How should we treat the newly elected leader?

by Julian Hibbert

In the build-up to the average constituency meeting – whether it be at conference, union or higher levels – you will always find at least three groups of people involved: the speculators; the agitators; and the orchestrators.

The speculators are a benign group to which most of us belong. The agitators are usually a smaller and more focused group who have an agenda they want others to share, thereby hoping that they will be able to influence outcomes towards their bias. The orchestrators will always have sinister intentions, backed by strategic plans designed to put their candidates into power.

Session delegates are very much aware of these things, and generally arrive at such constituency meetings with a touch of apprehension in the pit of their stomachs. The dominating question in the minds of most is: ‘Who will it be?’

Once the vote is taken and the new leadership announced, that tension quickly dissipates and many delegates leave immediately, thinking that their work is done.

Does our responsibility cease once we’ve voted?

Do we discharge our obligations and responsibilities to church leadership with a cross on a piece of paper, or by waving a voting card?

Are we only there to determine who will lead us – or do we have responsibility to influence how they lead?

To my thinking, the real question that we should ask ourselves is: ‘How should we respond to these new leaders, whether they are our choice or not?’

Do we adopt an aloof ‘wait-and-see’ attitude, secretly hoping that they will make heavy weather of their new responsibilities? Then, if they do, we can smugly broadcast that we ‘knew it would happen’!

Or do we become more aggressive than that, creating complex issues that will put them to the test – so we can then ‘put them to the sword’!
The ‘saints’ have had practice

This strategy is not new. Regular upstanding churchmen tried it on Jesus 2,000 years ago:

‘After dinner the Pharisees and the lawyers attacked Him with all kinds of questions, hoping He would say something wrong. From then on, they acted more like His enemies than His friends.’ (Luke 11:53, 54, The Easy English Clear Word.)

Ingratiation

Another approach to new leadership is ingratiating. Those who employ this strategy are often masters in the use of subtle compliments that gently caress the carnal nature. Suggestions that ‘Things have never been so well-run before’, or ‘You fellows are a breath of fresh air’, can create dangerous illusions of success for new leaders. It is human to want to be close to our leaders and count them as our friends. But ingratiating slides easily beyond compliments to tangible favours, and favours build obligation, and obligation may cloud objectivity!

Beware of ‘courtiers’

A ‘courtier’ was one of those people who once swarmed around the rich and the famous, especially royalty. The courtier couldn’t ‘buy’ the regent’s favour with gifts of money or land, but if he supplied choice information he gained a special status, and the protection of the king.

Some leaders have an insatiable thirst for certain types of information. They want to know about the latest alliances, what people think of them and their leadership style, the moral blind spots of their colleagues and counterparts – anything that may give them perceived leverage over those they lead! But the real ‘leverage’ is in the clever courtier’s hand. He may use information selectively, mischievously, partially, or in any way he chooses, to manipulate the gullible leader.

How does God want us to act?

God can’t support aloofness, aggression, ingratiating, obligation or manipulation. So what does he expect from us? Perhaps these ideas will be helpful:

Join them in ‘Gethsemane’ – Every leader is going to have moments of intense stress, or times when nothing runs to plan, and nobody seems to care. These are often very, very lonely moments – times when our leaders need to know there is someone else in their ‘Gethsemane’ with them – someone who is praying for them!

In Matthew 26 we see how much Christ would have appreciated the praying presence of Peter, James and John. Just listen to the sadness and raw human need in these words:

‘Then Jesus came with the disciples to a place called Gethsemane and said to them, “Sit down here while I go over there and pray.” Then he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be in terrible pain and agony of mind. “My heart is breaking with a death-like grief,” he told them, “stay here and keep watch with me.” ’ (Verses 36-38, New Testament in Modern English, J. B. Phillips)

His vivid anticipation of the next day’s legal charades, public humiliation and inhuman torture, and the burden of humanity’s measureless iniquity, squeezed blood from his pores – but they slept. He was in severe turmoil – but they slept. Three times he urged them to ‘watch’ with him – but they slept! So, loyal members and colleagues, let’s join our leaders in their daily ‘Gethsemanes’.

Hold up the leaders’ hands – On the way to the Promised Land, Israel was attacked by the Amalekites, and this is what happened:

‘As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, . . . Aaron and Hur held his hands up – one on one side, one on the other – so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.’ (Exodus 17:11-13, NIV.)

Moses was holding up his rod, a symbol of God’s power and grace, but he could not do it alone. He needed the ongoing support of Aaron and Hur, because victory is always a team effort!

So, when our leaders are holding high the symbols of God’s power and grace, let’s support them tirelessly!

Tell truth to power, but do it properly – Bob Stone, a management consultant, makes the following observations:

‘Telling the truth to the boss is the first responsibility of an ethical subordinate. . . . Speaking the truth isn’t just a matter of personal integrity; it’s crucial for organisational success.’

And he is right on target. The one thing that our newly appointed leaders wish for is that we tell them the truth. We need to be open with them about what we think should be stopped, fixed or initiated for God’s work to be successful. But we must make sure that we have the truth before we tell: that our motives are pure, our facts accurate and our perspectives balanced.

‘Telling truth to power’ is never easy. It takes courage – but it also needs to be done in a gracious spirit and with due tact. Time and place are also important. Many a true word has been wasted because it was said at the wrong forum. The rule of thumb for ‘truth telling’ is simple: the smallest audience will usually deliver the best results! Nathan confronted David about his sin, not Israel.

‘Tell truth to power’ – our leaders are waiting!

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So...

Do we discharge our obligations and responsibilities to church leadership with a cross on a piece of paper, or by waving a voting card? Are we only there to determine who will lead us – or do we have responsibility to influence how they lead? ♦


Pastor Julian Hibbert is the Editor of MESSENGER, the British Union Conference journal, and this article is an expanded version of an editorial he wrote in the issue of 22 July 2011.

About a year after the Atlanta Session, former General Conference President Jan Paulsen issues a book with the title: Where are we going? The title is associated with the ancient tale of the apostle Peter fleeing from the persecutions in Rome who then meets Jesus going into the city. Peter’s question Quo vadi, Domine? (“Where are you going, Lord?”) is answered by Jesus giving him direction: “I am on my way into Rome to be crucified afresh”. And Peter turns around and follows his Lord, ultimately giving his life for Christ. Paulsen’s title therefore suggests that his book is fundamentally about following the Lord and being true to His mission even at the peril of our lives.

As one reads on, however, it becomes clear that the title is also rooted in one of Paulsen’s favourite themes, the Pilgrim Motif, by which he sees the Church and God’s people being on a journey through this earthly, foreign land – where we live as strangers - towards God and our heavenly destination (note pp. 102 and 118-127). On the title page, it is joined with Ellen White’s well-known statement on the time dimension of the history of the Church: “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history”. As Seventh-day Adventists, we are travelling towards God’s future and that is the direction Paulsen wants us to be clear about.

In this book Paulsen reviews his life of service in the Church, identifies lessons learnt as a leader, and delves into the many challenging issues that he has faced as a world-church leader in 1999 – 2010, particularly ones that our church is still facing. It is an unusual book, because it is rare that the world-church leader shares his inner thoughts on church issues in this way. The book is candid and will stimulate thinking and decisions within our church. Particularly striking are the many sections lifting up and explaining the Christian, biblical values that Seventh-day Adventist church leaders need in order to be faithful to Christ and His mission.

Values that Paulsen holds high are openness (against “bunker-motility”), humility, and Christ-centeredness. Adventists are being encouraged to maintain faithfulness to God’s mission by cultivating a vibrant and living relationship with God and with the world that God wants to save.

Paulsen shares views on unity, church elections, teamwork, and how we deal with “weeding” of erring members and leaders. He speaks frankly about women and youth as those who must be brought into active participation and leadership in the life of the Church. He reflects on the dual concept of “revival and reformation”, endorsing it fully but asking us to be clear on what we mean with it. If we fail to define it biblically, it may not bring the blessing that we seek but could be abused and lead us away from our mission. While Paulsen underlines that “revival” is what we all seek and have always sought, he warns that “reformation” needs to be clarified so that we all know from what and into what we are reformed.

It is interesting to note what is said about “people”. On one hand they are the greatest challenge for a leader (p. 22), on the other hand they are the most precious in the eyes of God, and Paulsen reminds Adventist leaders that “God will save people, not statements” (p. 32). He says that “people are both our greatest assets and our most complex challenges” (p. 74).

A very thought-provoking chapter is the one called “What Drives Us?” where Paulsen outlines the profile of an Adventist leader. He reasons around the following main points and this is good reading for all leaders in the Church:

Outstanding Adventist leaders
- Have transparent motives.
- Have nothing to prove.
- “Read” the community.
- Have the humility to lead.
- Can handle change.
- Realize they are not always right.
- Are faithful.

In discussing and illustrating these characteristics, Paulsen draws from the Bible, Ellen White and his life experience. It is stimulating and practical.

Sometimes during my reading, I had the feeling that the topic was not exhausted and that Paulsen had more to say. Perhaps he has been constrained by Pacific Press to confine himself to a certain number of pages. Since the topics he raises are very important for the Church, I wish there could be a way for him to come back to us as readers and share more.

In the chapter “The President and His Associates” Paulsen discusses, among other things, the concept of “loyalty”. Unless well defined, it may be a confusing term. He starts from the recognition that “when it comes to creating an environment that draws out the best in our colleagues, I believe there are two values of critical importance: trust and freedom.” He then denies that “(personal) loyalty” should be included as a value in this context. He underlines, rather, that the Church is different from institutions in the business world where the CEO requires personal loyalty (obedience) from his team. In the Church, however, any loyalty in a leadership team is primarily directed to Christ, and the decisions are made by a committee representing the Church and whom the president serves. Therefore, Paulsen concludes, “Elected church leaders are, quite simply, servants of the Lord and his people. They have accepted a trust and a privilege, not a right or an entitlement. Church leaders who forget this basic truth and who expect personal loyalty from their associates are misguided and can’t be trusted to lead.” (p. 74). I agree completely with this point, which is well made.

There is a sense in my opinion, however, in which “loyalty” is perfectly in order as a requirement between the team leader and his associates, namely, if loyalty is defined in terms of “trust and freedom”, which Paulsen highlights as being values of critical importance. Paulsen does acknowledge that we are not justified in “undermining those who’ve been given leadership assignments”, and he quotes James White’s appeal in 1870 against the “ongoing campaign of criticism and innuendo” against his and his wife’s work (p. 73). The term “loyalty” in the sense of not undermining the leader is in my view perfectly legitimate and refers to a value that is vital in building trust and cultivating a climate of freedom. And this is also how Paulsen uses the term “loyalty” in other parts of his book (pp. 79-81). The conclusion is that “loyalty” can have at least two senses, one referring to a servile following of a leader against the will of the Lord and for personal benefit or lack of integrity, the other referring to the value of being a trustworthy and supportive member of the team, one that can be trusted with the freedom of creative thought and even corrections of what the president may say and do. Perhaps this distinction could have been carried out more clearly in the book.

Despite its relative brevity – the book comprises only 128 pages – this is an important contribution to the thinking on leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. You will be a better leader in the Church by reading it and prayerfully reflecting upon it. A big thanks to Jan Paulsen for his candid and open book. It not only summarises a long and successful leadership in our church but contains important indicators of where the Church must be going if it is to remain faithful to the Lord and His mission.
The General Conference Initiating Leadership Training at Annual Council

The General Conference has decided to devote one full afternoon of each Annual Council meeting to leadership training. This is called a LEAD Conference, an acronym for Leadership, Education And Development. It will start on Tuesday afternoon, October 11, 2011, and the programme will address ethics, transparency and accountability. Issues such as humility/pride, firing employees and governance issues will be addressed through lectures, skits and group discussions. Such training events will be a standard feature of Annual Councils in the future. Among the members of Annual Council are all General Conference and Division Officers, as well as all Union Presidents. The material presented will be geared towards the participants taking it with them and repeating the training at home. --Bertil Wiklander ♦

Diligent & Faithful Leadership

 SCRIPTURE: Luke 12:42-44 And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

 OBSERVATION: Jesus teaches the disciples that those who are given authority and responsibility will be held accountable for their faithfulness in exercising their authority and responsibility for the cause they are called to. He who is faithful is dedicated, committed and loyal. He who is sensible is wise and discerning. Thus, if they do well with the authority and responsibility that is given to them, then they will be deemed blessed and often be given more.

 APPLICATION: As one whom has been blessed with the privilege of being given leadership and responsibility, I want to be mindful that I need to be faithful and diligent in fulfilling that which is assigned to or asked of me. At times, it can be easy to enjoy the position, appointment and authority, but get caught up in the benefits and fail to deliver the goods for whatever reasons that can be distracting or disengaging. I am honoured to be serving the Lord in full time ministry and to be blessed with a position of leadership. I must remember to steward my appointment well and take a position of serving others before thinking of myself.

 PRAYER: Dear Lord, I am so thankful for your faithfulness and your giving me the opportunity to use my God-given gifts and skills to serve you and those you call me to serve in full time ministry. I also thank you for the honour to be appointed to leadership with the responsibility to lead others. May I not ever think of my position before my assignments and responsibilities. ♦

John Tilton, LifeJournal.cc

Leadership Development Newsletter staff: Dr Bertil Wiklander, news director; Esti Pujic, editor
119 St Peter's Street, St Albans, Herts, AL1 3EY, England

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