

## **Building Bridges of Faith: The Ecumenical Legacy of Bert Beverly Beach**

Victor P. Kabangut'se

[steermealways@gmail.com](mailto:steermealways@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the significant contributions of Bert Beverly Beach to the ecumenical movement, specifically within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The analysis is guided by three research objectives: investigating Beach's personal and theological background in relation to ecumenism, analyzing how Beach's work promoted ecumenical practices within his denomination, and assessing the broader impact of Beach's contributions to ecumenism beyond the Adventist Church. To accomplish these goals, a multi-methodological approach is employed, drawing from descriptive and investigative research methods. The descriptive method provides contextual information about Beach's work, while the investigative method delves into the historical, contextual, and missiological aspects of his involvement in the ecumenical movement and analyzes relevant writings by and about Beach. The study challenges the notion that ecumenical engagement is always intentional and argues that even inadvertent involvement, such as Beach's, can have an impact. This research highlights the pioneering nature of Beach's efforts, particularly within a denomination that has limited awareness of ecumenical matters and sometimes harbors negative stereotypes towards other Christian traditions. The paper recommends further exploration of Beach's legacy and advocating for the recognition of his contributions as a catalyst for ecumenical consciousness, especially within a context that historically resists ecumenical endeavors.

**Keywords:** Interchurch Relations, Ecumenism, World Council of Churches, Unity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Ecumenical Movement, a global initiative for Christian unity and collaboration, has a robust history influenced by various individuals.<sup>1</sup> The ecumenical movement has undeniably been shaped by contributions, both intentional and unintentional. While some pioneering figures are well-recognized, others remain less explored, potentially lost to time. Suzanne de Dietrich, an engineer by training (though often referred to as a theologian), and the highly influential lay leader John Mott are just a few examples of non-theologians whose work significantly impacted ecumenism.<sup>2</sup> This research examines the life and work of Bert Beverly Beach, a figure with limited public recognition but significant influence within the Ecumenical Movement, especially regarding his interactions with the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Drawing from these various influences, the Adventists emerged from a revival movement in the United States in the mid-19th century that was driven by apocalyptic intensity. This movement drew from the existing Christian landscape, known as the “ecumene” of the time.<sup>3</sup> Methodism and the Holiness Movement emphasized ethics and spirituality, while Puritans and Seventh-Day Baptists focused on divine law and observing the Saturday Sabbath. American Restoration movements, such as the Disciples of Christ, contributed a combination of biblical literalism and ecumenical rhetoric. These diverse strands eventually merged to

---

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Höschele, “Defining Ecumenics Fifty Years after Mackay,” *Communio Viatorum* 55 (2013): 108.

<sup>2</sup> C. Möller, C. Schwöbel, C. Marksches, and K. Zedtwitz, eds., *Pioneers of Ecumenism in the 20th Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Raoul F. Dederen, “Ecumenical Trends,” *Ministry* 46 (1973): 8–10.

form a denomination with a unique identity. Adventists believed themselves to be prophesied in scripture and entrusted with a special global mission leading up to the second coming of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

However, this distinct identity initially resulted in a limited interest in engaging in dialogue with other Christian denominations, particularly those that did not observe the Saturday Sabbath. The anti-Catholic sentiment prevalent among 19th-century American Protestants remained strong within Adventism. Additionally, the denomination held an equivocal stance toward other evangelical traditions and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement.<sup>5</sup> Orthodox Christianity, with its diverse theological perspectives, remained largely outside the Adventist purview.

While official Adventist doctrines recognized the existence of a broader invisible church (“ecclesia invisibilis”), it also positioned the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the sole visible embodiment of God’s remnant in the end times.<sup>6</sup> This ecclesiology, emphasizing Adventist exceptionalism, naturally fostered a cautious approach to ecumenism. For nearly four generations, the denomination had little official focus on building bridges with other Christian entities.<sup>7</sup>

Based on the little bridges with other denomination within Adventism, Bert Beach comes in to fill this gap. Despite the

---

<sup>4</sup> Juhyeok Nam, “Reactions to the Seventh-day Adventist Evangelical Conferences and ‘Questions on Doctrine,’ 1955–1971” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Fernando L. Canale, “The Emerging Church,” *Adventist Review*, 2010, <https://rb.gy/iuwexb>.

<sup>6</sup> Denis Fortin, *One in Christ: Biblical Concepts for a Doctrine of Church Unity* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Höschele, *Interchurch Relations in Seventh-day Adventist History: A Study in Ecumenics* (Habilitation Thesis, Protestant Theological Faculty Charles University, 2004).

historical barriers<sup>8</sup> Beach emerged as a prominent figure in spearheading a new era of Adventist involvement with the wider Christian world. This paper examines the significant contributions of Bert Beverly Beach to the ecumenical movement, specifically within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Through Beach's story, we gain valuable insights into the evolution of Adventist perspectives and practices concerning interfaith relations.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, influenced by its unique origins and distinctive theology, has historically demonstrated limited interest in engaging ecumenically with other Christian denominations. This research aims to examine how did Bert Beverly Beach, despite historical and theological barriers within Adventism, become a pioneer in fostering a new era of dialogue and cooperation between Adventists and the broader Christian world? This initial question serves as the inspiration for the present investigation.

### **1.2 Objective and Scope of the Study**

The main objective of this paper is to identify the significant contributions of Bert Beverly Beach to the ecumenical movement, specifically within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. To achieve this objective, the paper focuses on three specific objectives:

- Explore Beach's personal and theological background within the context of ecumenism.
- Evaluate Beach's work in relation to ecumenical practices within Adventism.

---

<sup>8</sup> Walter R. Beach and Bert B. Beach, *Pattern for Progress: The Role and Function of Church Organization* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985).

- Examine the broader impact of Beach's contributions to ecumenism beyond the Adventist Church.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study is guided by three key questions:

- What was Beach's personal and theological background within the context of ecumenism?
- How does Beach's work relate to ecumenical practices within Adventism?
- What is the broader impact of Beach's contributions to ecumenism beyond the Adventist Church?

### **1.4 Scope and Limitation of the Study**

This study explores the multifaceted contributions of Bert Beverly Beach to the ecumenical movement, with a particular focus on his influence within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although interactions with other religious traditions may be referenced, this paper restricts its examination to Beach's contributions to Christian ecumenism.

## **2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

This paper adopts a multifaceted approach<sup>9</sup> that combines descriptive and investigative research methods to thoroughly analyze Bert Beverly Beach's contributions to the ecumenical movement. The descriptive method provides contextual information about Beach's work, while the investigative method delves into the historical, contextual, and missiological aspects of his involvement in the ecumenical movement and analyzes relevant writings by and about Beach.

---

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Jean Vyhmeister, *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

### 3. BERT BEVERLY BEACH'S BACKGROUND AND THEOLOGY

Bert Beverly Beach's dedication to serving God and His church has been a lifelong pursuit that can be traced back to his early years. He was born on June 15, 1928, in Gland, Switzerland, to Adventist missionary parents. Following his family's missionary work in Switzerland, Belgium, and France, he returned to Bern. With a background in French, he managed to complete his German education despite missing school on Saturdays. Beach expressed gratitude for being raised in a household where his parents were Adventists but open-minded and not dogmatic.<sup>10</sup> As a result of frequent relocations, he became fluent in four languages, allowing him to converse, write, and even preach in German, French, Italian, and English. This multilingualism undoubtedly expanded his horizons and enhanced his adaptability.

At the age of 17, Beach enrolled at Pacific Union College in California. He obtained his Bachelor's degree at the age of 19 and continued his studies at Stanford University for a year, as well as spending some time at Berkeley. At 21 years old, he served as the principal at a Northern California Junior High School, developing his public speaking skills. He later returned to Europe to pursue a doctorate in French from Sorbonne University in Paris, graduating with distinction, *Magna Cum Laude*.

During his doctoral program, Beach assumed the role of principal at the Italian Adventist high school and junior college located in Villa Aurora, Florence, for a period of six years. This experience allowed him to develop a fondness for Eliane Palange, a Belgian woman, which led to their marriage in April 1954. In 1955, while

---

<sup>10</sup> Bert B. Beach, *Ambassador for Liberty: Building Bridges of Faith, Friendship, and Freedom* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2012).

living in Italy, Beach and his wife welcomed their first child, Danielle. Three years later, Beach relocated his family to Maryland to take on the position of Dean for the History department at Columbia Union College (now known as Washington Adventist University). In 1960, he was offered the opportunity to become the division's education secretary for Northern Europe and West Africa, prompting the family's move to St. Albans, England, where they resided for the next two decades. It was during their time in St. Albans that their second daughter, Michèle, was born in 1961.

Beach used this opportunity to build relationships with leaders of various religions and heads of state. From 1962 to 1965, he received an invitation to participate in the Second Vatican Council as a correspondent. He was appointed as the secretary of the Division in 1973. From 1970 to 2002, he served as the secretary general of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CCWC), representing over 2 billion Christians. After his tenure in the General Conference (GC) of SDAs from 1980 to 1995, he remained actively involved in multiple capacities. He served as the secretary of the Inter-Church Relation Council for 25 years, from 1980 to 2005. Additionally, he held the position of secretary general for the International Religious Liberty Association from 1980 to 1995, followed by two separate terms as president in 1996 and 2000. Furthermore, for over two decades, from 1995 to 2018, he dedicated his expertise as the editorial director and panelist for the Telecast of the American Religious Town Hall Meeting. The number of accolades bestowed upon him is extensive, including his induction as an honorary Igbo chieftaincy in Nigeria, the receipt of an honorary Th.D. degree

from the Warsaw Theological Academy, a knighthood conferred by the president of Poland, recognition as Pacific Union College's alumnus of the year, a Human Rights Leadership award from a prominent periodical, and an honorary Doctorate from Andrews University.

Beach, an esteemed educator and writer, demonstrated his writing skills by authoring seven books and numerous articles in various languages. Beach's loyalty to his faith, family, and friends remained unwavering throughout his lifetime, and he maintained his wit until his final moments. Beach is survived by his wife, Eliane Beach; his daughters, Danielle Beach and Michèle Beach; his sister, Colette Witt; his grandchildren, Philippe Beach Evers, Adriane Rapp, Emma Izzo, and Alyssa Izzo; his niece, Alexandra Witt; and his nephews, David Cotton and Walter Witt. Additionally, he is survived by his great-grandchildren, Lawson and Oliver Rapp.<sup>11</sup>

### **3.1 The First Ecumenical Dialogue Experience**

Numerous works have investigated the origins of Adventist theological discourse in the 1950s. The most comprehensive publication on this topic is Juhyeok Nam's work from 2005, which delves into the discussions that took place between the Adventist and Evangelical communities following the "SDA/Evangelical conference." While this work does not exclusively focus on the ecumenical aspect of the gathering. Juhyeok Nam presents a detailed account of the meetings, the efforts made to reach a shared understanding of doctrinal issues, and the profound impact of these

---

<sup>11</sup> "Celebrating the Life of Bert Beverly Beach 1928–2022, Memorial Program," *Spencerville Church Bulletin* (Spencerville, MD: Spencerville Church, 2023).

conversations on both the Evangelical and Adventist communities.<sup>12</sup>

In the early months of 1955, meetings were held between leaders of the SDA Church and a group of Evangelicals. This initiative was set in motion by Walter R. Martin, an esteemed scholar affiliated with the Evangelical publication *Eternity*. Martin, who had gained recognition for his expertise in scrutinizing religious sects considered to be “cults,” had written a manuscript about the Adventist Church. His intention was to gather primary information, prompting him to arrange a meeting with Adventist delegates.

Donald G. Barnhouse, the editor of *Eternity* and a prominent evangelical pastor in North America at that time, provided Martin with past correspondence he had exchanged with T. Edgar Unruh, a conference president of the Adventist denomination. This correspondence enabled Martin to establish communication with Unruh and secure a meeting with Adventist representatives, including Leroy E. Froom, a church historian and apologist, whose writings Martin was already familiar with. Martin conducted a series of theological conversations that ultimately led to the publication of two works: *Questions on Doctrine* (QOD) in 1957 and *The Truth about Seventh-Day Adventism*. QOD presented Adventist doctrine in a comprehensive manner to a global audience, establishing it as a defining reference. Through his investigation, Martin provided an unbiased representation of Adventist convictions, addressing criticisms related to the Sabbath, Ellen White’s prophetic role, the nature of the soul, and the heavenly sanctuary. The findings of this study affirm that while

---

<sup>12</sup> Nam, “Reactions to the Seventh-day Adventist Evangelical Conferences.”

Adventists hold distinctive doctrines, they are aligned with the principles of evangelical Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2 Reactions and Theological Impact

Based on Höschele's analysis, it is evident that Adventism's distinct identity from the 19th century underwent a deviation during the initial ecumenical discussions in 1955-1956. However, despite this deviation, Adventism maintained a robust organizational structure that allowed for collaboration while preserving its unique characteristics. Adventists, along with other Evangelicals, were reassessing their fundamental beliefs and striving for acceptance and recognition from a broader audience, rather than being perceived as a marginalized group.<sup>14</sup>

While there were reservations among some Evangelical partners about the mainstream ecumenical movement and its organizational aspects, Adventists were exploring the possibility of establishing their own form of ecumenism, but only with those who shared their theological beliefs, without compromising their organizational integrity. This approach aimed to solidify Adventism's position as a respected denomination. The dialogues or "conferences" held between the Evangelical and Adventist groups played a crucial role in advancing Adventist theology. While adhering to a conservative Protestant and biblical viewpoint, these exchanges facilitated the sharing of ideas on topics beyond the Adventist's traditional emphasis on the Sabbath and eschatology, including Christology and soteriology.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter Martin, *The Truth about Seventh-Day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> Stefan Höschele, *Adventist Interchurch Relations: A Study in Ecumenics* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Ekkehardt Mueller, "The End Time Remnant in Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11 (2000): 18.

This expansion of theological knowledge allowed Adventists to effectively communicate their doctrines to non-Adventist Christians in a more compelling manner. Consequently, this shift from contentious theology to constructive reflection represented a significant progression in the Adventist paradigm.<sup>16</sup> “Evangelicals” refers to a diverse collection of denominations that share a particular approach to practicing Christianity.

Therefore, interactions and discussions between Evangelicals and Seventh-day Adventists did not follow a standardized process between separate entities but took place within the broader Christian community. Despite the absence of a formal organization, engaging in such dialogues provided Seventh-day Adventists with a valuable opportunity to interact with Christians from various backgrounds and laid the groundwork for future engagements with individuals and groups of diverse theological perspectives.

### **3.3 The Second Ecumenical Dialogue Experience-Vatican II**

Adventists were presented with an unforeseen and momentous opportunity to engage in ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholics following World War II. This encounter took place during a council and was not anticipated by Adventist leaders or other Protestant groups. Therefore, the encounter was experimental for all involved. It is important to note that Adventists approached interactions with Roman Catholics with great apprehension, as they shared the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiments of Protestantism in

---

<sup>16</sup> Kwabena Donkor, “Church and Society in Adventism: Some Reflections,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 6 (2010): 77–95.

19th century America, resulting in a disposition of religious hostility and non-association.

The majority of Adventists exhibited a tendency towards caution and suspicion towards outsiders. However, Ellen White stood out as an exception. She prophesied that Sabbath keepers would soon face persecution at the hands of a coalition of Roman Catholics and Protestants before the Second Coming. Nevertheless, in the latter part of the 1880s, Ellen White began to warn against unjust treatment of Roman Catholics, perhaps due to her travels in Europe. From the 1890s onwards, she frequently advocated for moderation and friendliness when interacting with Roman Catholic Christians, as evidenced in her writings.<sup>17</sup>

These statements did not alter her theological or governance-related stance on Roman Catholicism. Nonetheless, they paved the way for future generations to engage with the church as an institution in a different manner. More than 2,800 bishops and ecclesiastical leaders from across the world attended the Second Vatican Council.<sup>18</sup> The Catholic Church's attitude towards other religious institutions underwent a shift during Vatican II. The Council resulted in a shift in priorities, but the papacy has remained committed to its fundamental tenets.

The Church maintains that redemption cannot be achieved outside of Catholicism, while also recognizing the potential for all Christians to share in a united Eucharist within the Catholic Church. Additionally, the pope is regarded as the cornerstone for

---

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1892).

<sup>18</sup> Cristopher Verian Luaya, "The Influence of Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches' Social Action Toward the Pursuit of Ecumenism in the 21st Century" (Master's thesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2013).

unity. The procedure Adventists followed to participate as observers in the Vatican Council was straightforward. The invitation received an overwhelming response, with over thirty organizations expressing interest. Adventists, initially excluded, designated a group, including Raymond Cottrell, Marvin E. Loewen, and later Arthur Maxwell, as journalists. They enlisted Bert B. Beach, a young historian and educational administrator, to accompany the team.<sup>19</sup>

Beach established connections with other Protestant observers, attended all four sessions, and gained unofficial observer status. Adventist reports on the Second Vatican Council recognized the significant changes that occurred within Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, they expressed apprehension and doubt regarding the extent of these transformations. Adventists held firm to their beliefs about future events, such as the pope's involvement, and struggled to accept that the largest Christian institution had truly undergone a metamorphosis through its declarations, namely *Unitatis redintegratio* and *Dignitatis humanae*. They perceived these changes as merely superficial, involving alterations in terminology and tactics.

In his book, Beach provides a meticulous analysis of Vatican II through the lens of Adventist theology. His work offers a comprehensive examination of the continuities and changes that emerged within Adventist discourse during the council period. Importantly, the book is groundbreaking in its approach to Adventist ecumenical relations, as it provides the first detailed

---

<sup>19</sup> Roy Adams, "Bert B. Beach: Adventist Statesman," *Adventist Review*, 2001, <https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/2001-1545/story1.html>.

treatment of such issues among comprehensive monographs on contemporary developments within a denomination.<sup>20</sup> Beach takes a measured approach in his analysis and refrains from indulging in apocalyptic predictions.

#### **4. BEACH'S ROLE IN SHAPING ECUMENICAL PRACTICES WITHIN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH**

##### **4.1 Contribution of Vatican II to Adventism**

One significant consequence of Vatican II on Adventism was the emergence of Bert B. Beach as a prominent figure in the denomination's engagement with other Christian traditions.<sup>21</sup> Prior to attending the council, Beach had shown no interest in ecumenical matters and had not intended to participate. However, his involvement proved transformative, propelling him to become Adventism's foremost authority on interchurch relations. Beach played a pivotal role in facilitating dialogues and establishing the Adventist Council on Interchurch Relations. Interestingly, Beach admitted that he would not have accepted the invitation to attend Vatican II had he been aware of its impact on his ministry.<sup>22</sup>

While Adventists may not have been fully cognizant of it, they were influenced by the council. Vatican II provided Adventists with an opportunity to engage with Catholic and Protestant leaders from diverse backgrounds on an equal footing, leading them to realize the significance of adapting their approach to listening to others.

---

<sup>20</sup> Bert B. Beach, *Vatican II: Bridging the Abyss* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1968).

<sup>21</sup> John Graz and Carol E. Rasmussen, eds., *Building Bridges of Faith and Freedom: A Festschrift Written in Honor of Bert B. Beach* (Silver Spring, MD: Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Bert B. Beach, "The World Council of Churches: Seventh-day Adventist Conversations and Their Significance," *Ministry*, 1970.

Consequently, Adventists embarked on an exploration of ecumenical issues, taking into account ongoing developments and their encounters with other Christian traditions, whether direct or indirect.<sup>23</sup> This period of reflection ultimately shaped Beach's vocational trajectory, as he dedicated himself to serving the Adventist denomination in the realm of interchurch relations.

#### **4.2 World Council of Churches (WCC)-SDA Dialogues**

While in Rome, Beach established connections with individuals involved in the Ecumenical Movement, including Lukas Vischer, a research secretary and later director of Faith and Order. Vischer was an authoritative figure on ecumenism from a Protestant perspective during the Vatican II era. Being an Adventist, Beach engaged in discussions with Vischer. The origin of the idea for a dialogue between the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Adventists in the mid-1960s remains unclear.<sup>24</sup> However, it is possible that Vischer proposed it due to the WCC's efforts to establish ties with non-member churches. Beach pursued these discussions for eight years, which evolved from informal to formal and theological. Preliminary and second reports were published in 1970 and 1972, respectively, emphasizing the progress made. Additionally, a booklet containing these statements and information about the WCC and the SDA Church was released.<sup>25</sup>

Beach was selected to lead an ecumenical outreach initiative due to his achievements at the Vatican II, proficiency in multiple languages, friendly demeanor, and persuasive influence on church

---

<sup>23</sup> Höschele, *Adventist Interchurch Relations*.

<sup>24</sup> W. A. Visser't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Beach, "World Council of Churches."

leaders, despite not holding an executive role. Being an American in Europe, close to decision-making centers for ecumenism, he was well-positioned to oversee the project's development phase. This was significant as similar dialogues among North American Evangelicals had not taken place since the 1950s.

In 1970, Beach, a member of the Northern European Division, received invitations to engage in dialogues with representatives from the Vatican and WCC. However, the denominational leadership did not respond to these invitations. During the General Conference Officers Meeting held in July of that year, it was observed that such appointments would require Beach to be absent from his duties for a considerable period of time. Consequently, the officers recommended that invitations of this nature be directed to the secretary of the General Conference via the Division offices.<sup>26</sup> This advice aimed to ensure proper communication channels are followed, and Beach's responsibilities would not be compromised.

Based on the recommendations and warning, Paul Schwarzenau in 1978, analyzed Adventist beliefs in comparison to those held by Christians in the WCC. He observed disagreements on specific doctrines but found substantial agreement between Adventists and other Christian groups in most areas of belief. Schwarzenau concluded that Adventists could be classified as Protestants with distinctive doctrines, particularly influenced by the 1844 Great Disappointment motif in their eschatology.<sup>27</sup> The publication "So Much in Common" summarized a seven-year dialogue between

---

<sup>26</sup> Beach and Beach, *Pattern for Progress*.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Schwarzenau, *An Evangelical Theologian Speaks about the Seventh-Day Adventists* (Laasphe: Wittgenstein, 1978).

Adventists and the WCC from 1965 to 1972, reflecting this assessment.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4.3 Beach and Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CCWC)**

In the 1970s, Beach's focus shifted to engaging in ecumenical activities with Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions (CCWC). He became involved with this organization in 1968 when he represented the SDA Church. He was elected as secretary in 1970 and served in that position until 2002. As secretary, Beach organized and facilitated communication among representatives from various confessional world organizations during their annual three-day meetings. His contributions were instrumental in shaping the trajectory of CCWC. CCWC adopted a streamlined organizational structure, which caught Beach's attention, as well as other Adventist leaders. Throughout the 1970s, Beach attended CCWC's annual gatherings to establish positive relationships and cultivate personal connections.

Over time, Adventist leaders recognized the value of these relationships for their denomination. Beach's participation in CCWC began as an experiment, but Adventists found the topics discussed to be of great interest and were given equal opportunity to contribute. During the 1970s, Adventist experts were invited to present annual reports on specific subjects, fostering mutual understanding.

The CCWC functioned as a space for open and nonviolent discourse among Christian leaders, allowing for denominational

---

<sup>28</sup> George R. Knight, "Introduction to the Annotated Edition," in *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine: Annotated Edition*, Adventist Classic Library (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003).

customs and confessional priorities while being consistent with ecumenism. Adventist beliefs are in harmony with this stance, acknowledging Christian World Communions as ecumenical movements in their own right. In 1979, CCWC changed its name to “Christian World Communions” to prioritize unity.

Beach served in the Religious Liberty division at the Adventist world headquarters from 1980 onwards and contributed to the establishment of the Council on Interchurch Relations. Despite departing from the CCWC, he remained an advocate for Adventist participation in ecumenical efforts. Beach had a significant influence on the trajectory of ecumenism during the CWC-Forum Continuation Committee Joint Meeting in 1999. His ideas were well-received and were essential in determining the direction of ecumenism.

Beach’s participation in the CCWC was not widely known among Adventists, as he downplayed his commitment to the ecumenical movement to foster better relationships between churches. In an effort to foster greater inclusivity, he proposed moving the CCWC meeting to Rome. He also presented a book and medallion to Pope Paul VI. This action drew criticism from some independent Adventist groups. Beach’s actions were motivated by his theological and scholarly convictions and aimed at advancing inter-church cooperation and dialogue. He achieved success and influence in the CCWC without exerting undue pressure. The forum’s emphasis on the “ecumenism of life” aligned with Beach’s intentions of building Christian relationships without creating a permanent coalition.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Bert B. Beach, “Challenges and Problems of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue from the Point of View of a Professional in Religious Dialogue,” interview by *Shabbat Shalom*, 2001.

However, it is important to note that the SDA Church is not considered a CCWC member due to its distinct theological positions, particularly regarding the Sabbath and eschatology. Similar to CCWC, the SDA Church's theological distinctives prevent membership in WCC. Additionally, the WCC's emphasis on Sunday observance conflicts with the SDA Saturday Sabbath practice. While the SDA Church isn't a member of either organization, they do engage in dialogue with both the CCWC and WCC on matters of mutual interest.

## **5. AN INVESTIGATION OF BEACH'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT BEYOND THE ADVENTIST DENOMINATION**

Beach's transition into interchurch activity symbolizes his denomination's involvement in dialogues and other ecumenical activities. However, this does not mean that he changed the Adventist core beliefs or turned his church into an advocate for church reunions. In fact, the term "ecumenism" still carries a negative connotation for most Adventists, as well as many Evangelicals, classical Pentecostals, and even Orthodox Christians. This is why Beach preferred to use the more neutral term "interchurch relations" for SDA activities.<sup>30</sup> Beach's choice of words had its advantages. It provided a broader context for activities that were not as heavily loaded with ideology and elevated the matter to a relational level. His accomplishments can be divided into three categories: (a) raising awareness and educating others; (b) establishing and leading the first Adventist

---

<sup>30</sup> Höschele, *Interchurch Relations in Seventh-day Adventist History*.

entity dedicated to ecumenical matters, the Council on Inter-Church Relations; and (c) organizing official dialogues.

Beach's contributions were indispensable in terms of basic ecumenical education for Adventists. He was the first Adventist to publish a book on interchurch affairs, and his numerous literary works greatly influenced a whole generation on dialogue with other Christian traditions. In his writings, Beach skillfully merged a conservative Adventist theological perspective with insights from the Christian world of his time.<sup>31</sup> He always treated representatives of other Christian traditions and their beliefs with respect, attempting to provide a fair representation of their views and activities. This was especially important, considering that many Adventists held suspicions due to their anticipation of future persecution as a faithful Christian minority.<sup>32</sup>

In short, Beach was a bridge builder.<sup>33</sup> The establishment of the SDA Council on Inter-Church Relations (CIR) in 1980 institutionalized Beach's commitment to ecumenical relationships. Beach led this entity for 25 years with the support of the denomination's top leadership, allowing him to handle accusations of betraying the church's heritage professionally. Beach's approach in engaging in ecumenical matters prevented conflicts from escalating into crises and served as an example of institutionalized conflict resolution.

It is important to note that the primary objectives of the CIR were cultivating relationships with representatives from other churches,

---

<sup>31</sup> Jean Zucher, "Why Adventists Don't Join the WCC," *Ministry*, 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Fernando L. Canale, "On the Future of Adventism: Reason or Debate?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 46 (2008): 215–227.

<sup>33</sup> Höschele, *Adventist Interchurch Relations*.

initiating cooperative ventures, coordinating theological work on ecumenism, advising denominational leadership on ecumenical matters, and authorizing and realizing theological dialogues. The CIR became the nucleus for interfaith conversations in the early 21st century.

In terms of theological dialogues, Bert Beach was the chief innovator in the worldwide Adventist denomination.<sup>34</sup> He co-organized conversations between SDA theologians and World Council of Churches (WCC) delegations in the 1960s and early 1970s. In the 1980s, he played a key role in preparing and conducting bilateral dialogues with several smaller denominations, and in the 1990s, with the Lutheran World Federation. Since the turn of the century, there have been discussions with several other major churches.

Beach's strategy in organizing these dialogues was to include delegations of conservative theologians to make the activities acceptable to potential critics. Unlike many other dialogues, the objective was not theological convergence, but rather relational content and Christian fellowship.<sup>35</sup> Despite the lack of formal dogmatic agreement, Beach's warmth and personal touch ensured the success of these encounters. The theological dialogues improved mutual perceptions, explored areas of cooperation, and involved leading Adventist theologians in fruitful interchange with

---

<sup>34</sup> William Johnsson, "Seventh-day Adventists and Other Churches," *Adventist Review*, 2011, <https://www.adventistreview.org/seventh-day-adventists-and-other-churches>.

<sup>35</sup> Gerhard Pfandl, "Ecumenism: At What Cost?" *Perspective Digest* 15 (2010), <https://rb.gy/hkrf3o>.

colleagues from other traditions. These achievements introduced practices that were previously unfamiliar to Adventist leaders.<sup>36</sup>

## **6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This paper sought to answer three key questions. The first question was, what was Beach's personal and theological background within the context of ecumenism? The second question was, how was Beach's work in relation to ecumenical practices within Adventism? The third question was, what is the broader impact of Beach's contributions to ecumenism beyond the Adventist Church?

On the first question, the factors that influenced Bert Beverly Beach's commitment to ecumenism were manifold. Beach's upbringing in a household that embraced Adventist beliefs while maintaining an open-minded and non-dogmatic approach likely laid the foundation for his later ecumenical pursuits. His multilingualism, developed through frequent relocations and educational experiences in various countries, equipped him with the ability to communicate effectively across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Additionally, his educational journey, including his doctoral studies in French at Sorbonne University, exposed him to diverse intellectual traditions and perspectives, fostering a broad-minded outlook conducive to ecumenical engagement.

Considering the second question, the results show that Bert Beach's work significantly contributed to the development and implementation of ecumenical practices within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Beach's pivotal role in facilitating dialogues with representatives of other Christian traditions, including Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, marked a departure from

---

<sup>36</sup> Loren Seibold, "Letting Roman Catholics off the Hook: Seven Reasons for Rethinking Our Enemies List," *Adventist Today* 18 (2010): 22.

Adventism's historically cautious approach to ecumenism. His leadership in establishing the Adventist Council on Interchurch Relations (CIR) provided a formal platform for fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation within the denomination. Furthermore, Beach's involvement in organizing theological dialogues with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other denominations helped broaden Adventist perspectives and enhance mutual understanding between different Christian traditions.

On the last question, the lasting impact of Bert Beverly Beach's contributions on the ecumenical movement beyond the Adventist denomination is evident. Beach's efforts not only facilitated greater engagement between Adventists and other Christian denominations but also served as a model for constructive dialogue and cooperation within the broader ecumenical community. His emphasis on building relationships, fostering mutual respect, and promoting Christian fellowship transcended doctrinal differences and contributed to the advancement of Christian unity and collaboration on a global scale. Additionally, Beach's extensive writings on interchurch relations and his leadership in organizing theological dialogues continue to influence Adventist perspectives on ecumenism and inspire ongoing efforts to promote interfaith understanding and cooperation.

## **7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

### **7.1 Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates the significant role played by Bert Beverly Beach in promoting ecumenical engagement within the Seventh-day Adventist Church and beyond. Through his diverse contributions, Beach fostered dialogue, encouraged understanding,

and facilitated cooperation among various Christian traditions. His legacy serves as a testament to the importance of building bridges and promoting unity within the global Christian community, while upholding Adventist beliefs without compromise in the pursuit of ecumenism.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

Moving forward, it is recommended that the Seventh-day Adventist Church continues to prioritize ecumenical dialogue and collaboration as integral aspects of its mission. Building upon Bert Beverly Beach's foundation, the denomination should actively seek opportunities to engage with other Christian traditions, promoting mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation, while remaining steadfast in upholding Adventist doctrinal integrity. Furthermore, efforts should be made to educate Adventist members about the value of ecumenism and its potential to enhance the church's witness and impact in the world. By embracing ecumenical principles and practices cautiously and discerningly, the Seventh-day Adventist Church can contribute to the ongoing pursuit of Christian unity and collaboration on a global scale.