

NEWS OCTOBER 9, 2015

Why Adventists Participate in UN and Ecumenical Meetings



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By Ganoune Diop, director, public affairs and religious liberty department, General Conference

Seventh-day Adventist believers shower me with questions when they learn that I have represented the Adventist Church in the United Nations and at meetings of

Christian ecumenical organizations.

“How exactly do Adventists view Christian unity, interfaith relations, and ecumenism?” they ask. “Why do Adventists choose to accept and maintain only observer status and not membership among Christian ecumenical organizations? Why do Adventists choose to mingle with other Christians and non-Christians while abstaining from becoming members of organized Christian and religious ecumenical bodies?”

My answer is simple: It is legitimate for all people of goodwill to unite to save lives, to protect lives, and to affirm the importance and sacredness of life. It is even urgent for all people to partner to make this world a better place for all human beings, contributing to better health, education, and humanitarian work in all dignity, freedom, justice, peace, and fraternity.

How to Relate to Others

Seventh-day Adventist Church cofounder Ellen G. White offers practical advice in the art and science of relating to Christians from other denominations. Here are three pieces of advice.

- “Do not denounce other denominations. When some who lack the Spirit and power of God enter a new field, they commence denouncing other denominations, thinking that they can convince the people of the truth by presenting the inconsistencies of the popular churches. It may seem necessary on some occasions to speak of these things, but in general it only creates prejudice against our work and closes the ears of many who might otherwise have listened to the truth. If these teachers were connected closely with Christ, they would have divine wisdom to know how to approach the people” (*Testimonies*, Vol. 4, p. 535).
- “We should not, upon entering a place, build up unnecessary barriers between us and other denominations, especially the Catholics, so that they think we are their avowed enemies. We should not create a prejudice in their minds unnecessarily, by making a raid upon them. There are many among the Catholics who live up to the light they have far better than many who claim to believe present truth, and God will just as surely test and prove them as He has tested and proved us” (Manuscript 14, 1887; *Evangelism*, p. 144).
- “We profess to have more truth than other denominations; yet if this does not lead to greater consecration, to purer, holier lives, of what benefit is it to us? It would be better for us never to have seen the light of truth than to profess to accept it and not be sanctified through it” (*Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 620).

All the services and activities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church seek to promote life — and life in abundance. In the fulfillment of the church's mission, Adventists mingle with other Christian organizations. In reference to its position in global Christian organizations, the Adventist Church has held observer status at meetings and been open to partnering with other churches in areas that do not compromise its identity, mission, and message. The rule of thumb is to not hold membership in any ecumenical body that eradicates or erases the distinctive Adventist voice in reference to the sovereignty of God the Creator, the Sabbath, and the Second Coming.

In principle, Adventists choose not to be involved in doctrinal alliances with other churches because of the Adventist adherence to a holistic and integrated approach to biblical doctrines and because of the upholding of doctrines that Adventists consider have been sidelined, changed, or forgotten in the course of church history.

That said, unity is not a bad word. Adventists value unity just as God does. Unity is grounded in the existence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Adventists promote unity for the sake of mission, to make Christ known to all people groups, languages, tribes and nations. Christians can also unite to make the world a better place through the promotion of health, education, humanitarian work, and the promotion and protection of human rights.

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But Christians must keep in mind that they will miss their primary calling if they do not unite to uphold and model spiritual values grounded on the everlasting gospel. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are paramount in the Christian mandate and gift to the world. These virtues can best flourish when religious liberty is a reality. Religious liberty for Adventists is the antidote to syncretistic ecumenism and a call to embrace truth with the inalienable freedom of conscience, freedom of religion or belief, freedom to express publicly one's beliefs, freedom to invite others to share one's convictions or to join one's community of faith.

A Closer Look at Ecumenism

A subtle cluster of interrelated topics in the arena of interchurch and interfaith relations that needs much clarity is the issue of unity, visible unity, and ecumenism. Other words are sometimes brought into the conversation as if they mean the same thing. They are collaboration, partnership, and interchurch or interfaith dialogue.

The word "ecumenism" is used differently in various contexts. The word can refer to unity

among the world's Christian churches, but people usually use it to describe a general sense of cordial relations, dialogue, or partnership for a project.

Historically, the first church councils were called ecumenical in the sense that many churches interacted to define orthodoxy. This is not the sense it is given today. Some denominations, such as Catholic and Orthodox churches, use it in this sense because they believe they are the guarantors of orthodoxy. But to label any partnership among Christians as doctrinal ecumenism may be uninformed, uneducated, and farfetched. Spiritual honesty is also needed in identifying and evaluating the real content of interchurch relations.

Defining Unity

The concept of unity has a solid biblical and theological foundation. The blessing God intended to spread through Abraham and through his descendants was destined to all the families of the earth. God wants all His people to experience doctrinal unity.

This never materialized among His covenant people, Israel. The belief in the resurrection of the dead, for example, was not shared by all Israelites. The New Testament mentions that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

Today, unity is understood differently among various Christian churches. For Catholics, for example, unity includes the concept of the communion of saints, meaning both those who are alive and those who are dead.

In the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the communion of saints is described as “the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head.... The participants in that solidarity are called saints by reason of their destination [heaven] and of their partaking of the fruits of the Redemption.”

With this example in mind, global church unity could only be a reality if all Christians adopted the Catholic worldview or understanding of reality or if all Catholics gave up their deeply held beliefs.

Nevertheless, there is much that unites Christians, beginning with the foundation of unity itself.

Unity is dear to the heart of God. The whole plan of salvation demonstrates God's determination to unite His divided and dispersed family, which He created in His image. Unity is grounded in the being of God who is Trinity: a unity in Trinity.

Jesus' death was purposed to gather people into one. In John 17, Jesus prayed for unity for the sake of mission so that the world might believe. The Holy Spirit was given to seal the unity in mission.

Adventist Contributions to Unity

Adventists join God in all that God is doing in the world for its salvation. God evangelizes (Galatians 3:8), so do we. God is committed to unite the whole world under the lordship of the Savior Jesus Christ. We join God to fulfill His purposes to lift up God the Son so that the world might be saved.

Adventists are committed to call all peoples to fix their eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1). They remind all Christians of what constitutes a core confession since Apostolic times and is also present in the earliest Christian creed: the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The principle that informs Adventists' relations to other Christians has two inseparable aspects: truth and religious freedom. Adventist Church cofounder Ellen G. White underscored this in

The Acts of the Apostles, writing: "The banner of truth and religious liberty held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God's witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands. The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His Word. We are to receive this Word as a supreme authority. We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men." (pages 68, 69).

More fundamentally, Adventists understand their mission as their name intimates, that of highlighting the truth of the Second Coming as the hope of the world to finally embrace freedom from death and from evil, bringing with it justice and peace. These convictions are the reasons that Adventists emphasize the Second Coming and on a message of healing.

Adventists understand the words of Jesus calling His disciples "salt and light" (Matthew 5) to also apply to them.

Every aspect of Adventist engagement with any institution, agency or organization, whether ecclesiastical or political, is predicated primarily upon the reason for the existence of the church: bringing hope to humankind entangled in all kinds of evil. To fulfill this mission, Adventists participate in Jesus' method: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their

good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them to follow Him" (*Ministry of Healing*, page 143.)

Jesus served people, healed them, and fed them with no strings attached. He made them know and feel they were free to choose their future with or without Him. Freedom of conscience matters to Him. Without this freedom no covenant is genuine. This is because love cannot be forced.

Adventists and Interchurch Relations

Adventists recognize other Christians as genuine members of the body of Christ. But Adventists do not hold formal structural membership in ecumenical organizations primarily for freedom of religion purposes. Membership in an ecumenical body would limit the freedom to share one's convictions with everyone else and thereby jeopardize a universal end-time mission, as Adventists understand it.

Adventists are not part of the ecumenical organizations that require membership, but they do enjoy guest or observer status at meetings.

Partnership with other Christian denominations is in accordance with the Adventist Church's view of other Christians. White, writing about temperance, said this about leaders in other denominations: "In other churches there are Christians who are standing in defense of the principles of temperance. We should seek to come near to these workers, and make a way for them to stand shoulder to shoulder with us. We should call upon great and good men to second our efforts to save that which is lost" (*Testimonies*, Vol. 6, page 110).

In reference to prayer, White said: "Pray for and with ministers of other denominations. Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men, for whom Christ is interceding. A solemn responsibility is theirs. As Christ's messengers, we should manifest a deep, earnest interest in these shepherds of the flock." (*Testimonies*, Vol. 6, p 78).

In accordance with the above counsel, the General Conference, the administrative body of the Adventist world church, **has inscribed in the *General Conference Working Policy*** that church leaders "recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and ... hold in high esteem the Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ."

Rationale for Rejecting Ecumenism

Unity, though clearly willed by God, is not the supreme value. Loyalty to God's truth takes precedence.

The Adventist Church and several other denominations that have not joined organized ecumenical bodies object to ecumenism as doctrine or as an objective to fuse Christian churches into one world church, leading to loss of distinctive denominational identity. Also, Adventists and other believers do not adhere to syncretistic alliances that would diminish the importance and weight of truth, especially when beliefs in some churches may not be in harmony with revealed biblical truth.

The main concern of Adventists is that they will be restricted from sharing their convictions with every person regardless of religious or philosophical persuasion. This is fundamentally an issue of religious freedom. Christians cannot question the right to freedom of religion or belief while even the secular world has accepted this fundamental human right and value.

Conclusion

While considering other Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ, the principle that prevents the Adventist world church from being a member of an organized union of churches such as the World Council of Churches is that of religious freedom. Religious freedom implies the unrestricted right to share one's religious convictions and the right to invite others to join one's own Christian tradition without being accused or labeled as a proselytizer.

Seventh-day Adventists support Christian unity as they join the Triune God who is determined to gather people He created in His image. The purpose of the whole plan of salvation is the restoration of God's image and the gathering of those He saves. Unity is grounded in God. It was for this purpose Jesus Christ came to earth to unite all the families of the earth.

Doctrinal unity among Christian churches is elusive and unreachable unless churches lose their distinctive beliefs and join one of the church traditions, be it Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal or Adventist.

Freedom of religion or belief is a non-negotiable gift of God that should characterize the freedom of every Christian person or community to share his or her convictions with others, to invite others to join his or her Christian tradition. Obviously, for the sake of mission Christians can join to witness to Christ to a world that needs Him most urgently.

Ganoune Diop was elected director of the public affairs and religious liberty department at the General Conference at the General Conference session in July 2015. He became the department's associate director and the Adventist Church's representative for interfaith relations and liaison to the United Nations in 2011.

27 Ways Adventists Can Encourage Christian Unity

Here are 27 aspects of Christian unity in which Adventists may legitimately participate.

1. Unity in the confidence of the Christian vision of God, a Supreme Being who is well disposed towards human beings, a God who is love and who loves the human persons He created in His image. Unity in the conviction of being loved by God.
2. Unity in the necessity of having the mind of Christ.
3. United in shared identity: A new humanity recreated in the image of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father, through the Holy Spirit. Theological unity about **fully embracing God's identity revealed in Scripture as Trinity.**
4. Unity in one **baptism in the name of the Father of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**
5. United in bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5).
6. United in the joy of Jesus, the one Jesus makes complete in all His disciples of yesterday and of today.
7. Unity in understanding that our primary calling is to love God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves.
8. United in participating in God's mission, which consists of witnessing to Christ as Lord and Savior. Unity of purpose in God's Mission.
9. United in understanding metaphysical reality and the spiritual controversy between good and evil, Christ and Satan.
10. United in resisting evil and in abstaining from harming others.
11. United in the experience of the tribulation, the kingdom, and the patient endurance that are in Jesus (Rev 1:9).
12. Unity for humanitarian work or unity to help improve the living condition of our neighbors is an expression of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in humanity.
13. Unity to promote temperance has been highly recommended by the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
14. Unity in the promotion of freedom, equality, and fraternity is part of the international mandate ratified by the United Nations.
15. Unity in the determination to uphold the dignity of every person, unity of values, is mandatory for those who believe that human beings are created in the image of God according to His likeness.
16. Unity in being committed to non-violence is part of the refusal to violate people's

right to peace and to the integrity of all the dimensions of their personhood.

17. Unity in working for peace, justice, and reconciliation is a mandate Jesus gave to all His disciples in His famous discourse in the Sermon on the Mount. Unity in peace making.
18. Unity in serving communities to better the living conditions of neighbors. Unity in the solidarity with the human family is an incontrovertible part of the Christian gospel. Love of God and love of neighbor express itself in tangible or concrete ways in assisting people who are economically challenged.
19. Unity in alleviating human suffering and restoring people to comprehensive health is the gospel in action. It was part of Jesus ministry as He not only proclaimed the good news but also made the good news a reality by healing people. Unity in working for comprehensive health care and for the upholding of human dignity is part of the restoration ministry that is the goal of salvation.
20. Unity in promoting temperance is part of the education to responsibility.
21. Unity in promoting life. **This type of unity can draw a broad consensus and bring people of goodwill and compassion from various philosophical and religious backgrounds.**
22. Unity in upholding **the sacredness of each person.**
23. Unity of the churches in mission for the sake of uplifting Jesus Christ before the world seems to find consensus among Christians of various denominations. The miracle of partnership in mission has already a solid foundation among historic and more recent denominations. This unity for the purpose of witnessing to Christ should not lead to downplay of doctrinal differences.
24. Unity in practicing and preaching the teachings of Jesus Christ (Beatitudes).
25. Unity in being protected and cared for by God (The Lord's Prayer).
26. Unity in the rejection of the practice of partiality (James 2).
27. Unity in being submitted to God and against conflicts, violence and wars (James 4)

6 Danger Zones for Unity

Compromise for the sake of unity would mean loss of identity in these six areas. Adventists are resolved not to sacrifice their fundamental convictions for the sake of unity.

1. United in being grounded on Scripture, as revelation of God's character and absolute will. Epistemological unity. The centrality of the Bible as a source of revelation of God's character, will, and purposes is paramount for Seventh-day Adventists.
2. United in our **allegiance to biblical truth as the sole source of doctrines:** Doctrinal Unity.
3. United in living and **proclaiming the three angels messages:** To fear God, to give Him glory, and to worship Him with uncompromising allegiance (eschatological prophetic

unity).

4. United in fellowship with the Heavenly High Priest. Adventists have been particularly entrusted with the truth of the high priestly function of Jesus Christ.
5. United in the blessed hope of the Second Coming and the expectation of the King of kings and Lord of lords who will bring with Him complete healing, justice, peace, and everlasting fellowship.
6. United in being part of the end-time resistance movement, people determined to worship God alone regardless of what this stand might cost them. This is where religious liberty plays a key role. Religious liberty is an antidote to ecclesiastical ecumenism not based on truth and freedom. Adventists cherish the fundamental freedom of religious liberty, which includes the freedom to promote and propagate one's own faith to everyone else, anywhere and at any time, without coercion, intimidation, or manipulation.

Ganoune Diop, director of the public affairs and religious liberty department at the General Conference, served as the church's representative to the United Nations for four years.

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