

# Bert B. Beach: ADVENTIST STATESMAN

*Sometimes a group does not recognize they have a treasure in their midst.*

BY ROY ADAMS

**I**T WAS SWELTERING hot in Canberra, Australia, that February afternoon back in 1991. And the normally security-conscious officials of the World Council of Churches (WCC) let down their guard, directing that the side doors be opened to let some fresh air into a stuffy auditorium crammed with delegates from around the world.

However necessary, it was a development tailor-made for a couple of disgruntled Adventists who'd been stalking the assembly ever since it opened. As if the portals had been thrown ajar just for them, they quietly marched into the auditorium without warning. In front of thousands of stunned delegates gathered in plenary session, and in the name of Seventh-day Adventists, they unfurled a huge banner denouncing the Catholic Church and accusing the WCC of pandering to Rome.

It was a coup—you've got to give it to them. They even came armed with helium balloons that, as they left the room, hoisted the banner to a spectacular perch high up at the ceiling, its silent message continuing to stare down the astonished assembly. For more than a half hour the entire proceedings came to a dead halt as mortified council leaders scrambled to bring things back to normal.

In the back of the auditorium was a five-foot-six-inch Adventist gentleman getting ready to stand tall for his



PHOTO BY LUDI LEITO

Bert Beach is at home fielding questions.

church. A veteran WCC observer, he didn't take long to realize that the reckless twosome had single-handedly plunged the Adventist Church into deep embarrassment and brought its name into serious disrepute. After a quick confab with South Pacific Division public affairs and religious liberty director Ray Coombe and me (Ray and I were both attending the council as reporters and had watched the incident unfold from the balcony), he secured permission to address the delegates, a rare privilege for someone in his special-observer category.

His articulation of the Adventist Church's position and how we viewed the rude interruption of the council's legitimate business truly did us proud. And as the international delegation broke out into sustained applause when he finished, in my mind I said: *There goes an Adventist statesman.*

Who was this unusual character who, on the spur of the moment and in the wake of public embarrassment, could rise to such heights of compelling eloquence in behalf of his church? Who was this man who, notwithstanding the heavy tension of that sultry Canberra afternoon, could bring relaxed laughter to a crowd so recently provoked?

His name is Bert B. Beach. Up until his retirement\* in July 1995 he served as public affairs and religious liberty

(PARL) director of the General Conference (GC) of Seventh-day Adventists, probably known by more religious leaders outside his church than any other Adventist alive today. I sat down with him at our offices in Silver Spring, Maryland, to probe into his mystique. I wanted to learn some-

Adventist aunt in Oregon, attending Laurelwood Academy in that state and, later, Walla Walla College in the state of Washington. It was at Walla Walla that his parents met.

The first of three children and the

towering figure in the area of religious liberty. It was perhaps from him that Bert received his first spark of interest in public affairs and religious liberty, an area that would later come to dominate his life. While living in Paris in 1951, he enrolled in the University of Paris (at the Sorbonne), where he studied under the noted French historian Rene Renouvin, graduating magna cum laude in 1958 with a Ph.D. in history.

Growing up in Europe, Bert missed out on many things in his home country, the United States. The plus side, however, is that he now has fluency in no less than five languages: English, French, German, Italian, and Swiss-German, the last being the

everyday language spoken in Switzerland. One Sabbath last April I had the privilege of traveling with him and others to La Lignière, the place on the shores of Lake Geneva where he was born. Current General Conference PARL director John Graz delivered the sermon in French, with Bert translating. Then as we walked to another building for lunch, here was Bert

cracking jokes with some longtime friends, Gianfranco Rossi and his wife, in fluent Italian. I was impressed. I'm sure that over the years he's often looked back with thankfulness to his parents for accepting the call to Europe before he was born. I wanted him to talk about them.

**RA: How old were you when you first came to the United States?**

**BB:** I put my feet on American soil for the first time when I was 8 years old. In those days when they sent out missionaries to Europe, it was for a 10-year term. So my parents left in 1926 and didn't go home for their first furlough until 1936.

**RA: You dedicated your first book,**

**One moment** Beach can be as serious as a judge trying a murder case; the next, he's got you in stitches. Natural to him, it's also a strategy. "Many times you're dealing with people you don't know," he says. "If you can put them at ease with something that's not too heavy to start with, it kind of oils the machinery."

only boy of

the family, Bert began his education as a first grader in Paris, France, in a building still standing (but which today is part of the French Ministry of Education).

In 1936 he moved with his parents to Bern, Switzerland, his father having been called to be secretary of the then Southern European Division, headquartered in that city. Here his entire education (elementary to secondary) switched to German. The outbreak of World War II put a heavy restriction on movement. And it was not until 1946 that Bert was able to travel to the United States for study at Pacific Union College in California. Then it was on to Stanford University, from where (before he was done) he answered a call back to the Southern European Division.

Located in Paris upon his return, he joined the evangelistic team of Jean Nussbaum, a French evangelist and a

thing about his personal journey, to hear what makes him tick.

**RA: Tell me about your childhood and early life. Where were you born; where did you grow up?**

**BB:** I was born on Seventh-day Adventist soil, so to speak—at the Gland [Lake Geneva] Sanitarium in Switzerland, on the shores of Lake Geneva, in 1928. At that time Gland (or La Lignière, as it was—and still is—called) was the headquarters of the Latin Union (no longer in existence), which grouped together the Latin countries of Europe and also included Switzerland (and I think Belgium also). That Latin Union became the nucleus, you might say, of the future Southern European Division, which is now the Euro-Africa Division, more or less.

**A**s Beach went on to explain, his parents were in Europe as Adventist missionaries. His father, Walter R. Beach, was born in North Dakota near the Canadian border, but grew up in Mountain Home, Idaho, just 50 miles south of Boise. His mother, Gladys Corley, a Texan born near Waco, went early to live with her



**Vatican II: Bridging the Abyss, to your father; and you have these beautiful words, “To my father, a bright light in the home, a brilliant star in the church, a flame of inspiration and light.” How close were you to your father?**

**BB:** Very close. He was my role model. I’ve had other role models, of course, but my father was by far my most important human model. And in some ways I followed a little bit in his steps.

**RA: In what ways are you like your dad? And how are you unlike him?**

**BB:** Well, it’s hard to say. I think other people can judge better. But about a year ago I had a strange experience. My father was a rather short man—I’m short, but he was shorter still. Nevertheless, we have the same build. I was in the parking lot of the GC on my way home, and it was getting toward evening. The sun was behind me, and my shadow came up on the ground in front of me. I looked at that shadow, and I recognized my father walking in the shadow! And it really did something to me. It almost seemed as if my father was there walking in that shadow—the steps were the same; it was exactly the way he walked. And I said to myself, “Are we that close?”

**RA: That’s incredible! That’s precious. You dedicated your second book, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* to your mother, with a few evocative lines from John Greenleaf Whittier. What kind of person was she?**

**BB:** She was as wonderful and as good a mother as anybody could ever hope to have. She was fully dedicated to the church, and a woman of prayer. Every time there was some problem she would immediately call us together to pray about it. And she had the big responsibility of bringing up three kids in foreign countries, where sometimes



Here in **Bethlehem’s Manger Square**, Christmas 1999, Beach is in the front row during ceremonies to welcome the millennium. At his side is Elaine (née Palange) of Brussels, his wife of 47 years. They have two grown children, both faithful Adventists.



In **appreciation** for his contribution to freedom and interchurch understanding, Beach, in 1998, received from the current president of Poland the Knight’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Polish Republic. Polish Union president Wladyslaw Polok and former Polish Union secretary Z. Lyko (extreme right and left, respectively) shared the occasion. The woman pictured is assistant to the Polish president.



Beach’s encounter with the **Roman Pontiff** came as a member of the Christian World Communions, and following a special luncheon at the Vatican. The meetings were held as part of ceremonies to honor the martyrs of the twentieth century.

she didn’t even know the language.

**F**or decades Beach has served the church as a participant or observer in a variety of ecumenical and interchurch/ interfaith councils. And I wanted to know what events stood out in his mind.

The big event of his life, he said, was his attendance at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). “I was probably, if anything, a very typical Adventist worker, primarily interested in my own church. I knew next to nothing about Catholics. Then suddenly I’m approached by F. D. Nichol and his fellow editors at the *Adventist Review*: ‘Would you go down to the Second Vatican Council to observe, and then write a few articles for the *Review*?’” (Beach at the time was education director of the Northern Europe-West Africa Division, headquartered in England.)

The long-term effect of that

assignment would be to gradually shift his focus from education (the direction of his career up to that point) to the area of religious liberty and interchurch relations.

Not only was Beach able to take in the work of the council, but through a series of fortuitous circumstances he also managed to establish contact with prominent Catholic leaders as well as leaders of the WCC (including the founding general secretary Visser ’t Hooft and Lukas Vischer, the key WCC observer at Vatican II). Over the years, starting with that meeting in Rome, Vischer became a good friend and was instrumental later on in setting up the first semiofficial conversation between the WCC and a group of Adventists, “in which, over a period of some four years,” Beach says, “we discussed theological issues, including the reasons we Adventists did not feel we could be a part of the organized ecumenical movement as epitomized by the WCC.”

To travel with Beach to any inter-

faith function is to see a man thoroughly at home with these religious leaders, having mastered the art of dialoguing with them, negotiating with them, humoring them. For me it's a joy—and an inspiration—to watch.

"This visit [to Vatican II]," Beach told me, "opened to me a whole new world. Before that, I'd have to confess I was really quite ignorant. I didn't even know what ecumenism was really all about." In light of this, I wanted to know what he'd say to and about other Adventists.

**RA: Many Adventists are just where you were before that experience in Rome, but are speaking out, nevertheless. What do you say to that?**

**BB:** I think we should try to look at things where they are, *not the way we wish they were, or the way we expect them to become*. You cannot see the WCC today as what we think it will become as prophecy develops toward the end of time. I don't think we should "burden ourselves," as Ellen G. White says, "with these cares and troubles of tomorrow" already today.

Now, the purpose of the WCC since its establishment in 1948 has been to work for Christian unity. And, taken at face value, we have to admit that that is not a bad thing. I mean, unity is part of our Lord's great prayer in John 17: "That they may be one as we are one." We may have problems, of course, with the type of unity the WCC stands for. We feel that maybe their approach to the Bible is too liberal, too political; that not enough emphasis is placed on evangelism, conversion, and personal experience with Christ. (In my book *Pattern for Progress* I talk about why we're not members of the WCC and why we're not planning to become members.) But we should all seek to be accurate in our comments and observations.

**RA: Many Adventists are afraid that somehow their faith might become diluted, compromised, contaminated by frequent interactions with people of other faiths. What's your counsel?**

**BB:** I've found that my knowledge of Adventist theology and beliefs has greatly increased and improved as a

result of my contacts with non-Adventists. I find that when you're discussing theological issues with those not of your own faith, you have to be able to stand up and give reasons for your beliefs. In the contacts I've had over the years, I've never been asked or encouraged by any leader in the ecumenical movement to abandon my Adventist convictions. In fact, they say, "Well, you certainly stand up for your beliefs!"

Over the years Beach has practiced what he preaches, cultivating the habit of accuracy in his assessment of other religious communions. And, as might be expected, he has a burden in this area. "We should be very careful what we say about the teachings of other churches," he says, "just as we'd like others to be accurate in what they say about us."

We should be especially careful when we speak about the Catholic Church, Beach says. We should deal with Catholic theology and teaching as they have emerged from the Second Vatican Council and from other contemporary church documents. We shouldn't just use quotations from the nineteenth century or even go way back to the days of the Council of Trent. We ought to make sure that what we say they're teaching is really so.

**RA: Your personality seems just the ideal one for meeting and mingling in interchurch, interfaith contexts. But it seems that not every Adventist can do that.**

**BB:** That's probably true. All of us have our gifts. We don't need to have all our ministers concentrating on the Catholic Church or the Lutherans or the Presbyterians or whomever. But a few of us can do that. Others may concentrate on other aspects of the message and do a good work. I see myself as a bridge builder.

**RA: I understand you've had opportunities to meet the present pontiff. What were the occasions?**

**BB:** Church leaders who visit Rome like to be able to say they met the

pope, and that's what happened when the Christian World Communions (CWC) met for meetings in that city back in 1997. It was then, as a member of that organization, that I had opportunity to meet the current pope.

Another time there was a celebration honoring the martyrs of the twentieth century, and I felt it would be an appropriate thing to be involved in that, even though I was not there representing the Adventist Church.

**RA: So you were not representing the Adventist Church, as such?**

**BB:** That's correct. Even so, I saw one of these occasions as a kind of witness. There were about 20 of us from the CWC greeting the pope in front of some 20,000 Catholics present. Each one would come up and greet the pontiff with a kiss on his ring. But when my turn came, I just shook his hand as I would that of any other human being. To me, that was a little bit of a witness.

**RA: You once presented a medallion to the pope. What was that about?**

**BB:** It happened something like 24 years ago, I think, during the term of Pope Paul VI. Once again, it was in the context of a meeting of the CWC, and I was among a group of some 13 persons meeting with the pontiff. Knowing that he had a tendency to present medals to visitors, somewhat as a memento (or record) of the occasion, I felt, *Well, I'd like to give him something*. So I gave him a book about the Adventist Church, with a listing of Adventist beliefs. Then I also gave him a medallion of the GC, the same one as we gave to political and other leaders during that time.

**RA: What was on it?**

**BB:** On one side it said, "Behold, he cometh . . . and every eye shall see him." So it announced the Adventist message. On the other side you had the Ten Commandments, an open Bible, and the cross. Nine of the commandments were represented only by Roman numerals, but with numeral IV were the words: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." So the medal presented both the Sabbath and the Advent. I thought this would give a little message



from us as to where we stand.

**RA:** So here you were, actually giving a witness to the highest official in the Roman Catholic Church, and you caught flack from some Adventists for it.

**BB:** Yes, I got flack. Some people felt that this was kind of paying homage to the pope.

**RA:** What particular accomplishments during your term as PARL director of the GC bring the greatest satisfaction?

**BB:** I wouldn't want to claim that anything were "my" accomplishments. I think it's always a group effort, with my departmental colleagues and the GC administration working together, even though the director must play, of course, a certain leadership role. There are several things I think we could mention. One was to get the Declaration on Religious Liberty voted by the United Nations in 1981, a year after I came to the department.

**RA:** So the Adventist Church had something to do with that?

**BB:** Yes, through Gianfranco Rossi (now retired), then religious liberty director of the Euro-Africa Division. Working through our Religious Liberty Association, he was very effective at the U.N., not only in helping get the declaration through but also in having included in it a clause upholding the right of every person to observe days of rest in accordance with the teachings of their religion.

**RA:** So that's one thing that brings satisfaction.

**BB:** Another thing was the fact that the GC was willing to undertake an organized approach to interchurch/interfaith relations, creating the Council on Interchurch Relations. We now have a committee that looks after issues of relations with other churches, an important development. We were also able to improve relations with Communist governments of Eastern Europe. We didn't quite realize that things were opening up so much, until everything was ready to fall. But to be able to work in the Soviet Union was significant. And I was especially instrumental in Poland, even receiving, in 1998, a knighthood from

the Polish president.

**RA:** In this whole area of religious liberty, so subject to unfounded speculation and hysteria, you've proved yourself a symbol of credibility and balance. Unfortunately, there are others in the field who are given to hysterical statements and reactions.

**BB:** What we have to say should be the truth and not what we think it should be or expect it to become. You have to say it the way it is today. Today the Catholic Church officially says that every human being has the right to follow their conscience and to practice their religion. I mean, that's quite clear. And the proof of the pudding is that in Catholic countries like Poland, Italy, and Spain (now, you couldn't be more Catholic than that), they have actually passed laws recognizing the rights of the Adventist Church, rights Adventists don't have even in some Protestant countries.

**RA:** Significant, indeed! Does this imply that the predictions we have in the book of Revelation and in *The Great Controversy* about last-day religious intolerance are to be relegated to the very distant future?

**BB:** Let me say this. The fulfillment of Bible prophecy in the world can happen very quickly. Just think, for example, of the fall of totalitarian Communism. Some of these happened in just a matter of months without a shot being fired. In short order, these regimes came tumbling down. I was in Berlin in June 1989. I'm talking to the secretary of state for religious affairs in the German Democratic Republic [East Germany] and in strong German language he tells me categorically (in June!): "Here in the German Democratic Republic we will not follow the Polish road." Three months later the Berlin Wall was down, and the whole German Democratic Republic went out of existence.

I say this in order to show that things can just shift rapidly in today's world. In a way of speaking, we have right now two superpowers in the world: the U.S. as the political superpower and the Roman Catholic Church as a kind of religious super-

power. And isn't that part of the prophetic picture that we anticipate in the future? So in various ways, yes, prophecy is being fulfilled.

What we have to do is watch and be ready, and not constantly interpret every little thing by newspaper headlines, getting everybody scared to death. Because then, when it really happens, I'm afraid a lot of people will say, "Well, we've heard this so many times over the last 50 years, and it never happened that way at all." So it's like the shepherd boy crying "Wolf, wolf"; and then when the wolf does strike, nobody pays attention.

What Bert Beach has done over the decades (and still is doing) has not been easy. If anyone thinks otherwise, let them try it. In countless cases—through his presence in a multitude of social, political, and religious settings—he has almost single-handedly succeeded in presenting a better face of the Adventist Church to those outside our own communion. We truly have a treasure in our midst.

And if Bert has been active outside the church, he's also been totally involved within it. He told me that for the past 40 years, without break, he's been a member of the GC Committee, and has probably attended more GC sessions than any other living Adventist—13 so far.

But when he spoke about attending his first session—at the Sligo church in Takoma Park, Maryland, as a page—it blew my mind that as late as 1946 such a venue was still an option. How far we've come since then under the blessing of the Lord! With Beach, let's pray that soon such sessions will be eternally over, and we can go home.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

\* Beach is still active in PARL on a part-time basis.

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