

Adventist jargon alienating, church executives say

Proposed church style-guide to sensitize exchanges with other faith groups

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Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN

Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Global Mission Issues committee heard suggestions last week for pruning Adventist jargon, archaic and potentially offensive language from official church communication.

By using well-meant but often misinterpreted words and phrases, Adventists may end up alienating members of other faith groups rather than ministering to them, Bruce L. Bauer, chair of the department of World Mission, told the delegates, each of whom received a draft of the proposed 'Style-Guide for Seventh-day Adventist Mission.'

Prepared by the church's [Global Mission Religious Study Centers](#), the style-guide lists potentially offensive words and phrases to be avoided when working with members of four of the world's main faith groups: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Postmoderns.

"Too many [Adventists] go to unchurched or unreached people with a set of sermons or [Bible studies](#) that were initially prepared for another cultural setting and never consider the local needs or situations," Bauer said.

When talking with Jews and Muslims, the style-guide suggests, pastors and church communicators should avoid "politically charged" language. Calling the Middle East 'Palestine' or referring to the state of Israel can be "interpreted as taking sides," Bauer said.

The style-guide also cautions Adventists to avoid referring to the church as "spiritual Israel" when talking with Jews. "The church does not need to usurp the identity of Israel in order to exist," Bauer said.

Universally offensive words such as "infidel" or "heretic" should never be used to refer an unchurched person, the style-guide said. Also, referring to outreach events as "crusades" is more likely to conjure up images of war and destruction than evangelism, particularly among Muslims.

Referring to Muhammad as a "false prophet" will not build bridges with Muslims, the style-guide also noted.

While both Jews and Muslims may take offense to many Christian-oriented phrases, Buddhists are more likely to be confused by Adventist imagery and illustrations, Bauer said. Western Christian terminology -- including "sin," "salvation" and the "blood of Christ" -- often doesn't resonate with Buddhists, who may also struggle to reconcile the concrete Biblical concepts of heaven and hell with their more transient concept of death.

One delegate expressed concern that Adventists, hoping not to offend, may end up clumsily hiding their beliefs -- an effort that would be both "obvious" and potentially manipulative, he said.

Tailoring the presentation of the church's core beliefs to better connect with those from various faith backgrounds doesn't unravel the message, Bauer said. The principles and cautions in the style-guide are simply meant to help Adventists establish a spiritual foundation with those of other faiths in a way that invites further discussion of beliefs.

As Pat Gustin put it, "You can't ignore that the Bible says Christ's blood is essential to salvation, but your opening hymn doesn't have to be 'There is a Fountain Filled with Blood.'"

While not technically a faith group, Postmoderns are also included in the style-guide. Because Postmoderns perceive the word "truth" as restrictive, the style-guide urged Adventists to avoid that and other cut-and-dried terminology.

Other suggestions for better connecting with Postmoderns include avoiding the phrase "inspired pen" to refer to prolific church writer Ellen G. White, the word "worldly" when describing secular or negative influences and citing "God's will" when explaining tragedies for which there is no logical basis.

Delegates questioned the inclusion of some phrases. The style-guide suggested that Adventists avoid the phrase "I'll pray for you" when talking with Postmoderns because some who hold that worldview may interpret it as an excuse for inaction. However, Artur Stele, president of the Adventist Church in Euro-Asia, said he'd observed that Postmoderns in his region were "surprisingly open to the concept of prayer."

When revising the draft, a world church vice president Michael L. Ryan suggested that instead of a list of what not to say, the style-guide also include words and phrases that some traditional Adventists think are taboo, but are in fact appropriate, such as using "Allah" as a reference to God.

"In all of our communication, we should strive to be clear and sensitive about our message," said Rajmund Dabrowski, world church communication director. "In this, every word counts," he said, citing the existing [ANN style guide](#) as a potential model for the proposed style-guide.

Following revisions, the style-guide will ultimately be sent to the administrative committee at the world church's headquarters for consideration. For now, the style-guide is destined for revisions back at the study centers.

<http://news.adventist.org/2009/03/adventist-jargon-ali.html>