same thing. Selfhood means that the church in Africa wants to be an African church in the African context. That does not mean that I go back to the old religion and take animism and mix it in a little bit of Christianity and come up with something that is less Christian. I want to be truly biblical but authentically African, so that when they see me they know that I am a brother in Christ and that I am from Africa.¹⁰

In a similar vein, Wayne E. Oates has defined selfhood as the specific focusing and clarification of human identity.¹¹ This focusing and clarification of human identity is not just an anthropological quest for meaning, but even a Christ-centered question. One's selfhood cannot be discussed apart from Christ. Christ is the center of

our being. The deciding factor of our identity is our encounter with Christ.

The decisions and responses of the individual to Christ necessarily involve at least three conflicts within the identity of humanity. (1) Conflict over one's personal and cultural background. This must answer the question: Who am I? (2) Conflict over one's sense of ultimate concern in calling and vocation: What am I going to be and what am I going to do with my life? (3) Conflict over the temporal and the eternal dimensions of one's destiny as a child of both the finite and the infinite—the responsibility of my trust and communion in Christ.¹²

Christ and our relationship to him changes the way history and society may have shaped us. Society has an influence on us, but it is not the lasting and determining factor. Christ and the claims of the gospel do transform the old self and create a new self in us. What happens to us at conversion necessarily introduces a process of rediscovering our selfhood in Christ. In Romans 6 Paul talks about the old self crucified with Christ and the new self raised to the newness of life. In Ephesians 2:12-21 he again underscores the fact that all those who have accepted Christ are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household” (NIV). Other New Testament texts that share this idea are Galatians 4:1-11 and 1 Peter 2:10.

The identity of African Christians is not only anchored in their cultural heritage; African Christians find their selfhood in their conviction that they are the sons and daughters of God. Oates points out that Jesus himself went through the struggle for selfhood. The stresses of the decisions in the wilderness confronted his own humanity in the decisive issues of his day-to-day living. He had to come to grips with his own heritage very early in life. He affirmed the prophetic heritage of Isaiah 61 in his Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:18-20), chose his true vocation by participating in the sufferings of others, did not detach himself, actualized his selfhood as a sufferer, and had an eschatological sense of destiny which was undergirded by an unflinching trust in the power of his Father.¹³

This is the same process that Christians in Africa must go through and affirm. Selfhood involves an appraisal of one's cultural heritage and an affirmation of and participation in the prophetic mission of the church on earth. This is the heart of Adventism. Selfhood does not draw us inward to ourselves; instead it makes us feel that we are counterparts with the rest of God's children who are involved in the task of mission. While, on the one hand, inferiority and superiority have the capacity to divide, selfhood, on the other hand, unites.

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Sometimes we assume that people naturally love themselves and hate others. Walter Trobisch, in his book *Love Yourself*, disagrees with this myth. He suggests that nobody is born with the ability to love himself.¹⁴ Loving oneself is something that is to be developed. This means that people who hate themselves find it difficult to love others. This is the reason why the Bible admonishes us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Loving others is dependent on loving ourselves.

Self-acceptance is a value that should be clarified in early childhood.¹⁵ It is well known that Africa has been a land of complexion creams—a manifestation of lack of self-acceptance. Selfhood and self-acceptance mean the ability to care for oneself and for others. The effects of lack of self-acceptance are wide-ranging. People who lack self-acceptance cannot finance local church programs and projects. They cannot finance the world church either.

Is it not interesting that in the New Testament, the statements regarding Christ's identity precede statements concerning His self-denial? Before Jesus washed his disciples' feet he “knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (John 13:3, NIV).¹⁶ Before we can go out into the

world as salt, we must first of all come to grips with ourselves. The church in Africa also must come to terms with itself before it find its place in the international scene.

Are you aware that the Third World churches which called for moratorium on missionaries have remained recipients of material resources? For that reason, Kalilombe, of the Catholic Church in Malawi, asked:

1) Can it be demonstrated that as more and more local people take over from expatriates, the local church is becoming correspondingly more self-reliant, more self-ministering, and more self-supporting? 2) Is the local church becoming more adapted to the conditions of the local people? 3) Is it answering better their needs and problems?¹⁷

These questions are very pertinent. As the African church grows in membership, the needs keep growing and becoming more complex. More qualified people are needed to provide a wider variety of expertise. The only security that the church has is the strength of the church as a whole—the laity. Kalilombe declared that “any church is worth what its laity is.”¹⁸ He laid down the following suggestions for self-reliance for the church in Africa:

- Projects must be planned and developed by the local churches so that they will possess a sense of ownership.

- The donor countries should not give with too many strings attached, such as manning the projects by expatriates who end up consuming the funding in travel and maintenance.

- The church’s life and activity should be based on the active participation of the majority in the church, the laity.

- The needs, aspirations, and problems of the

majority must determine the priorities.

- The structures and shape of our institutions and organizations should be dictated by the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; the standard of life; and the material, intellectual, moral, and

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spiritual resources of the active majority.

- The Third World churches must view their reliance on foreign assistance as the minimum that the churches cannot do without, not the maximum that the churches can negotiate.

- Third World churches must deliberately reduce their dependence.

- There must be an adequate period of preparation for self-reliance. Self-reliance does not mean isolation. No man is an island.¹⁹

Those of us in Africa admit that the greatest challenge facing our institutions of higher learning is the challenge for survival. Many factors indicate that the future of financing higher education, as well as the total activity of the church, must come to lie in our own hands rather than in external funding. Centuries ago Jesus said: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7, KJV). Certainly, the Lord who owns everything in this world is willing to give us all things. His wealth is placed in our hands and the hands of our neighbors. Let us tap our own African resources.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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