

## Is the General Conference Involved in Ecumenism?

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Is the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC)? Every week someone calls the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty office of the General Conference and asks this question. My answer is always the same emphatic “No!” Some callers believe that the Adventist church is a “secret member” or something “like a member,” but these categories do not exist. Visiting the WCC web site one can read the membership list. The name of the Adventist Church is not found there. In other words, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not a member of the WCC and is not planning to become one.

Does the church have relations with the WCC? From time to time Adventist observers attend the WCC Central Committee at their General Assembly. This attendance is not a secret, and articles are published in the *Adventist Review* which give a report of these meetings.

Some readers have heard that a delegation from the General Conference attends the annual meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of the Christian World Communions (CS/CWC). This is correct, but the WCC is not the CS/CWC. Let me explain.

The WCC is the official organization of the ecumenical movement. Its headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland. About 340 churches are members of the WCC, and they represent 592 million Christians. The purpose of the WCC is to promote Christian unity. “To promote” would have been too weak a goal for the founders of the organization. Following two World Wars between so-called Christian countries, it was their dream to build a visible unity between Christians—a unity which would be the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer for unity and a major factor of peace in the world. Today visible unity even among the members of the WCC is a real challenge. Members of the Orthodox and Protestant churches do not even share the Eucharist together despite half a century of meetings, statements, and studies.

The majority of Christians (about 75%) are not members of the WCC, and the most dynamic wing of Protestants, namely Evangelicals and Pentecostals, have not expressed any interest in becoming members. The Roman Catholic Church is very influential within the WCC, but is not a member either.

When we think about the WCC it is important to remember its purpose, which is the visible unity of Christianity. Unity may have different interpretations and it may seem a long, long process, but the WCC is the most significant religious organization which is totally committed to this goal.

What about the Conference of Secretaries of the Christian World Communions? Adventists are not a member of the WCC, but they are involved in the CS/CWC. The difference is that the CS/CWC is not an organization but a conference of Christian leaders, composed of the Secretary

General of the conference, other top officials, and representatives of various churches. The purpose is not to build the visible unity of the Christian family, but to share information, concerns, and reports, and to become better acquainted with each other. No church is encouraged to change her beliefs or to create a new Christian community. Doctrinal issues are not on the agenda. The members represent their churches and their beliefs.

The Conference of Secretaries represents about two billion Christians and covers more churches than any other organization, including the WCC. The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church are represented and so are the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Mennonite Conference, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, and others. Adventists have played an important role in this Conference in opening it to Evangelicals. Bert B. Beach was the Secretary of the Conference for 32 years. In 2002 I have been elected to serve in this position. Our presence in such a group, which represents the Christian world, has been extremely helpful for our church around the world. It has shown that we are a Christian Church recognized by the Christian family of leaders. We are not a cult or a dangerous group of fanatics, but a Christian denomination.

The relations between the WCC and the CS/CWC were difficult at the beginning, but they have improved. Difficulties arose because the CS/CWC accepted churches as they were and respected their differences. This was perceived as approving the division of Christianity rather than building unity. Today the WCC has its representative within the CS/CWC. Will the CS/CWC join the WCC? Some on both sides think a close cooperation would be good for all and a consultative commission was set up last year, but other members of the CS/CWC do not want the Conference to change its main purpose.

Adventists have always been favorable to developing good relations with other churches or religious groups while staying faithful to their own mission and their beliefs. Although Adventists respect other Christians, they believe that God has called them to fulfill a specific mission and to proclaim a specific message for the last days. They do not feel threatened within the CS/CWC, and meeting other Christian leaders gives them a great opportunity to be better known and to share their mission without compromising their identity and faith. The Adventist agenda is not ecumenism; it is building good relations.

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