

Hi everyone, greetings.

I have been reflecting on what to share today. In the past month, I have been present at the world headquarters for various meetings, and also at NAD for their year-end meeting. From many discussions with Body leaders in corridors and over many meals, it is clear that we are experiencing significant differences in conviction on the WO issue among leaders of good conscience and honest intent. I believe that these differences of opinion reflect to a certain extent what is happening in broader US society.

Anyone who had the misfortune of living in the US during the 2016 presidential election will know that the airwaves and the Internet were full of vitriol and outrage. When the election was over, I hoped and prayed that the vitriol would end, but alas it has not. However, this increasing polarization and anger in the media did not happen overnight. In the 1980s, the US Congress and the FCC watered down and then did away with certain media ownership regulations, allowing the creation of media giants in the USA. At the same time, Congress did away with the "Fairness Doctrine" which required equitable and balanced presentation of controversial public issues. In 2000, Congress also eliminated the "personal attack" and "political editorial" corollaries to the Fairness Doctrine, opening the door to a new era of rough, politicized, and outrage-based programming. And so since 2000, the US has witnessed an incredible rise in partisan and outraged programming, in both mainstream media and internet platforms. The internet in particular has given rise to thousands of new websites that are fueled by anger, outrage or hate.

Particularly on the internet, comment boards (perhaps unintentionally) serve to reinforce the partisan norms of the group, and studies have demonstrated that more than 85% of the harsh comments on internet comment boards are directed at external groups of people rather than at other contributors to the comment board. Comment boards reinforce the partisan norms of the group and strongly repel anyone with views contrary to the prevailing group. Historically, voting preferences in the US have mirrored racial, religious, educational, and union affiliations. However, over the last 30 years unions have decreased in size, and religious institutions have been abandoned by millions. In their place, we have seen the rise of informal "discussion networks," which are loose associations of like-minded people who organize themselves around social media. These discussion networks operate a powerful role in influencing social, political, and religious norms. When on social media, if somebody believes that they share their opinions with the majority on their particular discussion board, they are willing to speak up. However if they believe their opinions to be in the minority on that particular discussion board, they either remain silent or conform to the majority view. This is called by sociologists the "spiral of silence." Essentially, we live in a society where we increasingly self-censor to avoid the vitriol on a given issue that comes our way if we venture to express an opinion or conviction that does not reflect the majority view on the comment board in question.

Furthermore, social media gives individuals the opportunity to not only select friends, but also to deselect friends based on ideological or religious views. According to research, almost 1/3 of political conservatives have blocked or removed social media friends for these reasons, and almost half of political progressives have done the same thing. Thus, insulated from any opposing views, American society is increasingly living within very distinct social media bubbles, and as a result we are witnessing increased polarization. Throw into the mix the abandonment of a Judea-Christian worldview, the bleak winds of the new aggressive secularism and sexual ideology totalitarianism, and it is no surprise we are witnessing such polarization.

And what of the Adventist church? Based on what I experienced in the last month at the GC and then at the NAD, I believe we are witnessing a similar form of polarization, albeit to much a lesser extent. It

appears to me that those with politically progressive views tend strongly towards support of women's ordination, and some (but by no means all) are more open than religious conservatives to theistic evolution in various forms and the acceptance of the LGBTQ lifestyle in local congregations. A regular reading of Spectrum Magazine's discussion boards will confirm that these are the 3 concerns that particularly animate progressives. Likewise, it also appears to me that those with politically conservative views tend to be opposed to women's ordination, are more inclined to believe in Young Earth Creationism, and are more likely to be opposed to the acceptance of the LGBTQ lifestyle as being intrinsically valid. Each "side" has their own social media and comment boards. Spectrum magazine and A-today provide an online platform and comment boards for the progressives, whilst Fulcrum7 and Advindicate perform the same service for conservatives.

I scan these comment boards each week, normally on a Friday evening, to keep in touch with what is being said by brothers and sisters. It is never an uplifting experience and hardly brings a sweet spirit to the Sabbath hours. However, as I read I also pray that nobody who has yet to come to a saving faith would ever stumble upon such comment boards, such is the lack of Christ-like spirit shown by Adventist to Adventist.

This polarization may have serious consequences for our worldwide Body. Why do I say this? Let me give an example taken from the issue of WO. The discussion about women's ordination is morphing into a much broader question of how we as a worldwide Body make decisions, honor those decisions, and yet allow for the unique cultural differences that exist around the world and for the leading of the Spirit in different cultures in non-essentials. These are difficult questions to wrestle with, and on both sides I meet with people and leaders of good conscience who are honestly seeking to follow the will of God in this matter. I find it best to move forward on the presumption of good faith and honest conscience with everyone involved!

At the NAD year-end meeting, the Sunday afternoon was devoted to a general discussion of the "unity document" discussed at the GC Annual Council. The overwhelming majority of the views expressed at the NAD on that Sunday afternoon were wary / critical of the GC "unity document" and particularly of the request at Annual Council 2017 by the GC leadership for every member of the GC executive committee to sign an affirmation that they uphold the fundamental beliefs and decisions of the worldwide church. Essentially, most at the NAD year-end meeting did not agree with the requested signing of the "unity" document, and there was an undercurrent of rejection of the GC 2015 San Antonio WO vote. (What I am writing about was open to everyone to view as the meetings were screened live).

On the last afternoon of the NAD year-end meeting that was an extended discussion of the NAD child protection policy. The recommended revision to the policy, indicating who must have passed a background check prior to participating in local youth and children's ministries, had a requirement that any volunteer serving in any capacity in any local youth or children's ministries was to have passed an *a priori* background check. The denominational lawyers argued that these background checks were legally required, as well as necessary for us to continue having risk management insurance coverage. If anyone involved as a volunteer in children's or youth ministry were tragically to abuse a child, and it were to be discovered that such individual had not gone through an *a priori* background check, insurance coverage could possibly be refused, and the victim would be left to sue, and possibly bankrupt, the local conference. Strong objections were raised to this requirement by local lay and conference representatives, who stated that many individuals in local congregations are already refusing to participate in such background checks, and that the proposed revision was simply unenforceable at a congregational level. Possible reasons include the fact that such individuals a) have prior criminal

convictions, b) do not have legal status in the US, and c) do not want such private information being held at the local conference office.

During the discussion, the NAD president was asked about potential non-compliance with the proposed policy were it to pass. In response, he stated that as and when the NAD executive committee voted on the matter, he expected that every entity represented at the year-end meeting would uphold the decision, whatever was voted. A murmur passed through the committee as people realized the significance of what was being said. In due course, the amendment was passed by an overwhelming majority. The focus for most delegates was on the preeminent need to protect any child or young person within each congregation from any abuse of any kind. Now it is left to the conferences and individual pastors to shepherd this particular policy through to completion in local congregations – an unenviable and almost impossible task!

Now this all raises an interesting dilemma, and explains the murmur that ran through the committee members. Can those denominational leaders within the NAD, voting in favor of the child protection policy amendment, expect lay members, who are not employees, to adhere to NAD executive committee votes requiring them to sign up for background checks, when the self-same denominational leaders simply ignore the duly-taken votes of the GC in full session where they themselves also cast votes? The answer, clearly, is no.

It would appear to me that a denominational leader who actively ignores decisions taken by the GC in full session has no grounds on which to then turn around and insist that non-employee lay members within the NAD must follow and obey NAD decisions which the individual lay members personally disapprove of. In effect, we are risking the unraveling of church governance globally and within the NAD. Imagine if a local congregation in business meeting voted to build an extension, and the treasurer refused to do so on grounds of conscience. What would happen? The business meeting would meet again, and if the treasurer continued to refuse to honor the vote, he / she would need to step aside. What we are seeing at the GC / NAD level may be replicated at the local level, with members taking their cue from leaders who pick and choose which decisions to uphold and which to ignore. It may well be that decisions at any level simply become recommendations, because increasingly we refuse to submit one to another, and thus denominational governance starts to fall apart. Taking this further, what if lay members simply ignored NAD voted policy on tithe and started returning it each month where they sense the Spirit leading rather than to their local conference, as did EGW? Again, denominational leaders who claim the right to pick and choose which votes they will honor cannot urge compliance among laity in this area also. This is not a road anyone wishes to travel down. We are stronger together, no matter the internal disagreements we may have along the way. Such unraveling would be a huge tragedy, for God has worked incredible things when we worked in harmony with one another and submitted one to another over the past 120 years. How this all works out, only God knows....but this is a call to prayer for the Body we love and the paid servants of the Body, colloquially referred to as "leaders."

Which brings us to our conclusion for today. If we live within isolated Adventist social media bubbles, and de-select friends, friendship and fellowship with those who do not have the same theological / political / social outlook as ourselves, we will only witness increased polarization and vitriol within our Body. Decision-making will become increasingly difficult, because every man / woman will do as he / she pleases with each decision. As in the days of Judges 19-21, when everyone does what is right in his / her own eyes, this is the sure path to a complete breakdown within the Body. If however we choose to be intentional about not living in any particular bubble, progressive or conservative, and choose

intentionally to fellowship with, and be friends with, brothers and sisters across the theological spectrum, we have much greater chance of mutual respect, understanding and collaboration. With intentional friendship and fellowship across the spectrum, we are much more able to submit one to another, in good faith, trusting that people are acting in good conscience, and that the Holy Spirit is in fact leading, no matter how rocky or difficult the road may be from our limited perspective.

As Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." May each of us be peacemakers rather than polarizers, and may we learn to submit one to another in good faith and brotherly and sisterly love!

Have a blessed Sabbath,

Conrad.