

# What about Reorganization of the North American Division?

AN INTERVIEW WITH NEAL C. WILSON

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In a recent interview at Andrew University, Neal C. Wilson, vice-president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists for the North American Division, answered some questions on church organization addressed to him by two students there — Adele Waller, feature editor, and Bob Bouchard, editor, of the *Student Movement*. Because the questions and the answers are of wide interest, they are reprinted here (in a form slightly condensed from that in the February 3, 1972, issue of the Andrews paper), with the permission of editor and interviewee. □ M.C.

*There is a move to study possibilities for reorganizing the North American Division and some of the departments of the General Conference. Could you tell us what sparked this action?*

I think there's been a growing feeling that it's possible to become over-organized by placing emphasis on maintaining a wonderful organization and a lot of offices but forgetting the real purpose for which we exist. If we can get our job done with a different type of organization — by freeing either manpower resources or financial resources and utilizing them in a better way to accomplish our job — then we ought to do it. The tendency always is to build a larger organization, because the larger the organization you build, in the eyes of many people, the greater success you've achieved. But when you define what our mission is and what success is, then you've got to come to the conclusion that we could do the job just as adequately with a different type of organizational structure.

We don't want to be radical, but we should try to conserve resources by putting in effort at the grassroots (the action units) rather than at the upper supervisory levels of organization. Without question, there has also been a feeling on the part of many lay persons in the church — professional people, businessmen, and pastors as well — that we simply multiply offices without achieving greater efficiency. I think all these are significant factors.

*Some reorganization meetings were held in mid-January. Could you give us some idea of what kinds of study are going to come out of them and what types of opposition will be raised?*

Our meeting in January was really an initial meeting to shape up what we would like to think of as a comprehensive plan to present to the Autumn Council, which will be held in Mexico City in October. We need to look at what is going to happen to money and manpower saved in reorganization. We need to make it pretty clear that these are to be channeled back to a productive area and not into some cul-de-sac. Also, we ought to study very carefully the reason for, the function of, and perhaps even the need for our departmental organization in the church. Do we need a completely self-contained unit on every level of the church? Or have we proliferated this system merely to create more opportunities for men to have offices considered of importance? Should we have the same structures on all levels? If not, how can we ensure an effective communication up and down — both directions? That's going to have to be studied very carefully.

Naturally, many are reluctant to accept the fact that we could be doing the job just as adequately with less superstructure. Some objections are genuine; some are naturally a bit defensive. I think people try to be sincere. Some people say, "At a time when it seems as though we have a great revival among the young people, the older ones are getting into the act. We have some programs designed to try to share with others what we have, such as Mission '72, Mission '73, and so on. We ought to have a very well-organized church. Rather than cut down on organization, we may have to increase." This, in a sense, is a thoughtful approach, except that it misinterprets the purpose of the various levels of organization.

I don't think we ever ought to get the conferences so large that they lose touch with people. But the union level does not need to carry out the same function. The union is to give coordination, inspiration, counsel, and unity. The unions were set up at a time when transportation and communication were greatly different from what we have today. There is nothing at all sacred about ten unions in North America. The decision for this system was purely a mechanical-judgment decision, based on transportation, time, geography, and so on.

*What is your own personal opinion on this matter?*

My opinion is that we can do the job effectively with fewer unions. I think we can save, conservatively, \$3 million a year. If we want to, we can save a lot more in other ways, also.

*Do you have an approximate number?*

I think about six unions in North America would be a fair number — five in the United States and one in Canada.

*Do you foresee any involvement in this for the constituency? Do you think you'll need to educate them?*

That's one of the burdens I've had. There is always a tendency to short-circuit people in the church — people who are interested and who can be very helpful when they understand what we're trying to do. I think that when we have combined all the proposals into a single one (perhaps in the late spring) we ought to have a meeting of the lay advisory committees and the conference committees from each conference within each particular union. These could get together for an information session or a public hearing where we could explain what we have in mind, ask them for their ideas, comments, criticisms, and suggestions, and add to the input that we have at present. In addition, I feel that we ought to pick out a dozen major centers of Adventist population in North America and have open meetings for any who want to attend, explaining our progress to that point, some of the options, and what the hazards would be — and again, get their feedback on this.

Of course, this will be tedious work for some of us, extremely enervating because it takes time and effort. There are always many people who don't understand, who misunderstand, who misquote. Nevertheless, I feel that it is important that the church members know what is happening. From all of this we may want to refine or change some things that have been suggested and develop a final report to be given to the Autumn Council in October.

You've asked for my views. This procedure has not yet been voted, but I think there is a fair amount of support. I'm sure that some will be reluctant and resistant to this type of approach, feeling that such decisions probably should be kept in a close circle and not exposed to everyone because it doesn't depend on popular vote but rather on duly elected bodies within the church. On the other hand, I think we'll greatly weaken our case, as well as miss a great opportunity for communication, if we fail to do this.

*How would this affect the educational system? Of course, you've set up the Board of Higher Education. Is this board going to be given authority to make decisions or is it totally advisory?*

The Board of Higher Education at this point is a participatory type of organization in which all institutions have a voice. I think we are to the place

where the institutions recognize that something needs to be done. Furthermore, they have pledged their complete support to the decisions and actions of this board. Each institution is still legally autonomous, yet we feel that each institution in the Adventist church has a prior or higher loyalty to a system or a sisterhood of institutions which should have the same objective. That objective is to provide the very best kind of education for Adventist young people on as broad a spectrum as the church feels is necessary. By pooling our resources, our know-how, and our facilities, we can do a more adequate job than we can with each school operating in its own little sphere. The test is still ahead of us in many ways, but we think there are a lot of hopeful signs.

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*Is there any possibility of combining colleges? How do you think this would be handled?*

I doubt that there will be any combining of colleges. Rather, I think we ought to cut down on what each college is attempting to do and do it a little bit better. Perhaps we'll also need to change the concept that every college must be totally self-contained in every area and that there can be no cooperative programs. If we make better institutions out of the ones we have, we can use all of them. It's either that or get these institutions so large that a very important element is lost. With the growth factor today and with so many Adventist young people not attending Adventist schools, we'll be achieving more if we get more students in and keep costs from escalating, rather than trim down the number of colleges.

*In a subject such as English, it seems that teachers and students would be of a more unified opinion than in music, where students might defend types of music that most teachers would condemn. Don't you think it would be a good idea to include some students on the music committee?*

Yes. It would be nice to have student representatives on all of these committees. After all, the young people make up quite a large part of the church, and it's only right that all parts of the church be represented. The main reasons that students have not been included on committees previously are: (a) problems in selecting students, (b) problems with transportation expense, and (c) the time that these committees take from studies. However, I see no reason why these problems cannot be overcome so that students can be on the committees.