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# The Decline and Recovery of Apostolic Leadership in Adventist Ministry

## 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)

There are broad patterns 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 potential renewal—is the degree to which a church’s founding leaders embody and transfer the apostolic function for future generations (cf. Saarinen 1994; Morgan 2017). This article traces the initial function and decline of apostolicity among Seventh-day Adventist ministers as a case study with implications for contemporary Adventism and beyond.

After providing an analysis of leadership in the New Testament—with particular emphasis on apostles, apostolicity, and their 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modern notion of a “pastor” will be chronicled from early Adventist pioneer comments, as well as the development of key historical documents including official *Church Manuals* and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 (Matt 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" (Matt 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; Matt 24:14, 28:16-20).

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; cf. Allison 2012:207), Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7; cf. Reeve et al. 2015:237-242), and two additional unnamed apostles (2 Cor 8:23).

The three biblical marks of apostles were direct selection and appointment by Jesus (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2, 24, 10:41; Gal 1:1), personal post-resurrection witness of Christ (Acts 1:22, 10:39-41, 15:7-8), 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).<sup>1</sup>

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 and as trans-local overseers" (Allison 2012:208, 209). 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),<sup>2</sup> 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 Cor 12:28, 29 and Eph 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). Second, 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) and is therefore primarily a ministry text rather than a leadership text. 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 Eph 3:21 and the gifts of 1 Cor 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.

### **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 leaders (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 the 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 sent-ness of apostles), and collaborative leadership (both groups were listed as key decision-makers in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:2, 6). This collaboration is also demonstrated in the nature of the New Testament, which according to my count, 21 of 27 of its letters were written by apostles to coach elders of newly planted churches. 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 (*poimeno*)—while loaded with different nuances of meaning—refer interchange-

ably 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 pastoral or shepherding function (verbal form of *poimen*) within churches. Peter (both an 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 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 (Mackinnon 2012:80-81; Ferguson 2002:169-173).

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), which 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. (Viola 2012:228)

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-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” (Jones 2014:4).

## 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 and a global mission (Burrill 1998:161), became the Seventh-day Adventist Church (officially organized in 1863). One of the drivers for the Adventist movement, which has grown from 3,500 in 1863 to over 21.75 million members by the end of 2020 ([adventiststatistics.org](http://adventiststatistics.org)), was the founding emphasis on a sending model of ministers, adopted as a pragmatic approach to gospel expansion and not necessarily as a result of a significant biblical treatment of apostles and apostolicity.

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 Adventist leadership. James White (one of the three primary founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, along with Ellen White and Joseph Bates) 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” (White, J. 1859:21). 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. (White J. 1862:156)

The organization of the first statewide conferences starting in 1861 were for the express purpose of coordinating missionary assignments and preventing overlap in territory among early Adventist ministers (Loughborough 1907:116). These annual ministers’ meetings often followed a four-fold approach to the coordination for apostolic placement (148). First, the prospective fields where new churches needed to be raised up were listed. Second, 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 go. And finally, their assignments for the following year were given, often accompanied by a sense of God's leading among the entire assembly. This early understanding of an 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 (Loughborough 1907:1).<sup>3</sup>

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 (Loughborough 1907:68, 69; Viola 2012:230, 231). 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 (Loughborough 1907:129).

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 (132).

The New Testament distinction between apostles being called by God with a broader scope of authority and elders appointed in an individual church with local authority is affirmed but expanded as early Adventists also viewed "evangelists" as a "special" call from God for an itinerant function alongside apostles (127, 128). 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" (Loughborough 1907:127)—is used somewhat interchangeably with the term apostle rather than a distinct leadership position, while its itinerancy was not developed to the degree of the apostles' travels. 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).

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.

The practice of paid ministers as apostolic church planters also figured prominently in 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 (Kaiser 2013:177-218). Kaiser synthesizes the practice and roots of itinerant evangelism before ordination:

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 (185, 186).

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 (Krause 2013:203). 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 (204).

Pioneers and key leaders also bore repeated witness to the importance of itinerant, apostolic work by 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 as 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” (California State Conference 1874).

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. (2002d:18)

Her expectation for ministers included devising new methods of labor for raising up churches both domestically and internationally (White 1901d: para. 16; White 2002d:205), with the salvation of Christ as the gospel motivation for planting (White 1908). 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. (White 1884:658) 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 (White 2002b:683, 686). 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 (White 2002d:205, 210; 2002f:20). Larger churches were also challenged to organize themselves to send missionary teams to plant in nearby cities and villages (White 1891:450). Churches that sent their members out to plant new churches were themselves strengthened and refreshed (White 2002d:204; White 1901d; White 1901c), and counseled to do so in tandem with medical missionary work where possible (White 1901a; White 1901b).

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 pastors was evangelizing in new fields (Star 1886:5), 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” (A Candid Reader 1909:11).



## 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” (*General Conference Bulletin* 1901:267). 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,<sup>4</sup> 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 (White J. 1868:167; 1855:236). 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.” (1865:196) 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 (Loughborough 1987:88). While not a condition for membership, they were an expected duty for all true believers, (Nichol 7:1962:935) a helpful tool to train members and young ministers for ministry, sometimes practiced during devotional times at early General Conference sessions, (*General Conference Bulletin* 1897:144) 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 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. (White 1895:578)

Often after 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. (Loughborough 1907:125)

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,<sup>5</sup> the office of elder—the primary 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 (Loughborough 1907:131-132). Note that this typically included elders in the plural, but could also be a singular elder who may also function as a deacon in the smaller churches starting out. While itinerant ministers would come back to visit newly planted churches, the role of the volunteer elders 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 roles, 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 (Loughborough 1907:132, 162).

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. (Douglass 1998:185)

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 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. (White 2002a:72)

The above quotation reveals five characteristics of missional group life<sup>6</sup> 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 such as itinerant ministers, who—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 (Loughborough 1907:125).

In regards to the church gathered, social meetings (along with Sabbath School) formed the primary expression of a Sabbath gathering (Hoffer and Holiday 1861:46, 47).<sup>7</sup> Even at the denomination's largest church—a unique exception with several ministers attached to it—the preachers themselves testified that 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? (*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 1862:60)

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” (1902a:1-3). 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 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. (Daniells 1912)

The acknowledgment of this shifting reality was roundly rejected by other church administrators as well. In 1883, when a proposal was published to set up 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 (Butler 1883a:618; 1883b:745-746).

Ellen White denounced the idea of extending calls for settled pastors over churches (White 1902a:1-3), 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 minister (White 2002b:381)—

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, then 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! (White 2002f:18-19; 2002b:113)

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 harms the churches by making them spiritually weak through over-dependence upon the ministers, and ultimately it harms the church’s mission of saving the lost (Jones 2014:31-32).<sup>9</sup>

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) (Burrill 1998:210-220). Burrill goes on to describe the plan for assigning ministers to districts which began in the 1920s and was fully in place by the 1950s, a phenomenon which is predominantly in North American and other western and developed contexts where the primacy of pastoral care-giving is the norm (Burrill 1998:183-184). In the late 1950s, 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 has 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. (Richards 2005:156,158)<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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 (Butler 1883b:745-746). 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. (Butler 1883b:745-746)

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 elders—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 (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1932:26, 137).

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 (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2000:31, 137, 144).

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,” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016a:37-38) the overall emphasis of the minister as the key 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 church<sup>12</sup>—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* (2016a), *Minister’s Handbook* (2009), and *Elder’s Handbook* (2016b), 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 (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016a:26, 29; 2009:16, 107; 2016b:24-26, 31). Second, all three documents assume the office of the modern-day pastor as distinct from apostles or elders without any biblical justification or relevant reference material from Adventist pioneers (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016a:31),<sup>13</sup> Third, these documents only allow for significant ministry responsibilities to be performed by elders when the pastor is unavailable or grants special permission.<sup>14</sup> Elders serve as special assistants to pastors<sup>15</sup> 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 church manuals and handbooks firmly outlines both the removal of apostolic expectation among contemporary Adventist ministers and a 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 colleagues.<sup>16</sup>

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 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.

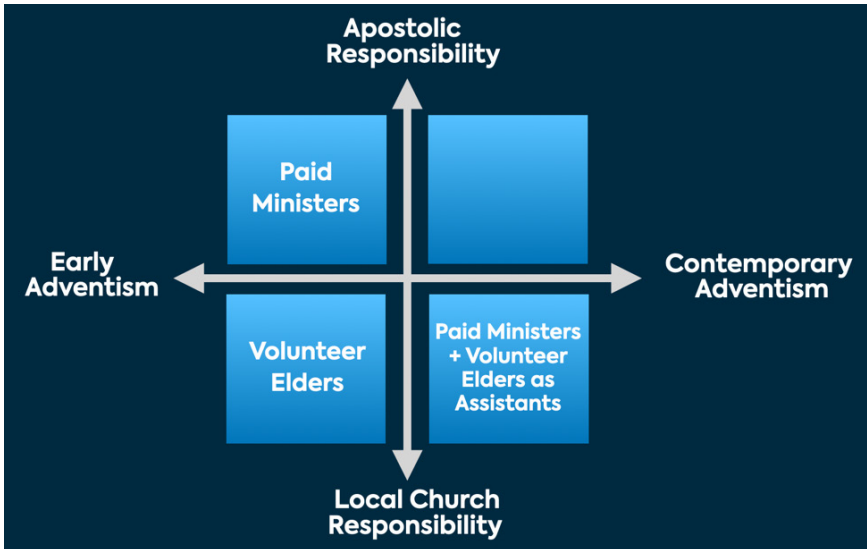


Figure 1: Adventist Leadership in Adventist Ministry

### 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 a 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 church 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) (Loughborough 1907:131-132).<sup>17</sup> 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 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 regardless 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” (1962:35). 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 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 ([www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org)).<sup>18</sup>

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 require interns to be exposed to working new fields before ordination?<sup>19</sup> 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 while volunteer leaders were appointed to pastor. In contemporary Adventism, volunteer leaders primarily plant then over time paid leaders take over

the pastoring these churches. This observation is more about organizational prioritization and less about volunteer planters—many of who are and will continue to function as missionaries.

5. *Increase the ratio of members to paid ministers.* If the previous four recommendations ever become reality, the increase in the ratio of members to paid ministers will take place organically. Far from decreasing the number of paid ministers, this new reality would actually enable the hiring of more through the restoration of the biblical model and early Adventist approach that saw the rapid planting and multiplication of simple, elder-led churches.<sup>20</sup> If however the previous four recommendations are not implemented, the change process could foreseeably—and painfully—take place in reverse. Whether triggered by financial, medical, technological, or other global crises, an externally-forced reduction in paid ministers would in short order necessitate a response on the previous recommendations.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>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 Alison 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.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>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. 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, (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.

<sup>5</sup>This view was expressed by James White—see “Gospel Order”, *Review and Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853, p. 173—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.

<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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, p. 641.

<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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 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.”

<sup>11</sup>For the specific proposal around two classes of ministers, see “Church Manual.” *Review and Herald*, September 25, 1883, p. 618. 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/](http://works.bepress.com/p_gerard_damsteegt/55/).

<sup>12</sup>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.

<sup>13</sup>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.

<sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup>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).

<sup>16</sup>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 Bevins, *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 which made discipleship optional.

<sup>17</sup>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.

<sup>18</sup>While there are of course multiple factors in these observations beyond simply the leadership expectations of the elder, this commonly 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](http://www.adventiststatistics.org).

<sup>19</sup>A key aspect of ordination as practiced today is that it is an affirmation of what God is demonstrating through the workers ministry. 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.

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