Fear in the Adventist Church

Reflection by Mark Johnson, Louisville, CO

I am deeply concerned about my Church.

I have been a Seventh-day Adventist for over 50 years, and even though I took Political Science in college, I have purposefully done my best to avoid “Church politics.” It’s not that I don’t “love” politics – it’s just that I love my Church more. Politics and love for the Church have always seemed to be mutually exclusive to me.

But over the past year I’ve been drawn more and more into the politics of the Church, almost imperceptibly and certainly not by choice or design. I can’t blame it all on the One project, but there’s definitely a close association between the fact that we have taken on the One project as a church ministry and I have found myself in meetings and conversations with church leaders at every denominational level!
As the Church Board chairman for the Boulder Seventh-day Adventist Church, I've learned over the past year and a half that there is a great deal of international, and perhaps even universal, interest in the One project. Most of the things I've heard and read about it, however, just don't match up with what I've seen and experienced. I've been reminded of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the “Red Scare” of the 1950s. Apparently anyone can still say or write anything they want to about programs like the One project and very important people will take them very seriously. We seem to have forgotten the lessons of the McCarthy scandal that charges need to be supported with evidence, and that lives and careers can be permanently damaged by such ill-founded or manufactured accusations.

My concern for my Church, though, is not based on what the One project is doing. As Gamaliel said, “Leave them alone! If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear, but if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them.” (Acts 5:38, 39 TEV) No, my concerns are based on what I’ve found as I’ve met with these denominational employees from the local level all the way to the General Conference. In many of these discussions I have been struck with the overwhelming sense that there is a pervasive, but largely unacknowledged, culture of fear hovering over the Seventh-day Adventist Church today. In fact, more than once I have been told, almost in whispers, “They’ are afraid that ‘they’ are going to lose their jobs.”

This is quite a puzzle. It strikes at the heart of the mathematical precision of my underlying beliefs about the Church: The Church contains the children of God; God is love; there is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out all fear (1 John 4:16-18). Thus this fear-based conundrum not only concerns, it confuses me – how could the church of God support a culture of fear?

It confuses me because the Church Manual and the Church Rules of Order clearly state that the governance of our denomination is not a democracy, nor is it a dictatorship. It has a representative government, in large part to prevent the chaos of a pure democracy and the imperiousness of a dictatorship, both styles of governing which are perfused with fear. I believed that we had learned from our historical mistakes at the General Conference of 1888 in Minneapolis, where attendees were reprimanded by our Prophet for suggesting that we could not make a decision without the presence and wisdom of the General Conference President, or from Battle Creek, where the governing style of a small clique of pastors and physicians led Ellen White to write, “The men bearing chief responsibility on our conference must not seek to embrace too much authority…. The work of setting up erring man to judge and dictate to their fellows is folly. When men suppose that they must watch God’s laborers, and exercise over them their human judgment the sure result must be confusion and dishonor to God…. The work of judgment has not been given to any minister or conference president.” (LLM 221, 222)

I will have no say or impact in the cavernous halls of San Antonio. The momentous issues with which our Church representatives will be wrestling lie far outside of my circle of
influence. But I will be praying – very hard. I will be praying for God’s Spirit to rest on the hearts of the representatives and “drive out all fear.” I will be praying for the manifestation of wisdom that is far above anything we humans possess. And I will be praying that “Church politics” fails, and that love for the Church prevails.

Recalibrate

1. Is it too much to expect that a human organization will not succumb to human politics?
2. If the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a “representative government,” is there a more effective way of ensuring that delegates do indeed represent their members?
3. If “culture trumps policy,” for what should we be praying as our leaders meet in San Antonio?
4. Do we really believe the wisdom of Gamaliel?

Feel free to send thoughts or comments to Mark Johnson.
A few of the leadership from the One project will be at the NAD Pastor’s Convention in Austin and the General Conference Session. We would love to connect with you.

Erin Hannah exec@the1project.org
Japhet De Oliveira japhet@the1project.org
Sam Leonor sam@the1project.org
Elia King elia@the1project.org

Pastor’s Convention Austin

Front of House A/V General Sessions for Pastors

General Conference Session San Antonio

La Sierra Booth 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day
Young Adult Program all General Sessions
Sam Leonor is speaking for Young Adults Friday Evening July 10
Sam Leonor is speaking for Teens Sabbath morning July 11

the One project headquarters is located at the Boulder Seventh-day Adventist Church
345 Mapleton Ave, Boulder, CO, 80304, USA.