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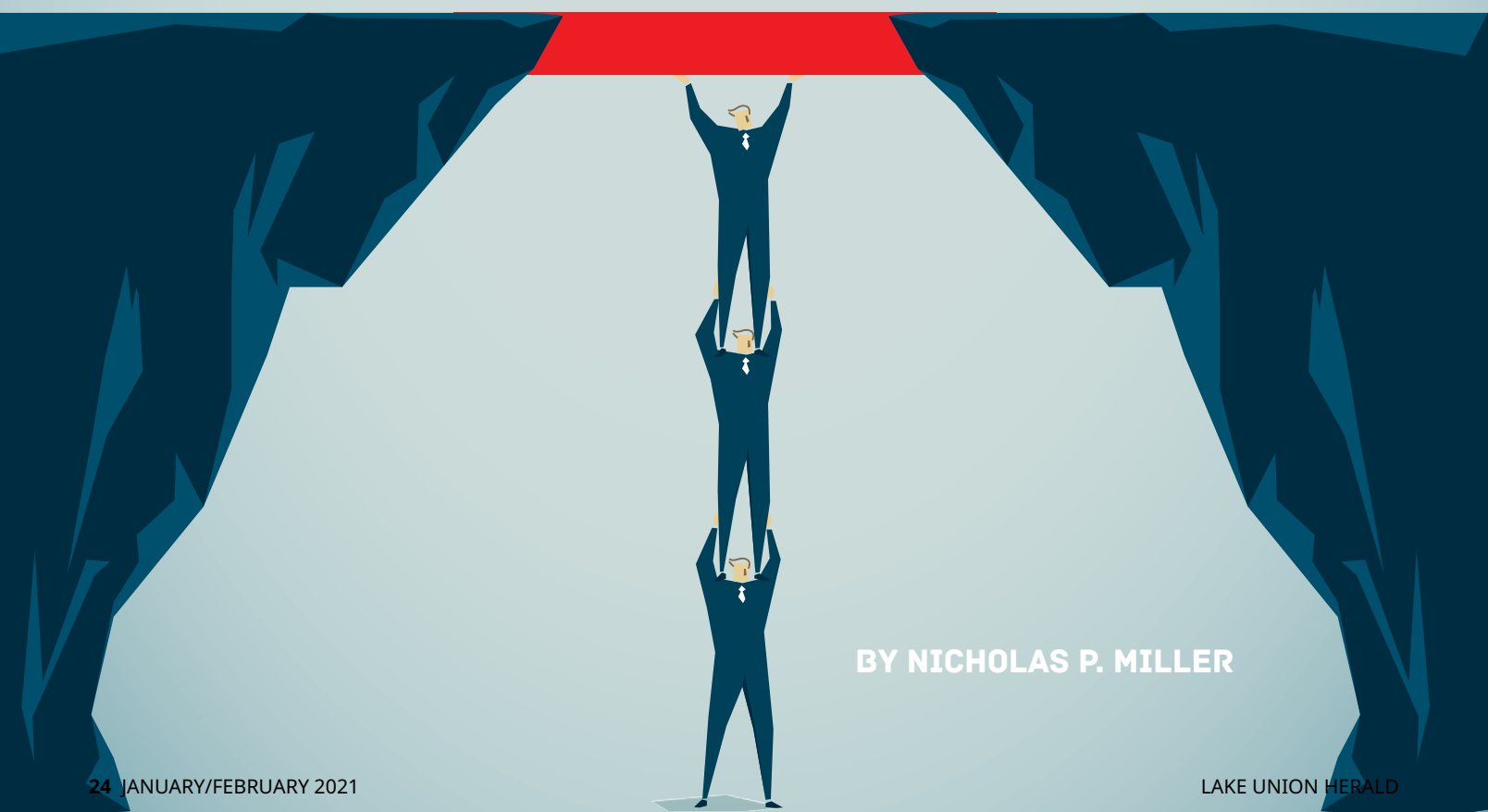
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AFTER THE DUST SETTLES

THE CHURCH AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN 2020

The outcome of the recent election season simply cannot be good news for everyone. Many of my friends are celebrating the exit out of our long, national nightmare; but, for many others, they believe we are just entering a long national nightmare. The experiences are mirror images of each other, one group experiencing what the other one did four years ago.



BY NICHOLAS P. MILLER

This shared experience is an opportunity for us all to understand and even empathize with each other, irrespective of the political views we hold.

Do you want your family and friends to be as frustrated and upset as you have been/or are beginning to be? Perhaps some of us feel that way now; but I think underneath, in our better selves and Christian hearts, we really do not want our loved ones to suffer. Surely, here is a bridge of understanding as we enter a new year.

It is a good time to remember the last President to preside over a national division greater than we have now, Abraham Lincoln. After a war that left more Americans dead than all other U.S. wars combined, over moral issues greater than any that divide us today, he said the following memorable lines: “The prayers of both could not be answered — that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

These memorable words pointed towards unity then, and I think they might help us today. Yes, Joseph Biden, Kamala Harris, and the Democrats have won the White House. But the Democrat “blue wave” that many pollsters were predicting and anticipating has not materialized. The Senate appears very likely to stay Republican, and the Democrats have lost ground in the House, although they hang onto it by a thin margin. There very likely will be no “court packing,” no implementation of new federal LGBT legislation, and no unrestrained implementation of a full Democratic agenda. Nobody has fully won; nobody has fully lost.

Can we see a design in this inconclusive outcome? . . . an invitation, even, to recognize that both sides have legitimate concerns and grievances; that there must be some working together for either side to get along in the business, the *people’s* business, of running OUR country; of which God has made us stewards for ourselves and for the world? The pandemic only makes clearer the important role we play, not only for each other as Americans, but as important members of the world community.

As we contemplate this message and its meaning, how might we think about the immediate issues we will face as Adventist Christians and as a church in the coming year? What follows is a brief discussion of the public affairs matters with which we will be grappling in the year to come.

An Ongoing National and Global Pandemic

While we get a new presidential administration on inauguration day, we still will be battling the worldwide

pandemic. By the time you read this, more than 300,000 people will have died in America and more than two million worldwide from COVID-19. While vaccines are in the pipeline, widespread implementation likely will not occur until later in the spring, by which time many thousands more people will have died.

The pandemic has resulted in economic, social and religious freedom concerns, caused by the lockdowns that have been instituted to control the outbreak. How necessary these lockdowns are in terms of extent and duration is a matter of some controversy, although most health experts agree that some level of lockdown and closings are necessary to save lives.

Some Christians have been eager to oppose the locking down or closing of churches as an infringement on religious freedom. Adventist religious liberty leaders, however, by in large, have viewed the lockdowns or attendance limits as appropriate exercise of the state power to protect public health and welfare. They point out that we are not prohibited from worshipping, as churches and Sabbath schools continue meeting over Zoom and Skype. Further, the lockdowns have not been aimed at certain religious groups versus others, unfairly pinching minority religions and leaving majority religions untouched. All have been impacted by the lockdowns.

In some places, especially more liberal states like California and New York, it does appear that, at times, religious gatherings are treated more strictly than secular businesses, like restaurants, bus stations or casinos. Indeed, just as I’m finishing this piece, the Supreme Court has ruled that limits on church and synagogue attendance in New York State were too invasive, and violated the First Amendment.

Some fear that this decision over-zealously promotes religious freedom at the expense of community health. But the opinion is carefully nuanced, and merely holds that limiting a thousand-plus-seat cathedral, or a

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several-hundred-seat synagogue to ten or twenty-five worshippers, is simply unreasonable and violates the First Amendment. The Court affirmed, however, that states can provide limits that are more carefully tailored to actual

health needs. Conservative justices specifically noted limits of 50 and 100 worshippers found in California to be acceptable.

This decision simply says that there are some limits under the Constitution to the state's regulation of church attendance, even in a pandemic. In many places, including Michigan where I live, churches are entirely exempt from closing and attendance limits. Yet still, when we do meet for worship, Adventist and other health leaders believe that we should abide by social distancing, mask wearing and hand washing protocols, as long as infection numbers continue to be high in our communities. Taking these precautions is an important way of loving our neighbors and each other.

The Ongoing Contest Between LGBT Rights and Religious Freedom

While I believe that the new administration will more effectively provide greater coordination and help at the national level to deal with the pandemic, I do think that their policies will increase the conflict between LGBT issues and religious freedom. As long as the Senate stays Republican, the federal legislation on the topic written by the Democrats, known as the Equality Act, will not be passed. Hopefully, this period of divided government will provide a window to pass an alternate bill called Fairness for All.

This legislation meaningfully protects the religious freedom of individuals, churches and even businesses, while preventing discrimination against LGBT persons in employment and housing. Adventist church leaders working in public affairs have helped draft and promote Fairness for All, and view it as a good balance between protecting our religious freedoms, and the fundamental rights of others.

Whether legislation passes or not, it is likely that the departments of Justice and Education will attempt to promote LGBT rights in its civil rights actions. Schools, hospitals and other religious institutions may face pressure to change or compromise their religious views on sexuality and gender. We may have to engage in litigation to defend our biblical teachings on these matters. The good news is that the Supreme Court is relatively conservative, and religious freedom likely will be protected in these matters. The Lake Union last Spring passed a Statement on Sexuality and Gender that speaks to some of these issues to help provide guidance for our conferences and institutions. That statement can be found here, along with other church statements on these issues: <https://www.lakeunion.org/policies/church-statements-on-sexuality-and-gender>.

Issues of School Funding and Vouchers

If the Senate majority changes to the Democrats, issues relating to school vouchers and the content of strings, conditions and limits on hiring and teaching will become a concern. But if the Senate stays in its current configuration, controlled by Republicans, it is likely that religious schools will have protection for their religious teachings and standards.

The importance of these matters was recently highlighted in a Florida case, where an Adventist elementary school teacher was fired for having a gay relationship. The media widely reported the story, and focused on the fact that school gets Florida vouchers money. But the Florida legislature is conservative, and has not attached limiting strings that would threaten our biblical standards. But contrary federal legislation could change that.

Absent Senate change, institutions in conservative states generally will be protected, and thus we should be good in Michigan, Indiana and Wisconsin, although perhaps somewhat less so in Illinois. At the college and university level, the Biden administration is likely to reverse Trump-era regulations which allowed Christian schools to assert a religious exemption in a case even if they had not previously applied for it. In our changed environment, it might be wise for our colleges and universities to seek such exemptions before cases or lawsuits are brought.

Continued Social Justice Protest and Unrest

The stress produced by the pandemic, along with the inequities it revealed in healthcare and education, economic resources, and the difference in COVID exposure between mostly blue-collar essential workers and better protected professional workers, produced a powder keg of emotions that were ignited by some high-profile police misconduct cases. The year 2020 will be forever linked with the names of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, who are added to the long and tragic list of black people — such as Philando Castile, Michael Brown and Eric Garner — whose lives were prematurely snuffed out by overly aggressive police behavior.

One need not believe or insist that all the names on that list were innocent of any crime or wrongdoing to see the injustice of receiving the death penalty for minor infractions like possessing a counterfeit \$20 bill or selling unlicensed cigarettes. Some of the names on that list were entirely innocent at the time of their death. In protesting this kind of over-reaction and unjustified human slaughter, Adventists join their voices with Ellen White, who more than 100 years ago wrote the following observation on the treatment of blacks in American communities:

“The desire to show their masterly authority over the blacks is still burning in the hearts of many who claim to be Christians, but whose lives declare that they are standing under the black banner of the great apostate. When the whites commit crimes, they are often allowed to go uncondemned, while for the same transgressions the blacks . . . are treated worse than the brutes.”¹

Many things have changed in our country for the better since Ellen White’s day, but some things have not changed enough. Many statistics show that people of color are arrested more frequently, mistreated with greater regularity, convicted more often, and given longer sentences for the same crimes than are white people.²

Did Ellen White believe that we should speak against this kind of unfairness? Well, she herself did. “The demon of passion is let loose, and all the suffering that can be devised is instituted against them. Will not God judge for these things? As surely as the whites have brought their inhuman cruelty to bear upon the negroes, so surely will God’s vengeance fall upon them.”³ Can we properly deliver a judgment hour message when we do not speak clearly on the kinds of things that God is judging?



Conclusion – Builders of Bridges of Reconciliation

Let us consider the role that we as Christians might play during these divided times. If, as we saw in our introduction, Lincoln could see God’s purposes in a political stalemate and could speak words of unity and compassion, cannot we do the same? If Lincoln could say these words, and mean them, after our great national Civil War, surely we can say them in light of our heated, but much less violent, social and political war: “With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation’s wounds . . . ~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace [and health!] among ourselves and with all nations.”

May we work as a church in the coming year to build bridges for the gospel, for religious freedom, and for peace and justice in our church and our nation. An important part of that work is the promotion and support of *Liberty* magazine, the only church paper that can regularly be found in the offices of judges, politicians and lawyers. *Liberty*’s witness is becoming all the more critical during this time of conflict and crisis. Be sure to work with your church’s religious liberty leader to fund subscriptions for the legal and political thought leaders in your area. The freedom you save could be your own! ■

1. 14 LtMs, 1899, Par. 9, in a letter to H.W. Kellogg.

2. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/work/wp/2017/11/16/black-men-sentenced-to-more-time-for-committing-the-exact-same-crime-as-a-white-person-study-finds/>

3. 14 LtMs, 1899, Par. 9, in a letter to H.W. Kellogg.

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