

The New Liberal Independent Adventist Churches

In the December 1997 issue of *Checkpoints*, we briefly noted the growing movement toward breakaway liberal congregations. Because a sizeable amount of information on this development has surfaced since then, we are now able to provide you with a more extended study.

We will begin by reprinting that December *Checkpoints* article. It will provide a worthwhile introduction:

A NEW LIBERAL ORGANIZATION—On July 24-25, 1997, in a conference meeting held in Oregon, the independent churches formed an organization. No, you had not heard about it. And why? Because it does not have the kind of members you might think it has.

Called the *Evangelical Sabbath Association*, it is composed of local church bodies which have separated from the main Seventh-day Adventist denomination—because it was not liberal enough to please them!

They describe themselves as “grace-based, Sabbath-celebrating ministries.” That is a pretty good description.

In early August they met again at a still larger conference at the Willow Creek Community Church, in Chicago, Illinois—in order to transform the fledgling association into a nationwide organization.

At the gathering, Robert Bretsch told how he left the pastorate of the Sunnyside SDA Church in Portland, Oregon, so he could have still more freedom to preach and practice liberal views.

Chad McComas told of the freedom to do as he pleased at the Set Free Ministries in Medford, Oregon.

Eric Bahme told of the full year he spent with the New Life Christian Fellowship of Congregational Seventh Day [sic.] Adventists, in Washington State.

Marc Schelske, youth pastor at the Bridge City Community Church, in Portland, tried to explain why evangelical Protestants (of which he is now one) should bother to still keep the Bible Sabbath.

It is intriguing that, back in the mid-1980s, the General Conference gave the go-ahead for Oregon Conference leaders to experiment with Celebration churches. Along with this, word was sent out to conference presidents across the nation to send their pastors to Milwaukie Church, in south Portland, for training in how to transform their churches back home

into little Celebration centers—so they could bring more worldlings to attend and unite with the denomination.

Well, it has all backfired.

David Snyder was asked to leave, after serious disputes with his board of elders (Snyder had a temper). The Milwaukie Church disbanded, leaving the conference holding the bag for a large sum it had loaned them to help in the construction of a new church.

Faithful believers all over the conference rebelled at the high-handed tactics the conference office used to force them into worldly church services. Many conservatives left the church.

Nominal members found they liked the new liberalism—and decided to leave the church, so they could have still more of it. They wanted to be even less fettered in their pursuit of worldly pleasures.

They are now forming a separate organization of “grace-based, Sabbath-celebrating ministries.” If you want a wild time, try attending one of their church services!

We understand still more local Adventist churches are planning to pull out of the denomination—and join this liberal organization.

Church leadership made a decision over a decade ago: In their view, it was wiser to try to hold on to the liberals than to satisfy the concerns of the faithful.

Now that decision is coming back to roost. The faithful have been leaving and the liberals, who have no loyalty to anyone but themselves, are deciding to go also.

If the trend does not change, ere long the General Conference will experience the empty nest syndrome.

That concludes the *Checkpoint* reprint.

In the late 1980s, it was the Southeastern, Oregon, and Potomac Conferences which surged ahead in the reveling pleasures of Celebrationism. Now other conferences (Potomac, Oregon, plus Colorado) are leading out in separationist liberal pullouts. The appetite by liberals for more freedom seems unquenchable. The more people are told they can sin with impunity, the more they enjoy the luscious freedom it seemingly offers.

The Potomac Conference had earlier given its full support and encouragement to an experimental

church project. The Damascus SDA Church, located not far from General Conference headquarters in Maryland, had requested permission to initiate “something different” which would “target the bored, burned, and bypassed.” Frankly, the thinking of the Damascus group was that attendance at a church which merely offered historic Adventism was not something most progressive people would desire.

Damascus came up with a new name, the *Damascus Road Community Church* (DRCC), and then worked hard to increase its membership. But it became clear that Damascus was merely siphoning members from the surrounding Adventist churches in the greater Washington, D.C. area, far more than it was leading non-Adventists into the church.

Although quite obvious that some of the teachings at Damascus bore little resemblance to historic Adventism, yet the tithes and offerings continued to be sent in to the conference, so leadership was content.

However, ominously, by mid-1997, it had become clear that Damascus was doing several things which indicated it was moving toward full separation from the denomination. One of which was the imminent acquirement of a 225-acre site for an independent church. Something had to be done.

On October 15, 1997, the Executive Committee of the Potomac Conference met in an open session; that is, a number of non-committee members were invited to attend. More than 50 were in attendance at this Wednesday afternoon meeting. Richard Fredericks, the senior pastor at Damascus, made a presentation which was then followed by a general discussion.

Three issues were carefully considered:

- Damascus had set up an independent corporation, to hold its property and provide overseeing management of the congregation (*Damascus Road Community Church, Inc.*, or DRCC, Inc.).
- Damascus was clearly moving into a level of independence from the denomination, which other local congregations just did not have.
- Damascus was teaching variant theological positions.

The discussion primarily focused on DRCC, Inc., the name of the congregation’s separate organization.

Page 181 of the *Church Manual* was quoted:

“In order to safeguard denominational property, it is necessary to have the title vested in a corporation created by a conference organization according to the laws governing in the locality where the property is located.”

Kurt Allen, Potomac Conference treasurer, commented that DRCC, Inc., “effectively creates a church within a church,” and that “its membership rules, its desire to hold church property, and its formal corporate organization under the Adventist umbrella is simply not compatible.”

Such remarks were likely to provoke intense discussion, and they did—for many of those present were members of the Damascus Church.

The discussion continued for four hours; and then the Executive Committee went into a closed-doors session, to consider what it should do about the matter.

Ralph Martin, Potomac Conference president, later commented that the committee had a difficult time; for they recognized that a break must come—yet they very well-knew what the outcome might be: the loss of many, many church members.

Here is the action which was voted:

“We are deeply saddened by today’s meeting and now recognize that:

“The incorporation document of Damascus Road Community Church, Inc., (DRCC) represents a break with denominational policy, a break that cannot be healed with the dissolution of DRCC, Inc., or a reversal of basic organization and leadership structure within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

“Although we laud many aspects of the innovative ministry implemented by DRCC and its pastoral team, their adopted direction no longer matches the basic beliefs and processes of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

“Therefore, with deep regret, we are accepting that DRCC, Inc., has, by its own choice, effectively separated from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Accordingly, we vote to grant Richard Fredericks [senior Damascus pastor] and Bob Fournier [associate pastor] severance according to denominational policy.

“All current DRCC members will remain members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Damascus, unless or until they choose otherwise.

“The Potomac Conference Executive Committee will not implement any aspect of this action until Monday, October 27, 1997. We appeal to the pastoral team and the membership of DRCC to change their course of action and choose to remain as an active, committed Seventh-day Adventist community of believers.”

After voting that action, a separate action was taken by the 20 members of the Executive Committee. A new Adventist congregation was voted into existence, with the understanding that it would use the existing Damascus church building. Dr. J. David Newman was asked to serve as pastor of the new congregation.

As an open expression of their growing independence, eleven days earlier the Fredericks’ congregation had moved out of the Damascus Church and into a local high school, where they were holding Sabbath services. It is quite apparent that they fully knew where they were headed.

The above meeting occurred on Wednesday, October 16, 1997. At 7:30 that evening, more than 300

members of DRCC met at the Damascus Church. At 9:30 p.m., Herbert Broeckel, president of the Potomac Conference; Ralph Martin; and Harold Lee, president and secretary of the Columbia Union, arrived at the church.

They read the action of Executive Committee, noted the violation of policy by the congregation in having a separate corporation to hold property it might acquire, and appealed to the members to stay with the denomination.

Martin pled for Christian fellowship and support of denominational policy. Fredericks replied that the denomination was flawed in its policies and religious teachings and that even if DRCC, Inc., was abolished, there would still be a strong conflict of beliefs. But he, too, asked that continued “friendship” might mark the separate parties.

Broeckel then asked Fredericks and Newman to come to the platform, and he said:

“Dr. Newman and Dr. Fredericks have already begun to forge a warm and congenial relationship, so that these two congregations can minister together in Damascus.”

This was not to say that the breakaway group could continue to use church property on which to worship, but the hope was expressed that the two separated congregations might be friendly.

Following prayer, the meeting ended.

The reason the Damascus church members had, for several weeks, been holding meetings in a local high school—was the ultimatum which had been handed down prior to that time.

Fredericks and Fournier had been called into the conference office—and asked to resign or be fired. This final crisis had come about over the fact that the pastors were completing a fund-raising drive among their members for their new church property, which would be owned by their separate corporation.

After the pastors’ termination on October 15, 90 percent of the church congregation went with them instead of remaining with the conference church and its new pastor, David Newman.

According to Fredericks, 280 people signed statements saying they wanted to be members in the new non-conference church, and the church staff was in addition to that number. The total membership enrollment in the new, independent church was 300.

Fredericks also stated that they had checked through the church records and, of the 100 single adults and families who had consistently given donations to the congregation, 98 remained with the breakaway group.

In accordance with an action voted by the Executive Committee on October 15, the new congregation was organized at the Damascus Church building on Sabbath, November 1.

On November 5, the DRCC completed the pur-

chase of an old medical suite in the center of Damascus as an office complex for the pastoral staff. Working hard, the members built walls; they also installed paneling, carpet, an attractive reception area, and office rooms.

At about the same time, 225 acres of land was acquired for the church site. (More on this later in this report.)

We next turn our attention to a church congregation in north-central Colorado.

Interestingly enough, the *Adventist Review* was planning to run a major feature article, praising the liberal innovations being made at Grace Place, a Fort Collins, Colorado, Adventist church. But, learning of its imminent release, Jim Brauer, president of the Rocky Mountain Conference, phoned William G. Johnsson, *Review* editor, and asked him not to print it, explaining that Grace Place was close to increasingly becoming a breakaway church.

Although given a clear warning, Johnsson apparently thought so highly of the modernist innovations of that liberal congregation—that he published an article in the *Review*, in October, with brief stories in praise of several congregations which were doing peculiar things; one of which was Grace Place—the very church he had been warned months earlier not to publicize!

Just a few days later, the crisis in Colorado had reached such a point that the pastor of Grace Place and the company status of the congregation was terminated by conference action.

In 1995, a number of couples in the Fort Collins area, in northern Colorado, had been discussing the possibility of starting a new church company. In December they intensified their search for a pastor to lead out in the proposed church. They had heard about the Sunnyside Church, near Portland, Oregon, and the Damascus Church, close to church headquarters in Maryland; and they wanted to experience the same excitement in their worship services.

In February 1996, they made contact with Clay Peck, an associate pastor at the Damascus Church under Richard Fredericks. Peck flew to Colorado and met with the group.

Even before Peck arrived, Jim Brauer, conference president, met with the leaders of the group. Recognizing that they intended to initiate a very liberal congregation, Brauer told them there were four areas in which they might try to be innovative,—but they could not push all four.

These areas were *worship, lifestyle, theology, and structure*.

Brauer was told that all four areas would be extensively experimented with. He was thus given advance notice that trouble was brewing.

Upon his arrival, Peck confirmed their position

as his own. He said the “gospel” would be the central doctrine, and he was not going to “water it down” among 27 other statements (the 27-point Statement of Beliefs, adopted at the 1980 Dallas Session). Peck was in full agreement that normal Adventist structures and practices would have to change in order to achieve their liberal objectives.

Hesitantly, the Rocky Mountain Conference agreed to recognize their new organization, *Christ Advent Fellowship* (CAF), as an experimental company and support it as such for at least three years.

In July 1996, Peck and his wife and son moved to Colorado; and, on September 14, their new church celebrated its opening. As with the Damascus Church, the objective was stated as providing a ministry to “the burned, the bored, and the bypassed.” They called their new church, *Grace Place*.

Gradually, it drew in liberal Adventists from the entire Fort Collins-Greeley area in northern Colorado until, at the present time, it has a weekly attendance of about 400. It meets in Berthould High School; and its services are typical Celebration-style, with drums, rock singing, dramatic skits, multimedia, and an evangelical sermon. Clay Peck, its pastor, had learned his lessons well at Damascus.

After a time, the church (CAF) started an independent nonprofit corporation, which they called *Christ Adventist Ministries* (CAM). Its charter stated that it could hold properties and equipment.

At this juncture, let us sort out these names: *Christ Advent Fellowship* (CAF) is the name of the church company, a recognized conference subsidiary. *Grace Place* is the name the church calls itself in local advertising. *Christ Adventist Ministries, Inc.*, (CAM) is the name of the independent corporation which is not under conference ownership or control.

Gradually, many of the members began earmarking their donations for CAM instead of CAF. Eventually, CAM took over the support of the pastoral staff.

For his part, Jim Brauer, Rocky Mountain Conference president, recognized the danger and tried several times to have CAF disbanded from the conference; but each time the conference executive committee refused to do so. It was at the time of one of these refusals that Brauer learned, to his horror, that Johnsson was planning to run a major article in the *Review*, in praise of Grace Place! Brauer managed to head off that article (only to have Johnsson publish a shorter praise piece about the church later on. The *Review* editors seem to like Celebrationism.)

Unable to budge his executive committee, Brauer bided his time. In October, he learned that Fredericks and Bournier, at the Damascus Church, were about

to be fired. That jolted his executive committee into realizing the time bomb it had in Fort Collins. Peck was pulling in members from northern Colorado churches along the eastern slope as fast he could, so he could take them out with him when he eventually bolted from the denomination.

On October 14, 1997, the evening before the Damascus pastors were to be discharged, Brauer arranged to meet with the CAF staff and key members. His primary concern was the same that the leaders of Potomac Conference had. —Not their theology, but their separate corporation was the focus of attention. Brauer wanted to show them they were doing what the Damascus Church was doing, and it could not be acceptable to conference leadership.

For his part, with the approval of his staff and key members, Peck had, in advance, prepared his own position sheet. It stated that CAM was paying the staff salaries, would own any land or buildings they might purchase, that non-Adventists were included on the board of the corporation, that tithes and offerings would not necessarily be passed on to the conference office, and that their doctrines included only ten evangelical points.

At the meeting, after both sides had made their presentations, Peck asked that the group might continue on as an experimental conference company. He knew that the longer CAF remained in the conference, the more members he would be able to siphon off from nearby Adventist congregations.

The next day (November 2, 1997, only a few days after Johnsson’s praiseful *Review* article on the “creative worship patterns” at Grace Place and other way-out congregations had been mailed to the world field), Peck was fired and the group’s company status with the conference was terminated. That Sunday afternoon meeting took five hours before the actions to be taken were fully decided.

Then, back in Silver Spring, Johnsson learned what had happened; he thought best to send an apology to all conference presidents for printing that article. He immediately published a three-page article in the November NAD edition of the *Review*, entitled *When the Family Splits*. We will discuss it later in this report.

Here is the text of the committee’s November 2 action (as reported later in a public E-mail from Brauer):

“CAF: Voted the recommendation of the Administrative Committee as follows: 1) CAF is no longer recognized and endorsed as a company of the RMC [Rocky Mountain Conference] as of November 5, 1977. 2) The name CAF is the property of

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the Seventh-day Adventist Association of Colorado, and may be used only as authorized by the Executive Committee & Association Board. 3) The membership of CAF is encouraged to transfer their membership to a church within the RMC. Members of CAF who do not transfer their membership to a church will remain members of the conference church in regular standing.

“Clay Peck: Voted the following recommendation from Adcom: Whereas CAF is no longer a company of the Rocky Mountain Conference and, whereas Clay Peck has indicated his unwillingness to meet the conditions of employment by returning tithe to the conference, and, whereas Clay Peck has indicated in writing, and verbally before this committee, that he is unwilling to accept a transfer to another position in the RMC, he is be terminated as of 11/5/97 and receive termination pay according to denominational policy.

“Clay Peck Credentials: Voted that upon Clay Peck’s termination day the conference will withdraw his credentials, and thus he will no longer be carrying active ministerial credentials.”

The Colorado firing took place on November 2. The next three days brought a deluge of phone calls, E-mail, and letters to the conference office from individuals who wanted their names removed from the conference books.

Three days later, on the evening of Wednesday, November 5, the conference president met with the church members and tried to soothe them. He assured them that they had not been disfellowshipped, urged them not to act hastily, and encouraged them to leave their names on the conference books. Brauer said the problem was nothing more than a difference of opinion regarding structure and methods. He played down the doctrinal differences.

But those present refused to leave it at that. They said doctrinal differences were, indeed, part of the dividing wall.

The next morning, in a public E-mail, Brauer admitted this.

“The straw that figuratively broke ‘the camel’s back’ came when administration pled with CAF leadership not to follow in the footsteps of Richard

Fredericks and the Damascus Church . . .

“In this context, CAF’s leadership team responded by outlining eight additional issues, which made further discussion impractical: Last-day events, role of the Adventist Church in prophecy, hermeneutical interpretation of Spirit of Prophecy, investigative judgment, the Sabbath as the discipleship seal of God, and role of the Spirit of Prophecy in providing lifestyle principles.”

Those six divergent points, summarizing as they did an even wider area of differences, would be of vital significance to historic believers. Yet they were not considered top priority by the conference in their efforts to keep liberals from departing.

The liberals were triumphant and flocked to church to celebrate a little wilder than usual the next Sabbath. It was “independence day Sabbath.” (Why they even keep the Sabbath is a mystery, since they have thrown out most everything else.) The hundreds of Adventists, drawn into the liberal net by Peck’s nucleus of workers, were enthusiastic and gave a \$22,000 offering that first separation Sabbath.

Brauer later mentioned that the conference was anxious to start several new churches in the Fort Collins area, and try to bring in new members. In a public statement, he said the conference was working closely with Ron Gladden, newly appointed Mid-America Union Church Planting Consultant, to this end. They are proposing a plan whereby the tithe collected from each newly planted church will be placed in a special conference fund, to be exclusively used to plant the next church.

About the same time, that three-page article written by William Johnsson, editor-in-chief at the *Review*, was published in the November NAD edition of the journal. Here are a few excerpts from this article, entitled *When the Family Splits*:

“As I write, many hearts are heavy at the General Conference complex—and so is mine. The Seventh-day Adventist church family in Damascus, Maryland, has split, with part following its charismatic leader, Richard Fredericks, into an independent congregation . . .

“A couple other congregations have moved out during the past few years—six months ago the large Sunnyside church in Portland, Oregon, split.”

It is interesting that *nowhere, in this article*, did Johnsson mention the ouster of Peck's 400-member Colorado church. He was careful to avoid mentioning it, since only a few weeks earlier he had praised it so highly.

Later in the article, Johnsson mentioned that the separatist liberal groups are obtaining part of their inspiration from Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Church, near Chicago, which has declared itself independent of all denominational connections.

"The influence of Willow Creek: Bill Hybels' church has become a mecca for Adventist pastors and elders. This congregation, free of any denominational ties, has grown rapidly to more than 13,000 members. Adventist pastors, concerned with slow growth and lack of vitality in their congregations, journey to Willow Creek in a search for answers. And Willow Creek has given them much of value to take and adapt to their situations. Hybels apparently makes no effort to win Adventists to his model, but we must raise the question: Have Adventists, seeing the success of Willow Creek, consciously or unconsciously been influenced toward congregationalism?"

What "of value" could we learn from Bill Hybels, or from his worship services? Johnsson, himself, seems to lean toward Hybels. Willow Creek has nothing to offer the people of God who cling to the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy.

Johnsson then addresses the reason that the separation between the conference and Fredericks, and similar liberal churches, is inevitable. *That reason is not beliefs (doctrines) or practices (standards), but refusal to send the tithe to the conference and a stubborn insistence on owning its own church property:*

"On the surface, one could ask why the Seventh-day Adventist Church couldn't bend a little and keep the united Damascus family within the fold. Many non-Adventist Christians would probably feel we should. This isn't the place for a rehearsing of the chain of events that led to the split; suffice it to say that the Potomac Conference welcomed the church, with its innovations, under its umbrella for many years (in spite of doctrinal concerns); but when the pastoral staff publicly broke ranks with worldwide Adventist practice over return of tithe and the church registered itself as a legal body to hold its property as an independent organization, the conference leaders felt that they had no choice but to call for Fredericks' resignation."

Johnsson said, "The Potomac Conference welcomed the church, with its innovations, under its umbrella for many years (in spite of doctrinal concerns)." —*That is the problem! That is what is eating the heart out of the denomination!* We no longer care what the ministers preach or what the members believe—as long as they keep sending in the money and control of the property is assured.

Richard Fredericks, himself, noted this real reason for the ouster, in a pastoral letter he sent in November to his flock:

"Our healthy, committed congregation was amputated from the body by the Potomac Conference Executive Committee for the sole reason that our success as a congregation was perceived as a serious threat to the stability of the present financial system (which it is).

"Our union president made a very clear speech, that the only real issues were about preserving policy. Our conference president, in answer to the direct question of why he felt the need, in the space of just one week to suddenly ask us to resign or be fired—and then, in fact, to fire us—answered that he wanted to do it quickly before we closed the deal between the Damascus Road Community Church (DRCC) and Mr. White on 225 acres of land (169 acres of which is being given as a gift). I believe Elder Broeckel hoped it would help funding for that land to dry up. It didn't. Over \$150,000 was given during the next three weeks."

Because church leaders are more concerned with structure than beliefs, we have arrived at our present impasse.

The conservatives who place adherence to our Bible-Spirit of Prophecy beliefs and standards first are leaving the denomination because of it. The nominal members are given new theology pastors who educate them into modernism; and, as newly formed liberals, they then leave the church because it is too confining. —Church members are leaving on all sides because the leaders permit the pastors and the schools to compromise the faith of young and old. Purity of belief and practice is the solution, the only solution.

I predict that, if leadership does not return to our historic roots, in southern California and other areas where there is a higher concentration of church members, we will see large, independent liberal churches spring up and take out many members.

—Vance Ferrell