From Mission Comity to Interdenominational Relations: 
The Development of the Adventist Statement on Relationships
with Other Christian Churches

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In the year 2010, the Christian world, and especially those engaged in mission, will
commemorate one of the major Christian meetings of the twentieth century, the
1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. 1 This conference was undoubt-
edly one of the most important gatherings of the modern missionary movement:
for the first time, a multi-denominational group of more than 1,000 persons represent-
ing global Protestantism met for common strategizing, theological work, and
missiological reflection.

At the same time, Edinburgh 1910 has been called the birth hour of modern
ecumenism, for it is here that the impetus of the nineteenth century missionary
movement began to translate into the beginnings of the Ecumenical Movement
of the twentieth century. In a group representing scores of missionary organiza-
tions and quite a number of distinct church traditions, one prominent issue was
naturally that of missionary cooperation. Some missions, particularly the young
faith missions, were nondenominational altogether, but most organizations con-
ducting work among non-Christians were tied to some denominational body with
its confessions, church polity, and hierarchy. However, given the sheer vastness
of unreached peoples in non-Christian (or at least non-Protestant) environments,
Protestant workers of different societies often cooperated more easily in Africa
and Asia than they would have done in Europe or North America.

Yet there were also very different cases. Between Protestants and Roman Cath-
olics, frequently a veritable rush for mission territories occurred in the hope of
securing areas in which the other would not dare to intrude. However, even when
spheres of influence were recognized by governments, mutual infringements did
happen—as was the case in East Africa until the early 1920s. Even before Edin-
burgh, thoughtful Protestant mission leaders therefore devised the comity prin-
ciple, a missionary type of ecumenism, which implied that Protestant missionary
organizations confined their activities to particular territories in order to leave the
plans of other Protestant missions undisturbed. 2 After Edinburgh, comity agree-
ments became the rule in much of the Protestant missionary world.

1 This text was first presented as part of a public lecture on September 8, 2008 at Newbold
College.

2 The most comprehensive treatment of comity is R. Pierce Beaver, Ecumenical Beginnings in
For Seventh-day Adventists, comity was evidently a difficult issue. On the one hand, they appreciated the modern missionary movement and wanted to be part of it; after all, six Seventh-day Adventists attended the Edinburgh conference. At the same time, Adventists felt that they had the final warning message to bring to the world—and the world, to them, implied both the 'heathen' and Christians of other denominations. How could they, under these circumstances, agree to cooperate with other Christians in dividing territories and enter comity agreements? But even if they did not do so, how were they going to relate to the modern missionary movement and the churches that had sparked it?

This chapter seeks to contribute to an answer to this question by exploring the history of the most important comity statement that Adventists produced in that period (for the text, see the appendix). Beyond its initial goal, this statement ultimately became crucial for Adventist thinking on ecumenism in general; it has been quoted time after time in later Adventist interchurch encounters. However, its origin and effects have not yet been investigated in any study.

The context
The Seventh-day Adventist Church entered the twentieth century as a missionary movement that had expanded to all continents and was about to enter the second third of the world's nations. American Adventist missionaries served in much of Asia and South America; many Europeans were drawn to Africa and the Middle East. In most of these areas, other Christian bodies operated near Adventist mission establishments, and in some regions this fact led to significant friction, often not because the missionaries actively tried to make converts from members of other Protestant societies but because indigenous Adventist members were persuaded about the validity of their faith for their people and thus disrespected the spheres of influences that the Whites either agreed or assumed. In some areas, this led to serious conflicts; in others, Adventists were actively involved in attempts to create agreements or statements to clarify and settle such conflicts.

5 Interestingly, Adrian Hastings argues that Africans seldom liked comity agreements; he reasons that rivalry between different Christian groups 'had at least the merit that it provided Africans with a certain freedom of religious choice and even standards of evaluation to judge each particular missionary package.' See Adrian Hastings, The Church in Africa, 1450–1950 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1994), 421.

The most noteworthy discussions in this regard developed in Asia. Different from Africa, where many mission societies entered late and where there were vast unentered territories even in the early twentieth century, a much greater variety of missionaries had swarmed into the various Asian regions in the century before. This translated into an increased need of coordination between the scores of Protestant societies. Two cases in point were China and India. The National Missionary Council of India produced a comprehensive Statement on Comity among Missions in India in 1916. In China, a Special Committee on Comity was appointed by the China Continuation Committee (the Chinese equivalent to national missionary councils in other countries) in 1917. This Special Committee recommended the Indian statement in a revised form, and by 1922, 115 missions had accepted the statement. Adventists, however, were conspicuously absent from this group.

The second decade of the twentieth century was not only a period of war in Europe and elsewhere; for Adventists, it also signified continuing expansion of missionary activities and attempts at managing this ever-diversifying missionary enterprise. It is therefore not surprising that precisely in this decade the division structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was created, which effectively transferred much of the executive power and operations management to regions outside the United States. Precisely this transfer of authority also played a role in the Adventist response to the issue of comity. In 1917, the Asiatic Division of Seventh-day Adventists dealt with the issue, both in response to the discussions in India and China and because the matter was a pressing one for Adventists altogether.

The making of a statement
The way in which the most important Adventist comity statement developed is remarkable; this is why this study presents a detailed account of this development. The first reference may be found in a letter of the then Asiatic Division Vice-President, Judson S. James, in September 1917, the very year that the Special Committee on Comity in China had adopted its statement. The thrust of this letter is that Adventists felt the need to relate meaningfully to other missions and missionaries. However, in the absence of a confession of faith, a church manual, and a working policy, there was no binding basis on which an Adventist position could be built except elements of a theological tradition and concepts gleaned from Ellen White and the nineteenth century founders of the denomination.

6 Beaver, Ecumenical Beginnings, 81–110 (India) and 111–133 (China).
7 Ibid., 97, 102–109.
8 Ibid., 124.
9 J. S. James—'Dear Brethren,' September 18, 1917, General Conference Archives of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring (hereafter GCA) 21/1919/Comity.
James not only stressed the importance of the ‘very large and important’ comity question; he emphasized in particular that such a text could not constitute a definitive statement. While he encouraged church leaders to send their input because ‘the Asiatic Division should make some sort of a declaration of principles held by our people regarding the Comity of Missions,’ such a declaration, according to James, had to embody exactly this—not fixed rules, but principles. The Adventist non-creedal stance inherited from the nineteenth century Restorationist Movement certainly contributed to this hesitancy in crafting a binding text.10

At the same time, James’s cautious attitude was connected with a good deal of missionary wisdom, which implied an understanding of the contextuality of all matters related to cross-cultural ministry. He argued that comity ‘doubtless cannot be dealt with alike in all the fields. Certain rules and regulations can be followed in India that would not be practicable in China, and vice versa.’ Therefore, the statement was to express what Adventists thought regarding missionary cooperation ‘in this part of the world’—i.e. in Asia.11 The same view was expressed by William Spicer, the denomination’s missionary statesman, when the statement was finally voted in 1919. He commented on the action, ‘I believe it is well to have these comity statements made by the local sections rather than by the Home Board. Then each field may deal with the matter as they are pressed to say something, and other fields are not affected by it.’12 Apparently the principle of freedom in missionary practice and strategy as well as the non-creedal tradition were so important in those years that Spicer and other Adventist leaders of the period preferred to leave even a matter of such ecclesiological importance somewhat open.

This, however, did not hinder church leaders in different regions from formulating texts of their own. In India, the response to James’s letter came most quickly; only two months after his request for input, the India Union Mission had created their own statement.13 Apparently they were not satisfied with the first draft of a declaration prepared by the Asiatic Division and revised by Arthur G. Daniells,14 then General Conference president. Daniells’s text was worded in a very general way and surprisingly lacked any recognizable Adventist content; the Indian Union wording differed completely and contained a clear emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Adventist message and mission.

The discussion continued but was somewhat delayed by the General Conference session in 1918 and the creation of new administrative structures in Asia in 1918–1919: the Eastern Asia Division (which included China and the surrounding countries; later it was called Far Eastern Division) and what was soon to become the Southern Asia and the Australasian Divisions (1920/1922). With all the changes in leadership and organization, the comity matter was deferred for more than a year, even though it remained an extremely urgent issue, especially in China, where Adventists were vigorously opposed by some other Protestant missions.15

In early 1919, however, the Eastern Asia Division took it up again and voted a statement apparently drafted by Division Secretary Clarence C. Crisler;16 its structure resembled the 1917 version, but the text included a few thoughts more in line with the statement from India. Thus, it constituted—like so many theological consensus texts—a well-crafted compromise.

In examining the 1919 statement, one can discover very quickly that this is an outstanding Adventist theological text. In fact, it might even be considered one of the most important denominational texts in the first half of the twentieth century. Pre-dating the Fundamental Beliefs of 1931 and the first Church Manual of 1932, and produced only a few years after Ellen White’s death, this is probably the first post-pioneer text of public significance. While an interpretation of the text as such must be done elsewhere,17 it is important to note that the text did not create entirely new thinking but continued along the ‘friendly relations’ line vis-à-vis other Christians that was already present in a General Conference resolution of 1870.18

11 J. S. James—‘Dear Brethren,’ September 18, 1917, GCA.
12 W. A. Spicer—[J. L.] Shaw, March 21, 1919, GCA 21/1919/Spicer, W. A.
13 ‘Statement on Comity,’ November 17, 1917, GCA 21/1919/Comity; W. W. Fletcher—J. L. Shaw, October 4, 1918, GCA 21/1918/Fletcher, W. W.
14 ‘Revised Form, Comity Declaration,’ n.d., GCA 21/1919/Comity.
15 C. C. Crisler—J. G. White, November 17, 1918, GCA 21/1919/Comity. In this letter, Clarence Crisler lamented the fact that, in some parts of the interior [of China] ... there are a considerable number of missionaries of limited education and of rather narrow views who seem to have an altogether wrong conception of our methods of work.’ In fact, the China Continuation Committee wanted to take serious actions against Adventists in China, but apparently this could be averted.
17 An in-depth theological analysis of the statement’s theological content, like a comparison with the declaration from India and the earlier (Daniells’) draft, would be desirable, but space constraints have made it impossible to include the theological part of an earlier stage of the paper in this printed version. May it suffice to mention that the 1919 statement contains an enormously missional ecclesiology, a balanced soteriology, and—somewhat hidden in this seemingly technical text—an anthropology that strongly emphasizes freedom of choice. Related to these theological concepts is an implicit doctrine of God that emphasizes both his saving activities and his demands of humans. Altogether, the statement is typically Adventist in its theological thrust.
18 This resolution says, ‘RESOLVED, that for the sake of our blessed Redeemer we desire to cultivate fraternal feelings, and maintain friendly relations, with all who name the name of Christ; and in particular with those who in common with us hold to the unpopular
The beginning of a career

It is important to note that the comity issue and this 1919 statement were largely a matter of regional interest at that particular time. Mainly because of certain frictions between missionaries in China, the then Eastern Asia Division felt compelled to publish such a text. In early 1918, the division leadership still hoped that the General Conference would make a pronouncement on the issue in its session because they thought this was beyond their own responsibility.29 When this did not happen, J. H. Evans, the division president, expressed strong regret and almost begged for a General Conference Committee action even in late 1918,20 but, it seems, to no avail. Apparently, many General Conference leaders still wanted to keep out of the discussion as far as possible. Thus, there was no other way but to design a text in Eastern Asia, with the advantage that it was exactly what Adventists in the area wanted it to be like,21 and the disadvantage of a somewhat lesser degree of authority, at least according to the kind of thinking that Evans’s letter reveals.

Yet this presumed weakness did not take long to be remedied. The Review & Herald published the text in the year after it was voted, and even German Adventist leaders found it so interesting that they included it in their missionary magazine.22 The decisive action, however, happened in 1926, when officers of the General Conference decided to include it in their new Working Policy booklet,23 where it appeared in an almost identical form. This was done without any traces of a discussion regarding the validity of a regional policy to the worldwide denomination—in spite of the fact that the initial idea behind the booklet had been to collect doctrine of the second advent of our Saviour near.’ Business Proceedings, Eighth Annual Session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, March 15, 1870, GC Committee Minutes, GCA.

C. C. Crisler-E. C. Lobenstine, March 22, 1918, GCA 21/1919/Comity. However, the war conditions hindered many missionary representatives from attending, and the session ultimately did not address comity.

20 ‘How I feel that the General Conference Committee, having had this question referred to them, should make any declaration that is to be made, and take the responsibility from local men ... in my opinion great care should be exercised in wording any declaration that is sent out ... I trust that the General Conference Committee will make any declaration that is to be made, and have it uniform throughout the world.’ J. H. Evans—A. G. Danielis, W. T. Knox, and J. L. Shaw, December 2, 1918, GCA 21/1918/Evans, J. H.

21 John Luis Shaw, then an associate secretary at the General Conference, actually praised the statement by asserting that it ‘has the advantage of having been carefully worked out on the ground with leaders of our work in China and other eastern fields. In some respects these men were better prepared to work out a Comity statement than the General Committee on this side.’ J. L. Shaw—E. C. Lobenstine, August 13, 1919, GCA 21/1919/Comity.

Review & Herald 97, August 19, 1920, 5–6 (1061–1062); Der Advent-Bote in der Heidenwelt, October 1920, 30–31.


Later changes in the statement

The fact that the statement was included in the General Conference Working Policy did not mean that the text thenceforth remained exactly the way it had been conceived in the beginning. Like the ‘Adventist Fundamental Beliefs’, texts created in particular periods were being dealt with in a flexible way even if major parts remained unchanged. Although not every single amendment needs to be discussed (changes took place in 1977, 1988, and 1997);25 an overall comparison of the 1919/1926 version and the current text is enlightening (cf. the synopsis in the appendix at the end of this essay).

Probably the most important modification is the title. The text had been conceived as a statement for a particular mission context; through its adoption into the Working Policy, it became a declaration of global validity, but its career had not yet reached the climax. This happened when the title was changed from ‘Our Relationship to Other Societies’ first to ‘Relationship to Other Religious Organizations’ (1977) and then to ‘Relationships with Other Christian Churches and Religious Organizations’ (1988). Now the statement had acquired a global and ecumenically comprehensive meaning. Of course there were good reasons for this modification: After the end of the traditional western missionary era in the 1960s and the forma-

24 The General Conference Committee voted in its meeting of September 27, 1922, that ‘a committee of five be appointed to prepare a statement embodying the current policies of the General Conference ... and that this be presented to a later Council.’ See GC Committee Minutes, GCA. Of course even in those years the Divisions were regarded as part of the General Conference, but the relationship of Division and General Conference policies had not been defined.

25 The major changes took place in 1988; the 1977 and 1997 modifications were more or less cosmetic. See the GC Committee Minutes of October 16, 1977; October 6, 1988; and October 2, 1997, GCA. These amendments were all made at Annual Council meetings, which regularly modify the General Conference Working Policy content.
tion of independent church organizations in much of Africa and Asia in the same era, the relationship to other mission societies was simply no longer a relevant issue. What was important now was how to relate to other churches.

Curiously, the increasing weight in the new heading is counteracted to some extent by the 1997 reformulation ‘When interdivision work brings us in contact with other Christian societies and religious bodies.’ Before, this sentence had been worded ‘Wherever the prosecution of the gospel work brings us into touch with other societies and their work.’ Thus, it may seem that there was a tendency to reduce the authority of the statement and assign its function merely to those who serve in continents or regions other than their own. This, of course, corresponded to how ‘mission work’ had been understood by many in the missionary movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, the fact that the text still appears in the Working Policy section on interdivision employees testifies to its origin in missionary operations. In a way, the statement seems rather oddly placed in that section with its current heading, but probably there was simply no one who suggested an alternative location.

What is more important, however, is the fact that several other adaptations took place in 1988, which illustrates how a text from another era could still serve important purposes even two or three generations later and in a markedly different situation. One element that appears is ‘religious bodies’: Non-Christians come into focus as an analogy to non-Adventists; thus, the principles of ‘Christian courtesy, frankness and fairness’ apply to relations with people of all backgrounds. While this somewhat broadens the perspective, another change went in the opposite direction. The original had confessed, ‘We recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world.’ In 1988, a seemingly minor change to ‘those agencies’ was probably an attempt to relativize an assertion that to some appeared too generous and sweeping.

The most significant change, however, is the addition of two entirely new sentences which sharpen a particular view of Adventist identity. The 1988 revision added ‘Biblical truths in the setting of the special message of preparation,’ emphasizing that Adventists had specific teachings that distinguished them from others. Eight years after the 1980 reformulation of the denomination’s Fundamental Beliefs, this revision made up for the lack of explicit Adventist doctrinal content and emphasis in the original. In a similar spirit of emphasizing denominational particularity, the formulation ‘our policy is to make the great masses of the people our special aim in evangelistic work’ was abandoned and replaced with a formulation that deleted this last bit of comity heritage from the text: ‘The Seventh-day Adventist Church also acknowledges the rights of other religious persuasions to operate without geographic restrictions.’

Thus the text’s career had continued more than half a century after its birth. Some modification of details occurred; at the same time, there was a great degree of stability: many of the central items—good relations with other Christians, conviction as a basic principle, no explicit comity, and a concept of commission to share the Adventist view of the gospel with people of all backgrounds, whether non-Christians or Christians—persisted. The most important aspect of the text’s career also illustrates this mix of continuity and discontinuity: the comity statement had become a statement on interchurch relations.

The impact on Adventist interchurch relations

What effects did the 1919 statement and its later versions have? What was its Wirkungsgeschichte? After being included in an official publication of the denomination’s leading administrative unit and in the absence of rival texts,26 the statement probably had to make at least some impact on Adventist ecclesiological and ecumenical reasoning. Moreover, once it was a statement of the worldwide church, it constituted not merely a precedent but a comprehensive set of guidelines on relating to other Christian denominations everywhere. While a full account of the use of the statement would demand a study of its own, a few observations can be made here:

1. The statement and references to it appeared in a variety of Adventist publications very soon, indicating that it was well-accepted throughout the denomination.27 Naturally, it was also included at full length in Questions on Doctrine, a book documenting denominational positions in the context of an informal dialogue with Evangelical leaders in North America, under the heading ‘Adventist Relationship to World Missions Program’—meaning the missionary ventures of other Protestants. This book and the dialogue illustrated that the Seventh-day Adventist Church stood at some distance from other Evangelicals because of its particular beliefs but still desired mutual recognition as Christians and Protestants. Although the statement had not yet been updated to refer to interchurch relations in general, it provided a basis for this crucial stage in the Adventist history of interdenominational relations.

26 Interestingly, the 1931 ‘Fundamental Beliefs’ contained no general section on the church, only a section on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and its relation to the ‘remnant church’ (No. 19). Therefore one can argue that conclusions on the question of the relationship between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other Christian denominations could not easily be derived from the 1931 Fundamental Beliefs.

27 See, e.g., Quarterly Review of the European Division of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists [hereafter QR], 3rd quarter, 1926, 2 (the European Division adopted the statement in 1926); Ernst Koitz, ‘Our Work in India,’ Review and Herald, April 2, 1931; C. C. Crisler, ‘Forty Years Ago in Kansas,’ The China Division Reporter, April–May 1933, 9; Oliver Montgomery, Principles of Church Organization and Administration (Washington, DC: Takoma Park, 1942), 129–131.
2. Very early some church leaders realized that the importance of the statement was not limited to missionary operations in non-Christian regions. The European Division magazine commented on the adoption of the text in 1926, 'The Statement of our Relationship to other Societies found in this issue ... applies primarily to the situation in the mission fields, yet the principles outlined are, generally speaking, of equal importance also for the homeland. The 1919 statement clearly had the potential for developing a dynamic of its own from the very beginning. Its mix of emphasizing good relations with other Christians on the one side and the urgency of sharing the Adventist message with them on the other represented the logic inherent in Seventh-day Adventist missionary operations from the beginning.

3. In most of the major documents relating to Adventist interchurch relations from the 1960s onward the 1919 statement or its revised version is referred to. Whether in dialogues such as the WCC-SDA conversations 1965–1971 and the Lutheran-Adventist dialogue 1994–1998 or in regional and international position papers: as a policy, the statement was commonly a major point of reference when interchurch relations were discussed. Its twofold approach of recognizing other denominations' activities and emphasizing the particular Adventist mission clearly suited the needs of interdenominational conversations.

4. As the earliest document included in the book Statements, Guidelines and Other Documents—and indeed the only one coming from the period before 1980—the importance of the 1919 statement was clearly recognized. Its inclusion in the book may be interpreted as meaning that the decisive and defining role of the statement was now undisputed.

So Much in Common: Documents of Interest in the Conversations Between the World Council of Churches and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1973), 73–74; Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation: Report and Papers Presented 1994–1998 or in regional and international position papers: as a policy, the statement was commonly a major point of reference when interchurch relations were discussed. Its twofold approach of recognizing other denominations' activities and emphasizing the particular Adventist mission clearly suited the needs of interdenominational conversations.

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Insights

The history of the 1919 statement conveys several insights, which are offered in lieu of a conclusion. One is of a general (ecclesiastical)-historical nature (1); others enlighten the way Seventh-day Adventism (2) and interchurch relations work (3), while a last observation is devoted to the question of how mission and theology are linked (4).

1. A general ecclesiastical-historical insight. It is fascinating to see how a movement—especially one that rejected creeds and written rules of church order—developed a tradition with statements that ultimately became very powerful. The 1919 statement started out as a regional product but was included in an authoritative manual of the General Conference and thus attained an official and global character just nine years after the initial discussions in China and Asia; moreover, once it had reached this status, it remained the focal point of reference whenever related issues were being dealt with.

This swift career also shows how a worldwide religious movement constantly renegotiates local varieties and concerns and its coherence on the global level. Rather than representing a top-down approach, the statement was developed in what was then the periphery in spite of some missionaries' pleas that the General Conference be involved in the wording. Not only did the statement find acceptance into the body of foundational denominational texts, it also influenced larger theological questions and administrative issues: Adventist ecclesiology, missiology, and ecumenics, i.e., the way in which Adventist future generations perceived appropriate relations with other Christian churches.

2. Seventh-day Adventism. While the overall theological importance and impact of a single text should not be overestimated, the 1919 statement still illustrates that even a short theological text often bears resemblance to the larger corpus of documents and context of thinking that it belongs to. Compared with other drafts of comity statements in the period, the 1919 statement was most representative of the mainstream Adventist position; therefore, the career of this most balanced statement—as far as the Adventist context is concerned—is not surprising.

When evaluating the statement more specifically with regard to Adventism and its attitude to other Christian churches, it reveals what seems to be an overall tendency of ambivalence in the way Adventists view and relate to them. The very positive affirmation 'We recognize every agency [or those agencies] that lifts up Christ as part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world' together with...
the 'high esteem' with regard to individual Christians is coupled with a refusal to recognize their activities as sufficient.

3. Ecumenism. On a more positive note, this seeming ambivalence may actually turn out to be a dialectic in which every Christian denomination finds itself. While Christians must recognize the fact that adherents of other denominations are Christians—even if the criteria for being ‘Christian’ are disputed—almost all (except underground Christians) will adhere to a particular congregation, which also belongs to a larger network of congregations. These networks are mostly still denominations or confessional bodies of some sort, and even if they are not, they are quasi-denominations or will turn into denominational bodies after some time. Thus, almost all Christians belong to some kind of a denomination, and these denominations have to relate to one another in some way. If a denomination has a reason for existence at all, it will uphold what it deems to be its own mission while, at the same time, recognizing the good in other Christian churches. These two principles may produce some tension at times but do not contradict each other. In fact, the Adventist way of embodying this dialectic may be a unique contribution to interchurch relations, and its study to ecumenics.

The Adventist model of ecumenicity that shines through the 1919 statement is a model that may actually appeal to large numbers of Christians who have no formal link to the Ecumenical Movement so far. Many of these are members of free churches, notably in the Evangelical and Pentecostal Movements. By emphasizing the necessity to build good relations between denominations even in the absence of territorial thinking and membership in organizations, Adventists provide an alternative to the common ecumenical paradigm, which strongly relies on mutual recognition based on a peculiar sacramental theology, territorial divisions, and formal membership in ecumenical bodies. Such alternative paradigms are much needed in the Ecumenical Movement, which has lamented its own stagnation for about two decades. Probably an Edinburgh conference representative of today’s global Protestantism and an ensuing new birth of an ecumenism for the twenty-first century would look different from 1910 and would move in a direction that is more in line with the Adventist approach.

4. Mission and Theology. Apart from these specific observations, an overall insight concerns the way in which mission and theology, the church’s action and reflection, are intertwined. Neither of the two is primary, and both are dynamic. This dynamism does not mean, of course, that there is no continuity—there definitely is much of it in the history of the statement and of Adventist interdenominational encounters, as in Christian thinking and Adventist beliefs in general. However, the 1919 statement and its theological thrust, which resulted from a missionary situation, is a fine example of the hermeneutical circle—or, rather, the hermeneutical spiral—that connects the beliefs of a religious community to its context in addition to its holy texts. This connection implies that influences work two ways; while theology impels believers to engage in mission, it is also true that theology is created in mission. Since the development of theology in mission can be seen already in the early Christian church and even in biblical times, would it be an overstatement to say that only a theology that is connected with the mission of the church is appropriate and faithful to God?


33 A good example of this approach is George Vandeman, What I Like about … the Lutherans, the Baptists, the Methodists, the Charismatics, the Catholics, Our Jewish Friends, the Adventists (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1986).

34 Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, 2nd edition, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006 [first ed. 1991]), suggests replacing the older metaphor of the 'hermeneutical circle' with a 'spiral' to indicate the dynamic nature of interpretation and understanding, which leads beyond closed circle-like systems. Evidently, this is helpful for theological hermeneutics as much as for biblical hermeneutics, and even more so for a theological hermeneutic that is informed by God's mission.
Appendix

Synopsis: Our Relationship to Other Societies (1919) and Relationships with Other Christian Churches and Religious Organizations (2005)

Sources: Advent Review and Sabbath Herald 97, no. 34 (1920), 5-6 (1061-1062); General Conference Working Policy, 2005 (Section O 100)

Our Relationship to Other Societies

In the desire to avoid occasion for misunderstanding or friction in the matter of relationship to the work of other societies, we, the General Conference Committee of Seventh-day Adventists for the Far Eastern Division, submit the following statement for the guidance of workers in the division:

1. We recognize every agency that lifts up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem the Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.

2. Wherever the prosecution of the gospel work brings us into touch with other societies and their work, the spirit of Christian courtesy, frankness, and fairness should at all times guide in dealing with mission problems; and in this matter we adopt the following principles and plan of operation:

a. That we recognize that the essence of true religion is that religion is based upon conscience and conviction. It is therefore to be constantly our purpose that no selfish interest nor temporal advantages shall draw any person to our communion, and that no tie shall hold any member, save the belief and conviction that in this way he finds true connection with Christ. When change of conviction leads any member of our society to feel no longer in accord with us in faith and practice, we recognize not only his right but his duty to change his religious affiliation to accord with his belief.

b. That before admitting to church membership any one who is a member of another church, every care be exercised to ascertain that the candidate is moved to change his religious affiliation only by force of religious conviction and out of regard to his personal relationship to his God; and that wherever possible, consultation be had with those in charge of the church or mission with which the applicant is connected.

c. That persons under censure of another mission for clearly established fault in Christian morals or character, shall not be considered eligible for membership in our mission until they have given evidence of repentance and reformation.

d. That an agent employed or recently employed by another church or mission or other organization shall not be employed by our church or mission without preliminary consultation with the church or mission with which the agent is or was formerly connected.

e. We advise that when setting salaries, the local mission auditing committees give consideration to the salaries paid by other missions operating in the same field.

Relationships with Other Christian Churches and Religious Organizations

To avoid creating misunderstanding or friction in our relationships with other Christian churches and religious organizations, the following guidelines have been set forth:

1) We recognize those agencies that lift up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ.

2) When interdivision work brings us in contact with other Christian societies and religious bodies, the spirit of Christian courtesy, frankness, and fairness shall prevail at all times.

3) We recognize that true religion is based on conscience and conviction.

It is therefore to be our constant purpose that no selfish interest or temporal advantage shall draw any person to our communion and that no tie shall hold any member save the belief and conviction that in this way the true connection with Christ is found. If a change of conviction leads a member of our church to feel no longer in harmony with Seventh-day Adventist faith and practice, we recognize not only the right but also the responsibility of that member to change, without opprobrium, religious affiliation in accord with belief.

We expect other religious bodies to respond in the same spirit of religious liberty.

4) Before admitting to church membership members of other religious organizations, care shall be exercised to ascertain that the candidates are moved to change their religious affiliation by religious conviction and out of regard to their personal relationship with God.

5) A person under censure of another religious organization for clearly established fault in Christian morals or character shall not be considered eligible for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church until there is evidence of repentance and reformation.
3. As to the matter of territorial divisions and the restriction of operations to designated areas, our attitude must be shaped by these considerations:

   a. As in generations past, in the providence of God and the historical development of his work for men, denominational bodies and religious movements have arisen to give special emphasis to different phases of gospel truth, so we find in the origin and rise of the Seventh-day Adventist people, the burden laid upon us to emphasize the gospel of Christ's second coming as an event 'even at the door,' calling for the proclamation of the special message of preparation of the way of the Lord as revealed in Holy Scripture.

   b. As this advent proclamation is described in Scripture prophecy, particularly as the revelation of Christ sets it forth in the terms of Revelation 14:6-14, it is commissioned that this special message of the 'everlasting gospel' which is to precede the coming of the Saviour shall be preached 'to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.' While this commission makes it impossible for us to restrict our witness to this phase of the gospel to any limited area, and impels us to call it to the attention of all peoples everywhere, our policy is to make the great masses of the people our special aim in evangelistic work.

6) The Seventh-day Adventist Church is unable to confine its mission to restricted geographical areas because of its understanding of the gospel commission's mandate.

   In the providence of God and the historical development of His work for men, denominational bodies and religious movements have arisen from time to time to give special emphasis to different phases of gospel truth. In the origin and rise of the Seventh-day Adventist people, the burden was laid upon us to emphasize the gospel of Christ's second coming as an imminent event, calling for the proclamation of Biblical truths in the setting of the special message of preparation as described in Bible prophecy, particularly in Revelation 14:6-14. This message commissions the preaching of the "everlasting gospel to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" bringing it to the attention of all peoples everywhere.

   Any restriction which limits witness to specified geographical areas therefore becomes an abridgment of the gospel commission.

   The Seventh-day Adventist Church also acknowledges the rights of other religious persuasions to operate without geographic restrictions.
Höschele, Stefan. “From Mission Comity to Interdenominational Relations: The Development of the Adventist Statement on Relationships with Other Christian Churches.”

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