

## **Seventh-day Adventists**

### **Report of the international theological dialogue between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches**

**Jongny sur Vevey, Switzerland, April 1-7 2001**

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#### **Preamble**

1. This document is a record of the dialogue between representatives of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches held at Jongny sur Vevey, Switzerland, April 1-7 2001. The theme of this dialogue was "The church in the setting of the Reformation heritage: its mission in a world of widespread injustice and ecological destruction".
2. Over many years frequent contact has been made between representatives of the two bodies at annual meetings of secretaries of Christian World Communions. In addition, an exploratory meeting between representatives of the two families was held in Geneva, November 28-29 1999. The present dialogue arises from these contacts, and are inspired by a desire to increase mutual understanding, remove false stereotypes, and on the basis of many commonly-held beliefs, to address the question how we may jointly respond to the claims of justice and equity in a threatened, divided and broken world.
3. We see the present discussion as part of a wider programme of conversations in which each party has separately been engaged. On the Reformed side these include dialogues with classical Pentecostal churches and leaders, the Roman Catholic Church, the Organisation of African Instituted Churches and the Oriental and eastern Orthodox churches. On the Adventist side, while the conversations have been fewer and more recent, they have included discussions with the Lutherans, Orthodox, and the World Evangelical Fellowship.
4. The churches of the Reformed tradition, while rooted in Scripture, owe their more immediate origins to the Swiss/French wing of the

Reformation. Their doctrines and polity were fashioned by a variety of theologians and, from the outset, were subject to development, not least in relation to the diverse socio-political environments into which they moved. The family comprises churches which espouse presbyterial or congregational church order, together with a number of united churches in which the two polities have been blended (in some cases with transconfessional ingredients as well). Through colonisation and the modern missionary movement, the Reformed have spread to many parts of the world where they have adapted themselves in various ways to cultural and social contexts. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational), which represents some 75 million members and 214 churches in 106 countries, was formed in 1970 as a result of the coming together of the World Presbyterian Alliance (1875) and the International Congregational Council (1891).

5. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a Scripture-based, Christ-centred church, which was organised in 1863. It emerged from the mid-century movement which looked for the imminent return of Christ. From a small beginning (3,500 members when organised) the Church has now spread to over 200 countries and has (in 2001) a baptised membership of more than 12 million, representing a total Adventist community of over 25 million people. The Church is especially strong in some Latin American countries, Africa, and the Far East. Adventists operate a school system of some 6,000 institutions from primary to university levels, comprising one million students, as well as a large network of health institutions. It is also well known for its Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and organised support for religious liberty.
6. From the above brief descriptions it will clearly be seen that the two communions represented in this dialogue embrace people of diverse cultural, linguistic, and national origins. It should further be noted that the preponderance of their members now reside in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australasia.
7. Every inter-church conversation has its own ethos and agenda, specific to the parties involved. Happily, Adventist-Reformed relations have not been blighted by anathemas, though they have been inhibited by misunderstandings. In this dialogue we sought to face and dispel some of these, and to articulate the common doctrinal ground on which we stand; and this with a view to proclaiming the eternal gospel in today's needy world.

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### **Common ground**

8. The Adventists and the Reformed acknowledge as brothers and sisters all who confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Among the many features we hold in common are the following:
  - We accept the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the supreme witness to God's saving grace in Christ.
  - We believe in the triune God.
  - We believe that God became truly human in Jesus Christ.
  - We believe that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God reconciles the whole created order to himself. By the work of Christ, God's holiness is honoured and our sins forgiven.
  - We believe that God calls all people to a new and better life.
  - We believe that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to

- proclaim the gospel of salvation to all people.
- We believe that Christ calls us to work to bring hope, healing, and deliverance from spiritual and economic poverty.
  - We believe we stand in the succession of those who, through the ages, have faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.
  - We believe that the Lord's Supper is integral to the church's worship and witness.
  - We acknowledge our debt to the Reformation with its biblical emphasis upon salvation by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*) in Christ alone (*solus Christus*).
  - We welcome conversations with other Christian churches concerning doctrine and mission.
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### Mutual Misunderstandings and Clarifications

9. Despite the considerable degree of common ground, the Reformed and the Adventists have frequently misunderstood one another and viewed each other with suspicion. The mutual clarifications specified below should help to clear the path to further Adventist-Reformed mutual reflection. What is clear is that both families have experienced a degree of doctrinal development as they have sought to bear witness to the gospel in ever-changing, diverse socio-intellectual environments.

### Adventist Clarifications

10. Adventists have grown in their understanding and articulation of doctrine. Therefore, some expressions of their teachings found in earlier publications do not accurately represent their present positions. However, some criticisms levelled against them derive from misinformation and have never been true. In each of the following paragraphs, we express a frequently-asked question ("Q") followed by a brief Adventist reply ("A").
11. **Q:** Do Adventists set dates for the second coming of Jesus?  
**A:** The Seventh-day Adventist Church was organised in 1863, and has never set such dates. It has officially and publicly rejected all such practices, as with attempts to attach significance to the year 2000. Occasionally, an Adventist preacher or writer may have set or implied dates for the second Advent, but they have acted without official endorsement or authority.
12. **Q:** Do Adventists believe in Christ's complete atonement on the cross?  
**A:** Adventists believe that the death of Christ on the cross provided the once-for-all atonement for sins, all-sufficient in its efficacy. Their distinctive view of the high priestly ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary teaches that he is applying the ongoing benefits of his atonement, not adding any value to it.
13. **Q:** Are Adventists legalists?  
**A:** Adventists hold to the Reformation principle of grace alone, faith alone and Christ alone. They teach and preach that as saved people the Lord calls all Christians to holy living. This includes obedience to the Ten Commandments, with Sabbath observance; however, they understand obedience to be the result, not the ground, of salvation.
14. **Q:** Do Adventists add to the canon of Scripture?

**A:** Adventists believe that the biblical gift of prophecy was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G White. They regard her writings highly as providing ongoing counsel, devotional material, and biblical reflection. However, they hold firmly to the principle of *sola scriptura*, teaching that the Bible is the rule of faith and practice that tests all other writings, including those by Ellen White.

15. **Q:** Do Adventists believe that they are the only ones who will be saved?

**A:** No. Further, although they understand themselves to be given a particular mission, this is within the larger context of God's activity through many agencies. Their *Working Policy* states: "We recognise every agency that lifts up Christ before man as a part of the divine plan for the evangelisation of the world" (O100).

16. **Q:** Do Adventists neglect the social implications of the gospel?

**A:** Adventists have always been engaged in social betterment as part of their understanding of the gospel. They have been reluctant, however, to engage politically in challenging societal structures.

### Reformed Clarifications

17. Understandably, the Adventists raised the question of predestination. In some cases the perplexity arises because "predestination" is mistakenly confused with "determinism." The biblical doctrine of predestination arises from Paul's grateful, retrospective confession that his standing before God was not of his own doing, but resulted from God's gracious, prior call. "Predestination" is thus a *religious* term which is not to be elided with "determinism" (as the latter term appears in, for example, moral philosophy, where Reformed participants may be found on both sides of the determinist-libertarian debate).
18. As to the perplexity caused by "double predestination," it must be admitted that this doctrine has given rise to a view of God as determining the eternal fate of individuals from the foundation of the world in accordance with his "inscrutable will," with some destined for heaven, others for hell. It should be remembered that Calvin and others did not place election to salvation on an equal footing with "preterition" ("passing by"). Subsequently, there was a hardening of this position whereby a relentless logic was ill-advisedly applied to a religious doctrine, to the extent that in some circles mission was inhibited because the free offer of the gospel was proscribed. Under the influence of the Evangelical Revival, further modifications were made, to the extent that some Reformed Christians can nowadays not only envisage a *rapprochement* with Arminians, but can happily live with them in united churches. There is thus a broad consensus to the effect that God's electing grace is not to be construed fatalistically, but in the context of God's indiscriminating love whereby *all* are called to salvation, to which call they may make their own, enabled, response.
19. It became clear to the participants in the Reformed-Methodist dialogue that the historic dispute over Calvinism and Arminianism need not be church-dividing. This conclusion resulted from the recognition that while Calvinists were seeking to honour God's sovereignty in salvation, Arminians were no less concerned to uphold human responsibility before God.
20. Adventists have queried the apparent relative lack of interest in eschatology (construed as the "doctrine of the last things") in

Reformed theologies. While Reformed theologians have, down the centuries, written widely on this theme, it is true to say that on the whole they have not, traditionally, majored on it; nor has eschatology been central in the piety of Reformed Christians. It may even be that distaste for more excitable millenarian claims has constituted an inhibiting factor in this connection.

Nevertheless, eschatology is not to be played down - least of all in the present dialogue in which we are pondering our witness in relation to God's new heaven *and earth*.

21. Some Adventists challenge Reformed churches in certain regions to examine, and where necessary to adjust, the balance of gospel proclamation and socio-ethical witness, the latter being perceived as taking precedence over the former instead of being informed by it. While there are some grounds for this challenge (which have been shared for a long time by many Reformed churches), the Reformed respond by underlining their conviction that since salvation concerns the whole person, in the whole of society, the proclamation of the Word cannot be divorced from the practical outworking of it in terms of the ideals of the kingdom of God.
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## **Mission**

22. As representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we are called to bear witness to the gospel in a world characterized by a diverse set of opportunities, challenges, and problems. Among the problems, we identify the following: social and economic injustices; ecological destruction; and racial, ethnic, gender, and religious discrimination. We are deeply aware that we have contributed both directly and indirectly to these conditions. We believe the gospel compels us to respond imaginatively and creatively to these concerns both at a local and global level.
23. We recognise that often there is a real and serious danger that is created by our tendency to dogmatize our perceptions of what God would have us do and be in the world in terms of certain experiences or doctrinal positions. We realise the urgent need for our theologies to go beyond simplistic dichotomies of dividing human experience into secular and spiritual; soul and body; black and white; male and female; rich and poor.
24. These dualities often manifest themselves in setting one against the other or glorifying one at the cost of vilifying the other. For example, we have lived as though nature has to be exploited because it is material and temporal. This is the line of thought that has resulted in a sharp divide in the church's participation in justice and the mission of God in the world. The Adventist and the Reformed representatives concur that such divides are not justifiable, either on the basis of biblical faith or our traditions. We have found that the whole of life is a gift of God that is to be enjoyed and nurtured through faithful stewardship. Therefore, we reaffirm our commitment to joining with God and one another in the ministry of reconciliation.
25. Our approach to the following issues is grounded in our grateful response to the grace of God who creates us, redeems us, and calls us to stewardship. We seek to embrace God's mission in creative, redemptive, and faithful obedience to our call to discipleship. We engage these matters not with the presumption that there can be simple resolution to the injustices that surround us, but with the deep desire to be in solidarity with the

marginalised and hurting. We learn this commitment from the incarnation itself; God's very entrance into and solidarity with the human condition in the person of Jesus Christ.

### **Socio-economic injustice**

26. We have become more aware of the socio-economic challenges that face many of our communities, particularly in the southern hemisphere. The global economy, dominated by multinational corporations and institutions that reinforce the indebtedness of developing nations to developed nations, exacerbates the economic and social hardship experienced by the majority of the inhabitants of the world. This phenomenon is manifest in the following tragedies, among others:

### **Poverty**

We acknowledge the widespread poverty in the world, which is manifest in the lack of access to basic necessities (e.g., food, housing, water, clothing) needed for sustaining a dignified human existence. These consequences of poverty are so egregious that the church needs to become more assertive in confronting these injustices. As Adventists and members of the World Alliance, we acknowledge that we are not as proactive as we should be in addressing these concerns. We see an urgent need and invite our churches to work both individually and, wherever possible, together in alleviating and minimising the effects of this malady.

### **HIV/Aids**

28. We painfully note the devastating effects of HIV/Aids in all parts of the world, particularly in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. This tidal wave of suffering and death, the loss of income, the burden of orphan care, the loss of hope, the desperation inflicting both individuals and communities, and the accompanying social stigma that threatens the dignity of the individual, make it difficult in many instances to deal realistically with the crisis.
29. Compounding the difficulty are the self-serving financial policies and insensitivity of international pharmaceutical companies that prevent many in developing nations from gaining access and benefit from the available medications that would reduce human suffering and prolong life.
30. There is need for our churches to address the disturbing issues related to this epidemic in their theological, ethical, and pastoral dimensions, and this with a view to facilitating the whole church's pastoral care of the infected and the affected. This will include working to influence behavioural changes and responsible lifestyles and grappling with the issue of how our two communions can cooperate in dealing with this issue as we proclaim the gospel.

### **Violence**

31. The ugly head of violence rises everywhere - especially against women, children, and other vulnerable communities. Dictatorships; militarism; racism; industrialisation that pushes people off their land; and racist violence against groups like the Dalit, blacks, and indigenous communities are responsible for a

large share of the wave of ongoing misery of countless multitudes. In addition, many structural adjustment programmes imposed on indebted developing countries have adverse effects upon human and peoples' rights. Such violence and discrimination brutalises and dehumanises people made in the image of God.

### **Ecological destruction**

32. In recent years there has been a global raising of consciousness to the ways in which human beings, particularly from affluent societies in the northern hemisphere, have contributed to the destruction of the environment. Manifestations of this destruction include reduction of valuable biomass (e.g., deforestation, over-harvesting of marine life, and overgrazing), compromises in maintaining eco-diversity balance (e.g., acid rain and use of fossil fuels), and global warming.
33. As Christian believers, we are called to respond to these crises by engaging in the work of healing and reconciliation. The doctrine of creation shapes our understanding of Christian mission in relation to environmental degradation. We view the world as God's good creation; a theatre of God's grace; a gift to be enjoyed and nurtured by God's creatures. Sabbath rest may well be a reminder both of God's providential care of the earth and our responsibility to serve as its creative stewards.
34. In light of the doctrine of creation, we exhort ourselves and other Christians to repent of the sinful ways we have exploited the environment and modify our behaviour accordingly. Positive practical steps that Christians can take on a local level to address these concerns include: recycling, conserving energy, buying ecologically-friendly products, and supporting local conservation groups. Our discussions emphasised that Christians also need to think with global and systemic perspective about their mission. In agreement with a report submitted to the World Council of Churches Central Committee in 2001(Document PR11 3), we call Christians from industrialised countries to recognise that they carry "major moral responsibility for precipitating climate change and therefore must exercise leadership that results in real action to reduce the causes." In addition, we hold that Christians be aware of the relationship of multinational corporations to ecological destruction and refuse to condone business endeavours that benefit industrialised countries to the detriment of developing nations.

### **Prejudices**

35. We recognise that prejudices still persist in many of our societies, including faith-based communities. Wherever they exist, these prejudices constitute a denial of the gospel. In this section we focus on issues of religious freedom and gender which impinge on the holistic proclamation of the gospel.

### **Religious freedom**

36. We recognise that religious freedom is a gift of God and a fundamental freedom that should be promoted and protected.
37. We are concerned by the increasing violations of religious freedom in several parts of the world leading to an increase of intolerance and conflict.

38. We encourage cooperation between our communions: (a) in defending and promoting religious freedom through international agencies, governments, and churches; (b) in organising conferences and symposia to discuss religious freedom issues; and (c) in sharing information and joining in common projects and prayers for those who are persecuted.

### **Gender biases**

39. Women experience discrimination, oppression and exploitation in many forms. We believe the church needs to continue combating gender discrimination. The doctrine of creation teaches that men and women are equally created in the image of God; in the household of faith we are all one in Christ. This theological affirmation needs to be supported by concrete action first in local contexts and then in networking with others from multiple contexts who are also advocates of women and women's concerns.
40. Women constitute a vital and dynamic force within the church. They keep the church active by their numerous contributions. But in many contexts they are excluded from leadership roles and decision-making bodies. The New Testament, by contrast, teaches that women are equal recipients of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and should therefore exercise leadership roles in the church's ministry. Reformed representatives emphasise that this includes the ordination of women to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, whilst admitting that the mere fact of the church's having this commitment does not imply that all gender-equality issues have been resolved. While it is true that, because of differences in biblical interpretation, Adventists do not at present ordain women to the ministerial office, women are occupying increasingly significant leadership roles, including service as local pastors.
41. In the course of our discussions we highlighted the need for: (a) ongoing interpretation of Scriptures pertaining to gender equality; (b) raised consciousness of social evils including prostitution in relation to tourism, *sati* (an Indian term for widow-burning), dowry, female infanticide, female sterilisation, job discrimination; and (c) increased understanding of the particular ways in which gender discrimination is manifest, depending on the particular context.

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### **Conclusion**

42. We are happy to conclude that our conversation has been productive in a number of directions. We have affirmed the common doctrinal ground on which we stand, and we have specified some of the ways in which our teachings have developed over time. We have sought to dispel mutual misunderstandings concerning doctrine. We have eschewed the sectarian spirit, and have not questioned one another's status as Christians. Recognising that the gospel of God's grace concerns the whole of life and the whole of society, we have turned our minds to some of the burning issues of the day. We invite our constituencies to redouble their efforts to work for justice, the eradication of poverty, and the preservation and right stewardship of the created order.
43. In many ways, this conversation was a learning process for both



parties. The Adventists made clear their indebtedness to the historic creeds of the church, and to the Reformation heritage, while the Reformed were impressed by the considerable efforts made by Adventists in education, health, and the cause of religious freedom. It appeared that while the Adventists might do well to reflect further upon socio-political involvement grounded in the gospel, the Reformed might in some quarters question the relative weight they give to evangelism and social witness.

44. In the course of our discussions, it became clear that there is scope for a greater degree of clarification on doctrinal and ethical issues than we have yet achieved. The following topics have emerged as candidates for future consideration, should the sponsoring bodies decide that further Reformed/Adventist dialogue should take place: the interpretation of the Bible; the Sabbath; law and grace; eschatology; the concept of the 'remnant'; the question of church discipline and holy living in relation to secularised societies; the relation of Ellen G. White's writings to the Scriptures; the meaning and implications of "double predestination"; questions concerning worship and polity; the contributions of liberation theologies; and the meaning and significance of Christ's "high priestly ministry."
  45. We have every hope that, were such matters to be pursued, considerable convergence might be revealed. This would lead to increased mutual understanding and acknowledgement of our communions as authentic members of the one church of the Lord Jesus Christ.
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### **Appendix I: List of papers presented**

Seventh-day Adventists: A Profile (William G. Johnsson, Adventist)  
The Apocalypse: God's Answer to the Human Cry for Ultimate Justice (Roy Adams, Adventist)  
Keepers of the Garden: Christians and the Environment: An Adventist Perspective (John T. Baldwin, Adventist)  
Seventh-day Adventists and Religious Freedom - An Aspect of Justice (John Graz, Adventist)  
Protestant Theological Heritage in Seventh-day Adventism (Hans K. LaRondelle, Adventist)  
The Challenges of the Post-Cold War for Protestant Christianity in Latin America (Arturo Piedra, Reformed)  
Church Concerns from the Southern Africa Perspective: A Presentation to the Adventist-Reformed Dialogue (Ruppert Hambira, Reformed)  
Reformed Ecclesiology (Alan Sell, Reformed)  
Women's Concerns from a Dalit Perspective (Nalini Arles, United)  
The Doctrine of Forgiveness and Its Implications for Justice: A Reformed, Feminist, North American Perspective (Cynthia Rigby)

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### **Appendix II: Participants**

#### **Reformed Participants**

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