

# Going to Willow Creek

**PART ONE OF TWO**

The God of heaven called the Seventh-day Adventist people into existence in order to proclaim the message of Revelation 14:6-12 to the world. That message has many ramifications, from the health message to the Sanctuary Service. But the basic truth is this: God requires that we obey His moral and physical laws; this can be done, only done, through the enabling grace of Jesus Christ, His Son.

In this present study, we will briefly overview three methods used today to spread the faith of Jesus: Our divinely given historic Adventist evangelism, the Willow Creek Method which our leaders have decided to switch over to, and the pitiful copy of it which they are now using.

## **HISTORIC ADVENTIST EVANGELISM**

The blueprint for Adventist evangelism is beautifully outlined in the Bible and the pages of the Spirit of Prophecy.

The entering wedge for reaching precious souls is through our health and healing work, using natural remedies. In the very use of natural remedies, we are obeying God's health laws. In the administration of poisonous drugs, we are transgressing them.

(For your information, Ellen White defined *all* medicinal drugs as "poisonous." The reason for that is the fact that they generally consist of chemicals, extracted from minerals or plants. When chemicals are left intact, within a non-poisonous herb, they are in a form that can frequently be beneficial when used properly. But drug firms cannot patent herbs, only extracted chemical combinations. It is for this reason that medicinal drugs are nearly always poisonous. One of the only exceptions to this rule is charcoal, which consists of a single chemical, carbon. Yet even it is natural. If you burn some wood, you will have charcoal.)

There is so much sickness in our world, much of it caused by a violation of the laws of health; the health/healing work is a most powerful means of reaching mankind. As we minister to their needs, at the same time we are teaching the importance of obedience to God's laws. This is a perfect lead-in to instruction in our doctrinal beliefs, which center around the message of Revelation 14:6-12: obedience to the laws of God, through faith in His Son.

This message of enabled obedience runs through every aspect of genuine, historic Adventist evangelism. To whatever degree we have swerved from it, we have grieved the heart of our Father and have brought darkness into our own lives.

## **WILLOW CREEK EVANGELISM**

Willow Creek evangelism has a far different approach. Although also keyed to efforts to help people, it primarily uses two methods: The first is entertainment; the second is offering people the forgiveness of God for their ongoing sinning.

Leading people to accept God's forgiveness for their sins has been the Protestant objective in evangelism for over a century. Everything is keyed to forgiveness; only rarely is any mention made of obedience to the laws of God. Indeed, such talk is scorned as "legalism."

In order to emphasize this theme, Christian doctrines have been twisted into an insidious error. The grand truth, that Christ died for our sins on Calvary, is made to serve the error that we have no part in our salvation, other than acceptance of Christ as our Saviour. Behavior does not matter. Live as you please, for you were saved at the cross. Your redemption was entirely completed 2,000 years ago. All you need now do is give verbal assent to an atonement completed before you were born. Your actions count as nothing; your acceptance is everything.

Willow Creek teaches this typical, modern Protestant error. But it also has something else: a heightened interest in providing entertainment and small-group activities.

Because Willow Creek keeps enlarging its membership, many Protestant pastors are going to Willow Creek for training in its methods. The frenzied goal is numbers; increase the number attending church each Sunday. That is seen as the true hallmark of success.

Why are we discussing Willow Creek here? Because our own denominational leaders, always interested in being the tail instead of the head, have made a campaign of sending our pastors to Willow Creek for training in its methods—in the hope that, upon their return to their own congregations, they will detour them into entertainment and community programs as a means of adding to our own numbers.

Please be aware that several problems are inherent in such a plan: (1) Our actions indicate that we have decided that modern Protestantism can provide us with a better way to reach the lost, one that is superior to the pattern given us in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy. (2) In following those methods, we are thereby repudiating our historic beliefs. Instead of preaching the health message, the Sanctuary message, and the crucial importance of obedience to the laws of God, we are unconsciously switching over to the teachings of modern Protestantism. (3) In the process, we are exchanging Revela-

tion 14:6-12 for the cheap entertainment techniques of vaudeville: worldly music, theatricals, non-sacrificial salvation, and easy entrance to church membership.

Thus we are copying, not only the evangelistic techniques, but also the doctrinal teachings of, what the Spirit of Prophecy refers to as, modern Babylon. If time lasts, rather quickly we are going to produce a generation of non-Adventist church members! Ironically, this comes at the very time efforts are increasingly being made to silence historic believers, strip them of their church offices, steadily move them toward the church doors, and sue those who have been pushed out. Truly, it is a time to weep and cry between the porch and the altar.

### NEW ADVENTIST METHODS

The astounding fact is that, when our pastors try to copy what they learned at Willow Creek,—they produce a second-rate version that is extremely high on entertainment and very low on community helpwork. In other words, we are adopting the worst aspects of Willow Creek.

In previous tracts, we have presented a broad variety of aspects of our North American Division efforts to bring modern Protestant methods into our churches.

In the late 1980s, the Celebration church technique was used. Borrowed from the methods used by very large Pentecostal and semi-Pentecostal Protestant churches, it emphasized bands, vocalists, standing and raising of hands, theatrical skits, and overhead-projectors instead of hymn books and pastors placing their hands on kneeling members, to help assure them of forgiveness of sins. You will find this discussed in detail in our 84-page, *Celebration Tractbook*, \$6.50 + \$.1.50.

Soon after that, the “cell” methods, developed by a large Korean Protestant church ran like the plague through American Protestantism. Immediately, our leaders had local conferences order the instruction books and begin using it. Cells are small, mid-week group meetings of church members, for the purpose of reorientating their thinking. Each meeting begins with a canned collection of jokes and interactive foolish activities or stories, declared in the instruction manuals to “loosen up” the members. With consciences thus dulled, they are prepared for the mental conditioning which follows. See the above book for more on this.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the words, “Celebration” and “festival,” were used for nearly every type of Adventist gathering, especially youth meetings. Our people were being conditioned to accept Celebration as the key to Christian living. Yet the concept is based on “salvation past.” “We were saved at the cross, and all we need do now is celebrate our salvation.” Behavior matters not, only profession.

The campaign for Celebration churches was the result. Pastors were shipped to the Milwaukie Church, in South Portland, Oregon, for training in Celebration techniques under David Snyder, who in college had been trained to be a professional actor. But when he quit the denomination, in order to become a Sundaykeeping

church pastor, the training seminars could not continue.

Because so many church members did not approve of the flagrantly wild entertainment, found in Celebration church services, the North American Division felt there was a need to enter our churches through a side door.

Why did our leaders not recognize the basic problem and repudiate worldly entertainment instead of insisting that our churches adopt it? The reason was simple enough: Throughout the 1980s, when faithful members would protest the increasing modernism brought in by pastors, the conference offices would side with the pastors and the historic believers would be edged out. But, whether or not they left, many began curtailing their financial support. This placed church leaders in a situation that, if they wanted to continue receiving the income they were accustomed to, new methods would have to be considered, which could bring in people from off the streets—faster than before!

Then, in the mid-1980s, Willow Creek, a large Protestant church in the Chicago suburbs, began instructional seminars to teach Protestant pastors its Celebration methods.

North American Division leaders, under the strong direction of its president, Al McClure, immediately took hold of this splendid opportunity to learn how the Sundaykeepers brought in members.

Unfortunately, in order to acquire the methods there was a need to modify our theology. The Protestant super-churches do well, only because they permit easy entrance into the church. “Only believe,” is all that matters. In increasingly large numbers, our pastors were shipped to Willow Creek in order to learn the way they crowded people into the church.

This may sound unbelievable; but, awhile back, we quoted a statement in the *Adventist Review*, that we were sending more pastors to Willow Creek than almost any other denomination in America!

“Fact: Adventists, both pastors and lay people, consistently make up one of the largest groups at Willow Creek’s half-dozen annual seminars.”—*Adventist Review*, December 18, 1997.

### THE STORY OF WILLOW CREEK

Since we are sending so many of our pastors to Willow Creek for training, you might want to know how they carry on their work. I have frequently been asked, “I keep hearing about Willow Creek. What is it?”

In the following overview, please be aware of the fact that, although Willow Creek has many useful techniques for bringing people into the church, our leaders and pastors only appear interested in the entertainment aspects. When men abandon Spirit of Prophecy counsels, in the hope of finding greater wisdom out in the world, their thinking becomes confused, and ere long they are truly the tail and not the head. (Deuteronomy 28 is well-worth reading again. Read it again tonight for family worship.)

william (Bill) Hybels was a student at Trinity Evan-

# Going to Willow Creek

gical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, during the only two years that Gilbert Bilezikian was a theology teacher there. Young Hybels learned from him the concept that a church should actually be just part of a community, and so involved in community activities that everyone in the community eventually went to church there.

Hybels had been leading a youth ministry called Son City which, in three years had grown from 25 to 1,200 in attendance. They used dramatic skits, loud way-out music, and multimedia slides to impact their listeners.

In May 1974, Hybels and other Son City leaders began to dream about starting a church, but a different kind; this would be one to which people could come, amid all their problems and not feel judged. They realized that simple talks about daily living, along with lots of music and drama, would be needed.

One day in 1975, Hybels rode up on his motorcycle to Bilezikian's home in Wheaton, Illinois; ran up to the door; and breathlessly told him that the two of them were going to start a church. When the older man asked what it was all about, Hybels told him the church would be based on Bilezikian's idea of community. When the teacher protested that they lacked funds, Hybels just repeated, "We are going to build a church."

Hybels resigned as youth pastor of the Son City project; and, on October 12 of that year, 125 people attended Hybel's first church service, held at the Willow Creek Theater, a movie theater in nearby Palatine. Somehow, the people who arrived for the service managed to ignore the lewd title of the movie playing that week. Hybels was only 23.

To pay the rent and buy sound equipment, 100 teenagers sold 1,200 baskets of tomatoes door-to-door.

A year later, the Sunday morning church services at the theater were filled with attendees, and Hybels and Bilezikian began conducting two services each Sunday. Two years later, the services grew to three; all of them squeezed into the morning hours, with everything packed and gone by 1 p.m., so the movie crowd could come in.

Within three years, the two men were preaching to 2,500 people a week. They did it with jazzy music, theatrical skits, and excitable sermons about youth topics to audiences in shirt sleeves, sipping on pepsi. The two of them believed that, by doing this, they were reviving the Acts 2 Church. With an evangelistic zeal, they pushed onward, always figuring out new ways to attract seekers who could, by merely declaring they had accepted Christ, become full-fledged church members. Doctrine was never an issue; "being saved" at a meeting was all that counted.

Young Hybels and the older Bilezikian made a point of not bringing "theological jargon" into their sermons or counseling sessions. Just "get them to an acceptance of Christ."

By the early 1980s, a larger church had been constructed which, oddly enough, retained the name of that cheap movie house. In 1988, the leaders decided that they would start small groups. Today, Willow Creek has

more than 2,600 of them. Most of them meet weekly in the church or a private home. There are over a hundred ministries, with community-care programs accounting for 29 of them. They deal with everything from career transition and postpartum depression to homelessness and marital restoration. Today, people initially come to Willow Creek through one of these. One example would be the Divorce Recovery program, in which 450 people sign up for each 10-week session. Of those attending, about 35 percent have never accepted Christ.

There are all kinds of groups. One consists of several men who repair cars belonging to poor people. In another, three retired men repair the church's 40 vacuum cleaners. There are groups of every possible type.

One of Willow Creek's four self-sustaining groups recoups its entire \$2.4 million yearly budget by selling 480,000 meals to church attenders and conference and seminar guests. Willow Creek has 8,000 volunteers.

Promiseland, the ministry that serves 3,500 children each weekend, teaches them Bible, crafts, and social dancing.

Other important "ministries" are the several theatrical groups which produce and present dramas in front of the church on Sunday morning. Each one is a real soap opera, with angry words dissolving into a happy resolution. From the beginning, Hybels and his associates have used music and drama to keep the people coming to the services.

Some of these groups would be worth emulating; but, when our pastors are sent to Willow Creek, they are told to focus on how to obtain that initial growth through entertainment methods. Sabbathkeepers do not do as well at "community churching" as Sundaykeepers. Our leaders ruefully know it is the Sabbath which is the offense. (It is for this reason that they are anxious to remove it from our church signs and do our "church planting" with Sunday morning services at their new "community churches.")

Willow Creek has had a special problem in finding qualified leaders for all its groups. So it devised a program to train leaders.

In addition, the extensive programs and all the volunteers are guided by 512 Willow Creek employees, 60 percent of them full time.

Although Willow Creek is known for making lots of new Christians, only 15 percent of those in attendance from week to week say they want to become Christians. The rest say they have already accepted Christ. Bound for heaven, they have little need to be concerned about their daily conduct, since it has nothing to do with salvation.

Then there are the seminars and conferences which Willow Creek conducts. Each major conference requires 1,100 volunteer jobs. These conferences and seminars are especially significant to us—for it is through them that our Adventist pastors are receiving their training into Protestant methods of holding meetings and bringing people into the church.

The Willow Creek Association is the name of the

separate non-profit organization which supervises all these conferences and seminars, with 5,600 member churches in 90 denominations.

In 1999, alone, 76,000 pastors and leaders from other denominations attended meetings on the campus of Willow Creek and elsewhere in the world. (In an earlier study, I wrote about how church leaders in Germany are complaining about the massive inroads of Willow Creek church methods into their churches.)

Willow Creek is growing so fast, that 45 percent of its staff were added within the past two years. Staff turnover is only 8 percent a year.

Willow Creek works closely with 62 ministry partners in the inner city of Chicago, its suburbs, and overseas. Since they are all Sundaykeepers, and generally hold in common to some type of instant profess-and-be-saved theology, they have enough in common to make this possible.

What is in the future for Willow Creek? *First*, it plans to double the size of its main building complex. A new, three-story administration building is being constructed, which will house 250 employees, including the staff of the Willow Creek Association. An additional 7,000-seat auditorium, with lots of classroom space is planned. It will add another 300,000 square feet of space to Willow Creek operations.

*Second*, it wants to establish "satellite regional ministry centers" within a 60-minute radius. This will cover all of greater Chicago. These satellite centers may just carry live broadcasts of Willow services. But, instead, they may have their own live bands, drama groups, and programming teams. A third possibility is for each participating church to be fully self-functioning, with its own ministries. Over 100 churches in the Chicago area already are connected to Willow Creek. Most of them openly express their desire to become Willow Creeks on their own. If Hybels' church can use jazz, bands, and theatricals to bring the people off the streets, they want to be able to do it also.

There are those among our own church leaders who are thinking the same thing. In the spring of 1999, the Heartland Community Church in Rockford, Illinois, began using the Willow Creek model—and now has 1,500 people attending its weekend services. Yet Rockford is not a major city.

*Third*, Willow Creeks want to deepen and expand its ties to other Chicago churches—including those who do not use its methods. Jim Tomberlin, a pastor who pulled together an alliance of half the pastors in the Colorado Springs, Colorado, area, has joined the staff and will be in charge of doing the same to Greater Chicago. The objective is a close, working ecumenical unity. This will strengthen them in the achievement of common objectives. Deepening Sunday sanctity is one of

them. Oddly enough, our people imagine that they can join Willow Creek and later get out safely.

*Fourth*, it intends to expand the Willow Creek Association, which provides seminars instructing churches throughout the world in how to use modern music and theatrics to bring more into the church. The church's 90 existing meeting rooms currently host 400 events a week and are often booked six months in advance. Some employees now have to work at home or in rented off-campus locations. Denominations and their pastors are hungry to learn how to gain more members, with the contributions they will bring with them. According to the previously quoted *Review* statement, few are hungrier than our own North American Division, which is determined to use the latest in modern revival techniques to bring in crowds of people who know relatively little of our beliefs into the church.

#### EARLIER MEDA-CONGREGATIONS

By their fruits ye shall know them. Entertainment-oriented church services produce a degenerate Christian experience. Eventually the churches which have tried the experiment sink into obscurity.

Aimee Semple McPherson did it in the 1920s. One day, she carried a chair to the middle of a Los Angeles street, climbed on it and began preaching. When everybody stopped to see what was happening, she led them to a nearby building and there began her church.

Before long, she built the 5,300-seat Angelus Temple, with more than 10,000 people crowded in every Sunday. Inside, Aimee provided them with full-scale theatrical enactments on a gigantic stage. The audience viewed large-cast, stage-production events—ancient, medieval, and modern. Live sheep and camels, ships filled with musicians, roaring motorcycles, screaming sirens, elaborately costumed casts of dozens portraying the fleshpots of Egypt, the torments of hell, the glories of heaven, Elijah on Mount Carmel, and the end of time.

Each time a new "illustrated sermon" was premiered on Sunday night, searchlights were brought in to wave back and forth across the sky. There were traffic jams in the streets, and specially scheduled trolley cars brought in hundreds more. Thousands stood in line, hoping to get seats.

Why did people crowd into the Aimee's "Temple"? The wild music and entertainment was exciting. But there was an added attraction. By attending, from week to week, the people could salve their consciences that they were now regularly getting their religion, and this made them right with God.

Throughout the week, Angelus Temple resembled one of our General Conference Sessions. It had youth groups, choirs, special music, orchestras, bands, parades, prayer groups, spectacular presentations in for-

# Going to Willow Creek

**PART TWO  
OF TWO**

Continued from the preceding tract in this series

eign costumes, sales booths, and illustrated magazines.

While Aimee had something we lack (miraculous healing services), we have several things she lacked: (clowns, mimes, other “artists” on the streets to invite the people to come inside).

Yet the high excitement, generated by Aimee’s Temple begun in the 1920s, faded in the early 1930s when Aimee ran off with a man.

But a new denomination ultimately grew out of Aimee’s work. Known as the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, for a time it included many local churches and then gradually faded.

Then there was Paul Rader’s Chicago Gospel Tabernacle. Built in 1922, it drew massive crowds for a decade.

A 5,000-seat rectangular building, Rader’s Tabernacle provided the people with plays, talks, a 100-seat restaurant, men’s and women’s groups, prayer services, volunteer media production workers, summer camps, and food programs for the needy.

Some of these megachurches remained in their denomination. One was Mark Matthews’ First Presbyterian Church in Seattle. Gradually building it up to 9,000 members, he started a radio station, hospital, and Bible institute.

Another was L.K. William’s church, whose Chicago Olivet Baptist Church had 12,000 members, 30 paid staff, and hundreds of volunteers who ran the church’s Sunday School, labor bureau, soup kitchen, adult education classes, medical clinic, nursery school, and kindergarten.

Yet another was Hollywood Presbyterian in southern California. Henrietta Mears built a 4,000-member Sunday School in just three years, using a variety of ministries to attract the people. By 1950, she had over 300 societies, classes, groups, clubs, auxiliaries, fellowship teams, choirs, camps, circles, flocks, and more besides.

But many other megachurches tended to move into nondenominationalism.

## **THE NONDENOMINATIONALISM TREND**

Builders of megachurches soon found that the key was make theirs nondenominational. Rader’s plan was to provide Chicago with a church which, by not aligning with any existing denomination, could more easily attract members from them all. This is exactly what Aimee, Hybels, and many other megachurch leaders have done. It is a way to bypass the Ecumenical Councils while accomplishing the same thing.

Rader’s Gospel Tabernacle was one of the most in-

novative and widely imitated church movements; but, by the mid-1930s, it had faded into just another church.

Then there was Martin DeHaan, who decided to take his Grand Rapids church nondenominational. He pulled his Calvary Reformed Church out of the denomination (Reformed Church of America) and proclaimed it a church for everybody. With a new title, “Calvary Undenominational Church,” he eventually drew in more than 2,000 people every Sunday.

Another was William McCarrell in Chicago, who pulled his church out of the Congregational fold and renamed it, Cicero Bible Church.

Yet another was the Cadle Tabernacle of Indianapolis, under the leadership of Bascom Ray Lakin, who, in the 1940s and early 1950s, drew over 10,000 people weekly.

As for the First Congregational Church of Columbus, Ohio, it had only recently left its denomination, renaming itself First Community, when Roy Burkhart gained control of it in 1935. During the next 23 years, Roy built a 3,400-member church, that had youth programs, home fellowship meetings, men’s and women’s societies, visitation programs, a large personal counseling center, social services for the poor, help for unwed mothers, a radio broadcast, and special programs to “help members find their place in the whole church program.” Burkhart once said, “You’ve got to have a little showmanship if you would be a successful minister.” He also got help from the local city council, which he persuaded to enact zoning laws prohibiting other churches from locating in the area.

## **NONDENOMINATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

Fully believing that nondenominational churches was the best solution, Burkhart started an organization, called the Association for Community-Centered Churches. That organization no longer exists, but Burkhart was correct: American Protestants today are tending to move into nondenominational churches. Why? Because such churches are less likely to demand that newcomers accept any particular doctrines. “Just accept Christ, and you are saved.” It matters not whether a person believes in predestination, tongues, hellfire, or no hellfire. All that matters is that he professes faith in Christ. Oh yes, and by the way, that he likes to go to church on Sunday.

Sociologist Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research has found that most denominational churches that are megachurch size (2,000 plus attendance) tend to downplay their denominational identity, if they have any at all.

One example of this is the Granger Community Church, in northern Indiana. With a program mirror-

ing that of Willow Creek, Granger is actually part of the United Methodist Church; but there is no indication of that in its signs, advertisements, or website.

Later in this study, we will learn that our own denomination is moving in this same direction.

### THE WILLOW CREEK ASSOCIATION

At the present time, the largest of these church-growth training associations is Willow Creek. In 1991, Bill Hybels and his staff founded the Willow Creek Association. The objective was to teach other churches what his church had learned.

For a yearly membership fee of \$249, any church can join the organization. The Willow Creek Association is actually the most vibrant and growing ecumenical organization in America today. Yet, we discovered, our own conferences in the North American Division are signing up our local pastors and their congregations as associate members, so the pastors can keep attending seminars, to learn “how to increase local church growth” (other words for figuring out how to baptize more with less instruction or change).

The Willow Creek Association offers conferences and workshops, books and curriculum, video and audiotape series, a regular newsletter, and other networking materials that teach rapid church growth. The yearly fee permits the local pastor to receive membership newsletters, tapes, videos, books, and attend seminars.

The Willow Creek Association especially caters to churches which have cut denominational ties, but they also work with those which wish to remain with their founding denominations. That is why Adventists fit in so well. Anybody can join Willow Creek Association. It is truly ecumenical. But this is also the reason why a number of local Adventist churches have split off from our denomination after having been taught at Association meetings how to do it.

The Willow Creek Association is truly large! Did you know that 3,300 local churches in America—including many of our own—are members? In addition, 200 in Canada and another 2,500 outside of North America are members. In most cases, the member churches are not large, but want to grow.

It is of interest that other megachurches do not join the Willow Creek Association. This is because they are already huge, and know how they got that way.

One of them, the Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, has also started an association to train other churches in its church growth methods. Entitled Purpose-Driven Ministries, this organization, belonging to Rick Warren’s 15,000-member church, urges member churches to push hard to increase the number of those attending services each week. It offers teaching materials and a specific formula for accomplishing this.

### OUR DENOMINATION HAS JOINED WILLOW CREEK

A friend phoned us about two months ago and told

us he called the Willow Creek Association and inquired about our denominational involvement. The secretary at the Association, thinking he was a prospective Adventist pastor, told him the average cost is \$250 per person attending while they are there. Each “conference” (seminar) involves about two and a half days of intensive training. When he asked who pays for the seminars, the secretary, eager to sign up another Adventist, told him, “The checks we are getting from the Adventists are from the churches, not the ministers.” So Willow Creek is now part of our denominational budget.

At the present time, over 2,200 churches have joined the Willow Creek Association. At least 56 of these are Seventh-day Adventist churches and 3 are Seventh-day Adventist conferences: Alaska, Dakota, and Greater New York. Seven of the churches are in Canada.

Three of the local Adventist churches are located near our hospitals (Hinsdale, Florida Hospital, and Kettering). Others include churches near our colleges (Sligo Church, next to Columbia Union College; College View Church, on the campus of Union College; and the Pacific Union College Church).

Adventist churches which unite with Willow Creek tend to be more liberal than most. For example, Sligo Church was the first Adventist congregation to ordain a woman minister. The Roman Catholic cardinal of Baltimore spoke in the College View Church, a little over two years ago, and concluded by sprinkling toward the heads of those present as a sign of baptism. Pacific Union College Church has refused to eject Desmond Ford from membership—from the 1980 Glacier View meeting on down to the present day.

Unfortunately, while the General Conference spends money suing separated groups so they will no longer be Seventh-day Adventist, a growing number of local denominational churches in North America are removing that hallowed name from their church signs and replacing them with nondenominational signs. They want the world to think they are not Seventh-day Adventists, and the conferences consider that a good idea. The North American Division is quite satisfied with this; it nicely fits into its “church planting” campaign, which is to disguise our churches as semi-Pentecostal congregations which appear not to be “churches,” and attracts new members with band music and theatrical entertainment instead of straight truths about the law of God, the Bible Sabbath, and the Mark of the Beast.

Here are the names of nine of these “Adventist Willow Creek churches”:

Oasis Christian Center, Washington  
 New Life Celebration Fellowship, Oregon  
 Sun Valley Fellowship, Canada  
 New Hope Church, Maryland  
 South Hills Bible Fellowship, Pennsylvania  
 Hamilton Community Church, Tennessee  
 New Life Christian Fellowship, Washington  
 Center for Creative Activity, Nebraska  
 New Church Plant, Canada

# Going to Willow Creek

We would think that our highest-level church leaders would be concerned about this trend. But, according to the *Adventist Review*, they are proud of the fact that our churches are increasingly aligning themselves with the Sundaykeepers at Willow Creek and learning their charismatic methods for winning and holding converts. It is no longer “to the law and to the testimony”; now it is to Willow Creek. Their seminars are fast becoming the standard for Adventist Saturday morning entertainment and, frankly, teachings. You see, the new style is to downplay doctrines and standards and, instead, feature music, theatrical skits, and short sermonettes on, what I call, “Protestant grace,” which is the forgiving of sin but not the enabling to obedience.

A major article in the *Adventist Review* (December 18, 1997) boldly declared this seemingly unbelievable statement:

*“Fact: Adventists, both pastors and lay people, consistently make up one of the largest groups at Willow Creek’s half-dozen annual seminars.”—Adventist Review, December 18, 1997.*

How can our church leaders advocate Willow Creek methodology, when it leads our people directly into liberalism, rebellion against General Conference Session decisions, and split-off congregations?

*“Fact: The three latest Adventist churches to divide or depart—Oregon’s Sunnyside, Maryland’s Damascus and Colorado’s Christ Adventist Fellowship—were clearly influenced by Willow Creek.”—*

*Ibid.*

Yes, church leaders are well-aware of the dangers, but they choose to forge ahead anyway. The reason is the hope of new members bringing in more money.

Has the grasp for numbers and wealth become the new god of some of our people? It surely seems so. At any rate, it is clear that many of our people are turning their back on the Bible-Spirit of Prophecy standards which led them out so far,—and are anxiously devising ways to more quickly return to Egypt.

We are so anxious to follow in the shadow of Willow Creek, that when it holds seminars overseas, our leaders recruit as many pastors and officers as possible to attend them. The 1997 Willow Creek Association seminar in Gothenberg, Sweden, was one such example.

*“The church has turned back from following Christ her Leader and is steadily retreating toward Egypt. Yet few are alarmed or astonished at their want of spiritual power.”—5 Testimonies, 217.*

Our connections with the churches of Babylon are entangling us more and more tightly each year. In order to make us appear more attractive in their eyes, the precious Sabbath, so hated by the Protestants, is being pushed into the shadow. In Sweden, our official name is now the Adventist Church. In Macedonia it is the Adventist Christian Church.

In order to worm our way more fully into fellowship with modern Protestantism, we continue to join more ecumenical (interchurch) organizations. Our North and

**THE DECEMBER 18, 1997  
ADVENTIST REVIEW ARTICLE**

**“What to do with Willow Creek?”**

**“Fact:** America’s most attended church, a non-charismatic nondenominational church in suburban Chicago, continues to shape not only its immediate community but, more notably, the 2,200 member churches from 70 denominations participating in the Willow Creek Association. WCA endeavors to “help the church turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ.”

**“Fact: Adventists, both pastors and laypeople, consistently make up one of the largest groups at Willow Creek’s half-dozen annual seminars—including church leadership conferences in May and October and a leadership summit in August.**

**“Fact: The three latest Adventist churches to divide or depart [separate from the denomination]—Oregon’s Sunnyside, Maryland’s Damascus, and Colorado’s Christ Advent Fellowship—were clearly influenced by Willow Creek’s ministry hallmarks (small groups, spiritual gifts discovery, friendship evangelism, contemporary worship), if not its congregational status.**

**“Fact: Many Adventists who haven’t been to Willow Creek are sick of hearing about it** from Adventists

who have been to Willow Creek. In some cases **local members have divided over how “seeker-sensitive” their church services should be.**

**“What to do with Willow Creek? . . .**I’m grateful for Willow Creek. It was there that my former academy church, Forest Lake, got intentional about worship; that Adventist friends and relatives recognized their natural abilities—from drama to maintenance—as natural ministries . . .

I’ve never exited the \$34.3 million [Willow Creek] complex without positive thoughts.

**“From this perspective I offer these sentiments:**

“Adventists should give Willow Creek a fair shake. As a people often prejudged, we should avoid prejudging others . . . Adventists should continue gleaning from Willow Creek . . . Willow Creek has its place in prophecy too. Granted, it’s a different place. But we can learn from each other . . .

“I think of Mountain View church in Las Vegas; of the freshly planted New Community in Atlanta; of my home church, New Hope, in Laurel, Maryland; and of other churches mature enough to incorporate Willow Creek principles . . .

“We can learn from each other.”—*“On Willow Creek,” Adventist Review, December 18, 1997 [bold print ours].*

South German Union Conferences, in 1997, joined the German Council of Churches (known over there as the ACK). They did so with the full approval of the Euro-African Division.

The next year, our Netherlands Union joined the Netherlands Council of Churches (locally known as the CIO), with the approval of the Trans-European Division.

Are such actions safe? Far from it. They lock our people into compliance with our worst enemies: the churches which, with the Vatican, will soon coerce national governments to enact draconian Sunday laws.

Soon after the Netherlands Union joined the Netherlands Council of Churches, that Council decided to present, to the national government of the Netherlands, a petition demanding it to declare one day as a day of rest and worship. The Council then set to work rallying the support of all its member denominations and their congregations. Of course, since nearly all of them were already dedicated Sundaykeepers, obtaining their signatures was not difficult. Then the Council leaders came to the headquarters of our Netherlands Union for their signatures. What were our leaders to do? Should they stand solidly in support of Adventist principles or should they sell out?

I will tell you what they did. Recognizing that they had gone too far, but unwilling to reverse their steps, they not only signed those petitions, but circulated them throughout our local churches in the Netherlands for our pastors and members to sign.

Did the Trans-European Division or the General Conference do anything to stop this treacherous betrayal of trust? Nothing was done. The General Conference was busily attending to its forthcoming Florida lawsuit against a small group of Adventists who dare to believe they hold to that faith and the European divisions were sending their men to Willow Creek meetings being held on the continent. (You may recall my earlier reprint of an article by a German Protestant pastor, appealing for the churches to stop supporting the accelerating number of Willow Creek seminars in Europe. It is reprinted on pp. 27-31, of our book, *The Truth about Church Planting* (\$3.50 + \$1.50).

Al McClure, one of the most influential Adventists in North America and president of our division, has led out in pushing us into Celebrationism and Willow Creek membership. He believes that historic Adventism is too dull for moderns. They will only attend if church services are spiced up quite a bit and doctrines are safely hidden till they are close to baptism. Here is a little of his reasoning (you will find the entire article on pp. 32-34 of our book, *The Truth about Church Planting*).

“Now, please follow me very carefully. Is this assumption valid? There are millions of people in North America who are simply not attracted to the typical Adventist church. If they were to stop

by some Sabbath morning about 9:25 and look inside, I suspect they would not be irresistibly drawn to enter.

“If that assumption is valid, then I have a question: Do we have an obligation to offer uncompromising Adventism to them in a form they will be apt to find more attractive?

“If your answer is *no*, then I must tell you that one of us doesn’t understand the Great Commission. If your answer is *yes*, then our mandate is unmistakably clear.”—*Alfred C. McClure, Adventist Review, December 1996 [italics his]*.

Are we required by the God of heaven to offer uncompromising Adventism to them? Yes. Does He require that we offer it without band music, theatricals, clowns, and wild music? Yes.

### THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY PATTERN

You will recall that, earlier in this two-part study, we discovered that the most successful churches made use of small groups in order to succeed. But, because they used worldly methods, each of those earlier churches eventually crumbled. The current ones will also. The seeds of their destruction are within them. The people are attracted to a successful hyper personality and then stay for the entertainment. But eventually it all wears thin.

Yet is there not a right way to do it? Yes, there is. You will find it within the pages of the Spirit of Prophecy. She was guided to explain exactly how we are to work for souls, instruct them in our message, bring them into the church, and make them fellow soul winners.

An important aspect of this divinely given blueprint will be found in our book, *The Medical Missionary Manual* (340 pp., \$9.95 + \$1.50). It consists of Spirit of Prophecy counsel on how to use health and healing as the entering wedge to reach the people. In doing so, in a practical way, we first teach the importance of obeying God’s laws and then the full message. In carrying out this commission, our people are to form themselves into small groups in every church. Read the book for more information.

It is important that God’s people in these last days understand the issues involved here. We are to preach the Third Angel’s Message to every person on earth. Our task is not to entertain them with music and drama, placate them with soothing messages, that they can be saved in sin, and accept into membership people who, within a few years, will corrupt our children and drive the rest of us out.

The objective of Willow Creek and their associate churches is to produce a nation of Sunday church attendees. Whether or not they realize the fact, this will make it easier later for them to enact a National Sunday Law.

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