“They preach a political gospel”: How Washington’s Earliest Adventist Cast a Light on the Road Ahead

“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:20-21).

It was June 1903. The leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination had decided to move their General Conference headquarters away from Battle Creek, Michigan, but they hadn’t made the final decision as to where. Would it be New York, or Washington, D.C.?

Judson S. Washburn, pastor of the Second Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington is in the midst of a twelve-page letter to Ellen White making the case for the nation’s capital city. His discussion of the opportunities Washington offered for the advance of the Adventist movement leads him to an important, related point: a fast-growing Adventist presence already exists in Washington, but unfortunately it was developing under the “wrong mold.” If something wasn’t done soon, the cause would suffer enormous harm. So, one thing that would be accomplished by a General Conference move to the Washington area – a secondary but important benefit – would be to position the church leadership to lay strong hands on matters and shape them into the correct mold.

The problem with the Adventists over at the First Church, Washburn reported to Sister White, was that “they preach a political gospel.”

Who were these unruly Adventists in Washington around the turn of the twentieth century? And what about this “political gospel” they supposedly were preaching?

Until about seven years ago, I knew next to nothing about them, and had only the most hazy and superficial conception of the rich history of Adventism in Washington, D.C. before and beyond Takoma Park. That began to change as a result of a phone call
that came out of the blue one spring day in 2001 from Dr. Mark McCleary, pastor of the First Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington. We had never met, but he urged that I or someone in the History Department at CUC write the history of his truly historic congregation.

In the years since I have begun to make the acquaintance of some of these progenitors of Adventism in Washington. I would like to introduce some of them to you this morning. And I do so in the setting of this conference with the possibility in mind that a look at how they as Adventists grappled with what W.E.B. Du Bois identified as “the problem of the twentieth century” – namely, “the color line” – will enrich our envisioning of an Adventism for the twenty first century.

We’ll start with James and Isabella Howard, who were among the 26 charter members of the first Seventh-day Adventist congregation in Washington, organized in February 1889. She was a graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio; he earned both a bachelor’s degree and medical decree from Howard University in Washington. James also took employment as a clerk in the federal government bureaucracy – not an unusual expedient for black physicians in that era.

They were idealistic young African American professionals, living in the city that was the social and cultural capital of Black America, as well as its largest center of population. They were part of a generation whose outlook on race relations was shaped by that hopeful period of about fifteen years after the conclusion of the Civil War: during that time there was a greater degree of interracial cooperation and equality in Washington than there would be again until at century later. For it all of that began to give way in the 1880s to what historian Constance Green called a “withering of hope” and C. Vann Woodward described as a “national capitulation to racism.” To their horror, before their very eyes, the wheels of history were turning backwards, as segregation became sanctioned by law in the South, and racism became respectable throughout the nation.

As new Seventh-day Adventists, though, part of a congregation that was racially mixed from the outset, they felt confident that this church was the one place where it could not happen. Seventh-day Adventists were all about ordering their lives according to “the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” no matter what the world might say or do.
In November of 1889, though, a report in the *Review and Herald* which defended separation of the races at a camp meeting in the South alerted Dr. Howard to the reality that not all Adventists were ready to extend that core commitment to race relations. Rather than give up his recently-embraced faith, he decided to lift his voice in protest, starting at the top with the General Conference president, O.A. Olsen. Listen to how Dr. Howard invoked Adventism’s apocalyptic hope, remembering that it had only been a year or two at the most since he had first heard the “third angels’ message.”

> It seems to me that the more nationalities we can have in the church the more like the future state the church will be, and the more evidence will there be of the Holy Spirit which alone would harmonize all of these. This would be a strong evidence in favor of the truth.

> “That they all may be one.” Strong evidence. “That the world may believe...”

Twelve years later, in 1902, as a crisis mounted over race relations in his own congregation, Dr. Howard spoke out again. In a letter to Ellen White he wrote:

> One of the strongest points of the Adventist cause in Washington among many white and colored people outside the church has been that with regard to the race question the Adventists were following the Christian course in that they did not separate their members on account of race. . . . In fact, attention is being directed to us, and there is increasing interest, outside the church and inside, to know just where the adventists will stand now on this question at the national capital and elsewhere.

> One of those who had been drawn by the fact that Adventists followed “the Christian course” was a former classmate of Isabella’s at Oberlin, Rosetta Douglas Sprague, daughter of Frederick Douglass, the preeminent African American leader of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Washburn referred to Mrs. Sprague as “one of the most prominent colored members” of the church.

> Before our overriding interest in the racial issue creates the impression that it was the be all and end all of the early Washington church, it might be well to pause for a glimpse at the broader picture, as given in a summary of the church’s activities published in the *Review and Herald* exactly ten years after the church was organized. Pastor Sven F. Svensson wrote:

> The meetings in the church are well attended during the week, and on Sabbath there is also good outside attendance. A good interest is manifested in the Bible studies held Thursday evenings.

> We are glad to report that the Spirit of God at work among our members, and many have felt a burden to do something for the Lord. Besides the regular Sabbath-school, two mission Sabbath-schools are conducted in the afternoon; and on Wednesday
evening another school is held for children. Two more are about to be organized in
different parts of the city. There are ten branches of the Christian help band doing work
for the poor and needy; and the Saviour, who said, “Go out into the highways and
hedges,” is blessing their efforts.

The Lord has indeed been good to us; and we rejoice to see our numbers
constantly increasing. four having been added to the church a few weeks ago, and last
Sabbath seven were received….

Svensson goes on to describe the work of the Hope Mission at 4 ½ St., SW, where
the attendance at revival services on Sunday evenings usually surpassed the seating
capacity of eighty. This ministry touched many who were struggling with addiction to
alcohol. “Some of them,” Svensson observed, “though highly educated, find that
education can not keep a man from the power of Satan.” During the colder months of the
year the mission served soup and furnished lodging for those in need.

At the end of its first decade, then, Albion F. Ballenger, who also rendered
ministerial help to the Washington church in 1899 and 1900, gave it this glowing tribute:
“This church is a living miracle of the power of God composed as it is of the two races.
The harmony which prevails is a great surprise to the members of other churches.”

Storm clouds were gathering, though. Among those being added to the church,
black people were noticeably outnumbering whites, and, in general, black believers
seemed to be the more enthusiastic participants in church life. Andrew Kalstrom, the
church elder for several years around the turn of the century, saw that the building
momentum of “white flight” and attrition pointed inexorably to the demise of the
congregation’s witness to racial oneness in Christ. That is, if nothing was done about it.
But for Brother Kalstrom, a Swedish immigrant in whom high ideals were harnessed to
an iron will, capitulation to worldly trends was not an option for the church of God.
Kalstrom, Dr. Howard and other members of both races believed that with a strong, bi-
racial ministerial team dedicated to winning new members from both races and teaching
them fellowship and equality across racial lines as a practice intrinsic to their new faith,
the church could continue to move forward against the prevailing winds in American
society.

But now, in 1901, the new president of the General Conference, A.G. Daniells,
had become convinced that Adventism’s racial dilemma in Washington should be
resolved in a quite different way: the congregation should be divided along racial lines.
Adventism could never hope to gain favorable regard among influential white Washingtonians if the races mixed in its churches, he believed.

For James Howard, Andrew Kalstrom and their kindred spirits, though, racial discrimination was not simply a regrettable custom to be accommodated or not depending on the degree of social and political pressure. For them, admitting race-based distinctions into the body of Christ was nothing less than a betrayal of Adventism’s defining mission of preparing a people for God’s new world that was fast-approaching.

In 1901 Brother Kalstrom told the General Conference president that his plan for dividing the church along racial lines went against the Washington church’s bedrock conviction regarding “the absolute oneness of all who are in Christ” and its commitment that

this principle of equality must stand alike in all places….The world day by day is widening the breach between the races by every possible way and this separation is wrong. If this same practice is followed by the S.D.A. it must still continue wrong.”

A letter sent in 1903 by Kalstrom to A.G. Daniells on behalf of the congregation’s 122 colored and 46 white members affirmed that

we are fully convinced that God’s people should stand united before the world so as to show by actual facts and real lives that God has real power to convert men and women wherever they are born or to whatever position in society they have attained, from any wrong thing – yes, even race prejudices which are lodged deeper than some other evil habits.

That the world may believe. That the post-modern world may believe. Not a set of mere propositions but the embodied “facts” of actual lives.

Was it then a “political gospel” that they preached? No, just the gospel. The gospel – not encumbered by alliances with partisan interests in the American political arena; not seduced by dreams of seizing the levers of power, of taking over the domination system. Just the gospel that refuses to stay safely confined in the compartment marked out and labeled “spiritual” by the powers of the present age; the gospel that permeates and transforms every aspect of life, whether the world calls it “political” or not. The gospel that unites diverse people, makes them one by the sole commonality of grace, and makes them into a community of love and justice that sheds a very public light to all around, so that the world may believe.
The “46 white members” Kalstrom mentioned were those who had stayed with the original congregation, which quickly took the name “First” Church after the congregation was in fact divided in September 1902. The ongoing witness of First Church was one reason why that division, devastating though it was, did not in itself shut down Adventism’s moment of opportunity for creative leadership in applying Christianity to “the problem of the twentieth century” in the nation’s capital.

Another reason was the presence on the scene of a remarkably gifted leader, Lewis C. Sheafe. As a young Baptist preacher in Minnesota and Ohio, Sheafe had, in the words of the Columbus Dispatch “achieved quite a reputation…as a pulpit orator.” His orations were not always pleasing to the powerful, though. At an Emancipation Day celebration in Springfield, OH, in 1895, with the Republican gubernatorial candidate on hand expecting to bask in the gratitude of colored voters to the party that had freed the slaves, Sheafe took the opportunity to lambaste the GOP party for its betrayal of the Negro in the years since the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s, thereby reaping denunciation in the Cincinnati press for slurring the memory of Lincoln and heaping scorn on the American flag….

Less than a year later, the fiery preacher stunned his congregation with the announcement that he had embraced the Seventh-day Adventist message. He testified to the General Conference session in 1899 of his “heart’s desire and prayer is that this message may go to my people all over the United States,” for he had come to view it, with its holistic dimensions, as nothing less than the path to their liberation.

Time prohibits us from dwelling long on Sheafe’s exploits. Suffice it to say that his work in Washington beginning in 1902 meant that the world – the world of the nation’s capital – would know about Adventism as never before and probably never since. Along with his widely-noted evangelistic meetings, he was in frequent demand as a speaker at major public occasions and forums. The Washington Post identified him as “the well-known evangelist” in its rundown of the dignitaries slated to speak at the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1903. In September 1903, the same paper reported that Sheafe was among the speakers at a voting rights rally who “inveigh[ed] against restriction of civil rights and urge[d] united and systematic resistance.” On several occasions he addressed the Bethel Literary
and Historical Society, the central forum of black intellectual life in the capital, taking
turns with the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

While serving as pastor of First Church, Sheafe also launched a new,
predominantly-black congregation called the People’s Seventh-day Adventist church in
December 1903. For a time, the Adventist cause in Washington seemed to be moving
forward in a relatively progressive and cooperative direction with three congregations –
the mixed-race First Church, the white Second, or Memorial Church as it came to be
known, and the People’s Church, positioned as the base for black Adventist institutions in
Washington analogous to those being developed in Takoma Park.

The bitter divisions and crushing setbacks that lay ahead have almost wiped out
the memory of a time when Adventists in Washington were at the head and not the tail
when it came to racial justice and equality; when, on the basis of the gospel they resisted
a national capitulation to racism.

Is it appropriate that subsequent failures erase them from our profile of what
Adventism has been – the indispensable reference point for conceptualizing about and
hoping for its future? Perhaps Dr. Howard, Sister Sprague, Brother Kalstrom, and Elder
Sheafe were no more than lingering fragments leftover from Adventism’s “radical
period,” swept into the dustbin of history as Adventism entered its Golden Era (as some
see it) of uniformity, fundamentalism, blandness, and disengagement from the radical
implications of the gospel for controversial public issues.

I am inclined to think otherwise, though. To me, their claim on Adventist identity
and place in our heritage is as strong as any. If we deny them that place and tune out
their voices, we thereby diminish the power and authenticity of our re-envisioning for the
road ahead. But I make no attempt of drawing together the implications or spelling out
the ways the witness of these early Washington believers can help guide the way to the
future

Let me conclude instead by going back to 1904. Less than a year after receiving
Elder Washburn’s rather poisonous report about First Church, Ellen White is staying at
the Carroll Manor house in Takoma Park, where she is on an extended visit to nurture the
new and transplanted Adventist institutions there. Toward the end of April, Elder Sheafe
paid her a visit. He asked her to speak at “the church here in which both white and
colored people assemble” as she put it in a letter to one of her staff back at Elmshaven. She noted that “[s]ome little difficulty in regard to the color line exists here, but we hope by the grace of God things will be kept in peace.” Regarding Elder Sheafe, Mrs. White commented that “many colored people in this city have accepted the truth” under his labors. “I was only too glad,” she wrote, “to promise I would speak in the church next Sabbath.”

On the Sabbath of her visit to the First Church, Ellen White observed that the “house was filled” and the “singing was good.” Looking out on what was becoming an increasingly rare sight in America—black and white together for worship—he preached on John 17, “That they all may be one...that the world may believe.”

*The historical information for this presentation is drawn from research for forthcoming books on the history of the First Seventh-day Adventist Church of Washington, D.C. and Lewis C. Sheafe. The major sources are church periodicals, correspondence located at the General Conference Archives and the Ellen G. White Estate, and newspapers in the collections at the Library of Congress and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library in Washington, D.C.*