

Seventh-day Adventists According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*

Peter Bentley

Religion and religious groups have rarely received coverage in Australian media circles in proportion to their numerical significance and wide influence in health, education, welfare, social justice and society in general. Certain topics receive regular mention but they are usually topics related to controversy or scandal.

One of the reasons for the scant coverage is the lack of journalists with knowledge of, experience with and interest in religious issues. The degree of knowledge of religion is particularly important because of the possibility of simplification and misrepresentation. This point has particular reference for small groups in Australia, like the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This article provides an overview of the media coverage of the Seventh-day Adventist Church during this century, with particular reference to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the main Sydney daily newspaper. The *Sydney Morning Herald* seems to provide the most extensive newspaper coverage of the SDAs in Australia, possibly because of the church's high density in the Sydney region (for example, the presence of Cooranbong, Avondale College, various offices and the Sydney Adventist Hospital).

In the first decade of this century, the most common item of publicity was the Seventh-day Adventist annual/regular camp or meeting. In its brief mention of the camp in early January 1905, the *Sydney Morning Herald* also provided a short history of the development of the church,

noting that its membership at that time was about 3000, served by 20 ministers in 60 churches. The article mentioned that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had a focus on health and social reform, particularly relating to temperance and that the various addresses at the camp focussed on "The Signs of the Times" and their relation to the Second Advent (S.M.H., 2/1/1905).

In October 1905, it was reported that another camp had been held which featured very "methodical arrangements" and a "perfect calm and quietude". The article also suggested that: "The air of freedom about such meetings as well as the novelty connected with them makes them, it is claimed both inviting and interesting" (S.M.H., 16/10/1905).

In 1906, the *Herald* noted that there were 106 Seventh-day Adventist churches in Australia and provided a brief profile of the Wahroonga Sanatorium (S.M.H., 24/10/1906).

There appeared occasional references to the camps held by the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the next twenty years in the *Herald*, but usually the reports were brief - 50 to 200 words and mainly descriptive, without interpretation.

In 1934 and 1935, the church achieved some coverage due to the continuing question of employees working on Sunday, which the trade unions complained gave the Seventh-day Adventist companies an unfair advantage (S.M.H. 17/7/1934). The Church, through the Assistant Manager of Avondale Industries, Carl Ulrich, had

lodged an application with the Industrial Commission on behalf of various employees to vary the award conditions. The employees were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and were paid award wages and observed normal working hours, except for Saturday. The Church and their employees wanted to observe Saturday as their officially recognised day off, thus leaving the Sunday (then the day of National Sabbath in Australia) free for normal work practices (S.M.H., 20/6/1935). The question was decided a few months later and the *Herald* reported that the concept of a 'notional Sunday' had been granted for the company because the people involved in the work were Seventh-day Adventists. For the purposes of the award, Saturday was regarded as Sunday (S.M.H., 12/2/1936).

Interestingly, twenty years later the question of Sunday work arose again, but from a different angle. The Theatrical and Amusement Employees' Association put pressure on the Greater Union Association to stop the Seventh-day Adventist Church from using the Capital Theatre (Sydney) for Sunday night services/evangelical meetings. Although only voluntary labour had been used by the church, "The union's attitude was that if theatres were operated for religious services on Sundays it might prove an excuse for opening them for non-religious purposes". Similar refusals were made to other bodies (S.M.H., 3/11/1954). This dispute flowed on to the suburban cinemas and other venues had to be used (S.M.H., 23/6/1954).

Just after the end of the Second World War, Pastor J.B. Conley, Australian delegate to the New Zealand Conference, was quoted in the *Herald* as condemning the keeping of greyhounds. The reason pro-

vided in the article was that they ate "edible beef". Pastor Conley estimated that 30,000 greyhounds ate 60,000 pounds of beef daily, while Australians were eating less meat in order to send supplies to a "hungry Europe". He also said that if something had to be done with the ashes of the greyhounds they could be used to grow runner beans. The greyhound authorities rejected his claims, saying that the dogs ate horse meat. The article ended implying that this meant a shortage of horses for farms and milk delivery (S.M.H., 15/12/1947).

One year later Pastor Conley defended the Church against (incorrect) reports that there was a mass exodus of people from the cities due to Seventh-day Adventist teaching about the return of Christ and the end of the world (*Daily Mirror*, 2/7/1945). Questions about this aspect of the Church's teaching were taken up some thirty years later with the visit of Dr Pierson.

The building projects and expansion plans of churches are a common area of media interest. In 1952 *The Daily Telegraph* (5/5/92) first reported on the plans for developing a health complex at East Hornsby (Wahroonga). It also reported on the launch of the an appeal for £100,000 for missionary work in the Pacific. (*The Daily Telegraph* 16/2/1953).

Avondale College received some publicity in 1967 with the opening of a new building (S.M.H., 12/6/1967) and the plans for the \$5.5 million dollar hospital at Wahroonga also aroused interest (S.M.H., 19/5/1970).

The hospital was also linked to the Adventist focus on health, which provided a popular media reference from the beginning. The public plans to stop smoking were begun when it was not as popular a health cause as it is today (S.M.H.,

10/12/1967).

Indeed, an article about Adventist health records was headed "How to live longer and be more healthy" (S.M.H., 16/9/1980). This article noted that a university study had found that "The Adventist lifestyle is conducive to less sickness, longer life and less call on health services compared with the general community".

Numerous articles about the Chamberlains during the 1980s contained references to health matters, including the various products of the Sanitarium company and the use of props like coffins in anti-smoking lectures.

In 1973, the President of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Dr Robert Pierson, visited Australia on a seven-week fact finding mission of Adventist work in Australia and the South Pacific. He was interviewed for the *Herald* by Alan Gill, one of the few religious affairs specialists in one of the longest articles to appear about the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Australian press.

Dr Pierson provided a brief description of the Church, outlining that it was a small church with a membership of "ordinary middle-class people". The article noted that members were known for their regular giving to the church (tithing) and their missionary activity in the South Pacific, though Dr Pierson rejected as "absolutely without foundation" allegations that his church used American dollars to buy the allegiance of individuals in developing nations.

The article highlighted their health orientation and hospitals, mentioning that the church had recently opened the Sydney Adventist Hospital, a 309 modern bed complex in Wahroonga at a cost of \$9 million and that the Sydney-based non-smokers' clinic was arousing increasing

attention.

On the question of the second coming of Christ, Dr Pierson commented that "the present state of world unrest and increasing moral laxity indicates that the second coming is imminent, and that Christ will return in a manner both visible and audible". Gill concluded by noting that Dr Pierson refused to forecast a date for Christ's return, however (S.M.H., 15/11/1973).

The briefest reference and perhaps one of the more intriguing concerned a report that Edward John Eastwood, the 34 year old convicted kidnapper, was baptised into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a "makeshift pool" at Pentridge Prison, Melbourne. Eastwood had kidnapped a teacher and six students from Faraday Primary School in Victoria in 1972. Five years later he escaped and repeated the action at another school in Gippsland, Victoria (S.M.H., 10/1/1985).

In 1988, Alan Gill, in the *Herald's* religion column, wrote that "In the 1970s the church began a quest, which still continues, to be considered part of the mainstream. A minister almost hugged me when I included his sermon in the *Herald's* now defunct 'From the Pulpit' column. There was joy verging on delirium when an Adventist service was broadcast by the ABC (S.M.H., 12/10/1988).

In another Alan Gill article (one of the best articles about the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it was written just before the trial of Lindy Chamberlain), it was commented that: "In recent years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, one of Australia's smaller but more interesting religious groups, has tried hard to gain publicity. Thanks to the Azaria Chamberlain affair it has succeeded, though not in the way intended" (S.M.H., 14/8/1982). This article had one of the more interest-

ing titles - "The Seventh-day Adventists make Weet-Bix, nurture Lindy Chamberlain and think Christ will come again".

This survey of articles relating to the SDA church illustrates Alan Gill's point above. Until 1980, there was little media coverage of, reference to, or interest in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia. After August 1980, a family who happened to be Adventist, arguably became the major determinant of the public image of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia.

It is difficult to determine how much media coverage there was of the Azaria Chamberlain affair in the 1980s, but it is possible that the number of articles alone would number in the thousands. The topic was not limited to articles in papers and magazines, but letters to the editors of city and local publications. Alan Gill, who was Letters Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* for the first five years of the Chamberlain saga said that during the trial they were receiving an average of 100 'Azaria' letters each day (S.M.H., 12/10/1988).

A survey conducted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church before the Azaria affair found that the church was not well-known and that people often confused it with other groups, notably the Jehovah Witnesses and "unusual-sounding sects, generally seen as radical and peculiar" (S.M.H., 14/8/1982). This general lack of awareness and understanding about the Seventh-day Adventist Church was a characteristic displayed by the media as well as the general public. It meant that there was an environment in Australia in which sensationalism and irrational discussion could flourish.

Most of the articles written during the 1980s did not contain any explicit reference or detailed analysis of the Seventh-

day Adventist Church, but it must be remembered that they were written in the context of a stereotyped and hostile environment. It was possible in this case to create a negative image of a group by emphasising certain characteristics of the individuals involved, juxtaposing emotionally sensational photos and illustrations, including "academic" comments and references. If you looked at a headline which read "Lindy: It was God's will that my daughter died...", what would you conclude? If an article about the trial of Lindy Chamberlain for the murder of her daughter was on the same page as a discussion about the acts of ritual infant sacrifice among cults, what could the average reader conclude?

The authors of the report about discrimination and religion for the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board concluded that there had been "prejudicial reporting" in the Azaria Chamberlain case and that media sensationalism was "tantamount to religious persecution". This style of reporting "had deleterious effects on its [Seventh-day Adventist Church] image in the eyes of the general public. Before these events, the Church had had a rather benign image, which it will now take some years to regain"¹

Dr Norman Young's book about the involvement of people in the campaign to overturn Lindy's conviction, *Innocence Regained*, also provides a perceptive examination of the role of the media and its substantial bias. It should, however, not be concluded that all media reports were sensationalist. Some reporters like Malcolm Brown of the *Sydney Morning Herald* made the majority look like cadets out for a journalistic kill.²

Media presentations changed significantly after the early release of Lindy Chamberlain and the subsequent Morling

Royal Commission which found that Lindy should have been acquitted.

The two main changes were:

- 1) A loss of interest in the case and a vast decrease in the amount of reporting.
- 2) As the 'poor' Chamberlains sought compensation for their trials, there was a more sympathetic presentation, though most of the media did not perceive any need to apologise.

There was a brief resurgence of media interest after the release of the film made by Australian director Fred Schepisi, *Evil Angels* (in the USA, the film was titled *A Cry in the Dark*). Again, what was most interesting was the absence of references to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Chamberlain's involvement in the church. This is perhaps not surprising since the film portrayed the media as "vultures picking over the carcass of a sensation" (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 6/11/1988). The sensationalist cultic murder theories were no longer popular and the image of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was again becoming "benign".

Church leaders, members and researchers have often commented on the spasmodic and idiosyncratic approach

which the secular media appears to take when reporting religious affairs in Australia, but as this study has demonstrated, the inability of the secular media to seriously examine religious beliefs is highlighted when the beliefs are those of the less established and smaller religious groups.

The secular media usually cannot adequately cover the large well-established religious bodies, but when they try to cover the smaller religious bodies, the results are often a tragic farce. If good reporting does occur, it is usually because a religious affairs specialist has been assigned to the task or the general reporter is unusually sensitive.

Notes

1. Anti-Discrimination Board of N.S.W, *Discrimination and Religious Conviction*, NSW Government Publisher, Sydney, 1984, pp 196-97).
2. See Norman Young's interesting assessment of Malcolm Brown in Norman H. Young, *Innocence Regained: the fight to free Lindy Chamberlain*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1989, pp 12-14.