

Celebration Church Update — Celebration Leads to Separation

When church leaders established a Celebration church, they established a halfway house to the world. Erelong many in that house will individually go all the way out into the world,—or, as a group, they will leave and establish an independent congregation. Here is the story.

THE SECOND FLIGHT FROM THE MILWAUKIE CHURCH—The best way for a conference president to ruin a local congregation is to permit it to become a Celebration church.

Back in the late 1980s, the Milwaukie New Life Seventh-day Adventist Church (on the south side of Portland, Oregon) was the leading Celebration church in Adventism. Indeed, it was the training center for pastors in this pattern of sensational worship.

The General Conference encouraged local conference presidents throughout North America to send their most liberal pastors there, so they could learn how to conduct semi-Pentecostal meetings—in the hope of bringing more people with their purses into the denomination.

Even the *Adventist Review* published an article on the church and David Snyder, its senior pastor. A large photograph of him was printed, along with most flattering comments on his pioneer work in leading the church into a new, higher experience of public worship.

When pastors arrived at Milwaukie, they went through a reorientation program, conducted by Snyder. About eight to 12 pastors were in training at any one time. A friend of mind visited one day and listened to that day's training session.

A key reason why church leaders had so much confidence in Snyder's Celebration church approach was that, when he started the new worship style, his church greatly increased in membership. But the actual reason for that was the fact that there were a large number of liberals, in the greater Portland area, who had earlier drifted out of the church. Snyder now offered them a quasi-Adventism, heavily laced with worldliness, and they bought into it. Attendance rose to 1,200.

This attracted General Conference attention; for it was hungering, not for ways to maintain standards and doctrines, but “church growth”—anything that would increase membership.

But one day, in anger, Snyder eventually spoke ill-advisedly in the presence of local church leaders—and they were so shocked at what they heard that they notified the conference office that he had to go.

When Snyder quit, he immediately joined a Sunday-keeping church and became associate pastor. The New Life Church was left in turmoil. **Many members chose to go out with him into Sunday-keeping, a number quit all churches; and those who remained had so accustomed themselves to the theatrics and display of semi-Pentecostalism, that they were in poor spiritual condition. All they had left was their front-stage rock band and the singers.**

To make matters worse, the conference president had earlier arranged for a sizeable amount of money to be loaned to the New Life Church. They had been renting a large Sunday-keeping Celebration church, and wanted to build their own structure. But when Snyder left, there were not enough members left—and they did not want to continue on with the project nor repay the conference.

(It is of interest to note that Snyder had been guided in much of his work by Dave Galloway, pastor of the Sunday-keeping church he was renting from. Snyder, like other successful Celebration church pastors, also attended Sunday churches to learn “new, improved” ways to attract worldlings to meetings. Galloway has since retired and is now on the faculty of an eastern Protestant seminary.)

In 1993, Mike Galeotti (a New York Adventist pastor), succeeded Snyder as senior minister of the Milwaukie New Life Church. By the time he arrived, the church membership was only 300, but he applied enough Celebration excitement to bring it back up to between 450 and 500.

But Galeotti also started having arguments with local church leaders. The problems may have been mutual; for the effect of righteousness is quietness and peace, and Milwaukie worship services were anything but that. Worldly living and noisy Sab-

bath displays generated strife and self-aggrandizement.

Upon his arrival, Galeotti fitted in well with some of his members, for he wore a wedding ring and ordained women elders who wore earrings.

By early 1997, Don Livesay, Oregon Conference president, was hearing reports about how far into Pentecostalism Galeotti had taken the New Life Church. **He heard that people were experiencing holy laughter, being slain in the spirit, and speaking in tongues,—and that members were increasingly desirous of such manifestations.**

The New Life Church was splitting over the matter, and many were leaving. Eventually, weekly attendance had dropped to about 200-250.

Galeotti and his associate, Angelo Nannocho, openly admit that, at each service, their concern is for the “spirit” to lead them and the congregation wherever it will.

Then one Sabbath Galeotti preached a sermon, in which he declared that “the teaching that the Sabbath is the seal of God is a lie from which the church must repent.” He also declared that the Sunday-keeping churches are also “the remnant.”

The following Tuesday, Galeotti was called to the conference office for a meeting. This was followed by a meeting with the personnel committee on February 11. Galeotti freely admitted his non-Adventist positions, and he turned in a resignation the next day.

On Sabbath, February 14, the conference New Life Celebration Church reorganized. At that meeting, it was discovered that only about 70 of the former members still wanted to stay with the denomination! The rest had all flown the coup.

Elden Walter is the interim pastor. If he keeps the jazzy music and hand-waving going, the attendance should pick up again—until the next crisis and mass departure. That is what the people have become addicted to and what they now demand.

Galeotti and over 100 of his followers now meet every week as an independent congregation.

Commenting on the experience, the Oregon Conference apparently had not yet learned its lesson,—for Livesay said, “We definitely support Celebration worship services, but we are uncomfortable with the style New Life has adopted.” Celebrationism is an avenue to apostasy, but church leaders have not discovered the fact! In Oregon, they still want to encourage it.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE DAMASCUS ROAD CHURCH—When the present writer was in attendance at the SDA Seminary in Washington, D.C. in the late 1950s, the *Damascus, Maryland, Seventh-day Adventist Church* was one of the more significant congregations in the area.

Several months ago, we prepared a study on the exodus of that church. Since it is part of the story of

how Celebration churches bolt from the denomination, we will briefly mention it again.

In 1992, Richard Fredericks left his position as associate professor of religion at Columbia Union College, in order to become senior pastor of the Damascus Church. At the time, only about 100 were attending. Fredericks turned it into a Celebration church.

This was done with the full approval of church leaders who were anxious to see if the semi-Pentecostal methods, used by a number of Protestant megachurches in America, could be used by Adventists to bring in more non-Adventist members. This was an unwise decision; for our leaders were willing to afford additions in membership a higher priority than maintaining historic standards of beliefs and practices. Quasi-Pentecostalism is not the way to get people to heaven. It is unfortunate when denominations forget the reason for their existence. The Adventist Church was formed to give the final message of obedience to God’s law, by faith in Christ’s enabling grace. How far we have fallen in these last days!

“The gospel, not our law-keeping, defines all who constitute God’s ‘remnant’ people,” Fredericks said in one of his sermons.

In five years, Fredericks’ church had grown to 600! Leaders were convinced that the Celebration approach was a good one. As with others elsewhere, Fredericks’ church had dramatic skits, drums, and a small band up front playing “contemporary” music, hand waving, and various other demonstrations.

Yet, in reality, all that had really happened was that liberal Adventists from all over greater Washington, D.C. started going to Fredericks’ church. As with other Celebration churches elsewhere, hardly any non-Adventists had united with the church; instead, church members had shuffled back and forth between local Adventist congregations. Siphoning members from nearby Adventist churches is not genuine “church growth.”

Yet something more subversive was also taking place. Collecting the liberals into one church and providing them with a measure of the “liberty” from standards that Aaron offered in his church services in the Sinai desert,—the liberals soon hankered for still more freedom.

And, as in a growing number of Celebration churches, Fredericks was the kind of pastor to lead them into it. **You see, in the process of leading his congregation into semi-Pentecostal demonstrations, Fredericks had hardened his own heart and their hearts against obvious Bible-Spirit of Prophecy counsel. Both were now prepared to distance themselves even more fully from Adventist standards and beliefs.**

In 1995, with conference approval, the Damascus

Church was renamed the *Damascus Road Church*. Shortly after that, they started their own, separate corporation and laid plans to build a new church—to be owned by their corporation.

The Potomac Conference set October 27, 1997, as the deadline for that congregation to dissolve their corporation (*Damascus Road Community Church, Inc.*). When this was not done, Fredericks was fired on October 27, and most of his members followed him.

On November 5, 1997, a contract was signed to purchase a 225-acre property for \$620,000. Since Sabbath offerings averaged \$65,000, Fredericks and the board felt they could safely go through with the deal.

This new, non-denominational church, located about 30 miles north of Washington, D.C., now has about 400 in weekly attendance.

Celebrationism cost the Potomac Conference dearly,—but no one at the conference office seemed to learn the lesson! Herbert H. Broeckel, conference president, declared that Fredericks’ “innovative style” of worship services would continue!

As if to signal the fact that what was left of the Damascus Church, after most of the members left with Fredericks, would continue to be liberal in worship and theology,—David Newman, former editor of *Ministry* magazine and the new pastor of the conference church at Damascus, renamed it the *Damascus Grace Fellowship Church!* Although a conference church, it is not called “Seventh-day Adventist,” but “Grace Fellowship”!

EXIT OF THE GRACE PLACE CHURCH—We earlier mentioned the loss of a Colorado church, and will briefly note it again in this larger report.

As a young pastor, Clay Peck had trained under Richard and fully imbibed his liberal positions. At the urging of the Rocky Mountain Conference, on September 14, 1996, he and the liberals in northern Colorado formed a Celebration church in Berthoud, Colorado, about 40 miles north of Denver. It met in the local high school auditorium.

They called their church *Grace Place*, and started rousing Celebration services which they called a “contemporary worship style.”

Peck had maintained weekly phone contact with Richard, and carefully followed his pattern of forming an independent corporation which would own future church assets.

Upset at this development, the conference sent him to Andrews in the spring of 1997, so the theologians there could examine his views. But, with the comment that they and many church leaders and workers believe as he does, they sent him back to Colorado.

On October 30, 1997, the *Review* ran a very complimentary article on his wonderful Celebra-

tion church. Three days later, on November 2, the Rocky Mountain Conference Executive Committee voted to suspend Grace Place and release Peck from employment. The crisis came, not over theology or the modernistic church services, but the fact that Peck’s church was not sending all its tithe to the conference; and they refused to relinquish their separate corporation.

Rocky Mountain Conference leadership remains in the dark as to the root cause of the problem. Its president recently said that Adventism “must have new, creative worshiping congregations,” and he intends to help get several more Celebration churches started in the conference!

THE BRIDGE CITY CHURCH FORSAKES THE DENOMINATION—Bob Bretsch, the very successful senior pastor of the *Union College Church*, became pastor of the 1,450-member *Sunnyside Church* in Portland, Oregon. From 1992 to 1997, he held that position. Sunnyside was the largest church in the largest conference of the North Pacific Union.

When Bretsch arrived at Sunnyside in 1992, he found a well-educated, but traditional Adventist congregation. Within a few years, he dramatically changed it, as he introduced a “contemporary worship service” (i.e., Celebration), a downstairs food bar, and Messianic Jewish dancing. That style of dancing, done at the annual Protestant Feast of Tabernacles Festival each fall in Jerusalem, is similar to square dancing, but is much more lively. With all the twirling, dancing bodies, it gives a sensual appearance which is pleasing to the a worldly on-looker.

While church leadership sat back and did nothing, Bretsch won a sizeable number of the members over to the wilder worship. Keep in mind that most of those leaders had been the ones who so strongly encouraged what went on at the Milwaukie Church which, partway through Bretsch’s pastorate at Sunnyside, had already collapsed.

A number of members, whom Bretsch called “the group of sixty,” complained to the conference office, revealing that Bretsch was irregular in tithe paying and was paying the equivalent of four associate pastors directly from local church funds (which denominational policies forbade).

Once again, as far as the conference was concerned, the problem was denominational control,—not such matters as theology, dancing, or theatrical worship services.

On May 29, 1997, Bretsch was fired by the conference. A few weeks later, on July 1, he was asked to pastor the newly formed Bridge City Community Church. Duff Gorle and Marc Schelske, associate pastors at Sunnyside with Bretsch, also joined the staff. About 600 are attending.

Unlike most of the other shattered churches in

this report, the group which remained at Sunnyside decided to drop the Celebrationism and return the church to a traditional form of worship.

FLIGHT OF THE NEW LIFE CHURCH IN WASHINGTON—Eric Bahme was senior pastor of the *Woodinville, Washington, Seventh-day Adventist Church*, not far from Seattle. **As with most of the other separated churches in this report, doctrinal positions were not a problem. Local churches can believe most anything they want and vary in their worship styles, as long as they acknowledge the authority of the conference. But a non-Adventist singer led the worship services and not all tithe dollars were sent to the conference; this irritated leadership.**

Because of various problems, he was terminated by the Washington Conference in May 1996. **But, by that time, it was already too late. He had totally saturated the minds of his congregation with modernist worship and liberal theology.**

Taking with him 98 percent of his members, Bahme started the *New Life Christian Fellowship of Congregational Seventh-day Adventists*,—the only one of the five churches in this report to retain the name “Seventh-day Adventist.”

With 60 members and a total of 180 who attend at various times, the new body has an average attendance of 140. The new church has a book center and sponsors concerts.

PART OF THE MEDFORD CHURCH DROPS OUT—From 1990 to 1996, Chad McComas served as senior pastor of the 600-member *Medford, Oregon, Seventh-day Adventist Church*. He had been a pastor in that conference since 1976.

When he ran into trouble with the conference over non-doctrinal matters, he was replaced as senior pastor in December 1996, but did not submit an official resignation until May 30, 1997.

After resigning, he remained in Medford and started a center to help people with addictions. July 5, 1997, was the first Sabbath of the newly formed *Set Free Christian Fellowship*. More than 60 people attended the first service. This church focuses on helping people recover from a variety of addictions, and has opened an in-house treatment center.

THE EVANGELICAL SABBATH ASSOCIATION—A significant part of this report is the fact that all five of these separated congregations are members of a newly formed organization, the *Evangelical Sabbath Association* (ESA). Don Ashlock, a Portland, Oregon, businessman led out in founding this organization, which seeks the membership of every liberal, independent Adventist group in the

United States. ESA says it is “dedicated to equip, serve, and empower grace-based Sabbath Celebrating ministries.”

ESA is similar to the *Willow Creek Association* (WCA) of independent Protestant Celebrationist churches, because it is based on it. In fact, ESA was founded during the 1997 Willow Creek Leadership Conference. (WCA has more than 2,200 member churches, from 70 denominations and 15 countries, and holds various workshops and conferences.)

CONCLUSION—Once the cancer is permitted to take hold, it can spread. In the late 1970s, we extensively reported on the Celebration churches which were started under the strong urging of the General Conference (see our *Celebration Tractbook*). As a result, Celebrationism—which is thinly disguised pre-Pentecostalism—is now in vogue in many of our local churches. **But, once given non-Adventist worship patterns, the jaded members find themselves tempted to throw off denominational control.**

Richard Fredericks, the rebel Damascus, Maryland pastor, says he has been inundated with inquiries from pastors and congregations interested in following similar courses of action.

Eric Bahme, the independent Woodinville, Washington pastor, says he receives E-mail everyday from all over North America and elsewhere in the world field—from people wanting to make a similar transition to independent congregations.

Bahme says he personally knows of 15 to 18 senior pastors (not including those in this report) “who will most likely be terminated or quit to start new churches.”

In promoting such a flagrant violation of our standards as celebration-style church services, denominational leaders sowed rebellion against Bible-Spirit of Prophecy standards, and they are now reaping a bitter harvest—rebellion against church control.

Last week, not far from here, an interconference seminar was held by the denomination, on how to reach “*Generation Xers*.” Adventist church leaders discussed the need to find innovative, new ways to reach the children of the baby boomers—different looks, different meetings, different magazines, different Bibles, different sermons, different appeals, different school curriculum, and extra-curricular activities. —Anything to increase liberal membership in the church.

So we look ahead to yet more liberal approaches being applied in the future. Church leaders are fanning the flame that will ultimately take out many of their local churches.

—Vance Ferrell