

# Hallmarks of Religious Extremism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

*This article explores the extremist tendencies in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church as it exists today as a global church. It seeks to demonstrate that the SDA Church has used methods and instruments that might be considered mildly extremist and out of the ordinary. From a small army of disappointed Millerites 160 years ago, the SDA Church has worked hard to establish itself as a church, with twenty million members worldwide, while claiming to be a defender of the faith of Jesus and the commandments of God. The SDA Church, operating without belonging to the ecumenical bodies in the world, has continued to spread its presence claiming a divine mandate ‘to spread the Adventist message to all the world in this generation’. This makes it an unlimited adventure that has a divine element, as captured by the spirit and words of Ellen G White (EGW), the key prophet in the SDA Church. The lone-ranger mentality gives it an added impetus that propels it to work hard as a remnant that keeps the faith of Jesus and observes the commandments of God. Though the comparison of educational establishments may seem unfair, Roman Catholics have 150,000 schools worldwide, and the SDA Church with 7598 schools and is the second largest privately funded system. With a theology that has historically (and continuously) associated the Roman Catholic Church with the beast in the books of Daniel and Revelation, the SDA Church feels it has made some credible and notable strides in the world as a remnant. This competition for souls has led the SDA Church to engage in practices that have extremist tendencies in some parts of Africa. The unhealthy and disdainful smearing of the Roman Catholic Church and others has brought some conflicts and social disharmony in some places. This article will shed some light on some of these extremist ideas that cause disharmony in communities where religious harmony should exist.*

## Introduction

The word extremism is at times associated with the idea of violence and other fearsome expressions of religiosity or ideology that, many times, put the lives of many at risk. In this presentation, I will not explore the mild extremism that is associated with some religious groups or sects and the ideological extremism that does not use force or violence in its expression.

Extremism is defined as activities and beliefs (and actions) that are far removed from the ordinary (Coleman and Bartoli 2003). In a variety of ways, some forms of extremist views are associated with apocalyptic and eschatological meanings and ideologies that are focused on the cataclysmic demise and destruction of others who are deemed below certain standards in a world of good vs evil (Coleman & Bartoli 2003). Extremism also includes a sense of superiority accompanied by determined steps to win others into their ways of belief through the evangelisation of non-members, the eventual elimination of “recalcitrant persons” and dissociation from those who are deemed to be fallen (Njoku & Akintayo 2018). This extremism is based on fundamentalist ideas that have

1 dominated the SDA Church since the early 1900s when the prophecy of Daniel  
2 and Revelation were used to qualify America as the beast with anti-religious  
3 sentiments (Campbell 2022). In this way, the SDA Church is no stranger to  
4 making seemingly extremist claims with its profound eschatological positions and  
5 hallmarks of mild extremism linked to dependency on the writings of EGW  
6 (Schwarz 1979:70).

7 His definition of a cult: “a group of people gathered about a specific person or  
8 persons misinterpretation of the Bible” Martin works with that which captures a  
9 departure from normative expressions of religions, an inclusion that the SDA  
10 Church has vehemently objected to. (Martin 2019:13). Experientially, those who  
11 are first or second-generation SDA Church members in Africa will testify to the  
12 fundamentalist approach they have experienced in the propagation of religious  
13 beliefs by the SDA Church, where indifference is real and the need to be different  
14 is militant in many ways (Bruinsma 2023). In this presentation, I will explore six  
15 grounds that I think make a case of mild extremism that seem to lend credence to  
16 claims of extremist tendencies in the SDA Church.

### 17 18 19 **Destruction of Traditional Ways without Acculturation** 20

21 By any measure or standard, Seventh-day Adventism is an importation of  
22 Americanism without any acculturation to any corner of the world it has been  
23 introduced into (Olsen 2004). From the division of the collective Study Guide that  
24 is studied every Saturday morning in the Church, the division of the year into  
25 quarters that mimic the seasons of the year in America, the voting of officers in the  
26 church, to points of theological reference, it is all based on Americanism. There is  
27 no adaptation or inculturation at all unless the governments of the host nations  
28 legally insist on conformity with national standards. The biggest casualties of this  
29 modernity and global development are the people who have left their traditional  
30 and secure practices that catered for a holistic way of life (Mbiti 1969:1). This is a  
31 life that did not compartmentalise political, social, and religious practices, which  
32 afforded a degree of holistic engagement and accommodation through the different  
33 stages of life (Mbiti 1969:3). These communities lived a life marked with a  
34 religious outlook that was anchored in practices that met the needs of the people at  
35 different levels in a holistic way. This holistic approach was exchanged for one  
36 that is individualistic and one that seeks purity and piety at the expense of a  
37 communal approach. These invoked many communal, social networks and  
38 practices that addressed all the needs of the African people were replaced by that  
39 which is different and selective in nature (Mbiti 1969:2). When people accepted  
40 Adventism, all these were replaced by an SDA theology that was imported from  
41 the USA and imbibed by Africans in Kenya and other parts of Africa successfully,  
42 where Africans have formed a great percentage of the SDA worldwide  
43 membership (ASTR 2023).

44 Further, the engagement between the SDA Church and colonial governments  
45 has a history of working collaboratively in ways that have enhanced the colonial  
46 agenda in all the colonial Africa where the SDA Church was granted access by the

1 various colonial governments chance to operate in a way that further enabled the  
2 destroying of the remaining fabric of a holistic life (Makapela 1986:141). This  
3 deep engagement was based on a tacit recognition that there was a divine element  
4 that made the existence of governments possible, not as a neutral system, but one  
5 that meets the needs of those who are committed to the success of the welfare of  
6 humanity. Religiously zealous people who are led by a theocratic ideal are more  
7 likely to support a government that is authoritarian and unaccommodating in some  
8 ways if their needs are met using Romans 13:1 as a constant point of reference.  
9 This was not unique to the SDA Church, rather, it was a phenomenon that was  
10 commonplace across Africa where collaboration with colonialists at the expense of  
11 the colonised was based on an ethic of self-interest (Plantak 1998:32).

12 The fundamentalist mentality that shaped the SDA Church after 1922 was  
13 indicative of the extremist ideology that was introduced in the Church and  
14 exported worldwide (Campbell 2022). This led to the destruction of women's  
15 support for women clergy and the adoption of other extremist ideologies that set a  
16 trend of complexity of fundamentalists in decades to come. It makes the slide into  
17 dangerous territory that the SDA Church has experienced and one that has not  
18 been seriously researched, especially concerning the failure of the Church to act on  
19 the thorny aspect of the ordination of women. This nuanced development has led  
20 to a total lack of acculturation of the theological teachings and developments that  
21 the SDA Church has developed over time.

22 The centralised management of theological, policy, and ecclesiastical  
23 developments means that all the thoughts and considerations are conducted in  
24 North America with the input of selected panellists who are from qualified and  
25 vetted institutions most of which are in the West (Ammodt 2024). The top-down  
26 cascaded theological knowledge leaves no room for acculturation or national  
27 appropriation. It is from the mouth of God/prophet to North America (preferably  
28 the topmost Adventist Seminary and University) to the rest of the world without  
29 change or adaptation of any kind. It might be as American as the quarter system  
30 that is dependent on seasons not experienced by the people along the equatorial  
31 belt, but it remains steeped in that language anywhere and everywhere. It becomes  
32 a cultural irrelevance while it ticks the box of unity without calculating the  
33 opportunity cost of the richness of the diversity foregone. Sadly, the SDA Church  
34 will never know the extent of the cultural diversity lost in the search for a façade of  
35 unity that has led to the sanitized cultures celebrated at a superficial level and the  
36 whitewashed uniformity that is alien to humans.

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### 39 **SDA Church and Ecumenism: An Indifferent and Exclusivist Approach**

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41 Of all the religious tenets that have brought a lasting effect in creating self-  
42 defined isolation, it is the claim of being a remnant. A thirst to be different and  
43 separate has defined the working relationship with other religious organisations at  
44 times, a strained relationship has existed where there needed to be collaboration  
45 instead of competition or suspicion. This exclusivist approach and an obsession to  
46 be different have resulted in a stunted effort to be part of the ecumenical

1 movement while promoting a culture of withdrawal from engagement on critical  
2 issues.

3 Ecumenism involves the coming together of religious organisations for a  
4 common purpose while not focussing on differences that each religious  
5 organisation is distinctly known for. Adventists have always been wearying of any  
6 ecumenical associations since the formation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the precursors  
7 of the present World Council of Church (WCC) (Schwarz 1979:539). This fear has  
8 always been based on the suspicion that any engagement with ecumenical  
9 colleagues will result in insidious acceptance of that which will usher in a system  
10 of government that goes against the will of God in a diversity of ways  
11 notwithstanding the good intentions of collaboration on certain issues of social  
12 justice that are of paramount importance regardless of religious creed, orientation,  
13 or colour. As such, over the years, there has been some collaboration of religious  
14 organisations at an ecumenical level, in finding a common solution to common  
15 human and environmental problems but not as full participants, only on the  
16 periphery to avoid being yoked with those who are not in agreement on theological  
17 issues (Schwarz 1979:540).

18 Since the inspired teachings of EGW do not allow for consultation or  
19 collaboration with other religious organisations, the SDA Church has assumed a  
20 lone-ranger mentality that shuns the engagements of others at a theological level  
21 and thus, it is a near-impossible to work with others on an equal footing. This is  
22 ratified by a view of being a remnant: a status the SDA Church has fought to  
23 maintain since its inception.

24 One of the hallmarks of the SDA Church is being a remnant: one who keeps  
25 the faith of Jesus and observes the laws of God (Miller 2013). Any collaboration  
26 with other religious bodies that threatens this unique identity is an existential threat  
27 to Adventism. In this light, some adherents see ecumenism as a negative trait that  
28 threatens the mission of the SDA Church and its call in Revelation 18 and the  
29 fallen Babylon (Miller 2013). As such, the SDA Church is not a member of the  
30 WCC and does not meet what the SDA Church sees as acceptable in its  
31 theological outlook (Landis 2005). It has remained as a church that sees itself as  
32 superior to other churches, hence the incompatibility of its theology with that of  
33 other ecumenically inclined churches. This view captures the rejection of being  
34 theologically yoked with unbelievers who are qualified to preach/practice a  
35 theology that is compromised. This way the SDA Church can maintain its purity  
36 and avoid addressing issues of social and political cause or have the risk of being  
37 drawn into unholy alliances that work against Parousia in this world and the next.

38 This strong indifference has worked in favour of developing a theological  
39 lone-wolf mentality that has served its course to some extent. The SDA has stood  
40 out, much to its desire, as a church that does not fear to be in the minority,  
41 following the narrow path, and cemented in its claim as the custodian of the faith  
42 of Jesus and the laws of God. In search of this unique position, the SDA Church  
43 has seemed indifferent to the suffering of people in places where it has failed to be  
44 part of an ecumenical solution, especially in South Africa where the Church was  
45 part of the apartheid problem instead of being a solution (Nkosi 1991:10).

1 The claim that those ‘believers of other churches who do not observe the  
2 Sabbath do not have the mark of the beast’ is an academic one that does not  
3 percolate to the ground where there are seminars that are conducted in the villages  
4 across Kenya during religious campaigns which are usually a platform with  
5 charged messages about the beast and its mark. Usually, it is the Roman Catholic  
6 followers who end up being branded as followers of the beast in not subtle ways  
7 (experientially, this has caused family conflicts and brought consternation in my  
8 village with unspoken acrimony based on such claims). It is a case of an academic  
9 claim far removed from a different reality perpetuated by exuberant and  
10 undereducated preachers who are not chided by the system that pays them.

11 This belief system has been anchored on the claim the SDA Church has made  
12 and developed where it sees itself as a remnant, the remaining ones who observe  
13 three key things: the faith of Jesus, the commandments of God and the testimony  
14 of Jesus (Ministerial Association 2005:191). Being a remnant has helped shape  
15 the indifference in cooperation with ecumenical associations since ecumenism  
16 does not encapsulate the observance of the three foregoing points in all their  
17 permutations. This has been developed into one of the key and fundamental  
18 beliefs in the SDA Church that all members must subscribe to when they join the  
19 Church and take baptismal vows publicly.

20 With this development, the SDA Church remains an engaging partner with  
21 the ecumenical movement but not as a full member.

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### 24 **Religious Control: Generating of Religiously inspired Guilt**

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26 To evangelicals, sin is always personal, not corporate with a God who is  
27 willing to forgive and work with deserving individuals who are repentant and  
28 contrite (Butler 2021:11). Those who are not contrite and remorseful are beyond  
29 forgiveness. That is the basic tenant in the world of evangelicals and others who  
30 have a simplified view of individuated sins. This means that the voice of one who  
31 sounds evangelical and is a product of Calvinism is inclined to have similar views  
32 to evangelicals. Ellen G White falls into this category. By a large measure, Ellen G  
33 White is the most dominant voice in the writings available to the SDA Church.  
34 Her position and influence have been used to settle theological differences in the  
35 SDA Church, where there is an over-reliance on her writings, as an acclaimed  
36 prophet (Daily 2020: 50).

37 There is a deliberate cultivation of a special place for EGW in the psyche of  
38 the SDA Church members which is so effective that many will quote her writings  
39 as a point of reference in their daily lives and often used to settle religious or  
40 theological arguments. From the open and public acceptance of her teachings as a  
41 requirement for one to be baptised into the fellowship of the SDA Church, to the  
42 constant reference of her writings in many of the teachings and studies in the local  
43 churches, EGW is like a canonical source that is constantly referred to in the  
44 expounding of scriptures. Her writings have been given prominence almost at the  
45 same level as the bible. A majority who are not given to theological studies in the  
46 local churches will blindly quote favourite sections of EGW writings out of

1 context to gain an upper hand in support of an argument or a reprimand. In my  
2 growing up as a member of the local SDA Church in a village in Kenya, it was not  
3 unusual to hear an argument: “EGW does not approve of such, therefore do not do  
4 it”. She set the standards of operation in the numerous writings that are ascribed  
5 to her in a variety of ways. EGW became a rod of chastisement and alienation in a  
6 disturbing and cult-like way. If her quotes are read or invoked in a discussion or  
7 argument, that usually is the end of a discussion. Arguing against her or her  
8 writings is tantamount to being a heretic who has denied and denounced the spirit  
9 of prophecy. Any argument about or around her writings is an indication that one  
10 is going against the baptismal vows as shall be discussed later.

11 In the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya, where I did my  
12 undergraduate studies, parts of Education by EGW were mandatory to read and  
13 recite during induction. It was for all regardless of creed or allegiance. Reference  
14 to her writings has generated a cult-like following and imbibition of her writings  
15 without contextualization, at the expense of anything else. An over-reliance on  
16 EGW and her writings has earned the SDA Church cult status in historical terms  
17 (Martin 2019:587). In as much as the SDA Church claims that it is not a cult and  
18 does not regard the writings of EGW to be above the Bible, the consumption and  
19 the near deification of her writings are at par with canonical treatment (Fortin  
20 2019).

21 Baptismal vow number eight requires one to recognise and accept EGW and  
22 her gift of prophecy and accept the remnant position of the SDA Church at a  
23 confessional session (Church Manual 2000:33). Failure to accept this prophetic  
24 gift means one cannot be accepted into the Adventist community of faith as a  
25 member. It is a sliding slope that generates guilt for those who have decided to be  
26 members of an alternative community only for them to feel that they are falling  
27 short of the standards set by that exacting community that claims to be a remnant.  
28 The nuances that come with a perceived special placement as a remnant and the  
29 impending end of the world all generate a very devastating and very deep  
30 shortcoming that threatens the future for those who fail to make it or uphold the  
31 high expectations (Bull & Lockhart 1989:45).

32 Psychological damage and fear factor are enough to generate a pang of guilt  
33 that is ruinous of life for those who are constantly made to feel inadequate and will  
34 forever face the wrath of an angry God at the close of probation (when the door of  
35 mercy will shut and one’s fate is eternally determined). In great detail and with a  
36 sense of authority, the beast, the elaborate scene of chaos for those who are caught  
37 short of the required level of imputed righteousness at the close of probation, the  
38 ushering of the millennium, the damnation of sinners and the resurrection of those  
39 who are in good books, all these are vivid and terrible images for those poor and  
40 miserable souls who are only human and have failed consistently. Religious  
41 control based on fear should not be used to scare people of hell but rather should  
42 be replaced with the use of positive motivation that seeks access to heaven.

43 This further leveraging of guilt is evidenced in the promotion of  
44 vegetarianism in a way that condemns and discourages the consumption of meat in  
45 a rather harsh and condemnatory language of “returning to the fleshpots of Egypt”.  
46 This view is intended to associate a resurgence of condemned practices that were

1 left in Egypt during the Exodus (White 1948:160). Exclusivist language such as  
2 “the light has come for many years that meat eating is not good for health and  
3 morals” insinuates that the consumption of animal products leads to a debased  
4 mind and uncontrolled passions (White 1976:413). While vegetarianism has been  
5 promoted as providing a superior way of life, some people have used it as a tool of  
6 harassment and exclusivity/superiority, in their exuberant way of making  
7 arguments supported by EGW. In institutions under the management of the SDA  
8 Church, there is no provision of meat in their menus at all as per the teachings of  
9 EGW.

10 This is in recognition that the original diet provided by God for human  
11 consumption was a vegetarian one (White 2T:362). A serious claim by both EGW  
12 and her physician that “eating flesh would arouse the animal passions and make it  
13 impossible to exercise sexual restraint” stands out and has been softened by “we  
14 are not to make the use of flesh food as a test of fellowship” that EGW made later  
15 after the backlash (Bull & Lockhart 1989:137).

16 This extremist approach that seeks to invoke animalistic passions was meant  
17 to show that “people could lose those qualities of mind that distinguished them  
18 from the animal kingdom” a risk that all humans should run away from especially  
19 given that the mark of the beast presents a real risk on spiritual and literal grounds  
20 (Bull & Lockhart 2007:236).

21 With these images of beasts and degraded and animalistic passions in life, a  
22 controlled religious life extends from the plate to the social and transcends the  
23 physical as it enters the future which should be safeguarded holistically. It is a  
24 controlled religious and physical life that stretches from here on earth to the  
25 heavens to come. This approach contributes to the generation of feelings of  
26 inadequacy and guilt in a never-ending cycle. It is counter-intuitive and needs  
27 serious professional attention to avoid damaging the psyche of the adherents of  
28 Adventism. The SDA Church needs to reassess its approach to this system of work  
29 to avoid further damage.

### 30 31 32 **A Tortured Conscience** 33

34 One of the most devastating aspects of religious life is the construction of  
35 unspoken guilt and a tortured conscience generated by religious expectations in a  
36 closed community. This happens through the creation of an alternative  
37 structure/community upon proselytisation. New members are introduced to a  
38 close-knit community where they are welcomed into a band of believers who are  
39 on a journey to heaven. With this deep connection are close networks of  
40 brotherhood and camaraderie that provide an atmosphere of belonging. The  
41 downside is the unspoken expectation of compliance and a sense of unqualified  
42 faithfulness to a system that is opaque and at some level quite exclusivist (Weber  
43 2017).

44 In this short writ, Weber captures the guilt that is associated with the  
45 consumption of a toxic mix of Parousia and required conformity to high standards:  
46 “One pastor’s wife wrote a letter to my mother explaining that I would be lost if I

1 didn't lose weight" (Weber 2017). Added to the demands of life from different  
2 dimensions are forces that shape a narrative that demands perfection in an  
3 imperfect world. In a world where one does not need to lower standards, a form of  
4 extremism demands perfection in a way that puts peoples' lives at risk (Weber  
5 1992:53-4). The obsession with living according to laws and commandments that  
6 measure one's life like a yardstick makes it easy for some people to seek  
7 conformity with a measurable outcome. When one has failed, the fear that many  
8 live with is eternal damnation, which Weber speaks about when he reflects on his  
9 tortured life followed by years of feeling inadequate (Weber 2017).

10 Suffice it to say at this stage (and leave room for the development of this  
11 thought for another day) there is an apocalyptically impatient theology that seeks  
12 to apportion blame on the members for delayed Parousia based on an accusation  
13 that they have failed to do diligent evangelism. This works hand in hand with the  
14 expectation that Parousia will be possible once the Adventist message has been  
15 preached to all the world in this generation. Any delayed Parousia is based on the  
16 failure of the keepers of faith of Jesus to spread the message effectively, as such,  
17 Jesus cannot return until the duty is done (Bull & Lockhart 1989:54). This results  
18 in a generation of collective individual guilt.

19 Until recently, one of the best icons of this tortured conscience was the  
20 commonly used song in the SDA Hymnody. It is a song that casts doubt on the  
21 assurance of salvation for those sinful beings: Is my name written there, on the  
22 page white and fair? In the book of thy kingdom, is my name written there?  
23 Written by Mary Kidder 1820-1905 (Blue Letter Bible). When other Christians  
24 were sure of their place in heaven, the Adventists have not been sure though they  
25 have committed all to this heavenly adventure. Their theology is summarised by  
26 this simple question: Is my name written there? It is a source of misery and torture  
27 for many, it shows an uncertainty of their claim that they are assured of salvation.  
28 There is a niggler in their conviction. However, the latest official hymnal does not  
29 feature that song in its selection.

30 Individuals who had to confront feelings of inadequacy for their salvation  
31 have been made to work hard on the salvific process that questions the guarantee  
32 of a life well lived not knowing when the probation closes (White 1948:691b &  
33 White 1950:614). The feeling of inadequacy and a contorted fear of exclusion  
34 from the remnant have been caused by the impending end of the world at an  
35 indeterminate time (RH 1905). A further consideration of interpretative  
36 phenomenological analysis research on the same is needed to ascertain the extent  
37 of this phenomenon.

### 38 39 **Shame: A Tool for Social Control**

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41 In a bid to control deviant behaviour, SDA members form tight-knit  
42 communities that offer an alternative community of like-minded people. This  
43 could be through a provision of health and education through medical centres and  
44 schools that are sponsored by the Church. One can go through the education  
45 system from kindergarten to graduate school and not interact with anyone outside  
46 the church circles. In a deeply enmeshed system of belonging, the provision of



1 education and health through a private system that is extensive, one can live in a  
2 parallel universe and be excluded from other ‘world’ influences. This way, a  
3 bubble is created that forms an exclusivity and hence is liable to forms of social  
4 control due to lack of external influences. Inbreeding and lack of cross-reference  
5 in life can lead to myopia where insiders live in a small world that looks big from  
6 the inside. “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers” is a common phrase that  
7 is used to discourage deep engagement with people who are not of the same faith  
8 (2 Corinthians 6:14). Further, there is a prohibition against marrying someone  
9 who is an unbeliever or someone who has not accepted the truth according to the  
10 SDA doctrines on the basis that others are not believers who are worthy of the  
11 association at such an intimate level (Church Manual 2000:173). These marriages  
12 are discouraged, not accepted, and condemned to the extent that the marriage  
13 officers in the SDA Church are strongly urged not to perform such weddings.

14 In the creation of an alternative community of like-minded people, Adventists  
15 are loving and will build a close-knit community that provides comfort at many  
16 levels for all involved. They indeed grow as a family. They build an insular  
17 network that is watertight in many ways. Its only drawback and negative is one,  
18 once an individual want to be independent and goes against the grain of the insular  
19 network, then rejection is swift and severe. Using diverse forms of appeal for unity  
20 of purpose and to embed a sense of community and belonging, is a use of shame  
21 as a tool for social control and coercion towards those who are seen to be errant  
22 and belligerent. They use the close-knit social fabric as the rubric on which they  
23 build their alternative communities that extend care, love and understanding to  
24 those who are of the same faith in a simple argument: “Can two walk together,  
25 except they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). This generates a fear of rejection by a group  
26 that has adopted you as one of their own upon baptism, a community of faith that  
27 one has come to identify with; a rejection from the fold of faith that claims to be  
28 the remnant brings elements of shame and rejection that are expressed as severe  
29 disciplinary steps (Church Manual 2000:184). Those who do not comply with the  
30 puritanical/pietistic teachings of the church are subjected to a public vote for  
31 removal or censure from the membership of the church as an example of failure  
32 (Church Manual 2000:185). The official line is that there should be continued  
33 communication and support for the erring and disciplined member, but in real life  
34 the disciplined members are often left to their own devices, shunned, and  
35 humiliated. Those who dare to return to the church as members must be baptised  
36 afresh, a public performance that shows the recanting of their previous life.

37 Another level of this shame generation is based on how differences among  
38 members are settled in the church. Intra-denominational mechanisms of  
39 reconciliation are instituted to deal with disagreements and strife among members  
40 apart from the rare occasions such as divorce and child custody are the matters  
41 headed for legal courts. Litigation using the law is discouraged because it will  
42 “expose the church to the ridicule of her enemies” (White 1952:242-3b). Seeking  
43 legal recourse can lead to rejection of a member by the Church. A threat of a  
44 disciplinary process from the Church for someone who has been condemned as  
45 impatient or selfish enough not to give the Church a chance exists as an example  
46 of coercive behaviour and an extremist attitude (Church Manual 2000:182). These

1 actions are built on the assumption that the system is right, superior, and better  
2 than, others and always has the truth hence the need to stay insular and only seek  
3 solace within. This then evolves into a system that generates machinations of  
4 social control that is serious and very isolating. It shames those who want to look  
5 elsewhere or who want to seek professional help or intervention from external  
6 agencies. It can be and has resulted in the manifestation of mild forms of  
7 extremism that thrive on coercion and varying levels.

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### Extreme Indifference

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In a world full of strife, and social, economic, and political problems, churches become centres that act as beacons of hope and offer guidance, solace and refuge for the weary. In this search for social relevance, the Anglican Church and others in South Africa had its champions, Desmond Tutu, Trevor Huddleston, and Allan Boesak among others. Others like Martin Luther King Junior, Allan Shapton in the USA, Oscar Romero in El Salvador, Bishop Kipsang Muge, and Reverend Timothy Njoya in Kenya, are a few examples who worked hard when they called out injustices in their countries. The SDA Church cannot point at a significant role player who fought for social justice or went to the trenches of war in any country or any place while using the Church's teachings or platform for such (Nhlapo 2019:145). Using a simple approach that disengages itself from the world of political interference, the SDA Church has claimed to be apolitical and neutral in all the world's harsh realities and only selectively engaging with different regimes when it suites its pecuniary advantage through an ethic of self-interest (Nderitu 2000:39 & Plantak 1998:47). Since its founder engaged with the emancipation of slaves, the SDA Church has been silent on social issues. In the awkward case of South Africa, the Church engaged in what I call extreme indifference when it not only ignored the suffering of its members and the victims of apartheid, but it also replicated the same policies in its structures when it chose apartheid instead of God (Magethi & Nkosi 1996:6).

When others were engaged in the struggle for dignity and rights for most people in South Africa, the SDA Church was in cahoots with the apartheid government while claiming to be a remnant at the same time. In a case of extreme indifference, the SDA Church copied the policies of segregation and apartheid in its structures and many cases surpassed the government of the day in the application of the same (Lawson 2000). The disinterest in social engagement reflected the distance between the Church and the society it claimed to serve. This extreme indifference is a source of frustration for those who are affected by injustices yet remain faithful to and hopeful of the teachings of the Church. They remain positive that the Adventist message will offer hope for human hopelessness, yet they remain unfulfilled in their hopes as the SDA Church has remained irrelevant to their needs at a time when they need it the most. In the South African case, the SDA Church was part of the apartheid problem and not a solution. When others provided guidance and examples of leadership, the Church

1 duplicated and surpassed the government in the implementation of apartheid  
2 policies in its structures (Makapela 1996:276).

3 The failure of the SDA Church to be a beacon of hope and a source of light  
4 was owned up in a half-cooked submission at the Truth and Reconciliation  
5 Commission headed by Desmond Tutu that the Church provided in a last-minute  
6 reprieve (Nhlapo 2018:145). Such was the failure that there have been repeated  
7 attempts to force racial merger and integration among the various racially  
8 organised conferences in some parts of the country. To this day, the SDA church  
9 remains racially segregated in South Africa where some regional structures have  
10 refused to merge the racially managed units hence the existence of such in the 21<sup>st</sup>  
11 century.

12 This indifference is visible and loud in a system that still claims to be the  
13 guardian of the faith of Jesus and the keeper of the commandments of God with  
14 such glaring inconsistencies and failures.

### 17 **Conclusion**

18  
19 As the SDA Church continues in its evolutionary trend as a structure that is  
20 growing, it has become more diverse but has remained the same in many ways  
21 with the potential to regress as a church that has joined the protestant world  
22 (Lawson 2019). This growth over the years has churned more than twenty million  
23 members worldwide, most of whom are in the developing world, and increasing  
24 the numbers of those who tend to over-rely on EGW and her writings without any  
25 critical consideration. This lack of theological independence in the developing  
26 world means the national and local SDA Churches are at the mercies of cascaded  
27 theological development that come from the high and mighty structures in the  
28 Church's Headquarters, Seminary, and the EGW Estate that hold rights to all  
29 EGW materials without critical consideration of the context or culture. Those who  
30 are conduits of this transmission at a local level and who are mandated to provide  
31 an exposition of EGW writings are not equipped with the deepest theological  
32 training. They are products of conservative and at times theologically biased  
33 institutions that only have malleable and unquestioning managers who are not  
34 exposed to any thinking that is outside the SDA system of education that is  
35 constantly seeking to control the theological thinking without external critique  
36 (Aamodt 2024).

### 37 38 *Acculturation*

39  
40 Experientially, there is a lot that needs to be done to achieve a critical  
41 engagement, translation, and acculturation of EGW's writings so that the full  
42 extent of her intentions can be harvested. There should be a development of  
43 theological parity that will help developing countries develop theological ideas  
44 that are meaningful to their context and needs. This will help in establishing  
45 theologically sensitive acculturation that will meet the needs of those who are far  
46 removed from the Western-leaning theological application that is exported from

1 the West to countries that have no connection with American or European  
2 grounding. With this overreliance on imported and external theological  
3 qualification, the extremist tendencies will remain if uncritical practitioners at the  
4 local churches and conferences continue to depend on the uncontextualized  
5 consumption of EGW writings ensconced in the format that the missionaries (who  
6 were viewed as if directly from God) left it. The Sabbath school quarterly that is  
7 studied every Saturday (sabbath) should be a devolved affair written at a local  
8 level but with a thematic unity worldwide. This will enable relevant sensitivities  
9 and acculturation at a local level yet maintain a united theme across the globe.

10 For the last sixteen decades, there has been a one-way exportation of  
11 theological thought to developing countries. Missionaries have moved from the  
12 West to countries that were continuously considered dark and needful of  
13 civilisation through missionary work and evangelisation. Much of this has entailed  
14 the use of a language and ideas that have not evolved since the first missionaries  
15 left the mission field. It is high time that the SDA Church considered its approach  
16 in these fields and what a theological dependence means for these countries that  
17 are not theologically independent while there is no meaningful way of harvesting  
18 their input. The tokenistic idea of delegates that represent the regions at the Annual  
19 Council or General Conference of the SDA Church does not provide real  
20 representation. Theological issues should be harvested at regional headquarters  
21 that consider continental issues after the empowerment of theological departments  
22 of various universities that serve these regions.

#### 23 24 *Ecumenical Engagement*

25  
26 At an ecumenical level, the SDA Church needs to reconsider its engagement  
27 with the rest of the Christian fraternity. The lone ranger mentality that informs its  
28 theological stance as a remnant while it harvests the Christian hymnody that has  
29 been developed and used by others is an illustration of a moot point. Others have  
30 developed the hymnody that the SDA Church has bought rights to share the Bible  
31 translations that have been developed by others, and continuously call at the  
32 academic depths of those who have developed theologically shared doctrines  
33 while maintaining a superiority of purity and remnant belief.

34 New developments have reflected the psychological damage done by  
35 religious control, public humiliation, and the constant exclusivist approach of a  
36 religious nature. Some extremist ideologies that have traced their roots to the SDA  
37 Church like David Koresh, several off-shoots, and independent ministries with a  
38 shared use of EGW's writings are enough anecdotal evidence that the hallmarks of  
39 extremism can have a devastating effect when left unattended. In as much as the  
40 SDA Church has distanced itself from these fringe groups that dovetail its  
41 theological developments, there remain many points of convergence and a shared  
42 ethos of exclusivity that make them appealing and relevant to many. Their use of  
43 the same formula of handling sin in a pietistic approach and a Calvinistic view that  
44 individuates sin that is developed in the West, provide a ground for extremist  
45 attitudes to be employed across the board. Those who might move from one

1 group to the other might do so in the comfort that their movement is not too far to  
2 be too radical.

3 On a different level, the SDA Church can work with other religious  
4 organisations and Churches when it comes to solving the problems of social,  
5 economic, and health nature. It is too late in the day for the SDA Church to  
6 continue the lone-ranger mentality. In the days gone by, the SDA Church deserted  
7 the social problems of the day during colonial and apartheid times. As a major  
8 claimant of being a real remnant, a defender of the laws of God and the keeper of  
9 the faith of Jesus, the SDA Church was absent in a loud way that has come to  
10 complicate its historical engagement on issues that matter to the common person  
11 (Plantak 1998:246). An engagement with authorities is a level that has only  
12 considered an ethic of self-interest while ignoring glaring issues of inequality,  
13 colonisation, apartheid, and dictatorship, which has resulted in the Church being a  
14 pariah and almost irrelevant (Plantak 1998:245). It will be great for the SDA  
15 Church to engage other religious and social structures in addressing the challenges  
16 of life in a way that will the very people it is trying to evangelise. This way, the  
17 Church will be both meaningful and relevant on this earth and in the world to  
18 come.

19

#### 20 *Psychological Consideration*

21

22 On issues of psychological consideration and management of errant  
23 members, the SDA Church needs to develop a more caring approach that does not  
24 humiliate those who have failed to live up to its standards. Taking a leaf from its  
25 claimed caring and pastoral practices, the Church can work out a way of putting  
26 into practice that which has been in the books for so long, a caring and loving  
27 place for all of God's children. Its extremist attitude of punitively and publicly  
28 humiliating errant members is a relic from that past that should be recanted,  
29 removed, and replaced by a more caring and considerate approach that empowers  
30 people to be like wounded healers communally seeking respite.

31 The power of religion, religious practice and psychology can find its place in  
32 the SDA Church when the right consideration is put in place for the care of those  
33 who are most in need. Religiously inspired trauma is something that the SDA  
34 Church needs to recognise and put mechanisms in place so that the Church that  
35 claims to be the custodian of God's laws and commandments can live out its full  
36 potential.

37 This point works in conjunction with the next one.

38

#### 39 *Language Reform*

40

41 One of the key reforms that is needed is language. The use of exclusive  
42 language that alienates people is a serious affair. A language of exclusion and  
43 exclusivity has untold psychological damage that leaves deep scars and trauma.  
44 One step the SDA Church can use is to reform the disparaging language used by  
45 the laity and the structures in place. Words that seek to alienate people who tend to  
46 be different, hold a differing opinion, have not towed the middle line or tend to be

1 of alternative thinking need not be alienated. Fallen, sinful, not pure, backslidden,  
2 gone back to the pots of meat in Egypt (reminiscent of the return to slavery for a  
3 people who had been saved from Pharaoh), etc are some that need attention and  
4 reform.

5 The use of pietistic language that seeks to juxtapose the holy with the unholy  
6 is serious. Further, using the remnant image and orientation sets the bar quite high  
7 and at a very superior ideological level. A reformation that seeks to have all  
8 humans placed at a level of equality where all stand on an equal footing without an  
9 air of superiority will fulfil their eager mission of “spreading the Adventist  
10 message to all the world in this generation” without any being denigrated as an  
11 unworthy candidate. Creating a small heaven down here will not be possible until  
12 the exclusivity language and extremist tendencies are addressed and removed from  
13 the ethos and the vocabulary used about those who are different.

14 At the end of the day, there practices of the past must be subjected to the  
15 needs of today for the Church to be relevant. Most of these extremist attitudes are  
16 informed by the history of the formation of the SDA Church that seeks to maintain  
17 it as a remnant church that is different for the sake of being different and superior-  
18 looking.

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