

Regional Union Conferences

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The ghetto is girding for survival. The present political administration has closed the Job Corps; cut the budget of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; paralyzed the Office of Economic Opportunity; and openly encouraged those who would defy the Supreme Court timetable for school desegregation. The Department of Justice assaults the Black Panther party but simultaneously tolerates such white groups as the Minutemen, the Vigilantes, and the Ku Klux Klan. The McCarran Act has provided for concentration camps in the United States for the incarceration of black militants and has envisioned the encirclement and immobilization of ghetto areas in emergency situations.

Since the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy, hope has well-nigh died that this country will ever accord the Negro all of the privileges guaranteed him under the Constitution, and a new mood has emerged that will surely affect every aspect of life in the ghetto. Black control of every institution in the ghetto is the immediate goal.

In these circumstances the organization of "regional" (black) union conferences is crucial to the survival of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an effective force among blacks. Perhaps one question as to the advisability of this step will inevitably be raised first: What about integration as a preferable solution?

We must avoid the trap of attempting ideological consistency when the problems to be solved are characterized by inconsistency. Let me explain. Total integration means assimilation and dispersion — the ultimate disappearance of the minority. Absolute rule by the majority is safe only when the majority acts with a degree of wisdom and justice clearly not now existing. (Only Christ can claim these attributes absolutely.) Total inte-

gration under imperfect circumstances, therefore, is not desirable to most blacks — in or out of the church.

I

What, then, would be the effect if meaningful integration were to take place here and now?

If instituted immediately, integration would greatly disadvantage the minority. In education, most black teachers would be “consolidated” out of their jobs. Most Negro students would be “consolidated” out to public schools. Only white pastors would be acceptable to whites. To use the Los Angeles Fifty-fourth Street Church as an example, with the assumption of a one-man-one-vote formula — blacks would rarely attain church office, and then at the discretion of the majority, and the benefit of such officeholders to the minority would be doubtful, since their continuance in office would depend on their maintaining the favor of the majority. Developments in the large ghetto areas, especially of the North, Midwest, and West, in terms of the polarization of racial attitudes, make it impossible for white administrators to administer, appreciate, or anticipate the needs of the exploding black society.

Integration leads to the dissipation of the minority’s power of collective action; hence, the majority controls the minority. Segregation, on the other hand, means overt denial of human privilege; hence, the majority controls the minority. Both integration and segregation mean death to minority power of action — or at best a form of benign paternalism.

The answer seems to lie between: (1) black control of their own affairs at the local and union conference levels but (2) integration of all departments, boards, and institutions that affect the work of the church. White-controlled union conferences would be expected to retain their black personnel and to maintain an “open door” hiring policy. Conversely, black-controlled union conferences should open their doors for white participation.

II

Many whites view regional union conferences as a form of separatism and call for their abolition at every opportunity. By the same reasoning, why not abolish white conferences and affiliate them with existing regional units? The fact is that *neither* need be abolished; throwing open the door to full participation by all races on the basis of merit avoids separatism. But since even this decision is subject to the will of the electorate, and since the

ratio is one to seven, the minority is still out in the cold. Exclusion is the necessary mechanism for separatism. An organization, therefore, may be all white or all black and not be separatist.

The Jews have given us the only example in history of minority survival. Their formula is simple: the Jews control their community and stick together at that level. In every country where there are sizable numbers, this is their practice.

Eighteen thousand black people are absorbed by the white race each year. This is possible because in physical appearance their negritude is difficult to detect. But for most of us highly visible brothers, survival outside the church and progress inside require collective action at the community level, and the integration of all institutions and levels of government meaningful to life in the community.

My visits to South America and many other parts of the world convinced me that control of union conference organizations by indigenous leaders does not lessen the fervor with which they love their white brothers nor their faithfulness in the prosecution of the work of the church. Rather, it forms what Ellen White calls a "unity of diversity" which has strengthened the church work.

I saw Brazilians manning the Brazil union conferences and Argentines manning Argentine union conferences. There is a Jamaican in charge of the West Indies Union Conference. Caucasians who visit in all these areas where the work of the church is literally exploding know that nowhere else in the world are they better treated or more warmly received, loved, and appreciated. Local governments in other parts of the world are now demanding that their own nationals in Adventist churches be given these seats of responsibility. Thank God that this practice has been accelerated in recent years. Doubtless we shall learn that we have lost nothing by trusting those who know their people best to administer the affairs that directly concern them.

Ellen White suggested that Negroes should be trained to work for their own people and that whites should be trained to work for theirs, but that there should be no exclusion of whites or blacks from those units of organization operated by both.

III

In my opinion, the time has come for the organization of regional union conferences for the following reasons:

1. There are sixty-one conferences in North America. Eight of them are

administered by Negroes. This means that when a president's term of office ends, there are only seven other places where he might possibly be invited. This situation can contribute to stagnation of leadership, for, with so few opportunities elsewhere, each man has to hold on where he is. White presidents have no such problem. With fifty-three places to go instead of eight, the advantage is obvious. The organization of regional union conferences would provide a natural outlet for men who have gained experience to move to a new level of church government and would make possible frequent changes in leadership, which, as the church has learned from experience, is indeed wholesome for the whole body. To its everlasting credit, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has had a program of training its leaders educationally, and in any organization the merit system is a key factor in morale.

2. There are certain pressing priority needs that demand the collective attention of all regional union conferences. Under the present arrangement, it is virtually impossible to secure unanimous action and secure inter-union cooperation between blacks in projects that are literally crying for attention. To be specific: in terms of capital improvement, there are needs in education that are becoming a disgrace to the church. A union conference organization would have the power to gain attention for these needs, because the resources of several conferences could be brought to bear on a given project without the organizational tension that might come from inter-union contacts.

3. Since union conference presidents exercise controlling voices in the affairs of the church, especially in North America, it is imperative that black men have someone at the union conference level to speak for them. Since the ratio of black to white in North America in the church stands at one black to every seven whites, the chance of the election of a black man to the presidency of a union conference is remote, to say the least. If it is wrong for black men to feel themselves entitled to presidency positions, by the same token it is wrong for white men to hold such positions.

4. The church needs regional union conferences because the present structure cannot possibly give controlling power to blacks in their own areas, since the whites operate as majority "stockholders" — which means that the position of blacks in the Seventh-day Adventist Church would ever be that of assisting, or associating, adrift in a sea of white power.

One point needs to be made clear here. The request for black union conferences is not a prelude to a request for a separate General Conference organization. In the perilous days ahead, blacks and whites will always

need each other. I can envision joint (black and white) union conference gatherings where men will meet as equals. Such gatherings could be the means of more significant Christian fellowship, as has been the case at the conference level, if there is mutual good will. Whites must not consider themselves threatened by this new maturity. This is not rebellion. It is the natural consequence of growth. Let it be remembered that this attainment is not intended to be the dividing of the church. It is the one means by which blacks and whites can "press together" as equals.

Although the church must *never* forsake its commitment to world missions, the Negro must be free to establish priorities closer home. It is a fact that for all of the far-flung mission philanthropies of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we, like the rest of the nation, have been slow in coming to the ghetto. Just here let me pay tribute to those white brothers who sense our needs, understand our language, and plead our cause. We are aware of the pressures that are sometimes consequences of their efforts. These white brothers are supported by prayers that they know not of. We blacks are embarrassed that they have to speak for us. If we are granted union conference organizations, we will speak for ourselves!

IV

Integration means one of three things, depending on who is talking:

1. Integration may mean total assimilation — dispersion through the body — intermarriage, interaction, and interpersonal relations. Race is forgotten! We blacks know that most of our white brothers don't want this. It may give them some comfort to know that most Negroes don't either. As Doctor King used to put it, "I don't want to be your brother-in-law, just your brother."

2. Integration may mean the establishment of a quota system all along the line — in churches, schools, and all church organization levels, the quota varying according to the pressures exerted by the minority, the good grace of the majority, or the direction the country is taking.

3. Integration may mean that the majority decides who the minority "representatives" among them shall be, using them to keep their fingers on the pulse of the minority. These are, in fact, representatives of the establishment.

The white minister isn't ready for integration in any but perhaps the third sense, and the white laity is even less ready. We are fooling ourselves if we think we're going to get anybody to try to force integration. Our white brothers know well that to begin a program of forcible integration would

jeopardize the financial security of the church and its success at its world mission. Therefore, they are left only the alternative of persuasion. This being true, we can expect no instant miracles! And further, while we refuse to start a revolution, we cannot wait for evolution.

The church regional conference organizations have anticipated the actions of the rest of the religious world. The Unitarians, who delighted themselves as a classless society, have organized a department for Negro affairs. This year the Catholics finally organized a black department within the hierarchy. (We were fifty years ahead of them.) The Methodists abolished their central jurisdiction and after a few years of "integration," in which blacks were consistently outvoted and outdone, the relationship is about to fall apart.

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We must combine the ideal with the pragmatic. In the language of our prophet, we must face the situation as it is. One need only visit a Sabbath service and see black men and women exercising fully the privileges of lay leadership to realize what a wise plan it would be to offer equal opportunity for each member of the human family to function to the full limits of his capacity. At the same time, equal opportunity knocks down walls of exclusion that would prevent the black from fellowshiping with his white brother.

It would seem philosophically sound, then, that we tailor our solution to the nature of the problem, namely, (1) that we integrate those institutions of church government that may indeed be integrated and (2) that we provide equal opportunity within the framework of one's own community relationship in those areas where resistance is strongest.

The record in eight conferences shows that with black men in control of their own business there has been an explosion in soulwinning and that financial support has skyrocketed and continued to rise. If this record is any indication, then the next step — the development of regional union conferences — can only make even more outstanding the results heretofore attained.