

CHAPTER ONE

Steady as You Go

The idea that we are “almost home” impresses on our minds images of a journey - a journey that we confess will soon come to an end. The biblical images of the Exodus from Egypt and Abrahams call out of Ur are images of God leading His people to their final destiny, to the home He has prepared for them. That will be the end of the journey. We shall then be where we were always meant to be. The goal of creation itself will then be realized.

The imagery is reinforced by Jesus when He says,” ‘I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am’” (John 14:3). We are not there yet, but we are almost home. And there is an acute sense of urgency that today characterizes the church to which you and I belong. Yes, we long for the day of “arrival,” but the urgency has also to do with what is happening to us, and how we spend our resources and energies on the way, as we complete the journey. And it is about this that I want to share some thoughts with you in this book. I have some concerns and maybe some wishes for what is happening, or should happen, to us as individuals and some for what is happening to us as a community, as a people.

My thoughts come in two clusters of three, considering first the individual, and later the community.

As individuals we are - most of us - certain of the Lord. He is strong, and we trust His promises; yet at the same time we are so fragile. We are fragile simply because that is our humanity. And because we are fragile we break easily, and we are hurt; and we don't know how to put together what is damaged.

- We see our fragility in the relationships we establish - or fail to establish.
- We see it in our choices of values.
- And we see it in our human tendency to keep looking back over our shoulders, sometimes wistfully because the past beckons and invites us to return, sometimes mournfully because there is so much pain associated with the past and it does not want to let go. But we do look back, one way or another, because it is so hard for most of us to be finished with the past.

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In taking up these three matters of the individual, I am very much conscious of the fact that our journey is nearing its end; that there is so much to be done that requires focused energy. And I see ahead of us a whole new world - a new and wonderful future with Christ - which lies before us and invites us. So, let us consider them.

Relationships. Most of us choose our friends on a very exclusive basis. It is based on the principle that birds of a feather flock together. We feel best surrounded by people who look like us, think like us, and speak like us. And yet Jesus broke the very idea of a closed circle of friendship. He condemns everything that separates people driven by the doctrines of success - elitism, racism, nationalism, and the sense of exclusiveness that comes with them. Relationships with people are meant to be open and free, and mutually enriching, without creating dependencies, one person to another. So, if you are a thought leader, do not gather disciples to yourself. If you are "attractive," do not market yourself too aggressively. Attracting personal followers is fraught with perils both for you and them. Respect their freedom, and keep yours.

Whether we establish relationships with people or not, is not so much a choice we make. It happens just simply because we are meant to relate to each other. That is the only way to live. Loners are condemned to oblivion. So, for all practical purposes we are all involved in relationships. It is the exclusiveness of such relationships, particularly within the church, that troubles me.

So, I ask, as we are nearing the end of our journey, what is it that drives our relationships? There is obviously a sense of family among believers that brings us close to each other and holds us together. Faith in Jesus is a powerful bonding element, as is our common spiritual heritage. However, there is no place for racism, elitism, and nationalism within the family of faith. They don't belong in the church. Before Christ they stand condemned without qualification. And yet, sadly, these divisions are there. They may arise from feelings of exclusiveness, or anger, or retaliation. And these are sentiments that don't flow in just one direction.

What do we, as members of God's family, plan to do about it? It has to be resolved by the time we get to the end of the journey, for these sentiments, these distorted values, cannot be carried over the threshold into the Promised Land. As they are alien to the heart of Christ, so they don't belong in His future.

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Choice of values. Every single day we are all faced with choices of values. And most of them are choices offered by the environment that surrounds us. What is the acceptable thing in my environment? The choices we make profoundly shape our lives. And they become, like it or not, value statements, for they disclose what we think is important and what we want to live for. So we ask,

- What should I study in college, or should I just drop out of school completely?
- Whom should I marry; or, am I not the marrying kind?
- Sounds attractive, but what's in it for me?
- Shall I sell my house and move up-market?
- Should I stay where I am and work for God, or should I emigrate to America?
- Should I go for the job I was offered? The pay is a lot better and the hours more humane.
- A Global Mission volunteer? Lord, You cannot be serious!

It is late in the day, and we are almost home. And the choices we make now become very important for us personally, and for our reason for being here as God's instruments of mission. Sometimes we make stupid choices of a very personal nature and we pay for our foolishness for the rest of our lives. Sometimes, particularly when we are young, we are reluctant to stand up and take charge of our lives and make our own choices - peer pressure is hard to handle. And we delay, or vacillate, or try to stay anonymous, and in the vacuum that occurs someone else steps in and makes the choice for us and hands it to us; and it becomes so hard to say No. And therein lies the demise of many a youth to addictions of one kind or another. And sometimes we make choices in the heat of the moment that are not so much a considered choice but just happen; and we hurt ourselves and others, and we are scarred by it. We wish we could undo history, but we can't. The good news is that there is indeed a Balm in Gilead, which is still good at healing.

The question I ask is this: In making our choices - any choice - how conscious are we of the fact that we are here on a Godsent mission? How large do the facts that it is late in the day and we are here to finish God's mission loom in our consciousness as we make our choices? Says the Lord Almighty: "1, the Lord, have called you.... [You didn't call yourself; I called you!] I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light for the Gentiles' " (Isaiah 42:6). "I have

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summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you

.Do not be afraid, for I am with you' ” (Isaiah 43:1, 2, 5). Is there a more wonderful assurance than that? ” ‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he’ ” (Isaiah 43:10). Clearly we are here for a reason other than to eat, drink, and die.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not just one more sociological phenomenon. God is the cause of this church. He is in the process of completing His salvation activities, and He has chosen us for an important role in that connection. All of our choices must be instructed by that fact.

The inclination to look back. Whether wistfully, with a quick, backward glance, like Lot's wife, wondering if it wasn't a bit hasty to leave it all behind; or like the Israelites, remembering the “meat pots in Egypt,” or as it says of the heroes of faith, “If they had been thinking of the country they left, they would have had opportunity to return” (Hebrews 11:15), many who used to be with us on this journey, regrettably, have lost their way for one reason or other. Maybe they allowed themselves to be drawn into doubts about the Christian commitment that they once made. Maybe the “longing for the better country” waned. We are not, as a church, doing enough to lovingly, caringly, and deliberately look after the needs of those who have become weary of the journey and whom we sadly do not see anymore. Apostasy becomes a bad word, almost like spiritual AIDS. It is as though we say, “Shame on them,” or, “That's their problem.” The church must accept it as our problem, and healing must be found. The cost of broken hearts in this life and loss for eternity is too high. And then there are those who keep looking back because they cannot let bygones be bygones. Haven't we all got things - events or moments from the past - that we wish were not there? But they are, and we cannot change that fact. The Lord has dealt with it and forgiven us, other people have forgiven, but somehow we find it so hard to forgive ourselves. And it becomes a plaguing memory that denies us the joy and sense of security we should have as we finish the journey. And it is a failure of faith.

It is not the flawlessness or perfection of our lives that is the critical factor, but the role of Christ in our lives and the unqualified decisions we make for Him. There is then no need to look back. Individually and as a people our eyes are to be fixed on

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- the goal of our journey,
- the One who is going to take us there, and
- what must engage and occupy us until we are there.

With an eye to us as a community, I have three main concerns - or maybe ideals is a better word - which I feel strongly for. They fall into three categories: mission, quality of life in the church, and unity.

Mission. The comprehensive message of the Bible is that humanity's lost condition and hopelessness can only be resolved by God, and God has chosen to do that through Jesus Christ; and, in fact, that is the only way it can be done; and that the church is God's selected instrument to carry that good news to people. The Bible spends very little time speculating on the success or failure of individual mission activities. It just says, "Do it!" Or, in the parting words of Jesus, "You will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That means simply everywhere! We have no other reason for being! That is why we are.

As we all know well, we human beings establish organizations - societies, clubs, fraternities, lodges, and what not - in order to care for the interests of those who are members, who have paid their dues and are in regular standing. The church is different. God established it primarily in the interest of those who are not members. It is important for the church to remember that and not become too preoccupied with itself or feel too special on its own. It is the world of fallen sinful people that God loves, and He needs the church to communicate that truth by words and deeds. "The burning, consuming love of Christ for perishing souls is the life of the whole system of Christianity" (Ellen G. White, *Lift Him Up*, p. 134).

The very simple message that comes from a quick look at Israel of old is that God's choice of them as a nation was for mission and witness. When Israel withheld that service, the nation's status lost its meaning. When God caused this Advent movement of ours to come on the scene of history some 150 years ago it was for us to be the carriers of a particular focus on Scripture that God wanted men and women to know about at this end time in history. And much of that is contained in our understanding of eschatology, the teaching of the earth's last events and the final stage of earth's history. And that is where we are in time today.

God's love for humanity is broad and comprehensive, and it includes you and me. But we are particularly useful to God as the

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carriers of His mission. So all that we are and have as a church finds its meaning in mission. I therefore ask that all initiatives we as a church engage ourselves in be identified and defined in terms of mission. So I say to my colleagues in leadership and planning: "Make a note of that." Our strategic planning is for mission. Our use of resources is for mission. And if we don't see the linkage between what we do and mission, we must ask, Why do we do it? Should we not be doing something else? For it is late in the day, and we are almost home, and we must not now become distracted.

The quality of life in the church. The truly wonderful thing about Jesus Christ is His immeasurable love for people - individuals who are disfigured, scarred from the battles of life, "smelly," ill-tempered, and cantankerous! But wonderfully loved by our Lord! Just by belonging to humanity we are highly valued by Him. We don't have to become anything or achieve anything to be loved by Him. And being highly valued by Him is not something that comes at an advanced stage of life when we can display a good track record that testifies to the fine "stuff" of which we are made. Each of us has that intrinsic value simply by being a human being. And as such we are deeply loved by God. Is your and my local congregation able to communicate that? Is this the aura that comes from our churches? Can someone walk off the street into your local church and feel the atmosphere of openness and warmth and loving acceptance?

The people of the world are looking to us to see what our faith is doing for our characters and lives. They are watching to see if it is having a sanctifying effect on our hearts, if we are becoming changed into the likeness of Christ....

It is not the opposition of the world that will most endanger us; it is the evil cherished right in our midst that works our most grievous disaster....

There is no surer way of weakening ourselves in spiritual things than to be envious, suspicious of one another, full of faultfinding and evil surmising (Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him*, p. 153).

Memory takes me back to a local church in which I worshiped years ago. Among those who came was a young teenager. He came reluctantly, he came late, and he would walk in after the others - those were his choices; and he sometimes came in jeans; that was also his choice. He carried anger against the church and the Lord; and there were things happening around him that he found difficult to understand and accept. He was a hurting and unhappy young man. His

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appearance irritated one of the local church elders; maybe he dressed so as to make sure he would irritate him. One day the elder said to him: “Go home and change before you come back.” He went away, and to this day, many years later, he has not come back.

Just like our Lord, the church must be in the “business” of saving people. That is where our whole existence is summed up! So, when you define your church, your local congregation, culturally and in other ways, just be sure that it remains good at saving people. For if not, we may have saved a structure and an organization, even a reputation, but we are no longer useful to God.

Unity. Whilst our rapid growth is a wonderful thing and a tribute to the God whom we serve, the very size, internationality, and cultural, political, and ethnic diversity of our church poses a formidable challenge in terms of unity. As a world family we are different from every other church. We are not a fraternity of similar national churches. We are one! There are a number of elements of unity that are unique to us:

- We have one set of fundamental beliefs.
- We have one common Church Manual.
- We have a common constitutional structure and similar policies.
- We are financially “intermarried” and we share our resources around the world.
- We have one shared sacred gift in the inspired writings of Ellen White.

These are Gods gifts to us. So, it is not just “by our love that they shall see that we are one.” There are a number of tangible elements of unity that uniquely bind together as one this family around the world.

Unity, however, does not look after itself. Hence the injunction: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit” in the one body (Ephesians 4:3).

And some of us don’t!

I recognize that as this church grows around the world, the local needs of the churches will also grow. The local needs will be financial, and there will be needs in terms of how the church should function and express herself. I understand that we should examine how these local needs can be met. I understand that in the process of doing so we will ask ourselves: What changes can we safely make? Changes with regard to how we share and use our money? Changes with regard to how ministry functions? Changes with regard to the structures of

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administration in our church? I understand the need for these questions to be asked and explored. In answering them, however, it is important that leadership does not sacrifice what binds us together worldwide.

There is something profoundly biblical about being willing to forego one's local exercise of freedom in the interest of what is good for the whole international Adventist family. We owe it to Christ, whose idea it was that has brought us to where we are today, to be very deliberate and careful in holding the family together.

It is late in the day, and we are almost home. We cannot now become reckless and careless. We owe it to the church, which is His body, to shore up and strengthen the whole body - the international family. In this context "congregationalism," does not belong; it is an alien concept that is irreconcilable with what God has given to this church. It is critical that elected leadership accepts this and discharges its leadership in harmony with what God has given to us.

So I say to the elected leadership: "Don't undo the elements that bind us together - the agreements we have arrived at as a spiritual family!" And I say to the rest of the church: "Hold your leaders accountable."

This is my vision of the church:

- I see the Seventh-day Adventist Church as God's redemptive community in these last days.
- I see it as an open and seeking community, and I believe we bring to the world a very particular focus on the Word of God.
- I see Christ as our Savior, Friend, and soon-coming Lord.
- I see the Seventh-day Adventist community as one united family in which the blend of all cultures and races enrich our quality of the life we share.
- I see this community as a mission instrument for God.

Can each of us look at this description and say: "Yes, that's my community; this is my people; that's where I belong; this is my spiritual home"? If you can say "Yes," I want you to feel safe and loved and at home in this church. I pledge to do what I can to make our church a loving community in which we support each other - carry each other, if need be - lift up our Lord, and seek to live our lives in obedience to Him; and arrange our lives, values, and choices, personally and in the church, accordingly.

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Now, let us embrace and hold hands firmly, let us “press together,” as we move forward to finish the journey!