

“We Will Never Be the Same Again:”
The Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists and the Ultimate Transition
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It is my privilege to speak to a group of historians that has done so much to promote and advance a knowledge of and appreciation for the Adventist past. I think it would be accurate to say that there have never been so many who do Adventist history at such a high level—with the education and sophistication and diversity, and the information we can access with the touch of a finger, and the vast capabilities for such dissemination. In many ways it may be a kind of golden age of Adventist historiography. Instead of an occasion for boasting this is a weighty responsibility, isn't it? This morning I would like to speak with you about how we can maximize that responsibility by making the ultimate transition.

Introduction

Don Neufeld stepped onto the platform of the Civic Auditorium in downtown San Francisco on Thursday, July 31, 1962. To the delegates gathered for the business meeting at the forty-ninth General Conference session, he briefly outlined the purpose and progress of the first ever Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia project. Neufeld's staff at the Review and Herald had begun work on the Encyclopedia after it had been voted by the Review and Herald board just months earlier on April 4, and approved at the GC Spring Meeting. The ambitious plan was to complete the single volume reference work in just two years. Prayers were solicited.¹

Four years later (back then GC sessions were held quadrennially) Neufeld again appeared before the assembled session delegates, this time at Cobo Hall in Detroit, on June 22, 1966, and announced that the “staggering undertaking” was complete. He revealed that, aside from his fulltime editorial staff of five, more than seven hundred individuals had written for the Encyclopedia (many of whom were present), and that the project had cost the Review and Herald some \$400,000. Then the Encyclopedia editor remarked on the purpose and distribution plan of the new volume:

“This Encyclopedia is designed to be a standard reference volume in the public, university, seminary, and other libraries of the land. Day by day people are coming to us requesting information about Seventh-day Adventists. Now we can refer them to the Encyclopedia. The Encyclopedia is also designed to be a reference volume for our own people. It is a thrilling story of the providences of God in a movement that is bound to triumph. In one convenient volume we have gathered a wide range of information previously scattered in hundreds of sources, some of which are not readily accessible.

In these days of far-reaching changes in religious thinking, the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to evaluate objectively its past so that it may understand adequately the present and plan effectively for the future. This encyclopedia portrays the church's rich past, shows God's purpose for the church, and His guidance in its developments. All of us editors have confessed that after working on this Encyclopedia we will never be the same again....”²

As you may know, in 1976, a decade after that first *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* that Don Neufeld introduced, a revised edition was published. Then, in 1996, a second revised edition appeared, this time in two volumes. In all three editions the purpose remained the same, stated in the first paragraph of the Preface:

“The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia is a compendium of facts about Seventh-day Adventists (in this work sometimes abbreviated SDAs)—their work, beliefs, organization, methods, and philosophies. The work is intended to inform not only church members but non-SDAs as well who may be inquiring about the church’s work and beliefs.”³

Today

Today, here we are, just months away from the half century mark since Neufeld announced the completion of the church’s first encyclopedia. If you are a person who appreciates symmetry, these congruities are for you: the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists (ESDA) project—an entirely new encyclopedia, not simply a revision of the original, as the previous two volumes have been—was approved at the GC Spring Meeting in April of last year, announced at the GC session by the editor just months later, and is slated to be completed and debuted at the next GC session, this time quinquennially (thank God) instead of quadrennially. Like that first *Encyclopedia*, the new Encyclopedia is “intended to inform not only church members but non-SDAs as well who may be inquiring” about the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The proposed medium for this new Adventist reference work also has some symmetry with the old. As commonplace or passé as it sounds today to have a book “in the public, university, seminary, and other libraries of the land,” in the 1960s this was actually a cutting-edge ambition for an Adventist encyclopedia, as of course there had never been a church reference work, let alone one in a public library. This was, undoubtedly, a kind of transition, and one that we are readying to make again with this new Encyclopedia project.

For as there had not been an Adventist encyclopedia in a public library in 1966, so fifty years later, there has not been an Adventist encyclopedia in the new public library, the internet. Yes, unfortunately as of the late date of March 18, 2016, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not had a general denominational reference work online, free for public access. There have been several encyclopedias obtainable for a fee in print, the *SDA Encyclopedia* has been on CD-ROM, or as part of a software bundle, and the *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* and Gary Land’s *Dictionary* can be purchased in Kindle; but an Adventist reference work has not been available on the information juggernaut dubbed the “Net” or “Web” that we now have at our command with the tap of a finger on a ubiquitous mobile device. The church’s official encyclopedia must make the very necessary transition from print to digital. Why? Because the encyclopedia must be where the people are, and right now, they are online. Allow me to provide you a brief overview of the project that will accomplish this ultimate transition.

The ESDA: A Brief Overview

In September of 2014 the officers of the General Conference (GC) requested that Dr. David Trim, director of the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research (ASTR), write a proposal for the production of an entirely new Seventh-day Adventist encyclopedia. The officers had three

main reasons for this request. First, the last official SDA Encyclopedia was almost twenty years old (1996), and thus was very outdated in its reflection of a global movement with 18 million members. The 1966 membership of the church was about 1.6 million; in 1996 the membership was 9.3 million; today it is at 18.7 million; when the ESDA is completed in 2020, it will be well over 20 million, God willing. The current encyclopedia, unsurprisingly, reflects the membership demographics of the church when it was written, when the majority of Adventists resided in North America, Western Europe, and Australia. Sufficed to say, its biases—the perspective in which it was written, the article choices and subject matter, the articles that were included and those that were not included—are not even remotely reflective of the church today.

Second, although a fine job was done with the resources then available, the current encyclopedia is often unreliable on key facts, such as the date the work of Adventists started in a country, the first church workers there, the foundation dates of organizational units, etc. In truth, the authors of the 1966, 1976, and even the 1996 edition of the *SDA Encyclopedia* did not have access to primary and archival sources as we do now, and, moreover, did not have a good system of communicating with each other; these shortcomings are evident in the contradictions that often crop up in articles that treat on the same topic. Although it appears that a sizeable portion of the facts are accurate, a sufficiently high percentage are incorrect, enough to make it necessary to constantly check primary sources—a task that the existence of an encyclopedia is supposed to obviate. Further, many facts and details (like a person's date the month, day and year of an individual's birth and death, locations of unions or conferences throughout the years), as well as entire articles (the developments of major doctrines, Adventist's historical positions on certain subjects) that people expect in a reference work, are missing. And, the 1996 *Encyclopedia* includes demographic, historical, geographic, and demographic data on countries, states and provinces that is woefully out of date. Given the explosion of Adventist historiography in the internet age, we, as historians, really need to take a fresh look, and give a fresh, thorough treatment, to the article subjects in the *Encyclopedia*, with our more matured understanding and vast resources at our fingertips. Imagine an encyclopedia, based almost completely on primary materials, written by able historians, living online, to be updated as our understanding is enhanced further!

Finally, although the 1996 *SDA Encyclopedia* sold fairly well, the vast majority of our membership and the public has never seen it or read it. What the church needed was an accurate, honest, exhaustive, authoritative reference work on Seventh-day Adventists, freely accessible on a website to anyone with the swipe of a finger on an electronic device. A book would not do; the church needed to transition to the digital age.

The GC officers chose ASTR to request to direct the encyclopedia project because the department is the archives and records center of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and therefore its official repository of history and historical preservation, and it produces the yearbook and statistical report of the church. Additionally, throughout the quinquennium (2010-2015) ASTR had provided an awareness of Adventist history to literally hundreds of thousands of people via its television, web, and social media presence—think about this in terms of the ultimate transition theme—led out in the world church's 150th anniversary commemoration and other history-centered events, and provided extensive original historical research for the global church and GC administrators, with a good portion of the research influencing major church

administrative decisions. David Trim, the archivist, and I, the assistant archivist, both had PhDs in history and had published a combined 15 books and hundreds of articles.

As historians you can imagine endeavoring to write a proposal for an all-new encyclopedia. At first David and I actually toyed with the idea of asking for so much money that we knew the proposal would be rejected, and thus we'd be off the hook. But we thought better of it, and in April 2015 at the Spring Meeting, the General Conference Committee voted approval of ASTR's proposal for the Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists (ESDA).

The ESDA is a five-year project that will produce an estimated ten thousand brand new articles—and it's important to underscore again that it will not be an update or revision of the 1996 *Encyclopedia* but an entirely new one—written by thousands of people around the world with expertise on the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Thousands more will contribute in some other way, be it researching, peer-reviewing, copyediting, advising, promoting, or praying. Each of the estimated ten thousand articles will include an authoritative text authored by an expert, with tabs in which the user can view audio/visual media, original documents, and share a memory statement on the subject. The public will be able to interact even more with the past thanks to a crowd-sourced portal operated by Adventist Review Ministries that will specialize in local church and primary school histories, allowing people to upload histories, media, memories, and the like. ESDA Online will be an integral part of the forthcoming Adventist Digital Library, a one-stop-shop for all things Adventist history and heritage. Through a dynamic promotion strategy, the Encyclopedia website will be optimized to appear among the top results in search engines, and will be shared and advertised on social media and popular websites. Accessible to all on an eminently user-friendly, engaging interface, the ESDA website and accompanying app will be designed for cell phones, tablets, laptops, glasses, watches—whatever new medium arises. The ESDA will live online indefinitely, to be regularly updated and amplified, thus precluding the need for a project of this scope to ever be done again, and to stay current as greater information becomes available and church and world dynamics shift. So not only will this encyclopedia make the ultimate transition from print book to digital; it will have an optimal, maximized online presence.

The Process

This all sounds well and good, but how will such an encyclopedia be produced? What is in place to ensure that this ultimate transitional reference work will be a sound, reliable, and comprehensive product?

The ESDA main office is located in the ASTR Office at the General Conference in Silver Spring, Maryland. Aside from David, who is the editor of the ESDA, there is two staff: Benjamin Baker, the managing editor, and Patricia Brauer, office assistant.

There are two kinds of assistant editors of the ESDA: regional and thematic. Fourteen regional offices are located in each of the thirteen world divisions and attached field, with an assistant editor from that particular region directing the office, and in some more complex regions, subeditors helping the assistant editor. This will ensure that the articles on significant people, institutions, entities, ministries, and themes in regions, omitted from the previous *Encyclopedia* because it was largely run from the Review and Herald, will be included this time, written by

experts native to those areas. This is crucial. Our regional editor for the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, who is here today, has hundreds of Chinese Adventists slated for individual biographical articles, whereas the 1996 *Encyclopedia* had less than five! The regional office will be the center of the ESDA project in that division, from which the entire process will be managed. Consultant editors, for the most part division secretaries, have been appointed by each division: they will represent the interests of the territory and act as liaisons between division administrators, institutions, and members, and the ESDA main office. The consultant editors serve on the ESDA Editorial Board, which is comprised of approximately three dozen international church leaders who will oversee the production of the Encyclopedia.

The other kind of assistant editor is the thematic editor. These are responsible for themes that may defy geographical placement, such as the history of theology, missiology, or Ellen G. White-related articles.

Now if you know anything about this church you know that any major project must be supported by committees. The ESDA is directed by several committees, comprised of global church leaders, laypersons, academics, and historians like yourselves. The Editorial Board, comprised mostly of administrators but with some scholars, oversees the production and publication of the Encyclopedia. The Editorial Board ADCOM acts as an operating board, taking some major decisions on the production and publication of ESDA between the annual Editorial Board meetings. The Editorial Committee is composed of ESDA editors and makes decisions on the day-to-day planning and production of the ESDA, like what types of articles should be included, word lengths and deadlines. These committees are not bureaucracy for the sake of bureaucracy; they were established to ensure transparency, integrity, foresight, and the full participation of the global church, in the production of the ESDA. Of course, there will be suspicion about how independent and truthful the ESDA can be, so we need to be honest about the controls and checks and balances we have in place and not apologize for it. But please know that the best and brightest of Adventist scholars—and not, as often is the case, just theologians—are integral in the oversight of the ESDA (the editor and managing editor are scholars and historians first), and more will become involved in writing and peer reviewing.

Now to the nitty gritty: How is any given article or entry produced? “Adventists and Espionage” is a thematic article that will be included in the ESDA, so let’s take that as an example. This topic was originally proposed by an assistant editor who compiled an exhaustive list of article titles for the Encyclopedia. The assistant editor’s list will be reviewed by the ESDA Editorial Board. If it is approved, the assistant editor will find a person with the requisite expertise and skill to write an authoritative, thorough, accurate and engaging article on “Adventists and Espionage.” When such a person is identified (and it will be someone who is aware of how Adventists have worked for national governments, of how Adventists have come under secret surveillance by different national governments, and something about the wider history of spying), the editor requests that s/he write the article. Hopefully the individual will respond positively. When the person accepts the assignment, s/he is given a deadline, and begins researching and writing the article. In six months to a year—however long the deadline is—the author will submit the article to the editor via a content management system designed by database developers specifically for the Encyclopedia project—a sophisticated digital

management system, a seamless and holistic portal, utilized by the thousands of contributors. The assistant editor will then go over the article, and send it to peer reviewers. Because history is done in community, the peer reviewers, historians like you, are essential to this process, and this is the phase that will really take this project to another level. The reviewers peruse the articles for content, accuracy, scope, and clarity. In most cases some edits, minor or major, will need to be made to the article. The author will review the changes, and make them as appropriate. Once the editor is satisfied with the article, he will mark it “Approved” on the content management system. “Adventists and Espionage” will then be reviewed by a staff member at the ESDA Main Office. If it passes muster, it will be taken for review to the ESDA Editorial Board. If the Board approves it the article will be formatted and fitted for the ESDA website. The final step is for it to go live, on the internet, for the whole world to freely access. As time goes by, and as things change, our understanding develops and matures, and new information becomes available, “Adventists and Espionage” will be updated as needed.

A word here should be said about authoring an article. Because of the ten thousand articles that will be commissioned, the authors will not be paid. There are, however, other attractive incentives for authoring an article:

- Participate in a World Church project that thousands of colleagues and peers are engaging in, and make an enduring contribution.
- The author’s name will be signed on the article, so s/he will be the authority on the subject. Each author’s bio and photo will be featured on the ESDA website.
- The article counts as a scholarly publication and so is credited toward an academic tenure and is impressive on a CV.
- Add to the body of knowledge on the SDA Church, and the author’s particular region, in a way that is accurate, honest, and represents the church well.
- Each author will have access to research resources such as a digitized 1996 SDA Encyclopedia, ancestry.com, newspapers.com, Adventist Review/World archives, etc.
- Each participant will receive a discounted price for the print edition of the ESDA.
- Many colleges and universities award professors cash money when they have published an article.
- Recognition will be given by each division to authors who contribute with distinction to the ESDA.
- Fulfill the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy admonition to remember, record, and rehearse how God has led in our history.

The Ultimate Transition: Meaning and Ramifications

What will making the ultimate transition of having our church’s first reference work available to all online mean? What are its ramifications?

Well, as you know better than anyone, the public’s ability to obtain reliable information about the Adventist Church has been a problem for the length of our history, from the Millerite era to this present digital age. Not only has there been unreliable information disseminated about our church by fellow evangelicals and Protestants, but by offshoots and former members, and increasingly, even fellow Seventh-day Adventists, however well-meaning. A large portion of this

comes from a misunderstanding, or partial understanding, of history. Why the ultimate transition? So people can know about us and the historical record can be set straight.

The content on the Encyclopedia website will utilize the church's considerable scholarly community as well as its accumulated knowledge and resources, to achieve remarkable and heretofore unknown reliability and comprehensiveness. This reference work will also not shy away from the challenges that have faced Adventists around the world, and from how we have responded, from apartheid to communism to polygamy to war. The measured and objective manner in which these subjects are treated will show the public that we are realistic and honest about ourselves, not trying to distance ourselves through glossed-over and triumphalist mythology.

The frankness and transparency with which the story of our movement is told will benefit Adventism in the world in another way. Adventists operate best, and indeed flourish, when they are secure in a faith grounded in reliable information, as opposed to when they are insecure, or, more disturbingly, secure through unreliable information. The Encyclopedia idea maintains that the more we know about our history the stronger will be our certainty that God has led us. Gone are the days of the fear that greater knowledge will lead to defection. The Adventist at his/her best, and most effective in society, is well-informed. The strategy to inform non-Adventists about our faith is, remarkably, the same strategy for informing Adventists about their faith: by honesty, accuracy, and frankness. The ESDA will not be made public for purposes of propaganda; rather, it will be a reference work that is honest, open, and accurate. The ability of Seventh-day Adventists to provide reliable information about their history, institutions, and people, that is accessible, is essential to an optimal relationship with the public.

Now undoubtedly it will be a challenge to write for such a wide audience. But be assured that each entry will be fair not fawning, information-rich, simple and straightforward, free from nomenclature that only Adventists understand, and mission-oriented.

The ESDA will be where the people are. This is a platform to present our story, by everybody for everybody. Because there will be thousands of contributors, the Adventist church will be better and more fully represented (egregious misrepresentations of Adventism occur more frequently when fewer voices are doing the representing). Instead of Don Neufeld's public libraries, the ESDA will be available on the internet, as I said, the first Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia to be published and available online. It will be born online, a free site that will live on the web indefinitely, to be regularly amplified, edited, and updated in real time, thus ensuring that it will stay current, and preclude the need for a project of this scope to be taken on again. Our story will be told in real time.

Conclusion

The Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists project requests the participation of every member of ASDAH, including those who are not historians of Adventism, to produce an Encyclopedia fit to make this ultimate transition. Please email me at either of the addresses on the screen with your ideas, thoughts, and suggestions. When you are contacted and asked to contribute by writing an article or peer-reviewing, please do respond positively. When the complete Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventist website is announced at the 2020 GC Session, I believe

that, as Don Neufeld opined, “we will never be the same again,” for we will have made the ultimate transition.

¹“A Running Story of the Conference,” *Review and Herald*, August 1, 1962, pg. 8.

² *Ibid*, 21.

³ Don Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Review and Herald Publishing Association: Washington, D.C., 1966), pg. xi; Donald E. Mansell and Bobbie Jane Van Dolson, revising eds., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Revised Edition (Review and Herald Publishing Association: Washington, D.C., 1976), pg. xiii; Bobbie Jane Van Dolson and Leo R. Van Dolson, revising eds., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Second Revised Edition, A-L (Review and Herald Publishing Association: Hagerstown, MD, 1996), pg. xvi.