

“The Decline and Recovery of Apostolic Leadership in Adventist Ministry”
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Introduction

It is a universal tendency in the Christian religion, as in many other religions, to give a theological interpretation to institutions which have developed gradually through a period of time for the sake of practical usefulness, and then read that interpretation back into the earliest periods and infancy of these institutions, attaching them to an age when in fact nobody imagined that they had such a meaning.

—Richard Hanson, twentieth-century patristic scholar

While the details vary, there is an overall pattern of growth, plateau, decline, and ultimately renewal or death among Christian denominations and networks. One of the factors that catalyze movement dynamics early on—as well as their eventual renewal—is the degree to which a church’s founding leaders embody and transfer the apostolic function for future generations.¹ This paper traces the initial function and decline of apostolicity in Seventh-day Adventist ministers as a case study with implications for contemporary Adventism and beyond.

¹ As a primer to explore further how the apostolic function is critical to both the initial founding and renewal of the life cycles of congregations, various denominations, and networks, see the following:

“5 Stages of a Lifecycle of Churches According to Compton,” n.d.

“Based on Paul Borden’s Paradigm of Life Cycle and Turnaround Work,” n.d.

“Biblical Examples of the Value of Writing a Vision down before Communicating It (Moses and the Sanctuary, David and Solo),” n.d.

“Bullard (Baptist Background) Frames the Life Cycle as 10 Phases from Birth to Death—an External Vision and Priority Of,” n.d.

Bullard, George. *The Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development*, n.d.

Compton, Stephen C. *Rekindling the Mainline: New Life through New Churches*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003.

Hardaway, Donald Lynn. “An Evaluation of the Growing Healthy Churches Program as a Method for Producing Healthy, Growing, and Reproducing Southern Baptist Congregations.” Doctor of Ministry Dissertation (Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary), 2012.

“Launch: Let’s Build Something New! -- Momentum Growth: It’s Going to Be a Wild Ride! -- Strategic Growth: Plan Your Work,” n.d.

After providing an analysis of leadership in the New Testament—with particular emphasis on apostles, apostolicity, and the relationship with elders—an examination of early Adventism’s attempt to implement this approach will be explored. Capacity-building practices that enabled itinerancy among ministers including the function of elders, member-ministry, and simple reproducible structures are also surveyed. The decline of apostolicity and transition into the modern notion of a “pastor” will be chronicled from early Adventist pioneer comments, as well as the development of key historical documents including official church manuals and handbooks. Finally, a synthesis of the shifting function of apostolicity in Adventist ministry will be provided with recommendations for contemporary Adventism and other Christian churches.

Apostles and Apostolicity in the New Testament

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus’ original twelve disciples were also identified as “apostles” either explicitly (Matthew 10:1-4; Luke 6:12-16) or functionally through being with him and sent out with divine authority to preach in his name (Mark 3:13-19). John’s gospel simply mentions “the twelve” (John 6:70), and Acts names and identifies the remaining eleven disciples as apostles at the time of selecting Judas’s replacement (Acts 1:13). The pre-resurrection function of these original twelve apostles—to be with Jesus then sent out on various missions within the “house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-12; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6)—is repeated and expanded in the post-resurrection sending of the apostles as disciple-makers to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; Matthew 24:14; 28:16-20; et al.).

Morgan, Tony. *The Unstuck Church: Equipping Churches to Experience Sustained Health*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2017.

“Non-Denominational Approach to Life Cycles, 7 Stages,” n.d.

“One of the Original Books That Described and Influenced How Churches and Denominations Reflect the Life Cycle of Living,” n.d.

Saarinen, Martin F. *The Life Cycle of a Congregation*. An Alban Institute Publication. Washington, D.C: Alban Institute, 1994.

To expand the mission of Jesus beyond the original twelve—referred to as “super apostles” (2 Cor. 11:5) and “apostles of the lamb” whom the New Jerusalem’s twelve foundations are named after (Rev. 21:14)—other apostles were added after the resurrection. Paul referred to himself as an apostle called by God (Rom. 1:5; 11:13), Barnabas is referred to as an apostle to the Gentiles on par with Paul (Acts 14:14; 1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:9), and Matthias replaced Judas (Acts 1:25-26). Other apostles included James the half-brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19, 29), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30; 4:18), Apollos (1 Cor. 4:6-9), and—depending upon interpretation— Silas and Timothy (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6)², Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7),³ and two additional unnamed apostles (2 Cor. 8:23).

The three biblical marks of apostles were direct selection and appointment by Jesus (Mk 3:14; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2, 24; 10:41; Gal. 1:1, et al.), personal post-resurrection witness of Christ (Acts 1:22; 10:39-41; 15:7-8 et al.), and divine confirmation of their mission through miraculous signs (Matt. 10:1-2; Acts 1:5-8; 2:43; 4:33; 8:14; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4, et al.).⁴ The apostles’ important role did not make them infallible (i.e. Peter’s hypocrisy in Gal. 2:11-14), yet their significant influence “derives from a distinctive status as ‘founders’ of the communities

² For a representative example of how Silas and Timothy’s inclusion is exegeted as Paul’s use of the “epistolary plural”, see Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2012), 207.

³ John W. Reeve et al., eds., *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies: Seventh-Day Adventist Leaders and Scholars Explore an Important Issue Facing the Church* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2015), 237–42.

⁴ The emphasis on selecting someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his earthly ministry (Acts 1:21-22) is not listed as a criterion as it did not apply to the Apostle Paul and others. A fifth possible criteria sometimes used by both cessationists and continuationists (while not listed as such by the New Testament writers themselves) is the writing of the canon. For representative examples of continuationists who believe the office of apostle has is no longer operative but the function of the apostolic gift is, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Zondervan Academic, 1994, 905-906, and Greg Allison who also notes that while others have referred to them as apostles, no major figure in Christian history has self-identified as an apostle. See *Sojourners and Strangers*, 210.

and as trans-local overseers”.⁵ While no contemporary disciple of Jesus fits all three marks of a New Testament apostle today (particularly those aspects which require the physical presence of Jesus Christ),⁶ the inclusion of apostles in gifting passages most certainly envisions the continued function of apostolicity beyond the New Testament era.

Comparing apostle references in 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 and Ephesians 4:11 in their larger context yields five foundational functions of apostolicity. First, the apostolic function is the primary catalyst that enables the other gifts to thrive. Both passages list it first and make additional comments to its foundational nature (1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11).⁷ Secondly, it comes directly from the Holy Spirit rather than through the church (it is a manifestation of the Spirit in 1 Cor. 12:7; 11 and an expression of ascension gifting in Eph. 4:8). Third, it is available to all baptized believers not a select group of leaders (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:7).⁸ Fourth, it brings unity and maturity when functioning in tandem with other gifts (1 Cor. 12:25-26; Eph. 4:13, 16). And fifth, it will continue to function throughout all generations (context of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:21 and the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 are placed in the context of a future love perfected when chapter 13 verse 12 says we shall see “face to face”). The New Testament describes both the unique early office of apostles as well as the ongoing function of apostolicity as foundational to God’s mission and His church.

⁵ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 208–9.

⁶ Not only do contemporary disciples not fit these criteria, but even some of the above-named apostles in the New Testament are interestingly not recorded as fulfilling all three criteria such as Barnabas and Apollos.

⁷ Perhaps what makes this aspect of apostolicity foundational is not its elevation over the other gifts, but rather in its apostolic founding of new environments without which the other gifts cannot function.

⁸ For an exploration of the fivefold gifting as a ministry text rather than a leadership text, see Alan Hirsch, *The Permanent Revolution*. Josey Bass, 2012, 94-96.

Apostles and Elders (and Pastors?) in the New Testament

While apostles can also be elders (1 Pet. 5:1; 2 John 1:1) they were appointed directly by Jesus for an itinerant mission. Elders on the other hand were appointed by the apostles in newly established churches as the primary spiritual leaders⁹ (1 Tim. 3:1-7; 1 Pet. 5:1-2; Titus 1:5-7) to do the shepherding (Acts 14:23; 20:28). While deacons were appointed later as a second leadership function within local expressions of church (Acts 6:1-7), the primary leadership roles of apostles and elders formed a relationship characterized by a division in roles (apostles founded new churches and elders led them), symbiotic benefits (apostolicity created the need for more elders whose shepherding of these churches ensured the continued itinerancy of apostles), and collaborative leadership (both groups were listed as key decision-makers in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:2,6).¹⁰ In other words, apostles and elders were the two primary leadership roles in the New Testament.

Interestingly, the New Testament provides no evidence of the office of “pastor” as distinct from that of elders or apostles. The three terms of elders (“presbuteroi”), overseers or bishops (“episkepoi”), and shepherds (“poimenoi”)—while loaded with different nuances of meaning—refer interchangeably to the same group of people. Elders are referred to as overseers (Titus 1:5-7; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17) who also fulfill the pastoral¹¹ or shepherding function (verbal form of “poimen”) within churches. Peter (both apostle and elder) was charged by Jesus to “shepherd” the sheep (John 21:16), and in turn charged other elders to “shepherd” the sheep (1 Pet. 5:1-2). Paul also described elders as overseers or bishops charged to “shepherd” the church

⁹ Also, these passages always refer to elders in the plural rather than as a solo leader.

¹⁰ This collaboration is also demonstrated in the nature of the New Testament as—in my count—21 of 27 of its letters are written by apostles to coach elders of newly planted churches.

¹¹ Pastor is the Latin word for shepherd.

of God (Acts 20:17; 28). These three-part references to elders and bishops/overseers as the same group of people who also do the shepherding, continued to be used interchangeably until the beginning of the second century.¹²

It is significant to note that the nominal form for shepherds or pastors (“poimen” or “poimenoι” in the plural) is used multiple times to describe divinity but only once to describe humanity. Jesus himself is the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14), the shepherd and overseer of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25), the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), and the great shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20). Yet outside of the verbal usages of shepherding by humans, the only single nominal usage of the term in the New Testament to describe a human being (Eph. 4:11) is in the context of spiritual gifting (not a leadership office), is available to all believers not just select leaders, and is used in the plural with no concept of a lone superstar.

Pastor, then, is a metaphor to describe a particular function in the church. It is not an office or title. A first-century shepherd had nothing to do with the specialized and professional sense it has come to have in contemporary Christianity. Therefore, Ephesians 4:11 does not envision a pastoral office, but merely one of many functions in the church. Shepherds are those who naturally provide nurture and care for God’s sheep. It is a profound error, therefore, to confuse shepherds with an office or title as is commonly conceived today.¹³

In addition, there are no biblical qualifications for becoming a pastor as opposed to an elder, no example of pastoral ordination or laying on of hands (as is the case with apostles, elders, and deacons), and ultimately the notion of pastor as an overseer to the overseers would invalidate the work of both apostles (who functioned with trans-local oversight) and elders (who were the designated overseers of individual churches). Indeed, “it would seem strange to have a stand-

¹² See James Mackinnon’s *Calvin, and the Reformation* (80-81), and Ferguson’s, *Early Christians Speak* (169-173).

¹³ Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: Barna, 2012), 228.

alone, separate office, never before or after mentioned in the New Testament, whose job was to shepherd the church when the task of shepherding the church was elsewhere said to be the role of the elders.”¹⁴

Apostolicity in Early Adventist Ministry

Emerging out of the Second Great Awakening, the followers of the interdenominational Millerite movement—with its emphasis on the immediacy and nearness of the second coming of Christ—experienced a great disappointment on October 22, 1844, when Jesus did not return. One of the post-disappointment groups which eventually united through bible study around several pillar doctrines, hunger for spiritual union with Christ,¹⁵ and a global mission,¹⁶ became the Seventh-day Adventist Church (officially organized in 1863).¹⁷ One of the drivers for the Adventist movement which has grown from 3,500 in 1863 to over 21.5 million members by the end of 2019,¹⁸ was the founding emphasis on the apostolic role of ministers.

Even during early Sabbatarian Adventism before the formal organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the function of itinerant, apostolic workers was the primary approach to

¹⁴ See Blake Jones, “Apostle or Elder? The Critical Need to Define the Adventist Minister’s Role” (Presentation at Adventist Theological Society, San Diego, 2014), 4.

¹⁵ For a description of how early Sabbatarian Adventists—fueled by the imminence of Christ’ return—placed transformative spiritual experience on par with doctrinal commitments—see Beverly Beem and Hanks Harwood, “My Soul is on the Wing for Glory”: Adventist Spirituality, 1850-1863. Andrews University Seminary Studies, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2006), 155-171.

¹⁶ For an overview treatment of how Adventism’s global mission was facilitated by an itinerant model of leadership and a non-pastor dependent model of the local church, see Russell Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church*. Hart Research Center, 1998, 161.

¹⁷ For a brief overview, see <https://www.adventist.org/church/what-do-seventh-day-adventists-believe/history-of-seventh-day-adventists/>

¹⁸ For in-depth statistical reports, see www.adventiststatistics.org

Adventist leadership. James White¹⁹ noted in 1859 there were “no settled pastors over our churches”, rather Adventist ministers were missionaries sent out into a cold world to “wear out their lives in preaching unpopular Bible truth.”²⁰ He went on to note in 1862 that the ability under God’s guidance to plant a church was viewed as validation that God had indeed called the minister:

In no way can a preacher so well prove himself as in entering new fields. There he can see the fruits of his own labors. And if he be successful in raising up churches, and establishing them, so that they bear good fruits, he gives to his brethren the best proofs that he is sent of the Lord...If they cannot raise up churches and friends to sustain them, then certainly the cause of truth has no need of them, and they have the best reasons for concluding that they made a sad mistake when they thought that God called them to teach the third angel's message.²¹

The organization of the first statewide conferences starting in 1861 were for the express purpose of coordinating apostolic assignments and preventing overlap in territory among early Adventist ministers.²² These annual ministers’ meetings often followed a four-fold approach to the coordination for apostolic placement.²³ First, the prospective fields to raise up new churches were listed. Secondly, the ministers would spend time seeking God’s will for their next assignment. Third, they would then each relate experiences of where they believe the Lord was calling them to plant. And finally, their assignments for the following year were given, often accompanied by a sense of God’s leading to the entire assembly. This early understanding of an

¹⁹ One of the three primary founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, along with Ellen White and Joseph Bates.

²⁰ James White, An Address reported in *Review and Herald*. Vol. 14. No. 3 (June 9, 1859), 21.

²¹ James White, *Review and Herald*, vol. 19, no. 20 (April 15, 1862), 156.

²² John Norton Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline*. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1907. See also Loughborough’s recognition that conference organization was first proposed by James White in his July 21, 1859 *Review* article where suggested that each state conduct an annual meeting to bring order in place of confusion in regards to the minister’s assignments in the field (p.116).

²³ *Ibid.*, 148.

Adventist minister's role—as well as the function of annual conference meetings—was most certainly influenced by the Methodist pattern of itinerant circuit preachers and annual conference meetings.²⁴

A close reading of Scripture also influenced the early Adventist understanding and approach to apostolic leadership. Functioning somewhat as an unofficial, de-facto church manual for several years, J.N. Loughborough's *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline* (1907) articulates well the early Adventist understanding and interpretation of New Testament leadership. The modern notion of a bishop with oversight over a diocese of churches was viewed as a post-New Testament development.²⁵ Rather, bishops, elders, and pastors were all understood as referring to the same role confined to a local church:

The term pastor is from *poimen*, and signifies literally a herdsman, a shepherd, especially a pastor, a teacher, a spiritual guide of a particular church. The definition of this term shows that it signifies the same office as *presbuteros* (elder), and *episcopos* (bishop), a local office confined to a particular church.²⁶

Within the local church, elders and deacons were both volunteer leadership roles with the former looking after the spiritual affairs of the church, and the latter primarily the temporal affairs.²⁷

The New Testament distinction between apostles being called by God with a broader scope of authority and elders appointed by an individual church with local authority is affirmed but

²⁴ The four-question assessment process for the Methodist circuit rider included the following: “Is this man truly converted? Does he know and follow the Methodist rules? Does he do a good job preaching? Does he have a horse?” See Ludwig Charles *Francis Asbury: God's Circuit Rider*. Mott Media, 1984, 196. For a detailed treatment of the hardships and sacrifices of circuit riders in the context of the annual conference where overseeing bishops would assign the preacher to plant in a new circuit (today's charge) for typically two years maximum, see William Powell Jr's “Methodist Circuit Riders in America, 1766-1844” University of Richmond, VA. Master's Thesis, 1977.

²⁵ *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline.*, 68-69. For a description of this transition from a modern Christian perspective see Viola, 230-231.

²⁶ *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline.* 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

expanded as early Adventists also viewed “evangelists” as an “especial” call from God for an itinerant function alongside apostles.²⁸ While this understanding of the evangelist as an itinerant church planter—“a preacher of the gospel not fixed in any place, but traveling as a missionary to preach the gospel and establish churches”²⁹—is used somewhat interchangeably with the term apostle rather than a distinct leadership position, its itinerancy was not developed to the degree of the apostles.³⁰ The two primary reasons given for the function of early apostles continuing beyond the original twelve were definitional—an apostle as one sent out by God on mission can happen in any age—and exegetical—Ephesians 4 envisions the continued need for apostles as a means of unity which the church has not yet fully realized.³¹

The practice of paid ministers as apostolic church planters also figured prominently into the early Adventist understanding of ordination. There were four primary criteria for examination of a candidate to gospel ministry: a clear calling from God, intellectual and spiritual fitness, beliefs in harmony with the church, and evangelistic experience in new fields.³² Kaiser synthesizes the practice and roots of itinerant evangelism before ordination:

²⁸ Ibid., 127-128.

²⁹ Ibid., 128.

³⁰ While the concept of evangelism as sent-ness can be developed from Romans 10:13-15 (in reverse order salvation comes from calling, which comes from believing, derived from hearing gospel proclamation by those who are sent), the three Scriptures Loughborough referenced to connect these concepts do not thoroughly establish it as Ephesians 4:11 simply mentions it in the context of gifting, 2 Timothy 4:5 includes the admonition to do the work of an evangelist with no concept of apostolicity, and Acts 21:8 describes Philip as both an evangelist and one of the original seven deacons. In addition to Romans 10:13-15, the narrative of Philip could potentially include the notion of itinerancy as he was taken up and sent by God supernaturally to different places and evangelized in cultures other than his own (Acts 8:5; 26-40).

³¹ Sixteen New Testament apostles are also named in addition to the expectation for continued apostolicity. See Ibid., 127.

³² While the additional criteria of a sense of one’s own weakness and incompetence is mentioned as having occasional usage, these four primary criteria are explored in Dennis Kaiser, “Setting Apart for the Ministry: Theory and Practice within Seventh-day Adventism (1850-1920),” *Andrews University Seminar Studies* 51, no. 2 (2013): 177-218.

The most feasible way to prove one's calling was by entering new fields where the present truth was unknown, and thus a period of 'labor[ing] publicly in the cause of God'... This period of labor, sometimes called a 'time of improving,' was usually marked by missionary activities in untrodden fields, often lasting one or two years, so that the church could recognize the candidate's calling and ordain him. Ellen White compared this time of 'improving' to the Waldensian practice of holding off on 'ordination to the sacred office' until the candidates had completed a three-year missionary experience in the outside world.³³

While the granting of ordination credentials to church administrators by virtue of their position was discouraged by the General Conference, there were examples of administrators being granted a ministerial license in order to improve their skills before ordination.³⁴ Uriah Smith—although already having functioned as an editor of the *Review* and secretary of the General Conference—was granted a ministerial license to improve his gift of preaching (1868), and G.I. Butler—already serving as a conference president in 1865 only received a ministerial license and then ordination in 1867.³⁵

Pioneers and key leaders also bore repeated witness to the importance of itinerant, apostolic work among paid ministers. In an 1875 California camp-meeting discussion, recent general conference president G.I. Butler—now serving as a missionary to that state—was recorded giving the following observation regarding local conferences and their relationship to ministerial compensation:

Elder Butler spoke to the point, reciting the imperative necessity of more laborers in the field in order to spread these living but unpopular truths...that unless those who go out to labor in this direction do benefit the cause, the Conferences generally do not feel under obligation to pay them for their time and efforts.³⁶

³³ Ibid., 185-186.

³⁴ Ibid., 203.

³⁵ Ibid., 204.

³⁶ California State Conference Minutes, 3rd Annual Session. Oct. 1-10. 1874, Napa, CA. Report of the 7th Session, Oct. 9, 8:00 A.M.

Ellen White repeatedly highlighted the apostolic role of paid ministers planting member-led churches, then passing on to do it again:

Our ministers are not to spend their time laboring for those who have already accepted the truth. With Christ's love burning in their hearts, they are to go forth to win sinners to the Saviour. Beside all waters they are to sow the seeds of truth. Place after place is to be visited; church after church is to be raised up. Those who take their stand for the truth are to be organized into churches, and then the minister is to pass on to other equally important fields.³⁷

Her expectation for ministers included devising new methods of labor for raising up churches both domestically and internationally,³⁸ with the salvation of Christ as the gospel motivation for planting.³⁹ If the methods used by ministers were not resulting in new churches being organized, then they were to examine themselves spiritually, seek counsel from fellow ministers, and be willing to change their strategies.⁴⁰ In Ellen White's view, the mentoring done by older ministers should include taking younger ministers with them into the harvest field to work new territories.⁴¹ In this way, ministers could establish new groups with a church planting DNA where the burden of supporting apostolic work exists in all believers with new churches to be planted from among the ranks of new converts.⁴² Larger churches were also challenged to organize themselves to send missionary teams to plant in nearby cities and villages.⁴³ Churches

³⁷ Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 7*, page 18, paragraph 4.

³⁸ Ellen White, *Manuscript 32*, 1901, paragraph 16; White, *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 3*, page 205.

³⁹ Ellen White, *Manuscript 47*, 1908.

⁴⁰ Ellen White, *Review & Herald*, October 21, 1884, Paragraph 18.

⁴¹ Ellen White, *Evangelism*. P.683.2; 686.1.

⁴² Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 3*, page 205; 210. *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 7*, page 20; White, *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 3*, p.205. *Letter 86*, 1902, Par.16; *Pacific Union Recorder*, August 1, 1901.

⁴³ Ellen White, *Review & Herald*, July 21, 1891, Paragraph 10-11.

that sent their members out to plant new churches were themselves strengthened and refreshed,⁴⁴ and counseled to do so in tandem with medical missionary work where possible.⁴⁵

In publications outside Seventh-day Adventism, the apostolicity of ministers was also recognized as a significant cause for rapid growth. Interviews with Adventist leaders were conducted indicating the primary function of evangelizing in new fields,⁴⁶ as well as the observation that “all Seventh-day Adventist clergyman are missionaries—not located pastors—and are busy preaching, teaching, and organizing the world over.”⁴⁷

Apostolic Capacity in Early Adventism

Member-led ministries, elder-led churches, and a simple reproducible ecclesiology all created significant capacity for the function of apostolic leadership in early Adventism. Ellen White challenged ministers to “establish your churches with the understanding that they need not expect the minister to wait upon them. They have the truth; they know what truth is. They should have root in themselves.”⁴⁸ Based on the biblical paradigm of every-member ministry and the contemporary influence of John Wesley’s three-part “method” of societies, classes, and bands,⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*. Volume 3, p. 204, paragraph 3; White, *Signs of the Times* August 21, 1901, par. 4; White, *Manuscript 32*, 1901, Par. 16.

⁴⁵ White, *Manuscript 16*, February 25, 1901.; White, *Letter 30*, 1901.

⁴⁶ G.B. Star. Wabash, Indiana *Plain Dealer*. October 1, 1886, 5.

⁴⁷ *Seventh-day Baptist Sabbath Recorder*. December 28, 1908. Reprinted in *Review and Herald*. January 14, 1909.

⁴⁸ Ellen White. “An Appeal to our Ministers.” General Conference Bulletin, Vol. IV. Battle Creek, April 16, 1901. Extra No. 12.

⁴⁹ Wesley’s formation of societies (larger groups for teaching, preaching, and teaching), classes (mandatory, diverse mixed-gender groups up to 20 for non-programmed discipleship), and bands (optional, smaller same-gender groups for following a set of questions for spiritual accountability) was an eclectic borrowing from both Anglicans and Moravians. For a general overview, see Andrew C. Thompson. “‘To Stir Them Up to Believe, Love, and Obey’—Soteriological Dimensions of the Early Methodist Class Meeting”. *Methodist History* 48.3,

the primary expression of early Adventist ministry was centered around group life in the “social meeting.” A renamed and adapted form of the Methodist class meeting, social meetings were not designed around sharing doctrinal truths but instead sharing Christian life as participants testified of their experiences, confessed sins, offered prayers, sang together, and encouraged one another.⁵⁰ Uriah Smith captured the spirit of the social meeting gathering as “a meeting characterized by spirited and soul-cheering testimonies, the beaming eye, the voice of praise, the earnest and stirring exhortation, and often the falling tear-scenes in which faith and love flame up anew.”⁵¹ These were non-programmed gatherings, and if people started preaching in social meetings they were instructed to keep it short as one particular meeting recorded 117 testimonies in 53 minutes.⁵² While not a condition for membership, they were an expected duty for all true believers,⁵³ a helpful tool to train members and young ministers for ministry,⁵⁴ sometimes practiced during devotional times at early general conference sessions,⁵⁵ and of much greater significance to church life than being “entertained by a preacher”:

Let every one consider the value of the social meetings, and let not large or small companies of believers think that they cannot have an enjoyable season unless

(2010). For a detailed treatment of the success and declining influence of the class meetings as they became more regimented, programmed, and eventually replaced by Sunday School (with its emphasis on Bible instruction rather than the discipleship of persons), see Philip F. Hardt. “A Crown and a Cross: The Rise, Development, and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting in Eighteenth Century England.” *Methodist History* 49.2 (2011), and David Lowes Watson’s *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: It’s Origins and Significance*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002.

⁵⁰ See James White, *Life Incidents*. Vol. 1 (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1868), 167; *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, vol. 4, no. 30 (Rochester, NY.: May 29, 1855), 236.

⁵¹ Uriah Smith. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (May 23, 1865).

⁵² J.N. Loughborough. *Miracles in My Life* (reprinted by Leaves of Autumn Books, Phoenix, AZ: 1987), 88.

⁵³ Ellen White, Letter 7. 1883, quoted in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, 935.

⁵⁴ Ellen White, “Labor at the Camp-Meetings,” *The Signs of the Times*, May 17, 1883.

⁵⁵ As an example, see *General Conference Bulletin*, 32nd Session (Lincoln, Neb., Feb. 21, 1897), 144.

they are entertained by a preacher. Where this dependence upon the minister exists, the people fail to obtain that vigorous religious experience which they so much need wherever their lot may be cast. If the minister alone does all the witnessing, then those who have newly come to the faith become dwarfed and sickly for lack of opportunity to use their spiritual muscle. They have need to learn how to testify, how to pray, how to sing, to the glory of God: but failing to do this, they have a one-sided experience.⁵⁶

Often at the heels of an evangelistic endeavor in a new territory, the best practice of immediately forming the new believers into a social meeting and selecting a leader for them by the itinerant minister(s)—before officially organized them into a new church at a later date—provided three key benefits. The new believers could get better acquainted, they learn who they can trust and have full fellowship with, and can discern which roles each one may be best qualified or suited for:

Where bodies of believers are brought out on the truth in new places, we would not recommend the immediate formation of a church. In such cases let a leader be appointed (this can perhaps best be done by the evangelist when he raises up the church), and let social meetings be continued till such time as the individuals become thoroughly acquainted with each other, and ascertain with whom they can have fellowship, and who are qualified for the important duties of officers of the church. As to the particular manner of organizing a church, when the proper time comes, we shall be allowed to avail ourselves of the experience of several ministers who have already adopted the following plan, and testify that it works well.⁵⁷

A second capacity-producing practice for apostolic leadership was elder-led churches. While the traits of biblical elders in the New Testament were seen as part of the assessment criteria for both local church elders and itinerant ministers,⁵⁸ the office of elder—the primary

⁵⁶ Ellen White, “Witnesses for Christ,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Sep. 10, 1895.

⁵⁷ J.N. Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline*, 125.

⁵⁸ This view was expressed by James White—see “Gospel Order”, *Review and Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853—and Ellen White—see *Testimonies for the Church*, Volume 5, p.617 and *Testimonies*, Volume 2, p.621—where she rebuked a paid minister named “Brother B” based upon the traits of elders even though he wasn’t a local church elder.

spiritual leader in a local church—was an unpaid position ordained by the itinerant minister after being selected through informal ballot by the members when the new church was organized.⁵⁹ While itinerant ministers would come back to visit newly planted churches, the role of volunteer elder created the ability for early Adventist ministers to invest the majority of their time and efforts in raising up new groups of believers. As the primary spiritual leaders of the church, early elders took on significant leadership including functioning as the chairman of the church's business meetings, dealing with erring members, and taking the primary lead in organizing the church's various activities.⁶⁰

A third key practice that enabled apostolic leadership was a simple, reproducible ecclesiology. The church itself was viewed not as a human program but rather a spiritual organism. L.H. Christian's comments are representative of this view:

Many have asked whether the Adventist worldwide church organization is congregational, presbyterian, or episcopal... While it has similarities with other churches, it is really different and an organism by itself. It came as a fruitage of the creative ideas from the advent message guided by God and the Spirit of prophecy. The Adventist Church is a church with a task, and the Lord gave it a body to fit the task.⁶¹

This non-programmed view of church enabled the planting of simple, reproducible church units. Whether in large churches or regions with no church and no itinerant minister present, members were to organize themselves organically into basic church groups in order to fulfill mission:

The formation of small groups as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err...if there is a large number in the

⁵⁹ J.N. Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline*, 132. Note that this typically included elders in the plural, but could also be a singular elder who may also function as deacon in the smaller churches starting out (p.131).

⁶⁰ Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline*, 132; 168

⁶¹ Douglas, Herbert. *Messenger of the Lord*, p.185.

church, let the members be formed into small groups, to work not only for the church members but for unbelievers also. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers.⁶²

The above quotation reveals five characteristics of missional group life⁶³ as a simple, reproducible expression of church. First, groups were the foundational expression of church—“a basis of Christian effort.” Second, they are a divinely revealed strategy—“presented before me by One who cannot err.” Third, they are member led—the members do the “work.” Fourth, they are for both believers and non-believers—“not only for the church members but for unbelievers also.” And finally, they are a pathway to church planting in unentered areas—“if in one place there are only two or three who know the truth.” The planting of these simple reproducible church units was not simply a stopgap approach in unentered areas with no apostolic leader as itinerant ministers themselves—through engaging in evangelism in new fields—were to first establish social meetings as healthy group life with new converts before coming back to organize them into an official church.⁶⁴

In regards to the church gathered, social meetings (along with Sabbath School) formed the primary expression of a Sabbath gathering.⁶⁵ Even at the denomination’s largest church—a unique exception with several ministers attached to it—the preachers themselves testified that

⁶² Ellen White, *Christian Service*, 72.

⁶³ While the social meeting was the most organic and foundational expression of groups in early Adventism, I use this term here because there were other expressions that developed, including Sabbath School, and it is not clear that this quotation limits groups as a basis of Christian effort to the social meeting.

⁶⁴ J.N. Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline*, 125.

⁶⁵ J. Hoffer and Brother Holiday. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*. Vol. 18. No. 6 (Battle Creek, MI.: July 2, 1861); also note Ellen White’s comment that “this is as it should be” in relation to when her son Edson—who was a minister—was at home and physically present with a local church group. See Ellen White, *Review and Herald*. October 14, 1884, par. 2.

frequently its richest Sabbath blessings happened when they were not there and the members held social meetings:

The church at Battle Creek needs these preachers less than any church in the State, from the fact that it has more active members than any other church in the State, many of them of long experience and sound judgment. We sometimes preach to them, but often feel when done that a social meeting would have been better. And it is frequently the case that, when we return from spending a Sabbath with some other church, we are told that the brethren enjoyed an excellent meeting, the best in several Sabbaths. Now what is the use for us preachers to get in the way of these experienced, living members?⁶⁶

As noted by Ellen White at the beginning of the 20th century, “our people should not be made to think that they need to listen to a sermon every Sabbath.”⁶⁷ Elder-led churches, member-led ministries, and a simple and reproducible ecclesiology all contributed to the enablement of apostolic leadership among early Adventist ministers.

Decline of Apostolicity in Adventist Ministry

With this apostolic plan in place for the first four decades of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the annual ratio of the number of paid ministers per new church was never more than ten-to-one.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the following 1912 statement by then General Conference President A.G. Daniells highlights the trends away from apostolic leadership as well as the prophetic implications of abandoning the early Adventist model:

We have not settled our ministers over churches as pastors to any large extent. In some of the very large churches we have elected pastors, but as a rule we have held ourselves ready for field service, evangelistic work, and our brethren and sisters have held themselves ready to maintain their church services and carry

⁶⁶ Advent Review and Sabbath Herald. Vol. 20. No. 8 (July 22, 1862), 60.

⁶⁷ Ellen White, “The Work in Greater New York,” *Atlantic Union Gleaner*. (January 8, 1902).

⁶⁸ By the mid-1900’s this ratio declined significantly until each new church planted annually within the North American Division took on average 122 paid ministers. See Russell Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church*. Hart Research Center, 1998, p. 191-192.

forward their church work without settled pastors. And I hope this will never cease to be the order of affairs in this denomination; for when we cease our forward movement work and begin to settle over our churches, to stay by them, and do their thinking and their praying and their work that is to be done, then our churches will begin to weaken, and to lose their life and spirit, and become paralyzed and fossilized and our work will be on a retreat.⁶⁹

The acknowledgment of this shifting reality was roundly rejected by other church administrators as well. In 1883, when a proposal was published to setup two classes of ministers—those who do itinerant apostolic work and those placed with existing churches—it was immediately rejected by then General Conference President G.I. Butler.⁷⁰

Ellen White denounced the idea of extending calls for settled pastors over churches,⁷¹ with the accountability for the resulting mission loss shouldered by both the members—some of which should be rebaptized if unable to stand alone without a minister⁷²--and the ministers who had created “religious weaklings” by prioritizing nurture of members over evangelism with unbelievers:

God has not given His ministers the work of setting the churches right. No sooner is this work done, apparently, than it has to be done over again. Church members that are thus looked after and labored for become religious weaklings. If nine tenths of the effort that has been put forth for those who know the truth had been put forth for those who have never heard the truth, how much greater would have been the advancement made!⁷³

Her strong warnings against the “hovering” model of ministers over existing churches highlighted three negative outcomes: it harms ministers by making them spiritually weak, it

⁶⁹ A.G. Daniells, Ministerial Institute Address. Los Angeles, California, March 1912.

⁷⁰ “Church Manual,” *Review and Herald*, September 25, 1883, p.618; G.I. Butler “No Church Manual”, *Review and Herald*, November 27, 1883.

⁷¹ Ellen White, “The Work in Greater New York”, *Atlantic Union Gleaner*. January 8m, 1902.

⁷² Ellen White, *Evangelism*, 381.

⁷³ Ellen White, *Testimonies* 7:18; idem. *Evangelism*, 113; idem. *Testimonies* 7:19; 18-19.

harms the churches by making them spiritually weak through over-dependence upon the ministers, and ultimately it harms the churches mission of saving the lost.⁷⁴

After Ellen White's death (1915) and the end of A.G. Daniell's presidency (1922), the shift in ministerial assignments from new fields to established churches resulted in an overemphasis on monological preaching for Sabbath services rather than dialogical sharing with the social meeting, which itself was replaced by the prayer meeting (a second, frequent opportunity for the minister to preach followed by a time of prayer).⁷⁵ Burrill goes on to describe the plan for assigning ministers to districts which began in the 1920's and was fully in place by the 1950's, a phenomenon which is predominantly in North American and other western and developed contexts where the primacy of pastoral care-giving is the norm.⁷⁶ In the late 1950's, famed evangelist and radio ministry pioneer H.M.S. Richards—in a book published out of his lectures to Columbia Union pastors and Theological Seminary students at Takoma Park Church in Maryland—notes this significant shift he personally observed through his own biographical account:

When I was baptized, and later became a young preacher, we looked upon churches that had to have settled pastors over every flock as being decadent. Most of our preachers were out on the firing line, holding meetings, winning men to Christ, and raising up new churches. Then every few months they would come around and visit the churches that had already been established. This seemed to be, according to our view of it, the plan of the apostolic church.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ See Blake Jones' synthesis of the 37 uses of this phrase (or similarly worded phrases) in "Apostle or Elder? The Critical Need to Define the Adventist Minister's Role" (Presentation at Adventist Theological Society, San Diego, 2014), 31-32., p.9.

⁷⁵ Russell Burrill, *Recovering an Adventist Approach to the Life and Mission of the Local Church*. Hart Research Center, 1998., 210-220.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 183-184. Note—while this pattern of pastor-led churches is not the norm in many union conferences and world divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church experiencing significant growth, the question of whether such elder-led churches in large multi-church districts is a function of theology or physical resources creates meaningful dialogue around the ongoing role of the Adventist minister in Adventist mission.

⁷⁷ H.M.S. Richards, *Feed My Sheep*, p.156. After recounting how a new church was started in the country of Czechoslovakia as a result of the president and treasurer being put in jail for faithfulness to the Bible, he goes on

Over time, policy caught up with practice as the gradual removal of the apostolic function from Adventist ministers was reflected in the progression of key historical documents beginning with the formation of a church manual. In 1883, a proposed church manual was considered by the General Conference Executive Committee (plus an additional group of ten) that contained a distinction between two classes of ministers, those who do itinerant apostolic work and those placed with existing churches.⁷⁸ In a written response by then General Conference President G.I. Butler to explain its unanimous rejection by the committee, three primary reasons were stated: the church had already navigated the greatest challenges around church organization without a manual, it would be viewed as a step towards a creed thus creating religious dependence upon a source other than the Bible, and ultimately it would position the denomination to embrace the formalism and spiritual feebleness experienced in other Christian groups that had adopted official manuals.⁷⁹ Even the proposed church manual itself recognized that this two-tiered systems was a departure from the established practice at that time:

At the present date, the work of Seventh-day Adventist Ministers is largely evangelistic in its character. Just enough labor is bestowed upon the older churches to keep them in good running order, the balance of the time being devoted to the proclamation of the present truth among those who have not yet heard the solemn message which relates to the near coming of Christ and the Judgment.⁸⁰

to says “maybe someday we will not have preachers over our churches. Many of us will be in jail. You know, if half of our preachers went to jail, we’d really have a revival in our denomination—that is, if they went to jail for principle.” 158.

⁷⁸ For the specific proposal around two classes of ministers, see “Church Manual.” *Review and Herald*, September 25, 1883. Note that in 1883, the idea of two distinct classes of ministers was rejected because it was viewed as too inward whereas in contemporary Adventism the idea would also be radical and face probable rejection as the settled pastor is now the default model. For fuller background information around the 1883 proposed church manual, see P. Gerard Damsteegt. “Have Adventists Abandoned the Biblical Model of Leadership of the Local Church?” Berrien Springs, MI (2005). Available at: http://works.bepress.com/p_gerard_damsteegt/55/.

⁷⁹ See G.I. Butler, “No Church Manual”, *Review and Herald*, November 27, 1883.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 618.

While Loughborough's 1907 *The Church: Its Order, Organization, and Discipline* was functionally a de-facto reference point for a church manual—and it retained the apostolic function of paid ministers and local church pastoral function of volunteer elders⁸¹—in 1932, the first church manual was officially voted. It stated that the paid minister—when assigned to a church—becomes the highest-ranking officer, the chairman of the church board, and the one responsible for the church's services, with the local elders (while still all members of the board) as his assistants.⁸²

In the 2000 update of this official church manual, while the minister continues as chair of the church board, his influence is expanded in the local church to also include *ex officio* chairperson of the nominating committee, chair of the board of elders—who are no longer all automatic members of the church board but rather a subcommittee of the board—and chairperson of the committee to select the nominating committee.⁸³

In the 2016 church manual—the 19th edition and most recent update at the time of this article—the loss of apostolicity in the job description of the minister is maintained from the 2000 church manual. While the acknowledgment of “small groups,” “house churches,” or “church planting core group” as a multiplication method in a geographic area is inserted with the simple appointment by the district pastor of a “leader,”⁸⁴ the overall emphasis of the minister as the key

⁸¹ Its views are representative of early Adventist pioneers and are synthesized in the earlier “apostolicity in early Adventism” section of this paper.

⁸² General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Church Manual* (Washington, D.C. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1932), p. 26; 137.

⁸³ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. ed. (Hagerstown, MD.: Review and Herald, 2000), pp. 31, 137, 144. My understanding of the comparison and development between the 1932 and 2000 church manuals is drawn from Damsteegt, “The First Church Manual” and “the 2000 Church Manual” sections.

⁸⁴ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th rev. ed. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2016., 37-38.

officer of the local church and elders as their assistants, is maintained. As illustrative of the highly complex and departmentally-driven eschatology in contemporary Adventism, the 2016 manual lists a total of 19 types of officers, departments, and auxiliary organizations in the local church⁸⁵—several of which require multiple positions and their own respective sub-councils—all appointed through a detailed and lengthy yearly nominating committee process.

Synthesizing the most recent edition of the church manual with other official leadership handbooks, a consistent pattern emerges. While these documents serve a pragmatic rather than theological or historical function, as global sources for policy and recommended practices they have served to solidify the settled pastor paradigm. The current church manual (2016),⁸⁶ minister's handbook (2009),⁸⁷ and elder's handbook (2016),⁸⁸ all exhibit a three-fold pattern around the decline of apostolic leadership in Adventist ministry. First, apostles and elders are affirmed in all three documents as the two primary leadership functions in the New Testament, with apostles as church-wide overseers and itinerant missionaries, and lay-elders as the shepherds of existing congregations.⁸⁹ Secondly, all three documents assume the office of the modern-day pastor as distinct from apostles or elders without any biblical justification or

⁸⁵ This current list includes: elders, deacons, deaconesses, clerk, treasurer, interest coordinator, children's ministry, communications, education, family ministry, health ministry, music, public affairs and religious liberty, publishing, Sabbath School, personal ministries, stewardship, women's ministry, and youth ministry. Identifying this list is not to minimize the importance of each function but rather to illustrate the difficulty in multiplying this model, particularly when many new churches start with only a small handful of leaders.

⁸⁶ Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2016.

⁸⁷ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook* (Silver Spring, MD: The Ministerial Association, 2009).

⁸⁸ *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook*. Silver Springs, MD: The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, 2016.

⁸⁹ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 26, 29; *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook*, 16, 107; *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook*, 24-26, 31.

relevant reference material from Adventist pioneers,⁹⁰ Thirdly, these documents only allow for significant ministry responsibilities to be performed by elders when the pastor is unavailable or grants permission.⁹¹ Elders serve as special assistants to pastors⁹² within the local church, composing their own board in an advisory relationship to the church board. This three-fold progression (or rather de-gression) as seen through the various editions of manuals and handbooks firmly outlines both the removal of apostolic expectation among contemporary

⁹⁰ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 31. Here the manual only gives two pieces of evidence. The first is the direct quotation of Ephesians 4:11-12 with no interpretive comment as to what was originally intended by the Apostle Paul's mention of the fivefold gifting or how the contemporary usage of the modern term "pastor" relates to any of these. The second is a quotation from Ellen White's *Testimonies to Ministers* (p.52-53) which states that God has appointed men to guard the church, without stating which of the Ephesians 4 fivefold giftings she is referring to, or if she is even referring to them at all. *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook*, 15-16: Here the handbook simply recognizes that Paul was called by God to ministry (1 Tim. 1:2) and a reference to Aaron in the Old Testament being called to ministry as high priest (Hebrews 5:4), which contextually illustrates the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ; in the *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook*, the only justification for the modern notion of a settled pastor is referencing 2 Timothy 4:1-5 on page 40, which is ironic as these qualifications of elders from 2 Timothy and other parallel passages are simultaneously used to highlight the traits of elders including their moral purity (37), age qualifications (16), supporting the pastor with oversight within the local church (25), being respectful (31), possessing spiritual leadership qualities (31), and others.

⁹¹ In the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, the elder(s) can only perform the following nine ministry functions "in the absence of a [or the] pastor" or similar conditions including "in the pastor's absence", "when the assigned pastor is unavailable", or "in the absence of an ordained pastor" (or through permission from the conference president in many cases): preside over a business meeting (64, 74), become the "spiritual leaders of the church" (73), conduct church services, a marriage ceremony, or communion (74), oversee election of church delegates to a conference session (76), oversee the nominating committee process (110), minister in word and doctrine (73), and conduct a baptism (75). In the *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook*, the Acts 20:28 reference to elders as overseers is applied to pastors (51, 92), the work of visitation is squarely the responsibility of the pastor but elders can assist if the church is too large or spread out to make the pastor's personal presence impractical (130-134), the elder may officiate in a funeral in the absence of a pastor (196), and the overall purpose and suggested litany of the installation service—with the conference representative's prayer as the official recognition of the pastor as "congregational leader" rather than the elders (220-227). In the *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook*, the elder(s) can only perform the following fifteen functions "in the absence of the pastor" (or similarly worded phrases mentioned above, pp. 23, 39, 41, 46, 56, 129, 131, 149, 151): conduct the ordinances, become the primary spiritual leaders of the church, lead the Sabbath worship service, plan the preaching schedule, preach regularly, oversee guest speaker invitations, guard the pulpit, conduct a baptism, chair the church board and business meetings, officiate at an anointing, officiate at a funeral service (unless the bereaved family requests the elder instead of the pastor), lead out in a marriage ceremony, minister in word and doctrine, and conduct a child dedication.

⁹² The language of elder as special assistants is in all three documents, with the *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook* providing the most significant usage of similarly worded phrases (29, 33, 40, 43, 44, 57).

Adventist ministers as the demotion of local church elders as the primary spiritual leaders in local churches.

Just as the early church abandoned the apostolic approach to apostles and elders after the death of its prophetic visionary John and other key leaders, so the Adventist Church abandoned its apostolic design for leadership after the death of Ellen White and other pioneers. While the historical details are different, a similar impact from the decline of apostolicity in ministers has also been observed in the Methodist tradition after the death of John Wesley and his colleagues⁹³.

To be concise—as shown in the *Apostolic Leadership in Adventist Ministry* matrix below—today’s paid minister functions pragmatically as a paid head elder within the local church. The early Adventist apostolic expectation of paid ministers has been abandoned. Neither group of leaders in contemporary Adventism (“pastors” or elders) is officially tasked with the itinerant, missionary responsibility. Because the apostolic model of leadership has been largely abandoned and paid ministers often replace the shepherding functions designed for elders, the resulting paradigm in contemporary Adventism has in essence created apostles with no apostolicity (they spend most of their time in the local churches), and elders with no true eldership (they no longer pastor the congregations). The transference of the itinerant minister to the domain of the local church is now a matter of official policy. The fears among early Adventists around the settled-pastor modus operandi of other mainstream Christian

⁹³ For a recent overview of the factors for the explosive growth and decline of the Methodist tradition—many of which are mirrored in the history of the Advent movement--see Winfield Bevens, *Marks of a Movement: What the Church Today can Learn From the Wesleyan Revival*. Zondervan, 2019. Additionally, as noted in the foreword through a per capita calculation according to Rodney Stark and Roger Finke’s *The Churching of America, 1776-200: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), two primary contributors to the immediate decline in Methodist growth rates were the 1850 decision to require all itinerant circuit riders and local ministers to complete four years of ordination studies, and the 1860 decision to no longer require participation in classes and bands making discipleship optional.

denominations are now historical footnotes as the non-apostolic approach to ministry has been adopted and fully entrenched within many geographical regions of Seventh-day Adventism.

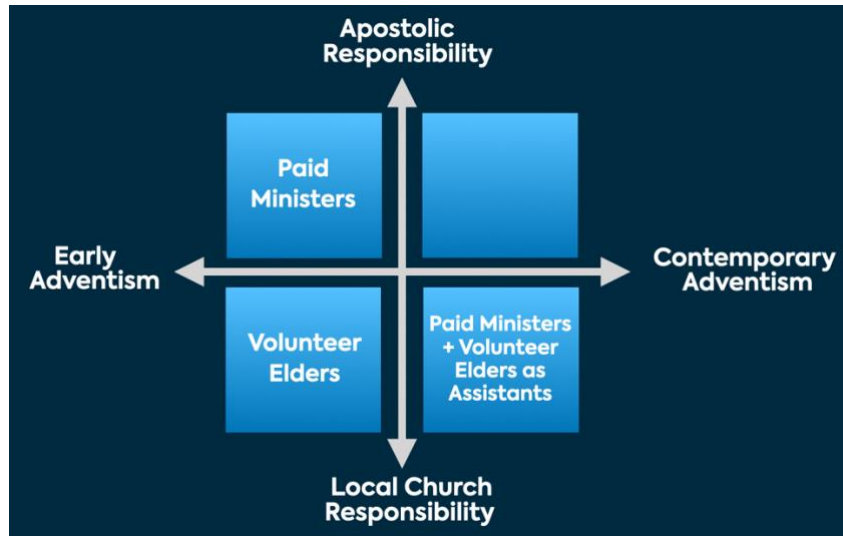


Table One—Adventist Leadership in Adventist Ministry

Recovery of Apostolicity in Adventist Ministry

The rapidly evolving cultural, societal, and technological changes of the 21st century have created immensely different conditions to those of the 19th century. Seeking to avoid both extremes of the idolatry of a bygone era as well as the naïve judgment of its historical irrelevance for the future, the following five recommendations are humbly offered towards recovering an environment of apostolic leadership.

1. Recognize that there are No Administrative Solutions to Spiritual Problems

Because the church is in essence a spiritual organism rather than a human organization, both its challenges and solutions are fundamentally spiritual, not administrative, managerial, or strategic. By living out an atmosphere of transformative spiritual experience with Christ—which this paper notes was a foundational catalyst of the Advent movement—deeper issues are being

addressed and the proper context for administration, management, and strategy is created. To add spiritual urgency, the 21st-century pervasiveness of materialism in the global north and increasingly throughout all technologically-connected cultures has created variants of Christian consumerism that are fundamentally in opposition to apostolic movements. These empty calories of nominal Christianity will only be replaced by the pursuit of deep faith, personal conversion, and Spirit-led revival. Only through recognizing that our deeper challenges are spiritual and experiencing a vital faith in Christ, can the additional recommendations in this paper become a reality.

2. Embrace a Minimum Ecclesiology for Maximum Reproducibility

No matter how Christ-centered the biblical message may be, you cannot easily multiply a church that requires a program-driven, highly-complex ecclesiology. The early Adventist example regarding what constituted a church⁹⁴ assumed a small number of believers that witnessed daily, gathered weekly (through “social meetings” and Sabbath School, often without the sermonizing or the modern equivalent of a “worship service”), and started with a simple volunteer leadership team (an elder, a deacon, and a clerk)⁹⁵. Contrasted with the historical development of an increasingly complex ecclesiology as demonstrated in this paper, not only is this baseline approach more reproducible but also simple enough for members with full-time marketplace careers to facilitate. In order to experience a recovery of apostolicity in a sustainable way, the mere change in classification of congregational leaders from paid ministers to volunteer

⁹⁴ Here I am referring to the governance and organizational subsets of ecclesiology on an individual church level, not the broad historic “marks” of a church or the prophetic nature of the message of Adventism.

⁹⁵ J.N. Loughborough, *The Church: Its Organization, Order, and Discipline*, 131-132. Note that this three-person team which was appointed through secret ballot and dedicated by an ordained minister was sometimes reduced to two in smaller congregations—a single elder-deacon plus a clerk.

elders must be preceded by a paradigm change around the baseline requirements to start and become a church. And in cultures where the church building has ceased to be the primary space for evangelism, repositioning church around mission rather than a modern worship service creates space for deeper discipleship and engagement in mission. Without intentional effort to identify, empower, and affirm simpler and more reproducible forms of church, newly planted congregations will remain one-generation groups and rarely multiply irregardless of whether they are led by paid professionals or volunteers.

3. Restore Elders as Congregational Leaders

Today's elders—particularly in the developed countries within the global north—are no longer the primary spiritual leaders of individual congregations but function rather as special assistants to the de-facto head eldership of paid ministers. Since this practice is now official (through manuals and handbooks), observable (in the everyday life of congregations), and often obligatory (as many constituents express entitlement for a paid minister because of returned tithe), members and elders must be re-educated on their biblical roles. Although planting new churches with an elder-pastored DNA is a more amenable environment than transitioning to the same paradigm within existing congregations, raising the level of engagement and responsibility within the latter group will also counterbalance the observation of Roland Allen: “Where churches are helped most, there they are weak, lifeless, and helpless. Nothing is so weakening as the habit of depending upon others for those things which we ought to supply for ourselves.”⁹⁶ While there will inevitably be a place for paid ministers assigned to local churches—particularly those too large to be led by volunteers—if the previous two recommendations are in place, the

⁹⁶ Roland Allen. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes that Hinder it*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1962. 35.

reconfiguring of elder training and their affirmation in the local conference and beyond can restore their biblical role as the primary shepherds of the local church. Viewed from the record of early Adventism and the lense of contemporary Adventism in developing contexts, the resulting growth rates demythologize the assumption that churches with their own pastor grow faster.⁹⁷

4. Reposition Ministers as Missionaries

The realignment of ministers as catalysts for mission in new fields is in harmony with biblical design and the explosive growth rates of early Adventism and other Christian movements. Such a massive cultural shift is possible if and only if the previous three recommendations are intentionally pursued. One of the influence points for making micro-shifts in the role of ministers is through their educational formation and ministerial internship. How might increased apostolic competencies be integrated in the curriculum? What does ministerial formation look like that effectively creates leaders who self-identify as equippers rather than performers? As early Adventist ministers could not be ordained without raising up a new group, can pre-ordination church planting internships be piloted, or at least a basic exposure to working new fields be integrated before ordination?⁹⁸ Placing in tension the extra-biblical notion of the office of a pastor with the acknowledgement of current reality, is it possible or even desirable to have both district pastors (assigned to a church/es) and missionary pastors (organizing elder-led churches)? In early Adventism, paid leaders primarily planted then volunteer leaders were

⁹⁷ While there are of course multiple factors in these observations beyond simply the leadership expectations of the elder, this commonly mis-held myth is seen in examples such as the Korean Union where although there are 859 ordained and licensed ministers to pastor and oversee 833 churches and companies, there has been a continuous 10-year growth rate decline down to 1.26% (2019). See www.adventiststatistics.org.

⁹⁸ One of the key aspects of ordination as practiced today is the affirmation of the demonstration of God is doing through the minister. Demonstration precedes affirmation. If the demonstration of a minister's ministry is only within the operation and growth of existing churches, then the affirmation through ordination creates a self-perpetuating non-apostolic expectation in roles.

appointed to pastor. In contemporary Adventism, volunteer leaders primarily plant then over time paid leaders pastor these churches. This observation is more about organizational prioritization and less about volunteer planters—many of which are and will continue to function as missionaries.

5. Reduce the Ratio of Paid Ministers to Members.

If the previous four recommendations became reality, the reduction of paid ministers to members will naturally take place. Far decreasing the number of paid ministers, this new reality would actually enable more through the restoration of biblical model and early Adventist approach that saw the rapid planting and multiplication of simple, elder-led churches.⁹⁹ If these elements are not in place, the change process could foreseeably—and painfully—take place in reverse. Whether through a financial, medical, technological, or other global crisis, an externally-forced reduction in paid ministers would immediately trigger a response on the previous recommendations.

⁹⁹ Beyond the references given in this paper, additional data combining the growth rates and pastor-to-member ratio of various world fields can be mined from adventiststatistics.org.