Introduction

One lingering challenge that will continue to cast a shadow upon the Adventist denomination in the twenty-first century is the phenomenon of racism. In an attempt to be authentic biblical Christians, Black Adventists must summon the courage to confront racism in society and in the church, to strive for racial reconciliation.

Interesting things are happening among some Christian groups relative to racial reconciliation in America. In 1995 the 15.6 million-member Southern Baptist Convention apologized publicly to African-Americans for not opposing slavery and for not struggling against its own legacy of racism. On May 30, 1996, the Baptist World Alliance convened a Summit on Racial Reconciliation in Orlando, Florida. Black and White Pentecostal churches have admitted publicly to their racist attitudes of the past and are working to merge their separate denominations from top to bottom. The interdenominational Christian men’s group Promisekeepers has boldly announced a goal of bringing men of all races together.

Yet our beloved Adventist Church is largely silent—internally and externally—on the issue of racial reconciliation. Today Christianity in general, and Adventism in particular, is separated by an invisible wall of race. Blacks and Whites have been coconspirators in the dividing and weakening of the church by allowing this wall to continue to exist. From the General Conference to the pulpit, race divides. The result is a weakened church with a weakened witness to a sick and dying world.

This chapter reviews a classic definition of racism, documents its prevalence in our society as well as our church, explores why it appears to be comfortably at home in the remnant church, and suggests viable methods to expunge it, under God, from Adventism.

Definition of Racism

Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines racism as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.”

Racism appears to be born of prejudice and ethnocentrism—prejudice being a preconceived idea or an opinion that exists in the mind without adequate information, and ethnocentrism being the idea that one’s own group, race, or ethnicity is the standard by which all others are judged. While prejudice is often based on ignorance, the practitioners of prejudice, when given adequate information contrary to the position held, are not inclined to change their viewpoints. Prejudice forms the basis of racism.

Racism is an ideology of superiority or supremacy that places a negative meaning on biological differences that result in unequal treatment purely on the basis of the accident of birth. It uses skin color, hair texture, and other physical features to determine the value of a person. Racism allows for the domination and control of one class or group over another, because of one class or group being thought inherently superior and the other inherently inferior.

“Racism is a system of domination and oppression. The sin of racism of the society and church in which we participate is that which places an uncritical priority on being white. Because whites control most of the organizations, major financial institutions and levers of power in our society, white racism is a special curse of our society. Institutional racism can be understood as the way organizational, institutional, societal, political, economic, and even religious structures and activities serve to perpetuate racial injustice apart from the question of individual attitudes or intentions. Intended or not, the mechanisms and functions of these entities may serve to perpetuate racism.”

Racism is overt and covert; it is maintained both consciously and unconsciously by all systems in our society—legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political, and military. It confers particular privileges on the dominant group. It also interacts with two other noxious “isms” designed to oppress and exploit large groups of people: classism and sexism. Regardless of educational attainments, vocational abilities, or skill or talent level, the victims of racism are excluded because of the color of their skin.

George D. Kelsey presents a more encompassing definition of racism: “Racism is a faith. It is a form of idolatry. It is an abortive search for meaning. Racism is especially problematical not only because of the peculiar nature of the racist faith, but because it is a ‘Trojan horse’ within organized Christianity and Christian civic communities.”
Kelsey states further that racism cannot exist without the ability to personify itself. There must be some system or apparatus in place to actualize its ideas, for “hands and feet” to carry out its will. This is accomplished through the manipulation and control of such societal institutions as the military, the body politic, and those religious and educational entities that are under the control of the dominant people of any given society.

A rather modern phenomenon, racism rose out of the technical, economic, and political realities of colonialism and slavery, facilitated by the religious intolerance of the Middle Ages. Christians and Muslims attempted to subjugate and enslave each other, seeing one another as infidels.

The dividing line was applied to Africa, with dark-skinned people being the out group, not because of their skin color, but because they were thought to be without religion, morals, or law. The fact that Africans were not White was not the primary issue at that time. Africans were enslaved because they were neither Christian nor Muslim. This enslavement was sanctioned by the Catholic Church; in the fifteenth century Pope Nicholas V issued a papal bull permitting Portuguese slave traders to enslave “the enemies of Christ.” This enslavement was to be followed by conversion and emancipation.

The shift from religious intolerance to racial superiority was a gradual one. Shifting political-economical realities in Europe necessitated an evolution in the rationale for slavery, as the Christian-heathen concept was not broad enough to legitimize the economic benefits of slavery. A new justification of slavery was needed, and a convenient explanation was available: the enslaved peoples were Black, and the conquerors were White.

“Since the white people possessed a superior economic and military technology and were therefore able to conquer and enslave people of color, it was a simple matter to explain the superiority of the cultural apparatus in terms of a superior human endowment. In other words, the exploiters read from right to left—from a cultural effect to a natural or congenital cause. Thus modern racism emerged as a sort of an afterthought, a by-product of the ideological justification of European political and economic power arrangements over colored peoples—the justification of a set of advantages that medieval religious sanctions could no longer sustain.”

Racism serves its devotees by defining their identity in acts of self-exaltation and self-defying pronouncements. Simultaneously, racism seeks to destroy the personhood of members of other races through deprivation and vilification. Ultimately racism, according to Kelsey, involves alienating humans from one another.

The racist holds the belief that he or she is superior, that he or she is the supreme manifestation of humanity and has the right, therefore, to dominate those peoples or races that are inferior. “The fundamental racist affirmation is that the in race is glorious and pure as to its being, and out races are defective and depraved as to their being.” Racism assumes that some humans are subhuman—that they are missing essential elements needed to be classified as fully human and equal in nature to those who possess those elements.

However, “since for Christians all being is from the hand of God, racism . . . calls into question the divine creative action.” By implication, racism questions the creative activity of God. The natural extension of White racism, for example, is that God erred in creating non-White races, or that they are the result of another fall besides that of Adam and Eve. For instance, Blacks, according to one theory, were the result of a union between Cain and an ape in the land of Nod (there is, of course, no scriptural documentation for this).

In further defining racism as a faith, Kelsey quotes H. Richard Niebuhr’s definition of faith: “Trust in that which gives value to the self.” “It is loyalty to what the self values.” Since the racist values his/her own group above all else, he/she gives it his/her trust and is loyal to self above all else. Thus racism is an idolatrous faith system that replaces God in the mind of the racist with self-adulation and worship of race. “The god of racism is the race, the ultimate center of value.”

This racist view of the order of things may lead its devotees to what may appear to be a logical conclusion: genocide (“The only good Indian is a dead Indian”). Ruth Benedict explains: “It is the dogma that the hope of civilization depends upon eliminating some races and keeping others pure.” This is precisely because that which is wrong with the “out group” is its ontology, its very essence and being. Since the “out group” is defective, the problem that their being creates cannot be resolved by mere segregation; extermination is the only solution. Without this option the racist lives with the fear that the “out race” will infiltrate his/her race by miscegenation.

Racism, in order to function, must have the privileges of power. Political action is bound and woven inextricably throughout the fabric of racism. Thus to be truly racist, by definition, one must have, in addition to the hatred of others because they are different, the ability to act, the power to direct the destiny of the “out group.”

African-Americans control no organizations or institutions in this country. The power in the U.S.A. and its institutions is unarguably in the hands of Whites. Thus African-Americans and other minority ethnic peoples resident in America have no power with which to give life to their hatred. They lack the ability to exercise their will to segregate, isolate, or kill with impunity, a component of racism.

African-Americans, in many instances, display a distrust and even hatred of Whites based on actions that have
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historically been perpetrated upon them: segregation, domination, and isolation as social pariahs. However, to theorize that these negative feelings exhibited by African-Americans are the result of "reverse racism" is to make the victim guilty of the crime perpetrated against him or her. This understanding of racism reveals the concept of reverse discrimination for what it is: a fallacy.

This does not mean that African-American attitudes do not take the form of prejudice and bias. Nor does this indicate that Whites alone are responsible for the imperfect relations between the races. It merely indicates that to confront racism in our society and the church, one must fully understand the problem.

Racism in America

The fact that African-Americans remain substandard in quality of life, health care, education, and economic status provides evidence that racism continues to be practiced in the United States in the 1990s.

Donald F. Blake, director of education at the Hartford Insurance Group in Hartford, Connecticut, in an article titled "The Black Male: An Endangered Species?" (published in the Jan. 1991 issue of Message), shares the following statistics: the homicide rate for African-Americans is more than seven times of that for Whites; one African-American male in three will die a violent death before he reaches the age of 30; 23 percent of all African-American males between the ages of 20 and 29 are incarcerated or on parole.

Karl Grossman, in an article titled "Environmental Racism" (Crisis, Apr. 1991), which quoted extensively from a report by the Rev. Benjamin Chavis, Jr., titled "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States," stated the following points:

1. Race proved to be the most influential among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. This represented a consistent national pattern.

2. Communities with the greatest number of commercial hazardous waste facilities had the highest composition of racial or ethnic minorities.

3. Although socioeconomic status appeared to play an important role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities, race still proved to be more significant.

4. Three out of every five African-American and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrollable toxic waste sites.

5. African-Americans were heavily overrepresented in the population of metropolitan areas with the largest numbers of uncontrollable toxic waste sites: Memphis, Tennessee; Houston, Texas; Cleveland, Ohio; and Atlanta, Georgia.

Robert F. Drinan, professor of law at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C., in an article titled "Civil Rights and the Thousand Days of the Bush Administration," points out that while some employment opportunities have opened up for African-Americans, the gap in wages between Whites and African-Americans has not lessened in the past decade. Quoting from "Lost Opportunities," a report issued by the Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, Drinan adds that African-American men in 1991 earned only 74.8 percent of the wages of White men, the present life expectancy for African-Americans has dropped to a four-year low of 65 (White men can expect to live to 72), and the infant mortality rate for African-Americans (17.9 out of 1,000 births) is more than twice that of Whites. Health care is a lingering problem for African-Americans, with 43.8 percent of African-American children receiving inadequate medical attention.

The Wall Street Journal reported that African-Americans and Hispanics are denied mortgage loans at a much higher rate than are Whites with comparative incomes. Forty-one percent of loan applications received from African-Americans were denied, compared with a denial rate of 18 percent for White applicants. Thirty-seven percent of applications made by Hispanics were rejected.

When racism spreads unchecked, it becomes institutionalized, filling entire entities with its pervasive and pernicious effects. Institutionalized racism affects the basis for employment, education, promotion, and the selection of personnel to fill leadership positions. Racism becomes a self-perpetuating and systematic use of power by one ethnic group over another.

Racism in Christianity

Christianity as practiced in Western society is not exempt from the reality of racism. The Christian religion, generally speaking, has absorbed the racist norms of the society in which it is found. Rather than being able to infiltrate and influence the society at large with its unique values, the church seems to have been taken captive by the principles of the world. Unfortunately, this appears to be the case within Adventism.

The existence of racism in the church is so terrible because it is diametrically opposed to the most fundamental principle of Christianity: love. Love is acceptance; racism rejects. Love unites; racism divides. Racism weakens the church and limits or shackles the operation of the Holy Spirit. Christianity in general, and Adventism in particular, suffers under the influence of racial prejudice.

James Dittes, in his book Bias and the Pious, states that although White Christians often denied prejudice or racism, "what people actually said and did remained consistently on the side of exclusion." According to Dittes, there is a "persistent exclusion of black people from situations under the control of whites. . . . We almost always end up with the
same result: the races are separate, and blacks are limited in their access to situations and goods which whites control." 15

On the basis of studies made within the Lutheran community, Dittes contends that there is more racial prejudice found inside Christianity than outside. 16

In explaining this phenomenon, Dittes explores the parable of the prodigal son, found in Luke 15: 11-32, where he finds two forms of religious expression presented—the contractual and the prodigal. Practitioners of contractual religion tend to limit their experience to the terms of a contract: service and obedience. In other words, if a person serves and obeys his/her parents, then he or she can expect to be rewarded, as the older son in the parable expected. If Christians serve and obey God, they expect God’s reward. If not, they fully expect God’s punishment, which they believe they deserve.

Those who practice a contractual form of religion can be referred to as “legalists,” which in this context means to be dependent upon the fulfillment of the claims of the law, or in the words of Dittes, meeting the obligation of a contract. The father in the parable is “impulsive and extravagant in his outpouring of love and forgiveness.” 17 The father is accepting and affirming rather than judgmental and censorious. This is a demonstration of prodigal religion, in which the elements of compassion and forgiveness, acceptance and love, are emphasized over condemnation and faultfinding.

Arnold V. Wallenkampf, in his book What Every Adventist Should Know About 1888, shares valuable insights as to why the Adventist Church found itself in the contractual mode of religious expression rather than the prodigal mode. Central to early Adventist preaching was the imminent, literal, bodily return of Christ and the desire to live in obedience to His commandments—including the Sabbath commandment—while they waited for Him. There was no particular need to preach salvation by faith. The emphasis was on what was omitted in the preaching and teaching of other denominations. “It was an unspoken premise that there is no salvation apart from Christ and His sacrifice for man’s sins. That was axiomatic among them; it needed no specific mention. And so in early Seventh-day Adventist sermons, books, and periodicals there is but scant mention of justification by faith and salvation by grace.” 18

Another suggested reason early SDAs allowed legalistic thinking to predominate within their ranks was that they allowed their critics to order their priorities: “Early Adventists were fiercely attacked by other Christians. To defend some of their beliefs—such as the binding obligation of the Ten Commandments, with the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath—they turned to the Bible. It was easy for them to find Bible texts that firmly tied their faith in Jesus to obeying all the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath commandment... Adventists gradually shifted from love and an intimate fellowship with Jesus to the keeping of God’s law.” 19

Thus because of a highly defensive posture in the teaching and preaching of Seventh-day Adventists, their religious emphasis became contractual rather than prodigal.

The contrast between the two forms of religion is significant to this study for at least one reason: racism is more closely associated with the contractual form of religion than with the prodigal form. A religious experience that is primarily contractual in form seeks to escalate obedience to laws or to the performance of good works to a higher position than those things deserve. There is a reliance upon these commodities to supply salvation an assurance that they cannot deliver.

According to Dittes, contractual religion compresses all that is majestic and mysterious about God and His relationship with humans into a deed or a series of deeds, objects, or rules that aren’t so mysterious or majestic.

In exercising racism, individuals collapse the “unfathomable mysteries of other persons into stereotypes or pictures or labels that can be managed to our benefit, but which bear little resemblance to the real persons. The prejudiced mind and the contractual mind—like the elder brother of the parable—constrict their experience and their world to narrow and familiar boundaries that they can patrol and control.” 20

Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart suggest that there are specific characteristics of the church that make SDAs particularly impressionable in regard to racism, including: a “desire to remain aloof from social problems”; the basic policy relative to separation of church and state; the fact that the race issue was subordinate to the “greater good of the church”; and the fact that “Adventist leaders believed it was to their advantage to accept the racial policies that existed in America and later to adopt them for their own use.” 21

Racism in the Adventist Church

In an attempt to gauge the level of concern in Adventism toward racism, a set of questions was developed and used as the basis for the following interviews. A slightly different set of questions was developed for ministers, conference administrators, and departmental workers. Several different representative groups of Seventh-day Adventists were interviewed: African-Americans attending predominantly African-American churches, Whites in White congregations, African-Americans attending White churches, and Whites attending African-American churches.

Four White pastors, four African-American pastors, and two departmental directors, one African-American and one White, were interviewed. All of the aforementioned interviews were conducted on the telephone and recorded with the knowledge of the interviewees, with the exception of the African-American pastors, whose interviews were
perceived the presence of racism to be real, deep, and strong. They cited the practice of pastoral placement and the perception of the lack of financial support as indicators. All of them were in favor of some type of affirmative action policy in the church, citing the neglect and unfair and unjust treatment that African-Americans have historically received in the SDA denomination.

One interviewee, citing Acts 10:28, 34, in which the Jews “had to be made to be equitable,” saw a biblical precedent for affirmative action. Three out of four had preached a sermon equating racism with sin. Only one characterized himself as having a problem with prejudice, though he had White people attending his church. He attributed his attitude to his upbringing in the South as a victim of racism.

These pastors also viewed the current state of race relations in the SDA Church in an unfavorable light. Their comments included: “distant due to cultural differences and fears”; “not good”; “poor but tolerable”; and “distant; reluctant to unite.” They perceived harmony to exist only in isolated areas. All of the African-American pastors interviewed believed institutional racism to be alive and practiced in the SDA denomination.

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African-American Pastors

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White Pastors

A White assistant pastor in a primarily Caucasian congregation felt strongly that there should not be any differentiation made between African-Americans and Whites. He had preached sermons condemning racism and prejudice. It was very important to this pastor that the leadership reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the denomination. He was convinced that Adventists were not adjusting fast enough to changes in the ethnic mix of the church, which is becoming increasingly multiracial and multicultural.

He believed the local conferences were going to have to educate the pastors as to the importance of recognizing ethnic diversity. He also believed the conferences needed to be persistent in seeking racial/ethnic leadership, of which he saw little happening. This pastor had seen racism in action in the denomination. While a member of a large church in another state, he recalled that an African-American family had requested membership in that church. The membership had voted against this request, stating openly that race was the sole reason. He had also seen what he considered racism in efforts by African-American Adventists to gain greater separation between the races.

He did not consider himself to be racist, and had African-American friends. Regarding affirmative action in the church, this pastor felt that the church leadership needed to reflect the racial/ethnic mixture of the membership. On the other hand, he felt it unfair to ethnic groups just to fill slots because of their ethnicity. “Excellence can be found if searched for,” he said. In regard to interracial dating or marriage, this pastor would prefer his daughter to marry “a good African-American man rather than a mediocre horridly White person.” He would not counsel his daughter against an interracial marriage, but in the terms of the type of things that could hamper their relationship. This pastor contended that the churches of various races needed to work together more.

Another White SDA minister had pastored many years in an area with regional churches and felt that the relations between African-Americans and Whites needed to be closer than they were. He had pastored churches in which African-Americans made up part of the predominantly White congregation. He saw it as “healthy” for the churches to show the true cosmopolitan nature of a world church: “When we are one ethnic group, we lose it.”

He had preached sermons on the equality of the races and had condemned racism, and found that they were “approved very heartily” by the non-White members and a number of the Whites. He felt that racial understanding strengthened relationships within the membership of the church: “If we can’t work in harmony here, we can’t do it in heaven, either.”

As for institutional racism, this pastor had not seen it on the upper echelons of the church, though he had heard of its existence in the denominational structure. It was imperative to him that all races “be identified at all levels of the church, because it is impossible to do the work or prepare for heaven without diversity being there.”

Diversity was important to him, and he felt there was no place in the church for racism. He hoped that he was not a racist. He was willing to try affirmative action because he felt it was “absolutely mandatory” that all members were included in the selection process. “It is not a White church; it is God’s church,” he added.

This pastor saw some dangers in interracial marriage, but had no problems with it as long as the parties involved were aware of the difficulty that society has with it. He didn’t believe that God had any problems with it. A person’s view of race relations revealed his/her spiritual growth, in the view of this pastor.

A White pastor of a semirural, predominantly White church thought things were fine among the different racial
groups in the church. He had heard rumors, however, that there were problems in other areas. He had never preached a sermon on the equality of the races, but had denounced prejudice and racism in sermons. He was not personally aware of institutional racism, but hoped that it didn’t exist, while conceding that it was possible.

It was important to him that the organization represent all races. He had African-American friends and socialized with them when distance was not a factor. He pointed to his actions and words as indicators that he was not racist.

He was in favor of affirmative action and, while aware of problems, felt interracial marriage to be workable. He saw problems with the children of interracial marriages being treated differently. Racial attitudes were an adequate indicator of a person’s spiritual development, in his view.

Another minister pastored a large church that was mainly Caucasian. He viewed race relations between African-American and White SDAs from the perspective of having attended an integrated Adventist academy. He said that there were several Asians and African-Americans attending the school in the early sixties. His family’s relocation to a multiracial community turned out to be a rewarding experience for him. The move helped him to learn about other races and not have a limited view shaped by bigoted people.

Though he had not preached a sermon on prejudice and racism, he had talked, throughout his entire ministry, about everyone being equal in the sight of God. He had not witnessed racism in the church, but personally knew people who had felt it. He saw it as important for all to be represented in leadership, but was not in favor of choosing persons of different race or ethnicity just to have diversity in administration.

He had African-American friends and socialized with them when the opportunity presented itself. He did not view himself as a racist; he believed that a person’s actions were a barometer of whether or not a person was indeed a racist. “If we are Christ’s children, we have to accept each other as His children, and all are equal in His sight, equally loved by God.” If affirmative action could be facilitated in such a way as to not have people kicking and screaming against it, he could support it. To him, prejudice, racism, and bigotry showed a narrow, unacceptable attitude with God.

He felt that as people grew up together and learned to appreciate the differences among them, it would become natural for them to intermarry, unless they had been taught to discriminate against each other. Those considering intermarriage needed to be made aware of the extra challenges to their marital union. He also felt that there was not enough interaction between the African-American and White SDA churches: “We have blinders on, focused on what is important to us; we need to work together, fellowship together, and understand each other better.”

**African-American Members in African-American Churches**

An older African-American layperson raised in the church saw the church as primarily segregated, even though it claimed to be integrated. He attended a large church with fewer than five White members. He saw no progress at all in terms of the relations between African-American and White Adventists in the present system. According to him, the church was at a standstill in terms of race relations, separate though claiming to be integrated.

In the view of this interviewee, the conference administration needed to take the lead in bringing about change in the race relations of the church. He suggested that administrators implement a program whereby White pastors and congregations are counseled on the prevalence of racism in the church. He also felt that there should be an exchange of pastors along or across racial lines. He was unconcerned about interracial dating or intermarriage.

A young African-American Adventist female found relations between the races to be impacted by the region of the country in which one found oneself. She stated that the different areas of the country in which she had lived—the Midwest, the South, and the West—presented variations on the theme of racism. In the areas of the country in which there were regional conferences, there was no contact between African-American and White Adventist churches. This interviewee stated that even though she now resided in an area in which there was an integrated conference structure, there still was no measurable difference in the relations between the groups.

She also stated that there seemed to be resentment on the part of some Whites with whom she had interacted through the local Adventist church school, operated jointly by two African-American churches and a White church. Having belonged to White congregations in the past, she stated that she never heard a White pastor talk about racism or define it as sin.

**White Members in White Churches**

A Caucasian male interviewee said he felt that general relations between African-American and White Adventists were “OK,” though he had never heard sermons that dealt either with the equality of the races or condemned racism as sin. He had friends who were African-Americans. He felt that while there was “some” institutional racism in the church, he did not believe that the administration or departmental leadership of the conference needed to reflect the racial diversity of the conference as a whole. He believed that the best person for a position should be in the position regardless of race and had no confidence in affirmative action, stating it had “gone too far.”

Interracial dating was not right for him, but he would
leave it up to other people as to how they would deal with it. He felt that if someone viewed another race as inferior, this would “hinder” a person’s spiritual development. He also felt that the local SDA churches could develop a better working relationship.

A White female Adventist viewed race relations as problematic. Her church is 99 percent White, and she had never heard, to her recollection, a sermon on the equality of the races or a sermon that condemned racism as sin. While she had acquaintances of another race, it was not important to her that the racial diversity of the membership be reflected in leadership. She was not, in her opinion, a racist. She was for affirmative action. The closer a person was to Christ, the less likely he/she was to be concerned with a person’s color, she felt.

White Members in African-American Churches

A young Caucasian Seventh-day Adventist recently transferred her membership from a predominantly White church to an African-American church. She believed that relations between the African-American and White Adventists could be better. She had heard a sermon condemning racism and prejudice as sin. She admitted that there “probably” was institutional racism in the church, saying that the “White class and the African-American class tend to have their own convocations, women’s retreats—everything seems to be separate—and the offices held to do those things are held by people of the race that is doing it.”

She felt that the denomination’s administration should reflect a diversity of people to make the various groups feel included. She likewise believed that she was not a racist, because she “treats everybody the same.” She didn’t care for affirmative action and didn’t think it had a place in the church.

An older Caucasian Adventist woman viewed the African-American-White relationship through the experience of having been raised in another country that was dominated by Blacks. She was taught by her parents that all people were to be respected and treated right. Intermingling with Black people all her life has helped her to respect them. She had two daughters who were married to African-American men, with her approval.

Though she could not remember hearing a sermon that said racism or prejudice was a sin, she had heard that Christians were not to practice racism, “because Jesus made us all alike.” She had no personal knowledge of institutional racism. While she felt it to be important for the leadership of the church to include all races, she was against any type of affirmative action. She said she was not a racist, because she had found good people in each race and believed that people of various races could work well together.

African-American SDAs in White Churches

An African-American member of a large predominantly White SDA church, this interviewee was a teacher at an Adventist elementary school. She was previously a member of another denomination. Her family was the only African-American family in her church, and she considered race relations in her church to be fine. Dealing with people as individuals and not as “colors,” she said she had “found no problems.” “I have not experienced any prejudice or antagonism because of my race.” Though she did not remember hearing a sermon that dealt with the equality of the races, she had heard sermons that denounced racism, bigotry, and prejudice.

Since her knowledge of the church beyond the local level was minimal, she was not aware of institutionalized racism. She had observed discrimination on the basis of class distinctions of employment, education, and the like. It was important to her that the church have representatives from all races included in leadership. She felt that she was not a racist and socialized with Whites outside the church setting. She supported affirmative action, although she felt methods of implementation sometimes caused problems.

Having a teenage son who had dated White girls and having had stepchildren whose father, her ex-husband, was African-American and whose mother was White, she expressed no problems with interracial dating or marriage if the persons were “emotionally together.” She believed that a person’s racial attitudes had something to do with their spiritual development. To her it was inconsistent to present oneself as a godly person while having racist views and attitudes.

An older African-American male had been a member of the SDA denomination for 17 years. This man had very positive views about race relations in the SDA Church. He was not in favor of affirmative action, stating that it was “not fair to Whites.” By attending a predominantly White church, he felt he could “help Whites with their prejudices” toward Blacks, but could not help Blacks with theirs toward Whites. He felt that though problems had arisen, the majority of people with whom he dealt seemed willing to communicate with one another and to work problems out. He felt that African-Americans were equally to blame for the existing problems in society and the denomination regarding race relations.

He said he was not aware of institutional racism, but could “perceive that there are people who have not grown beyond it.” Although he had never heard a sermon against racism, he had always felt welcome in White churches. The fact that he attended a church with a White membership indicated to him that he was not racist. He had many White friends and associated with them outside of church services. He saw nothing wrong with interracial dating and marriage (his ex-wife was White), if the couple realized that they may
have to invest extra energy to deal with the problems that others have with it. He wished that all churches would work together more.

**Local Conference Departmental Directors**

A Caucasian male departmental director who had served in his position for four and a half years felt that there should be more integration in the churches, but was not happy with the conflicts that he had seen in the church over the issue of race relations. He didn’t like power struggles and felt that some African-Americans seemed to make the race issue a “hobbyhorse.”

He felt that SDAs needed to come together more. He was against interracial marriages because the children tended to face difficulties with acceptance. He had never preached a sermon on the equality of the races or that condemned bigotry, prejudice, or racism as sin. He believed there was racism in the church and felt bad when African-Americans faced resistance from other ethnic groups. However, he believed that in America African-Americans had excelled. He found it unpleasant, though, when African-Americans complained that they hadn’t had the same chances, or allowed racist feelings to surface in conversations.

He believed that the leadership needed to reflect diversity because it is a world church. He didn’t have any African-American associates, nor did he consider himself a racist. Though he sometimes “demonstrated racism,” he was wrestling with it. He did not favor affirmative action, feeling that the best person for the job should get the job. He believed that cultural mores and norms had made it difficult for African-Americans and Whites to work together.

He had grown up in an area in which he had to drive 80 miles to see African-American people, and believed the color of the heart rather than the color of the skin to be the criterion by which people should be judged.

A Black departmental director had held his current position for four years. He believed that African-Americans in the regional conferences viewed race relations in the church differently than African-Americans in the integrated conferences. He felt that African-Americans were more suspicious of Whites, while Whites didn’t even think about African-Americans until they came in contact with them. Also, that there was tension between African-Americans and Whites, but that this tension was reduced the more the racial groups came into contact with one another.

He saw things from the pragmatic standpoint of the church not being perfect, saying that Adventists had gotten better over the years in terms of their racial dealings. While pastoring, he had never preached a sermon on the equality of the races, though he had preached that bigotry, prejudice, and racism were sinful practices. He did believe that there was institutional racism in the church, which reflected society.

He considered decision-making power to rest almost exclusively in the hands of Whites and felt it extremely important that the leadership of the church reflect the racial composition of the church. He had no White friends, but did not consider himself a racist.

He was in favor of affirmative action giving preference to qualified minority racial/ethnic groups. He saw nothing wrong with interracial marriage, but recognized problems, obstacles, and barriers to a successful marriage. He felt that as people of different races interacted, their racial views would be. He suggested the need for developing strategic methods of working together.

**General Conference Personnel**

Warren S. Banfield, an African-American SDA pastor, served for 12 years in the General Conference as director of the Regional Department and then as director of the Office of Human Affairs. The Regional Department served as a forum for the African-American presidents of regional conferences to promote their needs at the General Conference level, allowing the African-American membership to work in a united manner and put pressure on the denomination for Black SDA causes.

According to Banfield, as the church carried on its program of evangelization in large urban communities in the U.S., increased diversity began to appear in the church. However, the church had no mechanism to deal with the problems that arose. When in the seventies the Regional Department at the General Conference was closed at the request of the Black presidents, the Office of Human Affairs was inaugurated at the GC to address matters of diversity in the church.

Though positive about the future of race relations in the church, Banfield believed that “as long as we are on this earth there will be racial problems, and how the church deals with them is important to its success.” Under Banfield’s direction a plan was developed to help educate the members of the denomination about racial tolerance. Unfortunately, said Banfield, that program became “the best-kept secret of the church.”

Rosa T. Banks, Ed.D., a former college professor and administrator, and director of the Office of Human Affairs since 1988, said the office has been adversely affected by severe cutbacks in funding and personnel, as mandated by the process of trimming the costs of operating the church at all levels. Her staff has been cut from five people to one. She also serves as associate director of the department at the North American Division level.

Banks viewed Adventism as “mirroring society at large.” and therefore felt that “some of the same values that
are found in society are found in the church.” According to Banks, any “upsurge in racial tension in the society . . . is more exalted in the church.” She recognized these racial tensions to be the work of “the enemy.”

Banks pointed out that there was no specific program in place in the denomination to deal with racism, although her department attempts to address it. She cited the need for a proactive program that confronts racism, and looks forward to developing such a program, using resources and personnel outside the General Conference office staff. At present the program consists of emphasizing such things as Humanity Day and Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, while emphasizing love and unity.

Banks pointed to a sense of denial at the top: “People don’t want to address it [racism].” She felt that “most White older SDA ministers do not have a grasp of the sociological issues that affect the church, although the younger ministers seem to have a better understanding of this issue.” Banks conceded that Adventists were doing better, attempting to mix more, and that the employment profile was no longer “lily-White” at the top.

E. E. Cleveland, retired GC Ministerial Association secretary and teacher of evangelism at Oakwood College, has had rich experience as an evangelist, having held public meetings on every continent in the world. Cleveland saw Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White as the basic guidelines for race relations in the church: “Jesus taught that race is not the major factor in the qualification for the kingdom of God. The disciples were slow to learn the lesson, and Jesus actually took them into the ghetto of Samaria to help them deal with their racism.”

Cleveland emphasized that Christians needed to treat all people as equal family members, with agape love, goodwill, toward all persons. He believed that prejudice had to be educated out. Cleveland expressed a positive stance toward the future of race relations in Adventism, citing improvements in this area over the years.

Interview Summary

These interviews were of value because they revealed a cross section of attitudes among various groups in the SDA denomination. Although limited in number, the author believes that they are representative of what would be found on a broader scale.

The interviews indicated that a large segment of the African-American clergy is disenchanted with the current state of race relations, feeling that there is racism in the SDA Church. They are in favor of affirmative action in terms of job placement within the church. While only one of these African-American pastors openly admitted being prejudiced, the African-American ministers in the Northern California Conference who were interviewed have little to no dealings with White SDAs, either clergy or laity. They did not express a desire to interact or to intermingle with them.

Their perception seems to be that Whites are responsible for racial problems in the church and that it is their responsibility to initiate a change in the sad state of race relations. They felt that Whites are not willing to share the decision-making process, keeping all the real power to effect change to themselves. There is an emerging hostility between African-Americans and Whites, and these African-American pastors seemed to take a proactive stance in regard to addressing racism.

White pastors claimed little personal knowledge of any race problems in the church and were quick to characterize themselves as not being racists. In fact, none of the interviewees would admit to being racist, although one said that he sometimes acted in a racist way. All of the White pastors felt it important for African-Americans and other racial ethnic groups to be reflected in the leadership of the organization. Only one of them was in favor of affirmative action being used in the church to achieve parity or equal representation in administrative positions.

African-American laypeople also seemed disappointed with the status of race relations in the denomination. Some saw no progress for many years, and a majority felt the racial climate to be cold. Some just didn’t want to be bothered with White folk at all. Some Blacks, however, saw positive things in the area of race relations in the denomination.

Whites, both clergy and laity, had a more positive view. Some, as members of African-American churches or of churches that are mainly White, felt that there were no problems, while others sensed a deep division. While most African-Americans were in favor of some type of affirmative action, the majority of Whites interviewed, even those who attended a predominantly African-American church, were quick to denounce it.

Apparently African-Americans and Whites are not talking to each other about the perceptions of racism in the church. Both groups are viewing the same situation from their own experiences, and there is a need to open dialogue on the subject. Many people not included in these interviews felt that the state of race relations in the SDA denomination is negative, while many feel positive about the future.

African-Americans:
Organizing to Face Racial Separation

Compared with churches that chose complete separation, the African-American segment of the SDA denomination took a different approach to the problem of discrimination and segregation.

It is fair to say that the Black Adventist leadership early on agitated for total and complete integration. Failing to achieve that goal prior to the 1940s because of the near
monolithic resistance of White leaders and the general membership, many African-American SDAs accepted a partial separatist status as a means of working successfully for the Lord among their own people. This idea was first presented as early as 1929 by J. K. Humphrey, but was rejected by White leadership. By 1944, however, things had changed.

The difference between 1929 and 1944 was that with the passing of time and with the intense evangelistic efforts of Black SDA evangelists, there were now more Black people in the denomination. These people desired to make their presence felt.

According to excerpts from a lecture presented by Roy Branson on March 29, 1974, at Loma Linda University, entitled “Minorities in the Church,” many Blacks had the benefit of higher education and organized themselves to present to the General Conference leaders in Washington, D.C., a petition titled “Shall the Four Freedoms Function Among SDAs?”

This large group of African-American SDA ministers and laypeople met with J. L. McElhany, president of the General Conference. Interestingly enough, their petition did not request the organization of Black conferences; it recommended the eradication of discrimination at all Adventist institutions. They also asked for a full accounting of the money that Black people were contributing to the denomination and requested that their Black leaders be treated with courtesy.

The denomination’s response, not exactly what Black ministers and laypeople expected, was a proposal to formulate segregated units of organization, and thus were born the Black conferences. It is important to emphasize that the formation of Black conferences was proposed by the White leadership as a response to Black SDAs’ request for integration.

In the main, African-American Adventists have always desired to follow what they consider to be the model of the Bible when it related to race relations among Christians. However, lacking full and complete inclusion, Black SDA leadership has made the best of the situation. They settled for “self-determination” and have opted to take full advantage of the separation that was foisted upon them by White leadership.

Viewing it as a natural progression of the current situation, many within Adventism have promoted further separation in the form of Black unions, which are the next unit of management above the local conference. In the late 1970s the regional conference presidents appealed to the General Conference to establish two Black union conferences, to which the local regional conferences would belong. The request was voted down. Since then the regional union concept has not been vigorously promoted.

Of current importance to the African-American SDA Church is the Black Caucus. The caucus, made up of the presidents of the regional conferences, along with the editor of Message magazine, the president of Oakwood College, and others, meets regularly to discuss relevant concerns of the Black church and to monitor and report on the state of race relations within the denomination. What is missing, though, is a “national caucus” of African-American SDAs that is constitutionally mandated to work to secure full and complete integration within the denomination.

**Acknowledging the Existence of Institutional Racism**

The first step in improving race relations in the SDA Church is for the denomination to acknowledge that there is a serious problem. In regard to racism in the SDA denomination, there is a strong sense of denial. This is because the church has never, in its publications or programs, admitted to the existence of racism within its confines, nor has it devised programs or strategies to deal effectively with racism.

Before there can be a change in behavior, there first must be an acknowledgment that there is a problem. There needs to be a mature inquiry and a straightforward diagnosis and prognosis of the malady. This process has been missing within Adventism on any broad scale. One reason is that there is pain involved in this process, the pain of admitting that the “true” church has been “untrue” with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To avoid this pain, the SDA denomination has engaged in a form of self-deception in the field of race relations. Leaders and administrators throughout the church have avoided addressing this issue effectively, thus weakening the witness of this denomination.

**Better Communication**

A serious hindrance to solving the race problem is communication, or lack of it. When people fail to have meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas, stereotypes and myths are allowed to proliferate and adversely affect the relationship. Where there has been little communication between racial groups, avenues of interaction must be cultivated.

To construct a culture in which racial reconciliation can thrive, White Adventists need to be educated as to the lifestyle and culture of Black Adventists (Blacks are familiar with White culture just by living in the majority-dominated society). When Blacks and Whites truly begin to learn to dialogue with one another, the ground will be set for change to take place. Such an understanding is important for pastors, teachers, and administrators as they fulfill their roles as change agents for racial reconciliation.

Cross-racial communication can inspire an atmosphere of unity and wholeness, which will bring the denomination into a truly biblical position relative to race relations. Unless SDA Blacks and Whites risk changing the focus of race relations in this church, the status quo will remain intact. Ethnic and racial groups will continue to lose confi-
dence and trust in the denomination, and Whites will continue to embrace the mistaken view that all is well.

Strategies for Fostering Racial Reconciliation in Adventism

Following are suggestions by which the Seventh-day Adventist Church may move toward the objective of being a racially inclusive denomination.

1. **Editorials.** An editorial team can be composed to write editorials for the major publications of the church, such as the Adventist Review and Ministry, and to other magazines that have a large Adventist readership, such as Spectrum and Adventist Today. The purpose of the editorial team would be to challenge the church to move toward a new reality in the area of race relations by keeping the issue public within the church.

2. **Working together.** In cities and towns in which there are SDA churches of different ethnic groups, the churches can enter into joint projects and enterprises, such as evangelistic series or health fairs. This would allow them to become acquainted with each other in a working capacity.

3. **Pulpit exchanges.** Pastors of African-American and White churches can exchange pulpits and preach on multiculturalism or some related Bible subject.

4. **National symposium on race.** A national SDA symposium on the state of race relations in the SDA denomination could meet annually to review accomplishments in creating the new reality of a nonracist church.

5. **Children’s programs.** Since most people receive their views on race at an early age, a national program to educate children regarding the value of all races and persons may be designed for the Sabbath school.

6. **Sabbath school quarterly materials.** The General Conference Sabbath School Department should devise lessons for a biblical study of race relations to be used for all levels of the Sabbath school.

7. **Budgeting and funding.** Various entities of the denomination—the General Conference, North American Division, unions, and local conferences—should fund programming for the purpose of educating the members regarding racism.

God has high expectations of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, the church has not yet met the goal of being a totally inclusive body, even though Adventism is making strides in that direction. It is hoped that the information presented herein will provide valuable assistance in creating a church with a new vision of itself as a model on earth of what God can do when humanity maturely faces its challenges.