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Process, timetable unveiled for review of theology of ordination

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Church leaders today announced a timetable for the process for studying the theology of ordination over the next few years, the latest action following a promise at last year's General Conference Session to study the issue.
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Every Sabbath last year, Seventh-day Adventist church members put an average of US$40 million into offering plates worldwide for an annual total of $2 billion.

"To me, that is a miracle," world church Undertreasurer Juan Prestol told Annual Council delegates during a treasury report at world church headquarters this morning.

"No one is forcing anyone to do this. People do it voluntarily because the Lord impresses them to give. This is a tremendous testimony," Prestol said, particularly amid today's turbulent economic climate.

Part of that $2 billion in tithes and offerings received worldwide in 2010 is the foundation for the church's 2012 budget, church leaders said. Delegates voted today to budget $166.7 million for the church's appropriations next year.

One-third of the increases in the appropriations budget will go toward outreach, ministry and leadership to the 10/40 Window. The church's Loma Linda University, Southern American Division and Inter-American Division were among institutions and entities to see decreased funding as the church frees up money for the largely unreached area of the world stretching from Northern Africa across the Middle East and Asia.

The reallocation, recommended in 2008 by the church's Appropriations Review Commission, recognizes growing self-sufficiency in some areas, transferring additional funds to meet needs in other regions.

"In the past, we have had a tendency to pay financial attention to regions with high membership, but many are now capable of carrying their own weight," world church Treasurer Robert E. Lemon told delegates.

The church is seeing a dramatic shift in funding as Adventist membership worldwide grows. Between 2006 and 2011, church income from outside North America nearly doubled. While tithe from North America still funds a majority of the church's world budget, the church's finances are more vulnerable to fluctuations in currency exchange rates than in previous years.

The strengthening of the U.S. dollar against many of the world's currencies has a "major effect" on the church's work worldwide, said world church Treasurer Robert E. Lemon. While a strong dollar can cramp the world church budget, regions that receive appropriations in U.S. currency now find the amount stretches further, offsetting some of the loss, Lemon said.

Church financial officers deal with the opposite effect when the dollar weakens.

As the church, especially in the U.S., continues to emerge from a tenacious recession, Lemon said steady tithes and offerings are a blessing. Church members have felt the "strain" of uncertain financial times, but remain faithful, he said.

Tithe returned by members in North America is up 3.5 percent as of August 2011 compared to the same time last year, Lemon told delegates. Outside North America, tithe grew 17 percent in the same time period.
Church in Middle East now an attached field of world headquarters

Top leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted yesterday to transfer administrative oversight of church operations in the Middle East from the church’s Trans-European and Euro-Africa divisions to church headquarters.

The newly formed Greater Middle East Union Mission is home to 21 countries and more than 500 million people, and has 2,900 Adventists worshipping in 70 churches and companies.

Under the new organization, South Sudan becomes part of the church's East-Central Africa Division and the church’s Southern-Asia Pacific Division will oversee the Pakistan Union. Culturally, Pakistan can better be served by the division that also serves Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, leaders said.

The church's Euro-Asia Division will absorb Afghanistan. The world church headquarters will directly oversee the Israel Field and the new Greater Middle East Union Mission. That union mission will also include the Trans-Mediterranean territories. South Cyprus will remain in the Trans-European Division.

Despite more than 100 years of outreach to the region, data indicates that the mission of the church is moving with challenges in the region, members of the church's Greater Middle East and Mediterranean Survey Commission said in an October 9 report to Annual Council delegates.

Attaching the "high priority" Middle East region directly to world church headquarters will enable quicker implementation of projects, commission members said in the proposal. "It would make movement of personnel, funding and ideas easier across what used to be different division boundaries," they said. The realignment would also group countries together that have similar cultures.

Commission members also said the Middle East "should be the focus of the entire church," citing another advantage for moving regional leadership to oversight by world church headquarters.

In 2010, the church tasked the commission with studying Adventist work in the Middle East, with the intent that a territorial realignment might be necessary. A study of historical, demographic and statistical evidence seems to indicate that the church grows best when overseen by a unified and geographically contiguous body, commission members said.

The Middle East is part of a region called the 10/40 Window, where two-thirds of the world's population lives, only one percent of which is Christian.

"I want you to think of the incredible challenges in the Middle East," world church President Ted N. C. Wilson told delegates. "We want to give full credit to the workers already there," he added.

Bertil Wiklander, president of the Trans-European Division said he and his team had some
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Artur Stele, a world church vice president and director of the Biblical Research Institute, said the process would examine the foundation of ordination as well as its implications for church practices.

Leaders announced the plan during Annual Council, a yearly business meeting of the denomination’s Executive Committee.

The Biblical Research Institute at the world church headquarters will coordinate the process of studying ordination with corresponding Biblical research committees in each of the church’s 13 world divisions, said church President Ted N. C. Wilson.

“This will be a very careful process," Wilson said. "We’re letting you know how the world field will be involved.”

Each division is asked to request their Biblical research committee to study the theology of ordination and its implications for church practices in that region.

Stele announced the timetable as follows:

In November 2013, each division committee at their 2013 year-end meetings will review the study made by their division Biblical Research Committee and recommend it to the Biblical Research Institute director for consideration by a Theology of Ordination Study Committee. The General Conference Administrative Committee will also appoint a Theology of Ordination Study Committee with appropriate division representation.

From December 2013 to June 2014, the Theology of Ordination Study Committee will analyze the materials received from the divisions and prepare a combined report.

In June 2014, the report will be reviewed by General Conference executive officers and later by with the President's Administrative Executive Council and the General Conference Administrative Committee.

In October 2014, the General Conference administration will process the report for Annual Council, which will review the report and, if needed, take any appropriate action. If voted material needs to be placed on the 2015 General Conference Session agenda, it will be processed accordingly.