

## **NEED FOR A DREAM**

By: Gordon Bietz

In any organization's life there come plateaus of growth or stagnation. In the North American Division it is my impression that we are nearing such a place of stagnation. I believe Elder Bradford has called it a "mid-life crises." This mid-life crises is not because the truth has changed, nor because the mission has changed but somehow we have changed.

I do not believe that we are simply catching the disease of distrust of leadership that is rampant in society. I do not believe that just the mistakes of Davenport have changed us. It is not something that we can attribute to a lack of commitment. The plateau or mid-life crises we enter is deeper, it goes to the nature of a mature organization. I believe we are at a kind of crossroads in our church.

Studies on the sociology of religious movements would indicate that we have only two options as we stand at the crossroads and they are both bad. The option of legalism or permissiveness.

The farther religious organizations move from their founders the closer they come to this inevitable struggle between:

Legalism - the attempt to preserve the fire of the past with laws, creeds, and organizational structure, and

Permissiveness - a loss of identity or a rather loose identification with the world.

Legalism is a time capsule trap that moves the church from the mission of spreading of the Gospel to the preservation of the forms, and traditions. Legalism is "the clever cage of rules by which alarmed members think to keep their treasure safe but it entraps them instead- and the treasure somehow slips away." [article Permissiveness and Legalism]

Permissiveness, on the other hand, is not a better road. It recognizes that the essence of the church will not be preserved by rules and regulations, or policies and creeds, but the solution it brings is no better for the escape from the cage of legalism is purchased with the price of loss of identity. The inner fire and devotion that lead to a distinctive lifestyle is lost and a lowering of standards and devotion ensues.

Whereas legalism focuses on seeking to preserve the church, and in seeking to preserve it, maintains the form but not the essence. Permissiveness focuses on individual freedom and in allowing complete pluralism loses the identity of the church altogether. The flight from the ditch of legalism lands one in the ditch of permissiveness. Which way for our church?

A number of years ago I went with my family to the Smokey Mountains to see the Fall colors. While we were walking down from a lookout we noticed a number of people who looked like they had come from the mid 19th century. It was as if we met an unearthed time capsule. The Amish society is living in another century.

Here is a group that in establishing their identity has so avoided the world that they are no longer making a significant impact on it. The Mennonites have also developed the Ordnung or “rules of living” so as to protect the church from the influence of the world. For example:

“No ornamental bright, showy form-fitting, immodest or silk-like clothing of any kind. Colors such as bright red, orange, yellow and pink not allowed. ...Hat to be black with no less than 3-inch rim and not extremely high in crown. No stylish impression in any hat. No pressed trousers. No sweaters... .A full beard should be worn among men and boys after baptism if possible... .No decorations of any kind in buildings inside or out.... No bottle gas or high line electrical appliances. Stoves should be black if bought new.” [Amish Society John A. Hosteller page 59-60]

The Amish have certainly maintained their identity but their impact on the world is more of a curiosity. In their attempt to preserve their identity they have locked themselves in a 19th century time capsule.

We might cite a more ancient religious movement as illustration of this process. The Jews at the time of Christ were seeking to preserve the dream of Abraham in the legalism of the talmud. The attempt to preserve the heart of religious zeal simply through formulations of laws and organizational structure will not work.

The general history of the Christian church follows the opposite road - the road of permissiveness. As the church became acceptable and institutionalized it began to adapt to the world and the fire went out of its spirit. So permissiveness has captured many religious movements. The Wesleyian revival that swept England with fire and enthusiasm became Methodism. I would suggest that Wesley would not recognize the church he founded today.

The Luthern movement that began the Protestant reformation became Lutherism, and I wonder what revolution Martin Luther would bring to the church he founded today. Which way for our church?

Will we travel the road to a legalistic isolationism, where we become a time capsule simply a preserved relic of the past - an anachronism. Will we travel the road to a permissive pluralism where we loose our identity in total identification with the world?

Is there not another option? Another road? Must we go down either of these polarities? Mr. L. A. King wrote in an article entitled "Legalism or Permissiveness an inescapable Dilemma?" "To date no denomination.. has maintained its original distinctiveness and power. It is difficult in succeeding generations to reproduce the vividness of the original experiences, and so at least some later converts will have less than the original devotion... Defensive isolation keeps the form but loses the fiery life, relaxed permissiveness - the commonest development - keeps an institution from having great distinctiveness or impact."

Must our church travel one of these roads? I pray not.

A Sabbath School story that many of us have been nurtured on is the story of the little boy Samuel working in the temple for Eli the priest. Is there anyone here who has not memorized the memory verse, "Speak Lord for thy servant heareth."?

In chapter 3 verse 1 of the first book of Samuel we read, "The word of the Lord was rare, there were not many visions." I would like to suggest that such a description of the condition of things during the beginning of the ministry of Samuel describes the condition of our church today.

Of course it is a story that is ready made for children for little Samuel hears the voice of God calling him. He mistakens it as Eli and keeps running to him until Eli tells him to say, "Speak Lord for thy servant heareth." And a vision, a dream comes to Samuel. A dream comes to him because he is listening. Listening for the voice of God.

Eli had received communication from God concerning his sons. God tried to communicate to him, but Eli wasn't really listening. Maybe he was so caught up in the controversy of the times, maybe he thought he could no longer change his ways, Eli was old and had always done things a certain way and maybe he thought that he couldn't change the way he treated his sons. Whatever, he wasn't listening to God. He wasn't acting on what he knew. Content to drift rather than listen to

and respond to a vision from God.

Samuel listened. "Speak Lord for thy servant heareth." And he received a vision from the Lord.

Today we need to remember that memory verse of long ago.

Today we need to be prepared to receive a vision from the Lord.

Today it is time that we listened for a dream.

To avoid the polarities of permissiveness pluralism and legalistic isolationism we must dream again.

"We are all of us dreamers of dreams,  
On visions our childhood is fed;  
And the heart of the child is unhaunted, it seems,  
By the ghosts of dreams that are dead.  
From childhood to youth's but a span  
And the years of our life are soon sped;  
But the youth is no longer a youth, but a man,  
When the first of his dreams is dead.  
He may live on by compact and plan  
When the fine bloom of living is shed,  
But God pity the little that's left of a man  
When the last of his dreams is dead.  
Let him show a brave face if he can,  
Let him woo fame or fortune instead,  
Yet there's not much to do but to bury a man  
When the last of his dreams is dead.

[William Herbert Carruth Dreamer of Dreams]

And might I add to William Carruth's poem, that:

"There is not much to do but to bury a church  
When the last of its dreams are dead."

According to Robert Dale the symptoms of the final stages of a movement are when it no longer focuses on its dream but becomes caught up in nostalgia of how things were in the past.

A healthy church is born out of a dream, a diseased church is one that Prefers simpler yesterdays to uncertain tomorrows. A church that sets a mood of uncertainty by reflecting on the "I remember when" stories which focus on the golden era of yesterday is signaling the beginning of the loss of a dream for the future. The healthy church builds on and is renewed by its dream. The diseased church doubts

and questions itself to death as it moves toward the last stage before organizational death.

Robert Pierson's last address to the church as the General Conference president was a plea to our church to somehow avoid the progression from movement to machine. The steady almost inevitable progression from a 1st generation movement begun with dream and vision to a 4th generation machine attempting to run a bureaucracy so as to preserve the forms that were created in the fervor of yesterday.

It is time to dream again.

In Winnie-the-Pooh, Pooh and Piglet take an evening walk. For a long time they walk in silence. Finally, Piglet breaks the silence and asks, "When you wake up in the morning, Pooh, what's the first thing you say to yourself?"

"What's for breakfast?" answers Pooh. "And what do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what exciting thing is going to happen today?"

[To Dream Again p. 12]

The choice we have at the cross roads of the future for our church is that choice. Are we to choose the breakfast dream or the excitement dream? Diseased dreams of small minds produce a diseased church. There must rise again among the people of God a dream. A vision that captures anew the essence of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. Our structures, our organizational charts, our job discriptions must be responsive to the dream of Adventism to the visionaries among us.

The future of our church will be found in the moving of the spirit of God as the people follow a dream, unity will not be found in absolute doctrinal purity.

If we would have done a doctrinal purity study of the early Christian church I doubt if we would have been pleased. Peter wasn't always understanding Paul and the Jewish Christians certainly had some different views than the Gentile Christians. But they were caught up in a vision, a dream - given to them by Christ - a dream to give the good news to the world and they were one in Christ in that effort.

If you would have done a doctrinal purity study of the early Seventh-day Adventist church you would find many different views but they were one with a message to give to the world. They were caught up in the excitement of a movement with vision, a movement that had the courage to dream.

The message of Adventism was not the dry musings of their teachers.

The message of Adventism was not the reminiscences of their parents.

The message of Adventism was not in an organizational chart.

The message of Adventism was not the codified beliefs of the church manual.

The message of Adventism was a living reality of their lives.

Unity - yes - they had unity but not the kind of unity that comes from formal assent to credal statements. Not a unity caged in formulations of systematic theology, or the unity of an organizational chart. It was the unity of a dream.

It is time to dream again, to have vision and commitment as did those who were the founders of our church.

To dream like Joseph Bates:

Joseph Bates felt a dream to publish the new truths he had discovered and in May 1846 he prepared a forty-page tract, entitled The Opening Heavens. Money to publish was supplied by an Adventist woman who sold a rag carpet she had recently woven. It is time to dream again.

To dream like J. N. Loughborough:

Twenty year old Loughborough had been preaching on Sundays for 3 years, when he cast his lot with the Sabbatarians and accompanied Hiram Edson as a circuit riding preacher and later pioneered the work in California and England.

To dream like Uriah Smith:

Uriah Smith who at 21 joined the Review office in Rochester New

York where his 35,000 word poem was running in the Review entitled, "The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy." The print shop did not have proper tools and he blistered his hands trimming their publications with a penknife. Smith remembered that the tracts they published were square in doctrine, even if the pages were not.

To dream like Stephen Haskell:

Stephen Haskell who heard his first sermon on the second advent at age of 19 and was so thrilled that talked about it to everyone he met. A friend challenged him to preach and Haskell jokingly promised to do so if they would provide a hall and audience. They complied and he was stuck so he combined part-time preaching with selling the soap he manufactured.

Time doesn't permit us to speak of James and Ellen White, J. N. Andrews, and a host of others. Others who caught the dream of a movement with a message to give to a dying world.

We can't do the work like they did. We shouldn't seek to emulate exactly what they did for times have changed. But we must dream again as they did.

Hubert Humphrey evaluated yesterday's good old days in a televised interview: "They were never that good. believe me. The good new days are today, and better days are coming tomorrow. Our greatest songs are still unsung." [To Dream Again p. 109]

The greatest song of the Seventh-day Adventist church is unsung, and we have the opportunity to write the tune of that song, to dream that dream.

It is time to reject the idea that we can encapsulate the church in a time capsule of the 19th century, legalistically preserving the form without the fire.

It is time to reject the idea that we can destroy the pillars of the church and it's very raison d'etre with a permissiveness that defines the church by the world rather than by God's word.

We must not travel either road of legalistic isolationism or permissive pluralism.

Instead of moving into the future with intentional planned direction may we not become prisoners of events. Reacting to crises and responding to phone calls. Prisoners of events because we have a

tendency to perceive that the enemy is all around us and so we become unwilling to develop the confidence and trust in each other so as to dream of the future.

Edward Lindaman encourages us to dream: “It helps to realize that everything that is now possible was at one time impossible. In every case someone somewhere dared to dream, dared to imagine something a little better, a little different.” [To Dream Again p. 137]

What does all of this have to do with this commission? I guess all I am desiring to say is that creative change for our Division or church is not bad. I am tempted to say that any change would be worth something. Some might say, “Well we don't want change for the sake of change!” And maybe not? Let us not fear change. I wear a different suit today then I wore yesterday. The one I wore yesterday is worn out, but a change is good for me. Some change would be good for our church. So the members would see not a monolithic unmoveable organization but an organization that is responsive and flexible to needs. So people could see leadership not simply seeking to protect yesterday's vision but dreaming a vision for today.

Thomas Jefferson once hoped aloud that America would have a revolution every twenty years. He was not seeking the overthrow of the government, he saw no battles or wars. What he sought was a redefining of the American dream for every generation.

That dream has faded as too many days have come and gone.  
It is time to dream again.

That dream has waned as generation after generation is born into a church without having experienced its message.  
It is time to dream again.

That dream has been dissipated by argument over doctrinal nuance.  
It is time to dream again.

To dream of a people consumed with an appetite for God's word rather than the words of others.

To dream of an organization that lives not to protect itself but others.

To dream of doctrines that change the way people behave rather than simply being subjects for discussion.

To dream of institutions committed to transforming the world rather than reflecting it.

To dream of the unbeliever seeing an unequivocal message in us:

-a message of hope for those in fear of nuclear destruction.

-a message of faith for those who live with doubt.

-a message of life for those dying of starvation.

-a message of sabbath rest for those stressed to death.

It is time to dream again.

To dream of a people transformed by their beliefs.

To dream of a church converted by its doctrines.

To dream of a church that leaves the world wondering, "Behold how these people love one another."

In our discussions let us remember the words of Samuel, "Speak Lord for thy servant heareth."

Let us listen for a vision – a dream.