BLACK SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS
AND SECULAR RELATIONSHIPS

by Frank W. Hale, Jr., Ph.D.

Introduction

In her provocative chapter “The Church Between the Times,” in the classic volume The Witnessing Community, Suzanne De Dietrich indicates that the church “stands under the twofold sign of Christ’s resurrection and of His coming again in glory and might. It stands between the times: its citizenship is in heaven, its task is on earth.” The central question remains: What does it mean for the church of Christ to be “in” and not “of” the world? The church, called to be an exemplary society as a challenge to the surrounding world, betrays Christ and its mission when it allows standards and categories of the world to take the upper hand over its own; when national, racial, or social prejudice invades it; when the ideologies and slogans of the world blur the message of Jesus and the salvation He offers to all. The twofold temptation of the church remains the same as it has always been: (1) the temptation to conform to the world—the salt losing its savor and, as a consequence, its usefulness; and (2) the temptation to live in self-contented isolation—the salt kept in the saltbox, equally useless.

It has long been my conviction that Seventh-day Adventists too often err by boxing themselves into frozen fellowship and effectively hiding their light under the bushel by embracing a superstitious fear of contamination by contact with others. In doing so, we have denied our Lord glorious opportunities to impress society with our knowledge and personality. This chapter attacks social recalcitrance in three ways: first, by a look at how this author’s background brought conviction regarding the need for Christian social activism; second, by discussion of conclusions of the church and the world drawn from philosophy, experience, and the Word of God; and finally, by offering some suggestions for positive societal relationships.

The Personal Journey

I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, but I spent most of my boyhood days in Topeka, Kansas, where my parents had moved when I was 10 years of age. My parents were solid Seventh-day Adventist Christians who recognized the importance of being Seventh-day Adventists, Christians, and citizens at the same time in order to meet the secular challenge. They were aware that some people viewed Seventh-day Adventists as a cult whose theological viewpoints separated them from the normative expressions of religion in our culture. Therefore, they were determined that their denominational affiliation would in no way compromise their Christian principles and their commitment to responsible citizenship.

In this context they led rather isolated lives, at least in terms of their social activities with non-Adventists. As a consequence, I had little interaction with children not of our faith, except during those limited classroom and playground experiences that I enjoyed while attending public school in Topeka. The fact there was no Adventist church school in the city placed me in the company of children with whom I was able to develop only a casual relationship. Once school was out, except for infrequent telephone conversations, I never had many occasions to visit their homes or to enjoy some of the movie, party, and dance experiences that they so often talked about between classes, on the playground, or on the way home after school. While I enjoyed a rather active social life with my SDA friends, the desire for peer approval and social conformity began to take its toll on me emotionally during my early teenage years.

I learned to compensate early for the isolation that made me feel deprived of what I had come to feel—that I deserved the recognition, acceptance, and approval of all my schoolmates. As a consequence, I developed a heightened interest in intellectual and cultural pursuits. After all, I didn’t have the slightest opportunity to develop a reputation as a dancer or an athlete, as these practical skills appeared to have been highlighted at weekend parties or sports events while I was immersed in religious activities at home or at church.

Nevertheless, my performances in the classroom won me favor from my teachers and respect from my classmates. I was determined not to be an “outsider,” even though I probably had less contact with my classmates than any other student in my school. In a short time my fellow classmates sought me out for help in writing essays, solving math problems, preparing book reports, and proofing assignments. I received the top awards in my classes for achievements in math, science, social studies, English, and music. As a result, I gained the applause and adulation that others had already earned because of the close friends and warm rela-
tionships that they enjoyed, which were unavailable to me. During those years—from the fifth through the eighth grade—I began to make a conscious effort to demonstrate that my religious background and training offered me a unique and enhancing advantage rather than peculiar and detracting disadvantages.

When I entered Topeka High School I exerted an unusual effort to be a part of the “in” crowd, even though my contacts were confined only to those snatchses of time that were available to us during the school day. The handful of Seventh-day Adventist students who were enrolled there were “outsiders” for the most part because they did not wear the varsity jackets and letters that gave recognition to those who had been singularly successful in athletic endeavors. I searched for ways to make inroads into the secular crowd without compromising the things that I had been taught as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. The wisdom of my resourceful father, a very successful businessman, contributed profoundly to my sense of self-worth and what I had to offer to my associates at school. Dad and Mom, Seventh-day Adventist fundamentalists to the core, pursued the drama of each day with prayer, Bible study, and a conscious effort to give assistance to the less fortunate.

But Dad had a special sense of community that extended beyond the boundaries of his local church family. At his used bookstore in downtown Topeka, his engaging and magnetic personality was responsible for attracting a substantial clientele that patronized the store in large numbers and especially on Sundays, as he was closed for Sabbath observance on Saturday. He put into his business a fine mastery of psychology and a genuine concern for people that catapulted his enterprise into capturing a following that included the general public, scholars, state leaders, and business colleagues, as well as persons of prestige and considerable eminence.

Dr. Charles M. Sheldon, one of the great religious stalwarts of the twentieth century and the author of In His Steps, was a frequent customer. He and Dad engaged each other in lively discussions on a variety of topics ranging from religion to economics to politics. Alf Landon, Republican nominee for president in 1936, developed the habit of stopping by the store on certain Sundays. Usually Dad had a stack of books awaiting him—books of special interest, particularly in government and politics. He and the governor maintained a close relationship through the years, exchanging Christmas cards even after my parents moved from Topeka in 1948.

George G. Hunter III puts it this way in his thought-provoking volume How to Reach Secular People: “Christians who reach secular people are honest about themselves. . . . And this honesty liberates them from a holier than thou stance.” Dad was always so relaxed, so warm, and so transparent in his love for people that his witness was effective, simple, and commanding. Those who came in contact with him caught the vision of his Christianity without any effort on his part to impose his theological beliefs upon them. At the same time he lost no opportunity to share denominational tracts with those who came into the store.

On one occasion I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Karl Menninger, the internationally famous psychiatrist who headed the Menninger Sanitarium and Foundation, located in Topeka. During intervals when I wasn’t waiting on customers, I read several of Dr. Menninger’s books (at Dad’s insistence), including The Human Mind, Love Against Hate, and Man Against Himself. Dad was never tentative about introducing me to such notable people. Few would deny that my father was a man in public life who in many ways rose above the exclusive trappings of religious provincialism. His impact was so effective that he was elected to the Topeka Chamber of Commerce, the only African-American so recognized at the time.

With such a formidable role model as my father, I really needed little encouragement to choose a path that would allow me to identify with appropriate secular interests. Though maintaining my respect for the Seventh-day Adventist teachings and principles of my upbringing, I felt the need to follow the dictates of intelligent inquiry and participate in those activities that would cultivate and promote the interests of the school in addition to my personal development. One such challenge was representation on the student council, a fervent concern of the few hundred Black students among the 3,000 enrolled at Topeka High School. In those days there was tension between Blacks and Whites because of the segregated activities in the school. There were separate social hours, separate governing bodies, and separate varsity sports activities. There was even a special area, designated “Little Harlem,” where Black students “hung out” during class breaks. I had been elected president of the Negro Advisory Council during my junior year, which automatically qualified me to serve on the Student Council as representative of the Black students who had elected me over four other candidates who had run for the office.

My success was both surprising and exhilarating, because I did not have the social credentials of my opponents, but I was widely respected because of my academic standing, my willingness to promote the interests of Black students, and my family’s standing in the community. Fortunately, these factors countered any pressures for social conformity that could have compromised my religious beliefs and neutralized my effectiveness had I expended my energies in attempting to follow the traditional requirements for being a part of the “in” group.

College and University Life as a Student

I struggled to accept my parents’ decision for me to
attend Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, after I had been awarded a four-year scholarship to Howard University, the “Harvard” of historically Black institutions of higher education. I am sure that Calvin Moseley, Jr., who had been awarded a four-year scholarship to Howard University, the “Harvard” of historically Black institutions of higher education. I am sure that Calvin E. Moseley, Jr., who had been awarded a four-year scholarship to Howard University, the “Harvard” of historically Black institutions of higher education. I am sure that Calvin E. Moseley, Jr., who had been awarded a four-year scholarship to Howard University, the “Harvard” of historically Black institutions of higher education. I am sure that Calvin E. Moseley, Jr., who had been awarded a four-year scholarship to Howard University, the “Harvard” of historically Black institutions of higher education. I am sure that Calvin E. 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Beginning My Professional Career at Oakwood College

I had to make a choice between an offer to teach at Lincoln University in Missouri and an offer I received from President Frank L. Peterson to teach at Oakwood College. I could not escape my upbringing. I knew that God deserved the firstfruits of my career, and I had no difficulty in accepting the offer to teach at Oakwood for one fourth the salary I was offered at Lincoln. It wasn't a decision that I really had to ponder. Rather it was a strange and wonderful choice based on how good God had been in bringing me that far in achieving my educational goals.

In 1952, after my first exciting year at Oakwood, President Peterson selected me to fill the new post of director of public relations. At my suggestion the president recognized the need for a physical education building and gymnasium on campus to meet the recreational needs of the student body. Until that time Oakwood had never made a public appeal for money in Huntsville or Madison County, Alabama. Oakwood had been an asset to the community—its faculty and students patronized local businesses, its dairy provided milk for the town, and its laundry and dry cleaning plant served hundreds of residents.

In short order we whipped up a plan of action. Most of the people in the surrounding area were aware that Oakwood College was a Seventh-day Adventist institution, but they were largely unacquainted with the details of our operation. They had little background on us except that we were “different” in terms of our day of worship, our diet, and our dress. Other than what they considered to be our “peculiarities,” they knew little about Oakwood’s mission.

Early on I met with a number of key business and professional people in the community, sharing with them all of the positive things that were happening at Oakwood in terms of character development, degree offerings, student activities, and the indispensable role of work opportunities. This opportunity to engage the city and county fathers in instructive dialogue was rewarding. As a consequence of this strategy, we received endorsements of our fund-raising venture from numerous community leaders, who agreed to have their written statements of approval printed in a brochure, which we distributed by the thousands throughout the area.

This experiment gave the college personnel and members of the community a chance to interact with each other and to move beyond the transparencies of religion, race, and separation. These leaders helped spearhead the drive that eventually led to the erection of the new physical education facility. This nonthreatening dialogue and participation of city and county officials was a liberating experience that opened the door to future contacts in the secular community.

In fact, this experience continued to open doors of opportunity when I became president of Oakwood College in 1966. Until that experience of 1952 I had felt that Oakwood was on the outskirts of our local community—separated by our location, our color, our dogma, and our conscious effort to maintain a physical and psychological distance. However, I was uncomfortable being on the fringe of the community, knowing that we had so much more to offer than simply giving them an opportunity to contribute to our Ingathering campaign once a year. From my perspective, our witness was far too general, and I knew that generalities have no power to attract, to challenge, to inspire, or to persuade.

One of my first actions as president was to establish a community advisory council to promote goodwill between the college and the community. It was a positive stroke that enabled the college to gain sustained attention and support from the community while offering us the rich expertise of fertile minds where we lacked either experience or competence or both. The council provided us with informational and fiscal capital beyond our expectations.

Concertmaster Alvin Dreger and the Huntsville Civic Orchestra became an ongoing, celebrative delight on our campus, with their participation in the annual rendition of Handel’s Messiah and other special occasions. The one unchanging aspect of Oakwood’s history and legacy has been the excellence of its music. The Huntsville community has been so supportive of the Oakwood Choir that in 1970 funds were raised to send the choir and the Huntsville Civic Orchestra to Los Angeles to perform Verdi’s Requiem on Easter Sunday to a standing-room-only crowd at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles.

A triumphal marriage existed between the college and the community. I was invited to be a member of the Association of Huntsville Area Companies, composed of representatives from more than 65 space-related industries. I also served as a member of the Alabama Center for Higher Education, a consortium of Alabama’s historically Black colleges and universities. Changes are brought about “by people who try to influence the segment of life they are involved with, strengthening the relationships and institutions with which they are associated.”
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I was aware that many people have a negative image of the church and church-related institutions such as Oakwood College. The age in which we live is technologically oriented, and so much emphasis is placed on science that some people tend to doubt the church’s capacity and intelligence to distinguish between truth and its beliefs. Leslie Newbigin, in his work Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture, makes the point that our culture has divided life into a “public world” of facts, upon which everyone agrees; and a “private world” of values, beliefs, and religion, in which each person believes in something or nothing by choice.

Our aim at the college was to reach secular people through social and professional networks comprising relatives, friends, and colleagues. It was obvious that a relevant church was one that met community needs. We attempted to meet the physical needs of the community by providing farm and dairy products in local stores, by selling bakery goods to local restaurants and hotels, and by providing laundry and dry-cleaning services to local residents and to Army personnel at the Redstone Arsenal. We opened our academic doors to people of all races and denominations, and many of our teachers spoke at social and civic organizations. Our music department shared its talent with schools, churches, and civic organizations. We brought speakers with national reputations to the campus, and our doors were open for the community to attend many of these events without cost. On special occasions the mayor, members of the city council, and other public officials were pleased to accept our invitation.

The relationship between the college and the community was harmonious, and we made sure that we would neither exploit nor manipulate their goodwill. We related directly and altruistically to them without any intention of imposing demands based on the conditions rising out of our relationship.

**Administrative Opportunities at Ohio State**

In 1971 I left Oakwood College and became associate dean of the graduate school and professor of communication at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. This position enabled me to establish sound contacts and relationships in the religious community, the social/civic community, the educational community, and the political community. I had had some experiences in a secular environment, serving a professorial appointment at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio, between the years 1959 and 1966. The situation at Ohio State immersed me into a secular arena that was both conscious and unlimiting. In the past my exposure to a secular environment had been more incremental.

The life of a Seventh-day Adventist educator on a secular campus can be a viable communicating form of Christianity. Many of my associates did not have the remotest idea of what Seventh-day Adventists believed. The university experience provided me an unprecedented opportunity to share my faith in discrete ways so as not to compromise the principle of separation of church and state. Many of my colleagues were surprised when I did not at tend meetings of the graduate council, faculty, or other important university functions, most of which were held on Saturdays. The university, on occasion, also held functions on Sunday, which my colleagues had no philosophical difficulty in attending. Apparently most people live their day-to-day lives “outside” the influence of Christianity. Religion, spirituality, and God are all being edged out to the periphery of people’s conscious world.

Early in my administration as dean in the graduate school, I began to establish meaningful relationships with local Black ministers. Recognizing the church as an important base for targeting youth with academic potential, good character, and leadership skills, I intentionally established an agenda for informing and influencing these clergy who were in direct contact with significant numbers of these youth on a weekly basis.

The clergy soon learned of my leadership role in the local Seventh-day Adventist church, so my base in the church and my role at the university provided me with unparalleled opportunities to speak at local churches for special programs such as Education Day, Men’s Day, Family Life Day, Black History Month, etc. During one particular year I had the privilege of speaking during the worship hour on Sunday at 16 different churches.

Each year my office sponsored a Gospel Extravaganza during the time when several hundred African-American seniors from historically Black colleges and universities would visit the Ohio State campus. Over the years we invited such gospel celebrities as Edwin Hawkins, Walter Hawkins, Tremaine Hawkins, Andrae Crouch, and the Winans, among others. Local artists from the Columbus churches had opportunity to demonstrate their musical wares during the preliminaries. These events created a bond between my office and the Black community. The tradition is still alive after 23 years.

Having recognized the importance of plowing, seeding, and watering fields of influence previously left uncultivated, I knew that we could not afford to sit back and wait for people to come to us. Contacts were made with African-American representatives who were members of the city council, the school board, and the Ohio General Assembly. Most of them became my avid supporters. God truly blessed our efforts and helped to make every day count. He provided an ongoing opportunity for a Seventh-day Adventist Christian and his church to be viewed from a vantage point of uniqueness, dignity, and creative productivity.

Too often our image has been one of smugness and in-
sensitivity; we adopt a holier-than-thou attitude and refuse to contribute to the religious community. My setting provided me with the opportunity to help undress the image of Adventism from all the baggy and unsightly clothed it has picked up. My Adventist colleagues at the university made major and positive contributions in helping institutional personnel to graduate from their negative perceptions of Seventh-day Adventist Christians by offering a new and meaningful interpretation to our influence as credible and competent Christians.

The Jesse Jackson Connection

In 1975 I was an active member of the local PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) chapter in Columbus, Ohio. When the chapter president was unable to attend the national convention, which was meeting in Philadelphia, I was elected to represent the chapter. It was there that I first met Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Jr., president of the national PUSH organization, located in Chicago. Our meeting was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted for nearly two decades. It has been a refreshing experience to engage in the dialogue and process of developing programs and strategies for championing the needs of oppressed people worldwide.

During that convention Jackson asked me to serve as a member of the National PUSH board of trustees. I felt very honored to be included among these distinguished board members, a who’s who of Black community activists. It was also at that conference that I first met Rev. William Gray, who at that time was president of the local PUSH chapter in Philadelphia. Gray has since become a United States congressman, chief executive officer of the United Negro College Fund, and a special envoy to Haiti.

Anyone knowing Jesse Jackson has to be aware of his record in pushing for new national initiatives. Among items on his agenda have been:

- Setting a goal for full employment.
- Promoting a foreign policy committed to human rights.
- Advocating a comprehensive industrial policy toward reindustrializing America.
- Reassessing the unjust distribution of wealth.
- Redefining threats to national security to include sickness, poor housing, malnourishment, and unemployment.
- Designing a foreign policy based on negotiating first and threatening and fighting second.
- Formulating an educational policy that teaches for life, not merely for making a living.

On September 28, 1978, I coordinated the visit of Jackson to the Ohio State University campus, where he was invited to address nearly 1,000 students and faculty of the College of Education. That same year I outlined a plan by which African-American educators could come together to give stability and visionary leadership to the PUSH-EXCEL education movement. As a consequence, Jackson asked me to coordinate a national conference for mobilizing excellence in education. The program involved a joint sponsorship between Operation PUSH, the U.S. Department of Education, and Howard University. Mary Berry, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, and James Cheek, president of Howard University, assisted me as primary planners of a conference that drew more than 1,000 educators from around the country. The conference proved to be successful in broadening the commitment and renewing the determination of teachers to continue to challenge and motivate our children and youth to develop their minds.

In the fall of 1983 Jackson returned to the Ohio State University campus to announce to an overflow crowd of 3,200 his decision to seek the Democratic Party’s nomination for president of the United States. He was greeted by enthusiastic cheers and chants of “Run, Jesse, run.”

Though the media has portrayed Jackson solely as a champion of America’s Blacks, his concept of a “rainbow coalition” included Hispanics, women, senior citizens, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, the young, and the poor, as well as Blacks. This philosophy served him well at the press conference that followed his announcement, during which he parried question after question with the exuberance and charm that have been his trademark. Jackson’s candidacy made an impact on my professional career, as I was elected to be chair of the Jackson campaign in Columbus, Ohio, and Franklin County.

I was especially fortunate to have a talented, efficient, harmonious group to assist me. These dedicated ambassadors of goodwill provided a variety of services, including the preparation and house-to-house distribution of literature, letter-writing, preparing news releases and radio and TV announcements, providing visitors with appropriate information, making speeches, instructing citizens on how to register and vote, taking people to the polls on election day, organizing volunteers, and maintaining a climate of general congeniality. We were participating in a historic effort; Jackson was the first African-American “to attain credibility and political impact as a genuine presidential contender.” And it was my first venture into a political arena of such meaningful proportions.

It was also about this time that I took the occasion to introduce Wintley Phipps to Jackson, which opened up wonderful opportunities for Phipps, propelling him into prominence and leading to singing appointments at the Billy Graham Crusade, the Democratic National Convention, Robert Schuller’s Hour of Power, the White House, the Oprah Winfrey Show, and other places. The times God has intervened to open doors in the secular world are beyond calculation.
My 17 years full-time and six years part-time at Ohio State University offered me opportunities to enjoy the friendship and support of some of this country’s most influential African-American leaders, including: Louis Stokes, Carl Rowan, Vernon Jordan, Mary Berry, Samuel Yette, Leon Higginbotham, C. Delores Tucker, Randall Robinson, Jesse Jackson, Samuel Proctor, Benjamin Hooks, Joseph Lowery, Wiley Branton, Molefi Asante, and Asa Hilliard.

Who would have supposed that a city and campus committee of 40 persons, including two Seventh-day Adventists, would sponsor a retirement dinner for me, but on December 4, 1988, that is indeed what happened. The dinner attracted 1,200 patrons, and 300 persons were turned away at the door. Once again it was an opportunity for me to cross paths with Jesse Jackson, as he was the keynote speaker for that wonderful occasion. There is no question that healthy secular relationships have been important in my professional career as well as allowing me to advance the causes that I have espoused.

The Church and the World

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

The scope and perspective of the gospel is so broad and so inclusive that it embraces all of the inhabitants and nations of the world. What a challenge! Many times the terms “world” and “worldly” are used in a pejorative sense by members of the Christian community. The world takes on the image of something unclean, something to be despised. This attitude is particularly prevalent among certain traditional members of the Christian community and their notion that the church should be exempt from anything that involves the social, political, and economic interests of the community.

Is it any wonder, then, that many in the secular community are exceedingly intolerant of religion because of the exclusivity that is so pervasive among certain churches and their adherents? They view the church as tiptoeing on issues that challenge the exploitative power brokers who are responsible for much of the human suffering that is so prevalent today. The critical factor, then, is whether the church is so preoccupied with its own parochial interests that its ears are deafened to the needs of the community.

This is a delicate stance that the Christian must take. While we are called to “separate from the world,” we are also called upon to be instruments for its salvation. Jesus Himself established the modus operandi—He was “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34, NKJV), yet IIC was “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26, NKJV). As Vance Havner states, there is no contradiction here: “We are not to be isolated but insulated.” Warren Wiersbe puts it even more succinctly in The Integrity Crisis: “Separation is contact without contamination.”

It is difficult to escape the confusion, perplexity, and uncertainty of our times. It is easy for us to lose our sense of perspective in view of the dilemmas that we face on a day-to-day basis. Ambivalence seems to rule the day. Politicians can’t agree on the right course for the country to take in meeting the needs of all of its citizens. Professors disagree over which is most important, research or teaching. There is no common bond among psychologists and psychiatrists concerning the basic premises of human nature. Clergy disagree over the validity and value of the very Scriptures that they are commissioned to uphold.

We are becoming bigger, faster, richer, and smarter on one hand, and more disrespectful, indulgent, cruel, greedy, and thankless on the other hand.

Fortunately, we do not live alone. We need people. We need each other. On paper this seems so simple, yet those of us who have lived long enough learn sooner or later that an epidemic of aloofness, alienation, and isolation raging in the world makes people feel unloved and unwanted. Our society encourages us to use people rather than to love them, to treat them as objects to be exploited in order to satisfy our own personal goals. We live—not isolated—but in contexts, and Seventh-day Adventists are no exception.

The contacts that we make on a daily basis with the secular world are many and varied: the grocer, the insurance broker, the realtor, the cosmetologist, etc. When all is said and done, there is no way that we can escape the contact or the influence of the secular world. But many issues loom larger than our traditional orthodoxy. There is the need to bring practical Christianity to bear on the dogma and doctrines of the Bible.

In our efforts to refrain from promoting unholy alliances between the “state” and the “altar,” we are sometimes insensitive to such issues as the protection of human rights; the promotion of international and global understanding; the necessity to remove social, gender, and racial injustices; and the struggle against homelessness, hunger, poverty, unemployment, child abuse, alcoholism, crime, drug trafficking, and other maladies that plague society. The church cannot legitimately call itself Christian if it neglects its role and critical function as the moral arbiter and conscience of society. The church needs to be “up front” and without apologies on matters of human decency and dignity, and let the chips fall where they may.

This point of view speaks not to the secularization of Christianity, but to a progressive spiritual theology and creed that addresses the intimate needs of people. The time has come for the church to swim against the tides of provincialism, opportunism, intolerance, lethargic liturgy, ingenuous and artless dogmatics, and mindless tradition that
compromises its ability to deal appropriately with questions of freedom, human rights, and intolerance.

The church’s credibility is at stake. We do not deserve to be protected from criticism from within or without if we are preoccupied with organization, hierarchy, administrative authority, and the ecclesiastical trappings that hint of rigid legalism and arrogant complicity. The mission of the church has as one of its highest priorities the dispossessed, the exploited, the oppressed, the despised, the downtrodden, and the powerless. Thank God, such a mission has come to prevail as a significant ministry among at least some regional conferences and churches within the denomination.

Is there any extraordinary quality in our mission or witness that makes us utterly different, but at the same time vital to secular society? The Bible is replete with examples in both the Old and New Testaments of how God worked through people. But none of these people acted in isolation. Each had a personal relationship with God. Each acted as a member of a community. Abraham began his pilgrimage as patriarch of a Chaldean tribe. Moses was first a prince of Egypt and later the mediator who led God’s people from bondage to freedom. Esther was queen of Persia when God moved to preserve His people from destruction. Daniel was a captive and a governor of Babylon while serving as ambassador of God’s people in a strange land.

Caution Has Its Place

Black Seventh-day Adventists, like their White counterparts, are very much aware of the erosion of religion in America as Protestantism has adapted itself too compromisingly to the world of the masses. Transformed and manipulated, many churches have lost the particularities of their original history and theology. The SDA Church takes special pride in maintaining its distance from the “world” and not subscribing to any cultural ethic or pattern at the expense of its theological particularity. This is not to say that individual members, confronted by a new and ever-changing environment, have not succumbed to the pragmatic relativism of community standards.

It is within the context of rising secularism and “religion in general” that the church has taken an evasive posture in any relationship that smacks of ecumenism. The Adventist Church has shied away because the ecumenical movement has often had the effect of “sanctifying the expedient” and “watering down” original Protestant Christianity. Thus traditionally the SDA Church has arched its back against any relationship that would lead to the decay of its teachings, doctrines, and practices. It winces at any compromise in the gospel to make it palatable for mass consumption.

But wait. The Christian can’t stop there. The power of Christian love should be so strong that it can cross lines of ideological (religious or secular) differences. If the singularity of our theology blurs our ability to witness in a world of defeatism and despair, we are no less rigid and inflexible than the despicable Pharisees to whom Jesus referred as tombs “full of dead men’s bones” (Matt. 23:27).

There is something extremely durable about love that is not confined or shaped by the sovereignty of our overworked inhibitions. God is not the property of those theological pygmies who would dispense love and compassion only upon those who fit their carefully crafted notions of who is acceptable and who isn’t. The world mission of the church should be neither dulled nor overdone by the pressures of our insecurities. We need not tear up our own roots to expand the concept of community. However, our Christian witness, if authentic, will not contradict the central theological core of our basic beliefs.

Challenging Negative Attitudes

Two negative attitudes discourage Black Seventh-day Adventists from developing positive relationships in the secular world. The first is the “love not the world” attitude, and the second is the “we don’t want folks to lose their way” mind-set. These negative attitudes need to be placed on the scales of analysis and challenged for their lack of validity.

“Love not the world.” There is nothing so disheartening as Christians who are so fervent and devout in their religious life and practice that they hesitate to consider anything else of much importance. There is an unhealthy separation between in-church and out-of-church activities; church members are detaching themselves from the social conditions affecting their community. While we consider alcohol and drug abuse as crises in the home and the community, we sometimes give the impression that our witness is far more hortative than rehabilitative.

Generally the church has little difficulty in developing policies, resolutions, and recommendations concerning the burning issues of the day, but what about the social and civic dimensions of our practices? At times we seem to lack the serious commitment to deal with the issues and tensions of race and gender that are on top of the table in both religious and secular communities. Racial tensions abound, and sexism continues to restrict women. Is our vision of Christianity so saintly that we are compelled to “pass by on the other side” when confronted by those interlocking forces that would deny the dignity of humankind?

What kind of Christianity allows its adherents to become “shadow partners” to politicians who demonstrate little concern that the biosphere is being destroyed by pollution, that developing countries are being robbed of their minerals to feed the ravenous appetites of a wealthy upper class, that the earth’s resources are being used up at cataclysmic speed, that the poor are being exploited and neglected even as white-collar crime goes virtually unnoticed, that the availability of
health care for all citizens is minimized, and that racial disharmony is being exploited through rhetoric, legislative agenda, and Supreme Court appointments.

True Christianity cannot exist in a void, quarantined from life. The two imperatives of Christianity are Go and Tell. We are to be part and parcel of all that is going on around us, motivated, of course, by Christian conviction and conduct. Jesus’ life was a magnificent demonstration of the fact that He did not exempt Himself, as Hans Kung has said, from “intervening constantly and effectively for the socially neglected or ostracized groups of his time, and yet, at the same time, noting without prejudice the concerns of the ruling classes.”

What we need is a more integrative vision of how the church can respond to the needs of the secular community. While an antithesis exists between Christians and the world, Christians have no biblical authority to turn their back on the worlds of history, art, science, music, and government. We can’t be our “brother’s keeper” and at the same time stay an arm’s length away from those factors and experiences that affect his life. To do so would be heresy.

It is required of us that our spirituality penetrate the rational, scientific, moral, social, political, practical, and artistic fabric of our being. Such a distinctiveness would make the Christian community an open community, affirming the dignity of all human beings and, therefore, ministering, sharing, and involving itself in dispensing the intervening grace of God on all levels of life and thought. “Love not the world” takes on new meaning when we understand, as Vance Havner puts it, that “we are not to be isolated but insulated, moving in the midst of evil, but untouched by it.”

What a magnificent challenge!

“We don’t want folks to lose their way.” Most people have at one time or another been confronted by those conservative Christian stalwarts who assume that their major role is to make sure that church members never have doubts or questions concerning the official teachings and doctrines of the church. They consider it heresy to visit churches outside one’s own denomination, or to invite preachers of other denominations to speak from their pulpits, lest by their utterances they confuse and corrupt the saints. There is something exceedingly fragile about a religion that is afraid to expose the validity of its propositions to the world.

Those who are always afraid that something is going to be said or written that could violate the tender nature of our beliefs must be “of all men most miserable” (1 Cor. 15:19). If faith means anything, it means having the kind of durable confidence and assurance that undergirds our convictions and withstands the conflicts that face Christians on a daily basis.

Is there a risk of church members losing their way when they find significance in being involved in the affairs of everyday life? Is it possible for the church to reject its own faith by its noncommitment to and in the world? If the church is to have any vitality at all, if it is to have any impact in helping to change people’s lives, it must get out into the world beyond the church.

It might well be that Christians are more likely to find their way than lose it if they dare to identify themselves with persons and institutions deemed nonreligious. Jesus rubbed shoulders with persons who certainly would not be considered religious, establishment, or “in crowd” respectable types. He moved among the outcasts of society—vagrants, prostitutes, the mentally deranged, racial minorities, vagrants, thieves, the sick and suffering, widows and orphans, political traitors. Misfits all. And still He was able to move easily among persons of stature—tax collectors, lawyers, military officers, the wealthy, and the clergy.

How is the church addressing the needs of rejected members of our society today? How is the church addressing the needs of a society in which civility and respect for individual differences are not always apparent? How is the church addressing the need for openness in a society that’s becoming increasingly diverse, multiracial, and multicultural? How is the church expanding its mission as a proponent of excellence and productivity in science, art, government, literature, history, music, and the professions? Excellence, like spirituality, must be our profession of faith in whatever our hands find to do. With such a witness, both inside and outside the church, we will find our way, not lose it.

The Conflict Between Spirituality and Intellectuality

At times in religious circles there seems to be a certain cynicism and/or hostility toward intellectuality. Such an attitude is reflected in such assertions as “You don’t need a B.A. degree; you just need to be ‘born again’”; “You don’t need an M.S. degree; you just need to be ‘master of self.’” Such dangerous rhetoric is dichotomous and disjunctive, forcing the listener to think of religion and education in either-or terms. One is to be trusted and the other distrusted. They fail to recognize the multidimensionality of Christ, who “grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52. NIV).

Sometimes, intentionally or unintentionally, pressure is exerted against intellectuality. I have observed how defensive some clergy and veteran saints become when questions are raised about the Spirit of Prophecy, diet, divorce, Sabbath observance, dress, and other issues that cut across their established points of view. Some of these inflexible representatives of the “official position” on religious matters seem to feel that the exercise of the mind has something dangerous, wrong, and sinful about it, that some beliefs are so dangerous that we cannot risk seeing whether they might be true. They seem to want truth to be the exclusive possession of a privileged few—to be predigested
and prepackaged and distributed to an unquestioning and unsuspecting clientele.

Such a position flies in the face of intellectuality. To begin with, an intellectual is a person who is able to suspend her/his commitments while engaged in thinking. Such a person will approach a problem without insisting initially on a certain predetermined conclusion. Such a quality disturbs and upsets some people. It certainly is an intellectual quality to possess some degree of detachment as well as the ability to think hypothetically, to exercise the imagination for the sake of the imagination, to explore ideas, to plunge oneself into worlds of wonder beyond the prevailing conventions and provincialism of tradition.

The Christian is called to live a life of rich fulfillment in this world. To be so preoccupied with the religious routines of our biblical and traditional definitions of Christianity that we consider all other issues in our society marginal and peripheral is to cast the church in the role of having abandoned the very society that it has been commissioned to save.

Those who espouse a doctrine of “Christ against the world” define the world as a realm under the power of evil, a region of darkness into which the citizens of the kingdom must not enter. “It is a pagan society with its sensuality, superficiality, and pretentiousness, its materialism and its egoism,” says C. H. Dodd in his book The Johannine Epistles. The dual commandment of love for God and love for one’s neighbor appears to have undergone a certain transformation that separates the Christian from any obligation to his/her secular neighbor.

Proponents of the “Christ of culture” concept commit themselves to be believers in the Lord, while also seeking to maintain “community” with others. They seek to reconcile, within limits, the gospel with the contemporary issues of the day, adopting the premise that Christ belongs in culture, because culture without “sense and a taste for the infinite” becomes sterile and corrupt. Karl Barth emphasized a duality—the need to be Christocentric, while at the same time participating in the work of culture, the development of science, the cultivation of art, the ennoblement of family, and the maintenance of the state (see H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture). True Christians do not turn their backs on art, science, social studies, and history; the truly Christian person is a scientific person, an aesthetic person, a social person, and a practical person.

The Impact of Racism

The secular charge, especially among African-Americans, that Christianity is “irrelevant” is rooted not only in history but also in personal experience. According to Ken Chafin, in his book The Reluctant Witness, many people do not think of the church as being plugged into life where they are.

African-Americans are not unmindful of the complicity of America’s Christian churches, clergy, and churchgoers in the racism that has pervaded our culture. Forrest G. Wood’s book The Arrogance of Faith provides an analysis of the church’s position on race, beginning with the papal bull that authorized the opening of a slave market in sixteenth-century Lisbon through four succeeding centuries, when the preponderance of Christian thought and conduct in the New World buttressed racial oppression to the point of championing slavery as a means of saving souls.

Vincent Harding’s essay “Black Power and the American Christ” underscores the concept and ideology of Blackness as growing out of the deep ambivalence of American Blacks to the Christ they have encountered. The current Afrocentric emphasis on searching for the “gods of our African ancestors” has exploited this ambivalence. Listen to Harding’s summation:

“We first met the American Christ on slave ships. We heard His name sung in hymns of praise as we died by the hundreds while still chained in stinking corrals beneath the decks, locked in with terror and disease with no hope or hope of hope. We saw Him so unlike ourselves, painted white and pink, blond and blue-eyed and dominating religious paintings, stained-glass windows, Sunday school charts, and color plates within the New Testament pages of our Bibles. We felt condemned because of our blackness, our broad noses, our thick lips, our kinky hair, our flat feet and our singular and evocative way of expressing emotion in singing, preaching, and dancing. He was so sedate, so genteel, so white. So all through the nation’s history, many black men have rejected this Christ—indeed the miracle is that so many accepted Him.”

Gordon W. Allport’s classic study The Nature of Prejudice demonstrates that the religious are far more racially and ethnically prejudiced than the nonreligious. Even among a sample of college students, those reporting that religion had been a marked or moderate influence in their lives showed a far higher degree of prejudice than those who reported that religion was either slight or nonexistent in their upbringing. Apparently belonging to or identifying oneself with a religious body in America certainly does not mean that one takes over the traditional Christian qualities of tolerance, brotherhood, and equality. “On the contrary, it appears that these values are more firmly held by people who do not affiliate with any religious group,” states a team of scholars in their exhaustive work The Authoritarian Personality. As Hans Kung states in his book On Being a Christian: “It is entirely the fault of Christians if too little is changed in the world. Christians themselves are the strongest argument against Christianity: Christians who are not Christians. Christians themselves are the strongest argument for Christianity: Christians who live a Christian life.”
A Prescription for Positive Societal Relationships

I am not sure that I can offer a categorical formula for success in establishing vital and rewarding relationships in the secular community. This chapter has focused on the fact that one’s religious affiliation need not be a deterrent to establishing healthy and contagious relationships among one’s secular peers.

However, I wish to suggest some specific ways of developing harmonious relationships in the secular community.

1. It is important for Christians to be involved in areas outside of spiritual and nonpolitical spheres. Their influence will be negative and counterproductive if they are perceived as having no regard for society and the world.

2. Christians themselves are the strongest argument either for or against Christianity.

3. Christians and churches should not ignore their share of responsibility and remain inactive rather than dealing with the social, political, cultural, and moral issues that face people on a daily basis.

4. The gospel must no longer be diminished and distorted to the point where churches and Christians give excessive attention to the needs of the wealthy while ignoring the needs of the masses.

5. The church ought not to be so theologically burdened that it offers only frail platitudes when faced with issues of hunger, poverty, disease, infant mortality, illiteracy, marginalism, inequalities of opportunity and income, and disharmony among social classes and races.

6. Christians do not have the luxury of naive and unrealistic neutrality on the issues of our day.

7. The credibility of Christians is more powerful when their knowledge is perceived as being eclectic rather than narrow, parochial, provincial, and doctrinaire.

8. Professional secular people are more impressed and influenced by the positive relationships they have with Christians than with efforts to influence them through evangelistic recruitment strategies or authoritative preaching.

9. “Christianity is more caught than taught.”

10. Social witness and social reform are positive factors in establishing meaningful relationships in the secular community.

11. Secular people are more apt to cooperate with those who accept them as they are rather than as “unsaved souls.”

12. Secular people, like most of us, relate with people who share common interests.

13. The strategy of being involved in the struggles that people experience on an ongoing basis is the way that Christians demonstrate the relevance of Christianity.

14. God’s temple is a sanctuary without walls, and sometimes Christians can be most effective by engaging secular people on their turf.

15. Accepting people where they are is indispensable to developing positive relationships with people.

16. Secular people who see Christianity as anti-intellectual or antieducation need to be exposed to Christians who are intelligent and educated.

17. The efforts of Christians can be counterproductive if it is assumed that they are out to “win” someone.

18. Effective Christians articulate and champion the causes of people in the general population.

19. Effective Christians are characterized by a remarkable zeal to pursue excellence in every aspect of their lives.

20. Effective Christians should be the spiritual embodiment of that which they profess.

Good News

In the happy home that I grew up in there were daily renderings from our old Victrola phonograph, which needed consistent cranking in order to maintain a steady rate and volume. But how marvelous was that antiquated musical box as it created moods of joy and exultation from such great artists as Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and Dorothy Maynor. All of these artists penetrated the spiritual depths of the gospel, tried and tested in the crucible of Christ’s suffering and death, making available to humanity the wonder, majesty, exultation, and all-encompassing beauty of His supreme sacrifice. These early foreparents would have declared with unabashed exhilaration, “Now, ain’t that good news!”

My experience leads me to believe that as Seventh-day Adventists we sometimes suffer an image problem. There is a legitimate pride that we claim because of our serious attachment to Scripture, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the teachings and doctrines associated with our beliefs. Unfortunately, though, some among us are so wed to the mechanics of the Word that they have overlooked the very simple fact that the “gospel” means “good news.”

There is no question that we need to maintain our own doctrinal and ideological independence on matters of Christian dogma. On the other hand, we need to be careful not to subscribe to a passive and stoic representation of life and practice that can lead inevitably to a warped and arrogant sense of self-sufficiency.

In one way or another, many live out their daily lives in fear, doubt, worry, frustration, and the poverty of pain and pessimism. The good news reminds us that just as Jesus identifies with our infirmities, we need to understand that we belong to each other and must be involved in each other’s destiny. Actually, nothing is more generally neglected and disregarded than the good news of salvation.

As members we get caught up in a pattern of do’s and don’ts, duties, obligations, and committee meetings, and in the process forget to utter even a hint about something good, great, and beneficial that God has done for us. The
Christian needs to set aside time to offer personal and ongoing testimony of God’s goodness.

Our pastors must give us more than erudite thrusts and academic discourses containing facts, figures, and fanciful rhetoric that show little or no regard for the fact that good news is the heart and soul of the gospel. It was this gospel that causes others to report that members of the early church were guilty, if you will, of turning the world upside down. What a charge, what a triumph, what a challenge!

Christians are eager to share the good news. And yet many are so frightened of the tender nature of their beliefs that they find it difficult to establish even limited contacts or relationships in the secular world. So they retreat and quarantine themselves into a religion of isolationism. Their attitude is somewhat like the old woman who, upon hearing the theory of evolution, said, “God grant that it isn’t true, but if it is true, God grant that not many people will hear about it.” Our faith is nothing if it cannot withstand the blasts of opposing forces.

The true believer, like the academic scholar, throws his or her convictions into the open competition of the marketplace with the assurance that at the end of the day victory will be achieved. That is the good news that has brought us thus far and that we must internalize as we cross over into the twenty-first century.