

# ADVENTIST SOCIETY FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES (ASRS) 2023 UPDATE

by Dr. Sigve Tonstad

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ADVENTIST SOCIETY FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES



## DISTANT PAST

ASRS is still a relatively young organization. It began in 1972 with a loose agreement among a growing number of SDA religion academics to meet in conjunction with the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). The Adventist Biblical Research Institute (BRI) agreed to sponsor and plan these meetings. The initiative was successful, but I sense that it was not trouble-free. The BRI ceased its sponsorship in 1978, just at the point when the decision was made to organize as a formal society in 1979 in New York City under the name Andrews Society of Religious Studies. 'Andrews' is short for J. N. Andrews (1829-1883), a luminous and scholarly figure in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It also reflected significant input and representation from religious academics at the Theological Seminary at Andrews University. The society presented itself as a Seventh-day Adventist scholarly community whose purpose is "to provide intellectual and social fellowship among its members and encourage scholarly pursuits in all religious studies disciplines, particularly with reference to the Seventh-day Adventist tradition." When the AAR and SBL lifted their restrictions on the use of denominational names, the society changed its name to the Adventist Society for Religious Studies. The two outstanding founders and significant contributors to the ASRS through the years were Roy Branson (1938-2015) and William Johnsson (1934-2023). We commend them for their contributions.

## CURRENT OFFICERS



**Sigve Tonstad, LLU**  
President 2022-2023  
Presidential Address Title:  
*Cosmic Conflict: Out-of-Date  
or Up-to-Date: Three Stops on a  
Journey*



**Lena Toews, UC**  
Vice President  
**Conference Program**  
(President 2023-2024)



**Rodney Palmer, AU**  
President-elect  
Thursday Night's Dinner  
(President 2024-2025)



**Michael Campbell, NAD**  
Communications Director



**Zdravko Plantak, LLU**  
Secretary-Treasurer  
(President 2008-2009)



## RECENT PAST

The main responsibility of the ASRS leadership team is to organize the annual meeting of the society. For the years I have attended (since 2004), this has been done in an exemplary way and to everyone's satisfaction. For the most part, the leadership does not have responsibilities other than the annual meeting.

However, in 2020, members of the society got together on an informal basis to publish papers presented at the annual conference in a book. Three such books are now in the making. All three are based on the theme of the respective year but are not always limited only to papers presented at that year's conference. For 2020, ASRS had the Sabbath as its theme. The manuscript will soon be in press at Oak & Acorn under the title, ***Remembering: It Matters How We Tell the Sabbath Story***. The book has been edited by Mathilde Frey (WWU), Ed Allen (UC), and Denis Fortin (AU) with Mathilde as the senior editor. The book's title reflects Mathilde's unforgettable presentation in 2020. It is in my view an excellent volume, and we are grateful to Ray Tetz and his team at Oak & Acorn for publishing it.

In 2021, the ASRS conference theme was ***World Disrupted, World Revealed: Ecology and Theology in an Age of Pandemic***, a theme developed and promoted under then-president Erik Carter (LLU). Papers presented at the conference are now in the process of becoming a book, guided to that goal by Melissa Brotton (LSU), Ross Winkle (PUC), and Roy Benton (PUC/WWU), with Melissa as the senior editor. The papers presented at the conference have been supplemented by solicited chapters, one of which is an outstanding description of the COVID-19 virus and its implications, written by Paul Herrmann, Chief of Hematology and Pathology at the Loma Linda University School of Medicine. We thus have another timely book in the works, timely because it deals in matters that are important to Adventist theology; timely, too, because it takes interest in the world as we find it. Again, we are grateful to Oak & Acorn for its commitment to publishing the book.

In 2022, last year, the ASRS conference theme was ***Mediating (W)holeness in a Broken World***. I do not think I have ever attended a conference that blended content and deep feelings as much as we felt last year. I was not the only one who had to wipe away tears—and more than once. Again, the papers presented have been collected and are now being edited for publication. Zdravko Plantak (LLU) a member of the current ASRS leadership team, is the editor. A word has been added to the conference title to make it, ***Restored: Mediating (W)holeness in a Broken World***. Dare we claim that these are profoundly *Adventist* topics as well as topics profoundly relevant to the world's deeply felt brokenness? You will not be surprised to hear that Oak & Acorn will be the publisher of this volume, as well.

## EDITORS



**Zdravko Plantak**  
LLU  
Senior Editor 2022



**Melissa Brotton**  
LSU  
Senior Editor 2021  
(Ross Winkle, PUC)  
(Roy Benton, PUC/WWU)



**Mathilde Frey**  
WWU  
Senior Editor 2020  
(Ed Allen, UC)  
(Denis Fortin, AU)



## PRESENT

By the present, I have primarily in mind the conference in San Antonio, November 16-18 this year. The theme chosen for this year is *Cosmic Conflict: Out-of-Date or Up-to Date?* Others may differ, but I cannot think of a topic that is more distinctive of Seventh-day Adventist theology than this one. Is the notion of a *cosmic conflict* a viable idea? Is it *biblical*? If so, what are the biblical underpinnings? Does it have explanatory power for present reality? I shall not show my hand in relation to the question *Out-of-Date*. But I will say this for the second part: It is hardly up to date. This will be the third year I participate in evaluating paper proposals. Submissions in the past barely exceeded twenty, and the process of selection was manageable. *This year, we had more than sixty submissions!* It is likely to be a record, and it meant a lot of work for Lena Toews (UC), our vice president with responsibility for the program. We decided early on that we could not limit the meetings this year to plenary sessions. That would eliminate far too many worthy proposals. So, as our program shows, there will be three parallel sessions on Friday, November 17. This made it possible to include forty-five of the submissions—with apologies to those who were not included. However, given that we are now on track for post-conference books, there will be an opportunity for these papers, too.

## PUBLICATIONS

In the window between the recent past and the present, let me mention the publication of two books published in the wider SDA community. First is Richard Davidson's *A Song for the Sanctuary: Experiencing God's Presence in Shadow and Reality* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Academic, 2022). And then, this year, there is John Peckham's book *God with Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2023). We salute these achievements.



## FUTURE

It is now an open secret that Adventist institutions of higher learning face daunting enrollment challenges. We feel it at Loma Linda University, too, even in a hard-to-get-into program like medicine. The number of qualified applicants from Adventist institutions is dropping, but this is only the tip of a much bigger demographic challenge. Our institutions depend on tuition for their survival (with some exceptions). Money is scarce for outside matters. This includes an institution's ability to pay for attendance at conferences, including the ASRS annual meeting. It also impacts the type of arrangement we have had in the past for our opening night. Expenses are on the rise. Financial resources are on their way down. This calls on us to do all we can to stay viable as a society while also acting in solidarity with the institutions we represent. We felt the predicament this year, and we are grateful to people who have responded to our need, short term. I wish to thank Ken Peterson (US), Reynir Indahl (Norway), Geir Frivold (US), Edwin Racine (US), and Carmen Lau and Alexander Carpenter (Adventist Forum/*Spectrum*) for their support. We look forward to a great meeting in November. Despite clouds on the horizon, we look forward to a bright future for ASRS and its ministry in our faith community.

It has been a great privilege to be an ASRS officer and to work this year with Lena, Rodney, Michael, and Zack. Thank you!



*Adventist Society for Religious Studies*

*Annual Meetings:*

*San Antonio, Texas*

*[adventistsocietyforreligiousstudies.com](http://adventistsocietyforreligiousstudies.com)*