

War and Adventist Pragmatism at the German Conference

Spectrum Newsletter | 14 May 2014 | [Helen Pearson](#) [1]

Helen Pearson writes about the story being told and the questions being asked at the Friedensau Adventist University symposium.

For the last 24 hours I have been listening to Seventh-day Adventist scholars telling the story of their church's attitude to and participation in war. Between them, they have told an amazingly moving and varied story – a story which, like all good stories, raises profound questions about Seventh-day Adventists, the God they worship and the faith and spirituality they practice.

It's a story mostly about men - Ellen White of course, is the token woman in the narrative. At this conference, the storytellers are 19 serious men from Australia, Europe (including Russia) and the USA. They are "the presenters." They sit in a circle of tables in the center of the large auditorium at Friedensau Adventist University. Some of them wear ties, some wear open-necked shirts. A couple are wearing T-shirts. Four of them are under 50. None of them is black. Each of them has a bottle of water on the table in front of him and easy access to a microphone. Around them sit two more concentric rows where are seated about another 60 people – the "guest auditors." This afternoon, there were about 60 people in the outer circles – 10 of them were women, about half a dozen were black.

The well-crafted and deeply researched narrative these 19 men have presented so far is a story of the conflict between idealists and pragmatists. In the beginning it's an American story – a story of small-town American leaders whose pragmatism about what to do in time of war clearly owes a great deal to their history of knowing how to behave in times of challenge and difficulty – they had faced plenty of those.

The early Adventists, like their Puritan forebears, faced with the task of building an organization on the basis of a vision, were practical, no-nonsense people, used to making the best of the materials available and building their lives with what they had - working things out as best they could in their young country. They worshipped a God whom Ellen White described as "wanting us all to have common sense." The pioneers' emphasis on "present truth" allowed them to do and say what seemed useful in the moment to protect the fledgling organization so that its members could "spread the Message."

That pragmatic philosophy found its way into their own approach to civil war in their homeland but fell short when it became an "official" Adventist approach to war applied to the 1st World War fought between highly developed European nations where entrenched national positions, and complex international power dynamics generated the "war to end all wars." The early European Adventists were not American frontier people building a nation "*e pluribus unum*." They had come to believe the Adventist message in very different political circumstances. Many of them inhabited emerging nationalistic states with established social contexts – "the seat of western civilization" as one presenter described them. Adventist approaches to conflict and war had seemed like common sense on one side of the Atlantic; but when applied in Europe and later in Vietnam or Korea or Chile or Argentina, these same approaches often looked more like common opportunism and lack of principle.

Various presenters have offered convincing proof that in their official pronouncements, Adventists have frequently and often uncritically abandoned their discipleship of the Prince of Peace and their belief in commandment-keeping in the interests of organizational survival. At all costs, sometimes at very high cost in terms of principle, the church's ability to "preach the Advent message" must be protected. In many different contexts, a pattern has emerged that shows the official church appearing at best inconsistent and at worst self-serving as the evangelistic "end" is used to justify a variety of "means": combatancy, working and fighting on Sabbath, cooperation with militaristic or authoritarian governments. While individual Adventists, or small groups of Adventists, have in many countries endured ridicule and social marginalization for their pacifist principles, and in others been imprisoned and gone to hard labour and death for their pacifist faith, the church's formal pronouncements in time of war have done little to support them. As one presenter commented, "We believe that we're so important and it's so important that we exist that we must do everything to preserve that existence."

The questions are begging to be asked and indeed some of them have been asked already in the meetings. There are many serious-minded people here asking very important questions and it is a

great comfort to remember that they also are leaders in the church. Keynote presenter George Knight asked, "Why don't Adventists just stand up like Daniel for what they believe?"

Other questions are emerging in brief encounters during breaks and long discussions around the conference meal tables. What is this Adventist tendency to accommodate all about? What does it say about the faith we hold and the picture of God and of ourselves that we have developed? Why is it that Adventist teachings identify with radical reformers in history but, officially, are so intent on not offending and so willing to accommodate often socially immoral positions? What matters most – the message we preach or the gospel values we live corporately? What are the spiritual implications of the story we are hearing and the patterns that are emerging? What are we learning here?

As a counselor and psychotherapist, it is not unusual for me to encounter individuals facing the challenge of conflict in their lives and relationships. If the corporate Seventh-day Adventist Church were a client of mine telling this story of the struggles it faces while holding to its core beliefs in the face of conflict, I'd explore themes of identity and self-worth. What are the values and principles which enable mature people to know and be who they are? Where do those values and principles come from? Have those values and principles been developed in isolation or in community? What are the power issues in the inner life? Which internal voices are being heard and which are being ignored?

Will this conference explore both questions and answers? – and if it does, what will the contributors do with the insights they acquire? All of that remains to be seen.

Helen Pearson is a counselor and psychotherapist based at Newbold College in England, and a longtime elder of Newbold Church. Since 2003, she has been part of the Bridge Builders' Network, which trains church leaders to understand conflicts in the church and work to resolve them. She trains Adventist pastors and others in conflict resolution.

[Marianne Myhre](#)

I'm sorry. What I am going to say may be disappointing. Having belonged to that church all my life (until 4 years ago) and having been a missionary and pastor's wife there for decades. I can tell you the answer is, "no". They would never join the "fallen" SDA church because they are extreme (f.ex, they believe in celibacy for all divorcees no matter the situation). Besides, what you see is a facade. You would not want to merge with them because they are cruel (f.ex just a few months ago they made good their threat to withdraw my husband's pension leaving us to fend on \$1100 in SS because of our disagreement with their celibacy doctrine and our refusal to accept their gag order.). They are dishonest (f.ex. they have created multiple corporations to hide money in case of a lawsuit). They are haughty. They are very works-righteousness oriented. Many things are a test of fellowship making the church more of a club for saints, than a serious outreach to save sinners. A popular, prominent minister put a woman on probation for dying her hair in an effort to win her straying, unbelieving husband back. He attempted to send my niece (and thus her whole family) home from a camp meeting after the family drove from CO to CA to attend the meetings because my niece wore pants and had only brought a skirt for Sabbath! And they don't have 70,000 members. That number probably includes their offshoot referred to as the Nicos or the other "reform". Both my husband and I were with them from birth and were used to their very conservative, works-righteous ways. It was very difficult for us to shed the "Reform" paradigm. Within the last two decades, they have made a sharp turn for the worse. Rather than face severe poverty in our old age we are actually suing the church we had dedicated our lives to. The Good Lord has given us a phenomenal SDA lawyer. The following link from our lawyer's website has links to all the documents that have been filed with the court by both sides. (<http://kramerlawinc.wordpress> Both she and we have been shocked by what her research has turned up. You have to understand that having a "Reform Movement" is a blessing because it is a place that attracts SDA extremists, keeping the SDA church more balanced. You do not want to absorb them.

Source URL (retrieved on 06/03/2014 - 09:37): <http://spectrummagazine.org/node/5996>

Links:

[1] <http://spectrummagazine.org/authors/helen-pearson>

[2] http://spectrummagazine.org/node/5996#disqus_thread

[3] <http://spectrummagazine.org/page/commenters-covenant>

[4]

<http://spectrummagazine.disqus.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fspectrummagazine.org%2Fblog%2F2014%2F05%2F14%2Fwar-and-adventist-pragmatism-german-conference>

Final Reflections from Friedensau: What Have We Learned?

Spectrum Newsletter | 19 May 2014 | [Helen Pearson](#) [1]

The experience of German Adventists in World War I reveals the fault lines in Adventism.

By Thursday lunchtime last week, the 19 men at Friedensau Adventist University had told their stories of the various responses of the Seventh-day Church to the First World War and looked at the effects of the war on the church. In facing the call to arms, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, like any individual facing conflict, had found out a great deal about itself. The story showed that the major effect of the First World War was to reveal the fault lines in Adventism – areas where there was work to be done if the church was to become the Christian community it had always aspired to be.

The systematic theologians had identified narrowness and naivety in the church's eschatological vision. The sociologists and anthropologists looked at the social structures of the organization and asked themselves where power and authority lay as the church expanded outside North America. Church historians studying the role of Ellen White's writings in the development of the church, recognized the need for a decision-making process which is mature and community-centred alongside recognition of and reliance on the views of a prophet who is no longer with us to make specific pronouncements. Others recognized the need for more mature and developed thinking about pacifism in different parts of the world. Many scholars suggested that the organizational church needs to be less easily threatened by those who differ from it both inside and outside the church. It needs to be quick to try to understand and slow to pass judgment. The Tuesday night presentations by the brethren from the Reformed Church had suggested to many of us that the original schism between "us" and "them" need never have occurred.

So ironically, perhaps the biggest effect of the Great War which took place *outside* the church was to throw an ironic spotlight on the nature and causes of conflict *within* the church and our lack of skills in handling disagreement among us, especially disagreement about biblical interpretation. Schism with the Reformed Adventists was the early expression of that lack of skill. Fragmentation and polarization will continue to be the greatest threat to the unity and identity of the church unless we can learn to walk together with those from whom we differ.

So what lessons does this conference offer the church? Here are the lessons it taught me as a church elder & member who is interested in community and evangelism at grassroots level:

1. We Adventists, it seems, need to work smarter, not harder. We need to develop a better balance between our concern for truth and our belief in peace. We need to improve our internal communication with each other. We need to learn the skills and disciplines of discernment, of community life, of solving problems together, of seeking consensus. Telling the truth in love to each other is sometimes more demanding than preaching the truth to the unchurched. Unless we learn that discipline, we are doomed to worsen the kinds of schism and fragmentation that alienate people both inside and outside the church and distort our witness.
2. Peace-making, as one contributor said, is a category missing from the Seventh-day Adventist conversation. It must be an active process among us and we Seventh-day Adventists must learn to speak the various languages of peace as we bear witness to each other and the wider world. To speak the language of peace is not to abandon our identity or our commitments, nor to collapse into shapelessness, colourlessness and passivity. Quite the opposite. Speaking the language of peace means knowing clearly who we are and what "message" we wish to send to the world. And, like Jesus at the last supper, knowing clearly who we are, where we

- have come from, and where we want to go allows us to strike out in new and surprising directions in teaching people about the God who has called us.
3. We need to keep asking ourselves: "What is the 'everlasting gospel' that we are called to preach?" Is it the good news of salvation - that God loves us - or is it the prophetic news that God is judging us? Worshiping a judging God often creates judgmental people. We probably need to think more clearly about the evangelistic language which will best communicate the gospel of God's love. Can we allow the generosity of God's spirit working within us to translate the sometimes militant foreign language of evangelism into the reconciling tones of the love of God? Unless we can, our ability to speak peace to each other and to the nations will surely be compromised?
 4. The other language we need to speak better in the local and global church is the language of reconciliation - living out our relationships with each other influenced by the grace of the "everlasting gospel." This is the most important way to preach. It's a language our neighbors and fellow-citizens can clearly recognise as expressing life and hope rather than fear and judgment.

After the symposium, a Friedensau postgraduate student took us to the train station. As a graduate in theology, he told us, he had gone into the mission field with "priest" on his passport. That single fact had prevented him from getting a visa and being able to share the gospel. So he was back in education studying both theology and social science to strengthen his chances of exercising the ministry and mission he was called to – a pastor "dressed" as a social worker is no less a pastor. God "dressed" as a carpenter is no less God. How might God be asking me in my church to dress the third angel so that the gospel is well communicated?

Helen Pearson is a counselor and psychotherapist based at Newbold College in England, and a longtime elder of Newbold Church. Since 2003, she has been part of the Bridge Builders' Network, which trains church leaders to understand conflicts in the church and work to resolve them. She trains Adventist pastors and others in conflict resolution.

Read Charles Scriven's [first](#) [3], [second](#) [4] and [third](#) [5] reports from the conference. Read Helen Pearson's previous report [here](#) [6].

Source URL (retrieved on 06/03/2014 - 11:02): <http://spectrummagazine.org/node/6009>

Links:

[1] <http://spectrummagazine.org/authors/helen-pearson>

[2] http://spectrummagazine.org/node/6009#disqus_thread

[3] <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2014/05/12/conviction-and-moral-drift-war-story-adventism>

[4] <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2014/05/13/prophecy-war-moral-drift-and-moral-courage>

[5] <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2014/05/14/coping-war-stories-dilemmas-and-breakthrough-moment>

[6] <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2014/05/14/war-and-adventist-pragmatism-german-conference>

[7] <http://spectrummagazine.org/page/commenters-covenant>

[8]

<http://spectrummagazine.disqus.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fspectrummagazine.org%2Fblog%2F2014%2F05%2F19%2Ffinal-reflections-friedensau-what-have-we-learned>