

WHEN WE **DIS**AGREE*How cultural values shape our conversation*

HANDY RESOURCES

CHURCH LOCATOR

SUNSET CALENDAR

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BY CALEB ROSADO

It takes neither a seer nor a prophet to predict that the challenges that the Seventh-day Adventist Church will face in the twenty-first century will dwarf those of the twentieth century. Rapidly evolving technologies, an emerging global economy, and tremendous membership growth, especially outside of North America and Europe, will confront the church with logistical, financial, and cultural situations it never could have envisioned even a decade ago.

This doesn't mean that our present challenges and conflicts will go away: in fact, we will probably only be adding to the list. Every level of church activity, from the local congregation to the General Conference, could soon be overwhelmed by choices and crises impossible to ignore.

One possible course is for the church to retreat into a corner, put its hands over its face, and hope to hold out until the Second Coming.

More productive—and more faithful to the gospel—would be an embrace of a new kind of thinking. Members and leaders everywhere could rise above mere "problem-solving" (our usual approach, and the one that is burying us!) and learn new ways of meeting the ocean of change on the near horizon. "Change anticipation," a new way of thinking about the future, teaches people to look at what appears to be problems in the future and see, instead, new opportunities for mission and ministry.

How can we move from problem-solving to change anticipation? By looking below the surface of human thinking to the operating value systems that underlie all decision-making. Let me illustrate with some present "problems" the church is now facing:

- The independent church movement (congregationalism)
- Liberal versus conservative faculty on our North American college campuses
- Debates over the inspiration of the Bible and appropriate methods of Bible study
- The ordination of women to gospel ministry

- “Historic” versus “evangelical” Adventism
- The present state of race/ethnic and gender relations in the church
- “Traditional” versus “celebration” styles of worship
- The shallow conversion experience of members who joined the church in groups, but who are still dominated by spiritual and cultural forces incompatible with the gospel.¹

Each of these issues or problems is so important to one segment or another of the church that it has the potential of fragmenting the denomination. Yet to focus on these issues in our accustomed way is to do problem-solving, which often only generates more heat than light: even the compromises achieved through negotiation often prove unsatisfactory to almost everyone. When you consider how much energy, emotion, and money some people invest in these concerns, you would think people were caught up in a life-and-death struggle that determines eternal life or eternal damnation. And indeed, for some people any or all of these issues are just that critical.

The above issues, however, are actually surface symptoms of deeper-level decision systems out of which these controversies emerge. Church members and leaders alike need to look below the surface in all of these areas to the underlying belief systems operating within the various groups or persons if they really want to understand the present and potential hot spots in the church. Any hope that the church in the new century will be able to survive the destructive, self-serving forces within it can come only—from a human perspective—by looking beyond the differences, the attachments, the meanings that are simply the surface ripples of deep-level currents we call “culture.” These deep cultural currents are the value systems from which surface conflicts over worship style, ordination, and congregational autonomy all emerge.

How Did I Get My Culture?

What we call “culture” is actually a series of core beliefs or value systems, with each level expressing a different understanding of the world or the church. A “belief” or “value system” is a worldview, a set of perspectives/priorities/paradigms, a mind-set, an organizing framework for deep-level decision-making at the bottom line—which is why you can’t compromise about it. Your value system is the threshold at which you won’t negotiate.

Each level of cultural and human development represents a value system, or to use a term coined by Richard Dawkins, a *meme*. Just as genes carry the informational codes for our biological DNA, these value systems supply the codes (or *memes*, rhymes with “themes”) that determine our “cultural DNA.” Memes are ideas, beliefs, values, common ways of looking at the world that, like contagious viruses, spread from brain to brain through word of mouth, through media, through interaction between people. The third angel’s message is a meme. Net ‘98 was a global memetic event infecting the world with the divine virus of the gospel.

There are more than 6 billion people in the world today, and though we all come from some 100,000 genes—all of us—we share only a few basic value systems or memes. Researchers studying this topic have identified only eight thus far. For simplification of understanding, we can color-code them (Figure A).

These eight memes or value systems are the cultural magnets around which our “stuff” clusters and our lives are aligned.

When something isn’t right at the surface level—where we interact with others or with God—or when our priorities are distorted or our lives are out of balance, we need to remember that we too are shaped by these deep emotional, social, and spiritual messages we have received. For these influence how people think and how they respond to the world around them.

Figure A

WHOLISTIC	turquoise
SYSTEMIC	yellow
HUMANISTIC	green
MATERIALISTIC	orange
ABSOLUTISTIC	blue
EGOCENTRIC	red

These memes equal the whole set of the cultural and spiritual forces that shape our thinking they tell us from a human perspective what is right, wrong, and appropriate (Figure B).

ANIMISTIC	purple
AUTOMATIC	beige

Notice how the Focus column alternates between *me*-oriented *express-the-self* (warm colors) and *we*-oriented *sacrifice-the-self* (cool colors). Note also the differences people value the most in each system as they flow from *survival* (Beige), to *safety and security* (Purple), to *raw power* and instant gratification (Red), to *purpose in life* (Blue), to *strategies for success* (Orange), to *community awareness* (Green), to *alternative forms* (Yellow), to *global village* (Turquoise). The levels are open-ended; there isn't a final stage of development in this chart or any other useful one, for the ideal that God sets before us is "higher than the highest human thought can reach."²

Figure B

MEMES	COLOR	THEME	FOCUS	THINKING	VALUE SYSTEMS— BOTTOM LINES	LIFESTYLE
Level 8	Turquoise	WholeView	"We"	Wholistic	Harmony and Wholism	Lives for Wisdom
Level 7	Yellow	FlexFlow	"Me"	Systemic	Natural Processes of Order and Change	Lives for Mutuality
Level 6	Green	HumanBond	"We"	Humanistic	Equality and Human Social Bond	Lives for Harmony
Level 5	Orange	StriveDrive	"Me"	Materialistic	Success and Material Gain	Lives for Gain
Level 4	Blue	TruthForce	"We"	Absolutistic	Authority; Stability; "One Right Way"	Lives for Later
Level 3	Red	PowerGods	"Me"	Egocentric	Power; Glory; Exploitation; No Boundries	Lives for Now
Level 2	Purple	KinSpirits	"We"	Animistic	Myths; Ancestors; Traditions; Our People	Lives for Group
Level 1	Beige	SurvivalSense	"Me"	Automatic	Staying Alive; Reactive; Basic Survival	Lives for Survival

Here's the essence of the idea. Not only do nations, societies, and cultures embrace different value systems, but different groups and entities within Adventism are also at different levels, as seen on the above chart. This could be a prescription for rigidity and disaster if no one or no group ever changed or grew. But fortunately (through the work of the Holy Spirit), growth can happen. If my life conditions change and I handle these changes appropriately (if I remain emotionally stable), I will find myself pulled to the next meme level above where I have been.

Some have likened it to an ever-widening spiral of development as people move through various levels of physical, mental, social, and spiritual growth. Every time people move from one level to the next, they undergo a major paradigm shift, a different window through which to look out on the world, a transformation of their basic value system.

Remember those first weeks when you went away to a boarding academy or a college? The world exploded outward with new people, new possibilities, and new problems, and you rather quickly found (if you survived!) a system of thinking that made at least some sense of all of it. In short, you moved from one meme level to the next. You didn't lose everything you had been before; instead you embraced a new paradigm that let you build on what you had been in order to incorporate all the new possibilities.

Figure C

MEMES	COLOR	THEME	THINKING	VALUE SYSTEMS THE SABBATH REFLECTS
Level 8	Turquoise	WholeView	Wholistic	Brings Peace, Harmony, and a Wholistic Existence [Heaven in Miniature]
Level 7	Yellow	FlexFlow	Integrative	Rejuvenates the Earth; Reintegrates All Life Systems
Level 6	Green	HumanBond	Humanistic	Builds Community; Creates Equality; Stresses Environmental Stewardship
Level 5	Orange	StriveDrive	Strategic	Provides "Quiet Zones" in Life, a Stress Reliever, Peace to the Soul
Level 4	Blue	TruthForce	Absolutistic	"One Right Way"; the Seventh Day, not the First; the Holy Law of God
Level 3	Red	PowerGods	Egocentric	We Alone Have the Truth; Go Out and Tell Others They Are in Error
Level 2	Purple	KinSpirits	Tribalistic	Traditions; Family Worship; Gives Church Family Its Group Identity
Level 1	Beige	Survival Sense	Automatic	Staying Alive; No Understanding or Appreciation of the Sabbath Here

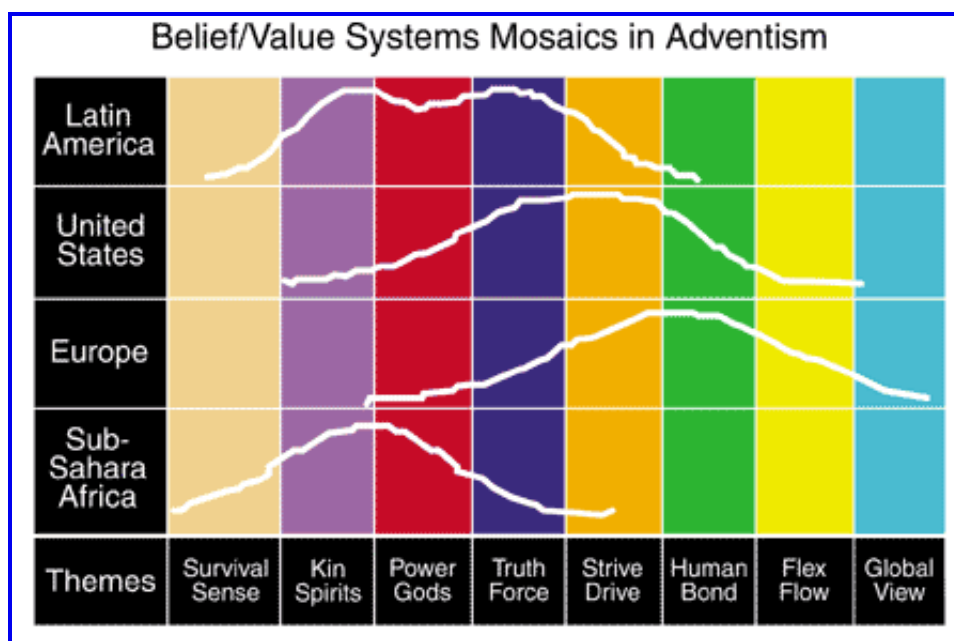
Both the research and our own experiences tell us that a person can be at more than one meme or

color level in different areas of their life, even though one value system dominates their outlook. Thus, while you may be a conservative Blue, especially in terms of religion and the church, in relation to your family you may be Purple (tradition-driven), at work you may be Orange (success-driven), in sports you may be Red (power-driven), and in relation to others you may be Green (people-driven). Even with all these variations, your basic paradigm and way of seeing the world is still Blue (order-driven).

An example may help. Here's how persons with different value systems might look at a key belief within Adventism—the Sabbath (Figure C).

Everyone on the chart might agree that God's Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. But how the Sabbath is viewed, the reasons it is important, and even how it should be celebrated may differ from level to level. As should be clear, these are not so much matters of right and wrong as they are of responding out of our deep value systems.

It's also important to remember that the color-associated values presented here aren't necessarily related to race, ethnicity, gender, or even length of time as a believer. Many of the same issues involved in conversion—moving from Red to Blue—can also be seen in constituency meetings and committee meetings when people disagree and tempers flare, even though just about everyone there would claim to be converted. Similarly, you can experience the animistic, spirited (Purple) worldview just as much at a Black worship service in Washington, D.C., as in Mexico City. Debates at a conference committee in Oregon about the celebration style of worship and local church autonomy (the Orange to Green meme) are much like the debates before an African division council over national leadership and a more contextualized method of evangelism.



That said, some broad generalizations about the Adventist Church may still be valid and help to explain the conflicts that sometimes arise when church leaders and members gather around the globe to do the church's business—as at the upcoming General Conference session June 29-July 8 in Toronto. In developing countries the church is dealing, for the most part, with issues within the level 1 to 3 zone (Beige through Red). The impact of local religions, higher rates of poverty and violence, economic crises, and providing for people in need are very much in focus. Staying alive, finding safety, and dealing with tribal kinship are still highly important to many Adventists in many world areas (Figure D).

The church in much of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America is often characterized by authoritarian (Blue, level 4) cultures and church structures. Responding obediently to designated authority is a very high value here.

Members in North America, Northern Europe, and Australia have achieved high levels of education and affluence, with lower birth rates and more expansive use of technology for communicating the gospel. Many church members in these areas are centered in the strategic, free-market-driven, and individual-liberty-focused perspective—all traits of the level 5 (Orange) worldview. Some members with new value

systems (Green, Yellow, with a small number at Turquoise, levels 6 to 8) are emerging in the “post modern” age and are strongly challenging the “by-the-book” Blue style of much of the church’s leadership and worship in these regions. Unless our thinking and our church structures adapt, we’d have to predict that Adventism, with a predominant Blue value system, will have greater success with groups and nations in the earlier memes (Beige to Blue) than with groups and nations in the latter memes (Orange and higher).

Where to Now?

Much of the conflict polarizing the church, such as racism, for example, or styles of worship—traditional versus celebration—are really surface issues that emerge from conflicting value systems, the ways we see the world, God, and each other. When you break through the color of skin, you see a different set of colors (i.e., ways of thinking about “the real world”). Older, stereotypical ways of grouping people—by race, ethnicity, national origin, gender—that the church has borrowed from society will probably matter much less in the new century. What we will discover is that only human values count, and that these can be expressed differently by persons who otherwise share many external characteristics. Two married Anglo women living in a middle-class suburb of Cleveland may have less in common as regards value systems than either of them may share with a single African male who has learned from his experience as a political refugee to value personal freedom.

*When you break
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Thus, for example, while Seventh-day Adventist Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda shared many of the same biological gene pools and cultural norms in terms of historic memories, they had very different value systems because of the ways in which their tribes experienced European colonization, local politics, and economic interests. And even though the gospel came to them, albeit en masse, its foundation wasn’t strong enough to withstand the historic, cultural, and political antagonisms that clashed in genocide and war.

Conversely, proponents for the ordination of women and those opposing ordination tend to express similar ways of thinking (self-righteousness from the left versus self-righteousness from the right), even though the content of their beliefs couldn’t be more different.

It’s a sad but true fact that without new understandings, new ways of thinking, most attempts to make peace will flounder. Yet 95 percent of all attempts at group reconciliation, conflict resolution, motivational training, workshops on church leadership, diversity training, and seminars on ministry and mission still focus on these surface differences rather than on the operating deep-decision value systems within. Our belief systems can and, in fact, will change when we discover that they have worn thin or fail to equip us for a world in constant upheaval. Evidence that doesn’t fit in my present system requires me to at least think about adopting a broader view. This is true when we come to Christ, and we are increasingly discovering that it is the law for how we stay with Him. Minds change with the times. New times produce new thinking—thank God!

Without an understanding of different value systems, I could judge everyone else from my own limited perspective. Believers at the Purple level, for instance, are focused on rigid roles, rules, security, and “thus speaks *the* prophet.” At Red are those focused on power and “what’s in it for me?” At Blue are those concerned with absolute values, saintliness, and “we alone have the truth.” Orange believers are focused on achievement, success, and “image is everything.” A fifth group (Green) focuses on equality, inclusiveness, community, and “we are in this together.” Each memetic level or system of thinking sees the same reality differently. And it’s painfully apparent that earlier levels are not able to understand later levels. Unless we have made the transition to another level, we tend to doubt that there is another level. Because we lack an understanding of the deeper forces at work in our disagreement, we focus on surface differences.

The idea sketched here actually holds tremendous power for good in our church, because it helps us understand why conflict happens instead of merely focusing on patching up differences. It also underscores why certain kinds of approaches can be crippling to the church and its mission. Put simply: Introducing a one-right-way Blue approach to authority in a culture used to working comfortably with consensus Green may cause many members to see *RED*!

The kind of leaders, therefore, the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs for the 21st century will be “spiral leaders, persons who are not “arrested” nor “closed” at any one level. We need leaders who understand the whole spiral of human development and are able to speak the “psychological languages” of people at those levels, enabling them to see the next step they are to take in their spiritual growth.

*Crisis points within
Adventism can become
opportunities for
inclusive change*

Our struggles in the church are not with human *types*, but with the value systems—the memes—within us that are in conflict. The problem is not that we are White or Black, male or female, believe Christ had a sinless nature or a sinful one, live in North America or Africa, believe women should be ordained or not, are liberal or conservative. It’s the value systems within us that are in conflict. In spite of their apparent importance as “stand-alone” issues, they are really expressions of our larger life experience. When I learn that the female with whom I may be in disagreement most strongly is trying to be true to her value system as much as I am to mine, there is room for empathy and even admiration, even if not yet agreement. The basis for understanding has been laid: something can be built on it.

Across Adventism, members and leaders are learning that “the forces that most influence organizations come from outside the organization, not from within.”³ What presently appear to be crisis points within Adventism can become opportunities for inclusive change. In Chinese the word for “crisis” is *wei-ji*, and is composed of two picture-characters: *wei*, meaning “danger,” and *ji*, meaning “opportunity.” Developing thoughtful, respectful ways of dealing with each other when we are in conflict—giving each other permission to grow and change and adapt—can bring tremendous blessings out of our dangerous opportunities.

¹ A sad illustration is found in what happened among some Adventists during the genocide that engulfed Rwanda in 1994.

² Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 18.

³ Peter Drucker, in *Forbes*, Oct. 5, 1998.

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Additional Resources

[Spiral Dynamics](#) (The Web site)

[Spiral Dynamics](#) (The book)