

Adventist Leadership and Changing Trends: Navigating Meaning and Influence in a Dynamic World

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Abstract: This paper examines the concept of leadership in a dynamic world influenced by various economic, social, religious, and political factors. Specifically, it focuses on the functionality of leadership within the global Adventist Church, taking into account emerging issues. The Adventist leadership model emphasizes the importance of consultation, drawing from the biblical principle found in Deuteronomy 19:15. This unique leadership approach offers several advantages, including policy compliance, shared authority and accountability, consideration of diverse perspectives and opinions, knowledge sharing, effective decision-making, and efficient governance. The paper highlights how the Adventist Church's leadership approach, centered on consultation, has contributed to its longevity and ability to chart its own course, distinct from approaches influenced by external factors. Consultative leadership approach has promoted unity and harmony within the church. By valuing diverse opinions and fostering a culture of respectful dialogue, the church has been able to mitigate conflicts and build consensus. This collaborative spirit has strengthened the bonds among members and has contributed to the overall cohesiveness and stability of the church. This approach has allowed the church to stay true to its core values, adapt to evolving circumstances, and maintain a distinct identity, setting it apart from approaches driven solely by external influences. Ultimately, this consultative leadership approach has played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of the Adventist church over its 160-year history, setting it apart from approaches driven by external influences.

Keywords: Leadership, dynamic world, servant leadership, LGBTQ+, ecumenical relations.

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Introduction

Ecclesiastical leadership in today's dynamic world is influenced by emerging trends driven by various factors such as economic, social, religious, technological and political changes (Banks, 2013). This paper discusses leadership challenges based on emerging (and often) controversial issues faced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and how the church has handled them without causing major splits. The emerging challenges call for visionary, adaptable and empathetic leadership within the Adventist Church. Leaders need to engage in thoughtful dialogues, study, prayer and collaborate

to address emerging issues while remaining true to the core beliefs and mission of the church.

There are various types of traditional leadership perspectives including transformational, delegative, authoritative, transactional, participatory and servant leadership that influence or shape the leadership patterns and all aspects of leadership in an organization (Demirtas & Karaca, 2020). The Adventist church operates with a decentralized leadership model (Standish, 2000). The organization's top leadership organ is the General Conference selected after every five years by delegates chosen from the church's 13 worldwide

Divisions. The Divisions in turn select their leadership through delegates selected from within their territories, representing units known as Unions. The Unions in turn select their leadership from members selected from units known as Conferences/ Fields, and these in turn have leaders selected from delegates representing local churches chosen by the local church business meeting – the lowest decision making unit of the worldwide church.

The central question addressed is, how does this system work effectively in light of emerging realities in the present world? The Adventist church embraces consultative dialogue in which the leadership is bidden to consult extensively through the ranks and files of the organization. Consultative leadership seems to have borrowed from the biblical principle in Deuteronomy 19:15, which reads, one witness shall not raise up against a man for any iniquity or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established (NKJV). This verse presupposes the putting together of two or three minds would then a matter be established. Again, in Exodus 18:13-26, Jethro observed Moses sitting from morning to evening, listening to and judging disputes among the Israelites. Jethro advised Moses to appoint capable leaders to assist him in managing matters. Moses accepted the Jethro's advice and appointed leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. This delegation of authority and establishment of a hierarchical structure shows Moses' willingness to incorporate consultative input for more effective leadership. The consultative process within the Adventist church involves multiple officers of the church who come together to make decisions that align with established policies and ensures collective responsibility. This approach to leadership has several benefits including adherence to the established policies that are ratified by the highest decision making organ of the church – the General Conference. Founded in 1863, and based in the United States, this organization oversees the global operations of the Adventist church (Land, 2005).

The sense of shared responsibility is encouraged and individuals taking part in the decision-making, will seldom be mentioned. This removes personal elements in leadership. Even under shared authority and responsibility, accountability is not lost in with the persons involved being able to defend the collective decision. In shared leadership, decisions

are often made collaboratively, drawing on the diverse expertise and perspectives of team members. This collaborative approach ensures that decisions are well-rounded and well-informed, contributing to accountability for the outcome (Kusek & Rist 2004). Consultative dialogue espoused by the church, caters for diverse opinions without victimization of the leaders. It also encourages sharing of experiences without any condemnation. Each member of the shared leadership team is responsible for representing the collective decisions and actions to stakeholders and the wider organization. This representation ensures that accountability is upheld externally as well. In shared leadership models, accountability is a shared responsibility that extends across the entire team (Schein, 2010). By fostering open communication, collaborative decision-making and a commitment to organizational objectives, shared leadership in the Adventist church enhances accountability and contributes to a more well-rounded and effective leadership approach. This ensures efficient institutional governance.

Leadership finds meaning in changing trends by adopting a proactive and adaptive mindset. By embracing a learning mindset, leaders recognize that change is inevitable and view it as an opportunity for growth and development. They should encourage their teams to stay curious, to continuously learn and to adapt to new trends (Schein, 2010). Effective leaders make it a priority to stay informed about industry developments, emerging technologies and changing customer needs. They gather insights through research, data analysis and by keeping a pulse on latest trends. By doing so, they can anticipate future changes and make informed decisions. For instance, the Policy Statement on Homosexuality, was issued by the Adventist church as early as 1999 when the matter had not been mainstreamed (Bohache, 2008). Issuing policy guidelines long before controversies emerged reflects the proactive approach to addressing potential issues by the church. By doing so, the institution demonstrated a commitment to preventing conflicts, ensuring that its values and standards are upheld. Besides, early policy guidelines provide clarity on how the institution intends to handle controversial matters, which cannot be challenged by emerging pressure. This approach has prevented confusion and has ensured that everyone understands the expectations and consequences.

Since leadership is dynamic in a constantly changing world, there is the need to foster an agile and flexible culture in which leaders embrace change and encourage innovative thinking (Taylor, 2021). This involves creating an environment where those being led feel empowered to experiment, take calculated risks and adapt appropriate strategies to align with evolving trends. There is a need to encourage collaboration and diversity of perspectives. There is also a need to understand and navigate changing trends effectively. Leaders should foster a collaborative environment that encourages diverse perspectives. By bringing together individuals with different backgrounds, experiences and expertise, Adventist leaders can gain a broader understanding of trends and their potential impact on the organization. The church elects officials through delegates on a 'one man one vote' basis, through a secret ballot. A church within the Conference will send a delegate or two, depending on the requirements set out by the local Conference. The candidate with the simple majority is declared the winner.

Historical Perspectives of Leadership in the Adventist Church

A look at the historical development of leadership in the Adventist church will provide insight into the evolution of leadership principles and practices within the denomination in the constantly changing world (Straub, 2017). Historically, leadership in the Adventist Church has revolved around the concept of representative governance, where leaders are elected by delegates at various levels of the organization, including local churches, conferences, unions, divisions and the General Conference. This is the rank and file of the church organization, from the lowest unit – the local church to the highest unit – the General Conference. This structure ensures broader participation and decision-making authority for members.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists was officially organized on May 21, 1863, in Battle Creek, Michigan, USA with John Byington as the inaugural President. James White had been elected president but he declined, feeling himself inadequate for such an enormous task (Wheeler, 2003). He would later serve three terms as president. The organizational session of the General Conference marked the establishment of a central administrative structure for the rapidly growing Seventh-day Adventist movement. This event

marked a significant step in formalizing the denomination's governance, beliefs and worldwide mission (Spalding, 2013). As the Seventh-day Adventist Church expanded globally, organizational structures were developed to facilitate administration and ministry on regional levels. Divisions are regional administrative units that encompass multiple countries or territories. They provide oversight and coordination for various unions and local conferences within their territories. Unions are administrative units that encompass smaller regions, typically part, one or more countries. Unions oversee activities of local conferences and churches within their territories. Meanwhile, Local fields, sometimes referred to as conferences, are administrative units that oversee the work within specific geographic areas, such as states, provinces or smaller regions. Local conferences facilitate evangelistic outreach, pastoral care, education and other church-related activities within their designated territories. The Seventh-day Adventist Church's growth led to the establishment of new divisions and unions around the world to accommodate the increasing number of members and congregations. Each division and union operates within the framework of the General Conference policies while addressing specific cultural, linguistic and regional needs.

In the Adventist church system, there is an emphasis on *Servant Leadership* inspired by Jesus Christ's example of humility and service. This is reflected on washing the Disciples' feet (John 13:1-17), healing the sick (Matthew 4:24), feeding the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21), teaching and empowering others (Matthew 5-7), sacrificial love and death on the cross (John 10:11). These references showcase various aspects of Jesus' ministry, demonstrating His love, compassion, service, teachings and ultimately His sacrificial death on the cross for salvation of humanity. Key aspects of servant leadership, including humility, compassion, empathy, empowering others, meeting needs and sacrificial love, serve as powerful inspiration for individuals seeking to emulate Jesus' model of leadership in their own lives. Servant leaders are expected to prioritize the needs of others, promote collaboration and empower individuals to fulfill their potential within the context of the church's mission. (Tenney, 2014). Founding fathers worked extensively months-on-end without pay, sacrificing their time and resources for the establishment and betterment of the new denomination. James White,

for instance, founded and managed a tract named the 'Present Truth' in 1849 using his meagre resources and saw the paper blossom into a major magazine that is still being published by the church to date. He founded the paper 14 years before the Seventh-day Adventist church was formally organized. He later became General Conference President and turned the Publishing ministry into one of the largest and most effective ministries of the Adventist church (Wheeler, 2003).

The Adventist Church traces its roots to the mid-19th century Millerite movement and after the subsequent Great Disappointment of 1844. The Millerite movement emerged in the United States during the early 19th century, led by Baptist preacher William Miller. Miller preached that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ would occur around the year 1843 to 1844 based on his interpretation of biblical prophecies, particularly Daniel 2, 7 to 12. When the predicted date of Christ's return, October 22, 1844 passed without any visible event, it resulted in a profound disappointment among Millerites. This event, known as the Great Disappointment, marked a significant turning point for the Millerite movement. It led to a greater emphasis on the study of biblical prophecy and a renewed interest in end-times theology among various Christian groups, led by a group of people who would formally organize themselves as the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1863 (Knight, 2003). The Great Disappointment also served as a catalyst for the development of different interpretations and perspectives on eschatology within Christianity and sparked a period of theological reflection, reinterpretation and formation of new religious movements that continued to exist and have had a lasting impact on religious history (Straub, 2017).

More importantly, new leadership primarily emerged from the ashes of the Great Disappointment through charismatic individuals like Joseph Bates and James and Ellen White among others. These pioneers played crucial roles in shaping the beliefs and organizational structure of the church. As the Adventist movement grew, the need for a more structured leadership framework was quite apparent. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the church established administrative levels, including conferences, unions and eventually divisions, to facilitate governance and decision-making (Standish, 2000).

Ellen G. White emerges as one of the influential early church founders and a prominent spiritual leader who played a significant role in providing guidance and counsel on matters of faith, doctrine and organization. Her writings and visions continue to be highly regarded by Adventists, shaping the understanding of leadership principles and spirituality within the church (Knight, 2003). There are instances of members and even ex-members who have contradicted her teachings. Through its leadership, the Adventist church addressed these accusations. Nichol (1951), for instance, addressed the contradictions and provided answers that guided leaders when dealing with such matters. These historical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding the structures and values that have shaped the Adventist Church leadership throughout its history. The early Adventist leaders were committed to spiritual leadership, servant leadership, representative governance and the preservation of core beliefs while adapting consultative dialogues to address the changing needs and contexts of the global Adventist community.

Emerging Issues in the Adventist Leadership

Adventist leaders are entrusted with upholding the core biblical doctrines and beliefs as established by the Adventist church. The church has a set of 28 fundamental beliefs. Some of the beliefs and practices that find their way into the daily livelihood of the Adventist believers include the second coming of Christ, the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, health principles and ethical standards (Straub, 2017). Leaders are responsible for safeguarding and promoting these beliefs among the membership in order to achieve doctrinal unity across the board.

Selected Issues in the Adventist Church

The Adventist Church, like any religious denomination, experiences emerging controversial issues that reflect the evolving societal and cultural landscape. While specific issues and their degree of controversy may vary across regions and congregations, some examples of emerging controversial topics within the Adventist Church include the Lesbian Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) controversy, the ordination of women and creationism vs evolution, among others. On top of the day-to-day burdens of making decisions on the running of the church,

Adventist leadership is constantly under pressure to define how the church handles such matters. In 1999, the Adventist church issued a statement entitled: "Position Statement on Homosexuality." The document was issued by the Adventist church's highest decision-making organ, the General Conference. It stated that the church believes that the Bible consistently affirms the pattern of heterosexual monogamy, and all sexual relations outside the scope of heterosexual marriage are contrary to God's original plan (Dudley, 2008).

Various societies and Christian denominations have readily embraced and even mainstreamed LGBTQ+ as members and even as clergy, leaving the Adventist church to come under sharp focus for this stance. The Adventists in the Inter-European Division recently issued a statement condemning the public statements of Pastor Saša Gunjević of Germany concerning his sexual orientation. The pastor stated that he was in fact bisexual, contrary to the church's official position as stated above. In 2014, the church issued yet another pronouncement forbidding the practice among its members and employees and forbade the celebration of marriages between persons of the same gender. The church leadership came out strongly against the said pastor who maintained his job only after stating that despite being bisexual, he had not acted upon his sexual orientation (Todd, 2023).

There is also an emerging debate about the traditional place of ecumenical relations. The Adventist church has traditionally maintained a degree of separation from other Christian denominations, primarily due to theological differences and concerns about compromising distinctive beliefs (Höschele, 2022). In Kenya, for instance, the Adventist church refused to belong to the Alliance of Protestant Missions (APM) which was founded in 1918 (Mungeam, 1978) primarily due to the stated concerns. In contemporary Kenya, issues facing society have not received the public voice of the Adventist church, which informed the withdrawal from grants-in-aid (state funding) for their schools (Sang, 2021).

Another controversial issue that faces Adventist church leaders today is the place of contemporary worship practices in which the style and format of worship as well as the traditional liturgy are under pressure to change. Masimba (2011) has opined that the traditional forms of worship, with a focus

on hymns and liturgy is considered by younger Adventists as out of date. The youth in the Adventist church argue that the conservative worship style has driven young people from church pushing them to seek contemporary worship styles that incorporate contemporary music, multimedia elements and more informal approaches. These concerns border on the conservative nature of the Adventist church. Masimba's primary research was held at the New Life Seventh-day Adventist church in Nairobi which gave its congregants a more contemporary worship experience featuring modern instruments, choruses (as opposed to hymns), dancing and clapping. This is differentiated from the traditional Adventism and was quite popular with the youth but discouraged by the more conservative members of the church who reacted to the changes in various ways. The Church offered guidance that eventually resolved the differences.

Finally, there is yet more controversy about the place of the health message. The Adventist church traditionally promotes health principles, including vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and other substances. It also emphasizes on a healthy lifestyle. There have been disagreements regarding the degree of strict adherence to these principles (Knight, 2003). Eating meat or serving it in Adventist institutions such as in the University of Eastern Africa Baraton, caused some talking points when the institution began accepting government-sponsored students who did not necessarily subscribe to the Adventist health message. The institution remained firm that the diet served in the school would remain, as has always been, lacto-ovo-vegetarian (Sang & Ngenye, 2018).

Handling Controversial Issues in the Adventist Leadership

The Adventist Church is indeed a diverse and global community and it is natural that opinions on these controversial issues will vary significantly. The church leadership presents a tough front while seeking unity and respecting diverse perspectives and at the same time upholding the core principles of the faith. Church leaders must adopt continuous learning and adaptation to emerging issues that do not compromise the traditional teachings but address them in a manner that lessens the demand for changes and reformation (Standish, 2000). An example of controversy in Kenya, was the sudden withdrawal by the Adventist church from accepting State funding for its schools in Kenya, starting from

1955 (Sang, 2021). In 1934, the colonial government decided to fund the missionary-run Adventist schools. The matter did not sit down well with church members who felt that accepting state funding would compromise their message.

Power behind Adventist Leadership

Leadership today finds its meaning in dealing with the world's constantly changing events influenced by a myriad of, often unexpected events. The challenges of leadership of the Adventist church on the global stage are not necessarily those faced by specific areas such as Africa. The unique socio-historical and ethno-political situation in Africa tends towards cultural conservatism (Sobania, 2003). This tends to be better aligned to the Church's overall leadership context of Christian conservatism (Ryan & Switzer, 2009). Due to cultural conservatism, the church's leadership context in Africa is far less challenging than it is with the West, which is much more liberal. As a result, much of the controversial issues in the West are already addressed in the cultural context the Adventist church operates in Africa. The largest of the 13 global Divisions of the Adventist church, is the East Central Africa Division (ECD). This is an administrative region of the Seventh-day Adventist Church comprising of 11 countries of Eastern and Central Africa, and operating under the organizational structure and policies of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The ECD, which is based in Nairobi, Kenya, is responsible for overseeing activities and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church within its territory. Like all other regions, there are leadership challenges over the same emerging issues. The ECD provides leadership, coordination and support to local conferences, missions, institutions and other entities affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the region. The specific policy guidelines and procedures followed by the ECD may vary and are based on the policies and guidelines set forth by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which is the global governing body of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These policies and guidelines cover various aspects of church operations, including doctrine, administration, finance, education, health and mission outreach.

It is important to note that the policies and guidelines of the ECD are included in the document entitled ECD WP (B15 15) which is an internal document that governs the operations and decision-

making processes within the Division. These policies are designed to ensure consistency, accountability and alignment with the overall mission and values of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Church leaders and officers are under obligation to observe and enforce the policies and regulations at all levels of operations. This unique approach to leadership forms the base for which the Adventist church is governed. Having survived for over 160 years, this approach has gained enough ground to allow it to shape the course of the church as opposed to approaches that align with the dictates of social, political, religious and economic factors.

Conclusion and recommendations

In the face of shifting trends, Adventist leaders should articulate an inspiring vision to motivate their teams. They must communicate the organization's purpose clearly, fostering a shared sense of meaning amid change. This calls for creativity, resilience and adaptability while upholding fundamental principles. The tension between tradition and new realities can be resolved through consultative dialogues. Feedback and stakeholder engagement are crucial. Transparent discussions help leaders make informed decisions, averting internal conflicts and mission drift. Upholding core values during challenges is vital, occasionally necessitating standing firm against trends. Grounded in Adventist values, leaders find stability and guidance. Embracing a learning mindset, staying informed, and fostering collaboration solidify leaders' positions in the face of changes. Through these strategies, leaders navigate transformation and seize growth opportunities.

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