

# ORGANIZATION: A Discussion of the Structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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BARCLAY: Today is not 1870. It is not even 1967. And we must deal with the problems in the church by moving forward, not by hanging onto the past. Truth is never threatened by changes in procedures or methods.

In order to expedite our discussion, we will have a few short presentations to help us understand our church structure. I have asked Elder Wilson to describe the General Conference, the North American Division, a union conference, and a local conference, and the purpose of each. Following this, Doctor Alexander will describe the local church and its purpose. Next, Mr. Randall will describe the constitutional relationships of the General Conference, the Lake Union Conference, and the Illinois Conference.

WILSON: Right at the outset I would like to make a brief clarifying statement. Some have suggested that it might be better if I personally did not get involved in a discussion like this. But I have done so very willingly, because I think it is important to understand one another in regard to what God has for us to do and how we can best do it. Perhaps one of the greatest dangers that confronts the church today is that the organization becomes the focus of our attention while we forget what our real mission is — our mission becomes secondary and that which is only a means to accomplish our mission receives our greatest emphasis.

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We could have changed slightly the direction of our discussion and concentrated on the growth and development of the church, and the miraculous, providential leading of God. However, merely to have progress, merely to make advances, merely to have success — this is not the mission of the church. The mission of the church is to carry the understanding of the love of Christ and his reconciling power, under the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit preparing men and women for the coming of Christ. And so I think it is appropriate for us to consider how we can really do the job. If this requires some changes and adjustments in our thinking or organization, then let's be willing to make them.

Back in the 1840s, small groups of Adventist believers were scattered in many different places. They were isolated. Many of them were mocked. But they had a conviction that had been born out of an understanding of God's Word; and when a few of them would get together, they would talk about the mission of the church. Although they were few, with no resources and no organization, they had a great vision of something that could be done — something that God had said *would* be done.

But they strongly resisted organization. Many of them had been in situations where organization was misused — substituted for the gospel — and they didn't want to see this repeated. But they wanted fellowship. They wanted to worship. They wanted to study God's Word. They wanted to witness, because they believed that time was running out and that Christ would soon come. How were they going to do these things?

It wasn't long before they realized that even in their own little groups they would have to have some organization, although the idea was still resisted to some extent. They got together in meetings to express their views, their hopes, their burdens. They noticed that some groups had strengths that others didn't have, and they wondered how they could pool their resources. And so, out of conferences as occasions for discussions they

developed conferences as organizational structures. In 1861, just a year or so after the first Adventist church was organized, the Michigan Conference was organized; and in the next couple of years, there were five more such conferences.

The purposes of these conferences were to preserve the unity of the faith, to rally the combined resources to accomplish their mission, to develop common guidelines and policies, to give counsel in unusual situations and difficulties, and to coordinate activities so that there wouldn't be a lot of overlapping and duplication.

For these same reasons, the General Conference was organized in 1863 with just six conferences and with three members making up the executive committee. This arrangement continued for some time, during which the departmental work developed. There were also various institutions, and many of these, you might say, were unilateral thrusts that were not very solidly tied in to the General Conference program.

In 1901 came the big change in structure. By that time it was felt that the departments and institutions should be brought into some happy relationship, without each going on its own independent course. Furthermore, it was realized that this was a world mission, to "every nation, kindred, tongue, and people." Thus, to enable the General Conference to take on a world task, union conferences were organized, each made up of a group of local conferences in a given territory, to carry out the same functions that the General Conference had been set up to do in 1863. And so the General Conference became, and still is, an organization made up of union conferences.

Now what about the "divisions"? There is no such thing as an independent division with its own constituency. A division is merely the General Conference operating in a certain geographical area, and all its officers, staff members, and employees are actually General Conference personnel. Because the General Conference headquarters is located in North America, it guides the work in this geographical area more directly.

The purposes of all the organizations are identical: coordination, guidance, pooling of resources, and unifying the faith — to care for the growing, expanding, and, we hope, soon-to-be-completed task. But there would have been no need for these organizations without the local church.

ALEXANDER: A church is a spiritual entity, in that it is a group of people who have been gathered by the Holy Spirit into a community of faith, to minister mutually to each other for upbuilding in the faith, as the Holy Spirit, through the gifts of the Spirit, operates in the congregation. A church is also a group of people who have been given a commission to preach, teach, and baptize.

Whatever organization is here exists for pastoral care and the nurture of individuals, so that every person will feel that he is part of the church body and will find himself being prepared to do the work assigned to him by God. Time has taught us that we need some kind of structure, where the gifts designated by the Spirit of God — pastors, teachers, apostles, evangelists, and all the rest — can function.

So there is an organization and an organism, and it is the combination of these two that makes up the local church. The church, in this sense, is the church in the world. In its building, it is building people, preparing them personally for the kingdom of heaven. In the world, it is the witness of the gospel and the power of the gospel in the human life.

RANDALL: Before we can consider how to use the present organizational structure more effectively, or how the structure could be changed, we need to understand the existing structure. This structure is controlled by constitutions.

The constitution of the General Conference provides that its membership shall consist of (a) the union conferences and (b) certain other (minor) entities; and that the voters of the General Conference shall be (a) the delegates representing the union conferences, and (b) the members of the General Conference Committee. Thus the voting control rests with the delegates selected by the union conferences, together with the officials of the General Conference who were previously elected by this union conference representation.

The General Conference officials, including the vice-presidents for the various divisions, are all elected by the General Conference. Each division does not separately elect its own chief executive. The vice-president for North America works under the direction of the General Conference Committee, which is the top executive authority for both the world organization and the North American Division.

The General Conference Committee now has 148 members resident in North America, elected by the General Conference in session. It is not unusual for a large organization to have a large board of directors for general direction; but it is unusual for such a large board to be active in day-to-day administration. In practice, this committee keeps close control over current operations, holding weekly meetings of the available members and processing a number of routine matters, such as personnel transfers and travel authorizations. Thus the church does not have a single officer who is respon-

sible for administration, but a 148-headed creature. It is only natural that such an entity sometimes has trouble keeping its heads coordinated, and sometimes appears slow, unwieldy, and inefficient as a top executive.

The General Conference president is specifically limited to do only what the General Conference Committee directs. The entire provision of the constitution pertaining to the president reads: "The President shall preside at the sessions of the Conference, act as Chairman of the Executive Committee, and labor in the general interests of the Conferences as the Executive Committee may advise." In the constitution and in practice, there is no delegation of administrative authority, temporary or permanent, to the president or any of the vice-presidents. The executive head of the church is a committee.

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To such a costly and inefficient situation has the church come, in deference to arbitrary interpretations of various warnings against "kingly power." If the union conferences deliberately sought to have a weak superstructure over them, they could hardly have devised a more cunning plan, for there is no General Conference official who is not, in effect, merely an errand boy for the delegates who elected him. A General Conference official may not even travel officially to any union conference without an invitation; and if and when he does get there, he does not have any administrative authority. His effectiveness is limited to his capacity as a persuader; and for any effective action to occur, the persuasiveness must be exerted on a whole committee, not just a local administrator. On the other hand, if the local officials ask for help of any kind, the General Conference is not authorized to give assurances of anything more than that he will take the request to the General Conference Committee for consideration.

The General Conference does not "direct" or "order" any union conference or other organization to take any action. It only recommends such action. There appears to be no requirement that the union conferences actually follow the recommendations, and in practice the recommendations are sometimes (though not generally) ignored. And there is no provision for a General Conference officer to call a union conference official to account for his official performance. Rather, the union conference officials can require the General Conference president and other officers to explain their actions.

Having guaranteed that their "superiors" in the General Conference are safely under their control, what have the union conferences done in regard to the power structure at their own level and below? As a typical operation, we will consider the Lake Union Conference.

The constitution of the Lake Union Conference provides that its con-

stituency shall be the local conferences in its territory, and that the voting delegates shall be appointed by the executive committees of the local conferences. The constituency also includes the members of the Lake Union Conference Committee, and any members of the General Conference Committee who may be present. At the constituency meeting in May 1967, 209 delegates were seated. Of these, 83 percent had been selected by the executive committees of the local conferences, and the other 17 percent were officials of the Lake Union Conference, the General Conference, and various institutions. Only 16 of the 209 delegates were laymen, and they were delegates by virtue of their membership on the Lake Union or local conference committees.

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The Lake Union Conference Committee, which includes the local conference president, has 22 members, of whom two are laymen. This committee has full administrative power (including authority to fill any vacancies that may occur before the next constituency meeting) with only the requirement that a report be made to the constituency at the regular quadrennial meetings. There is no constitutional authority for any General Conference official to sit on the Lake Union Conference executive committee.

The structure of the local conferences may be exemplified by the Illinois Conference. Its constitution provides that its membership shall be the Adventist churches in its territory and the voters shall be the delegates from the various churches. At the biennial constituency meeting in 1969, 317 of the 388 delegates were laymen, and the 71 others were pastors and various officials of the Illinois, Lake Union, and General Conferences. In the Illinois Conference, the delegates elect the two officers of the conference — the president and the secretary-treasurer — and the seven to nine additional members of the executive committee. This committee has full administrative power between the constituency meetings, and consists of the two officers, four ministers, the administrator of Hinsdale Sanitarium, and three laymen.

The president of the union conference usually sits with the local conference executive committee, and often dominates its performance, although there is no constitutional provision for his membership on it, or even his attendance.

Here is a system which is frequently described as "democratic," but which in practice eliminates the effective voice of the laymen after the biennial local conference constituency meeting and permits almost total control by union conference officials without any effective restraint.

The union conferences control the official access of the local conferences

to the General Conference, and also control the contacts between conferences. In these and other ways the union conferences dominate the local conferences, which theoretically should be controlling the union conferences. One result is that the line of authority goes around in a circle, instead of proceeding in a straight line from one administrative level to another. In practice, both the local conferences and the General Conference are subservient to the union conferences, where the administrative power has tended to concentrate.

This kind of organization gives the union conferences a large degree of independence; and historically this was desired in order to avoid a hierarchy that might tend toward administrative absolutism. But there is no built-in provision for check and balance. The church in North America now has ten centers of control instead of one. Whether this is good or bad depends on one's viewpoint. It may also depend, at least partly, on the size of the organization: what was sufficient in 1902 for 63,000 members may be inadequate now for 426,000.

If all went well — that is, if all the managers were all-wise — this system might be satisfactory, for it provides a tight circle of authority, well fortified against attack of every sort — even suggestions for improvement. But as a matter of history, all has not gone well. At the present time there is a great deal of unrest — among conference workers, educational personnel, business and professional persons among the laity, and others. And there is no effective way to voice complaints to an independent monitor who can command respect and ensure compliance with the policies laid down by local conference constituencies or the General Conference. Urgently needed is some way to appeal the actions of the established circle of command.

The present challenge is fourfold: (1) Can we strengthen and modify the central authority of the church to operate more efficiently and economically? (2) Can we provide a check-and-balance for the union conferences? (3) Can we provide an effective route of appeal apart from the established circular lines of authority? (4) Can we make these modifications without setting up an undesirable absolutism?

### III

JONES: I have just come to the union conference level, and I cannot support many of the statements by Mr. Randall. In the Lake Union Conference there are no local conferences where the union conference president or any other staff member dominates the executive committee meetings. We serve as advisers and that alone.

As to lay representation on the local conference committees, there are at least four laymen on each executive committee in the Lake Union Conference. There are also four laymen on the union conference committee. We feel that this gives adequate checks and balances.

ILES: In the Southern Union Conference the president's office had a revolving door for a couple of years, with presidents coming and going. And they were accountable to the General Conference and to the constituency.

RANDALL: I don't know the details of what happened there, although I heard rumors about it in Nebraska. But I understand that when the General Conference officials came to the Southern Union Conference, they had to come, not as officials directing what should be done, but as pleaders urging the local constituency to make certain changes. The authority to make the changes remained entirely with the people. Now maybe this is desirable. I am not contending that it is wrong. I am merely pointing out the situation that exists.

STOKES: One of the things we must do in analyzing any organization is to compare the "blueprint" organization with the informal organization. Almost every organization operates in terms of personalities and circumstances, shortcutting the official procedures. Thus, to describe the General Conference or a local conference without describing particular events and particular people, and the way particular decisions were made, does not show how things really work. We see on one hand the theory, but quite a different thing in practice. It is very difficult to describe something that is alive unless you describe what the live people do, not what they are supposed to do.

RANDALL: I would say that it is a weakness to rely on personalities for procedure. We can get ourselves into trouble with that kind of thing.

WILSON: You must remember that beyond the constitution, we have a "working policy," which is far more detailed than most people suppose. The most recent edition of the General Conference working policy came out after the 1970 General Conference session in Atlantic City. Now we are developing a North American Division policy book, which will apply the principles of the General Conference working policy to a North American setting.

These policy books should be available for purchase at our conference Book and Bible Houses. There's nothing mysterious about them. There's nothing to hide. They are well prepared. They are well thought through. They have been sifted and combed and refined. I'd just as soon let anybody have them any time.



The working policy spells out some of the relationships that are given very briefly and in a technical way in the constitution and bylaws. Furthermore, practice establishes certain relationships. And when it comes to practice, the office of the General Conference president is not as weak as it may sound in the constitution. There are much greater powers given to an individual than you might assume. However, should one abuse the authority that is given to him by the General Conference Committee, the committee and the constituency can withdraw it. So the constitution is a safe one. And personally, I think this is a very wise type of organization.

As to a union conference president dominating a local conference committee — this may take place in very isolated situations, but it is not the general practice. No union conference president can dominate any committee if the members of that committee will truly fulfill their responsibility and exercise the authority that the constituency vested in them. If they do not have the wisdom and the conscience to stand up and say, "This is what I believe, and this is the way I am going to vote," I don't think they ought to continue as members of that committee. One of the greatest weaknesses of the church is that those who are constitutionally asked to carry a responsibility will allow somebody else to do it. Somebody will say, "Well, he may find himself out of a job." So what? There are plenty of other jobs in this world, and I would be very discouraged if I felt that a committee member, purely to hold on to his position, would allow someone to come in and dominate a meeting.

When it comes to the General Conference being controlled by the union conferences, this is not really correct. It's true that they choose the delegates to the General Conference session, but they do not dominate the General Conference or its personnel. They have a voice, and that voice should be heard. But let me remind you that the constituency of every union conference always includes all of the General Conference Committee members who may be present at a union conference session. If some union conference were going completely off course, the full General Conference Committee could move in at the next session and could probably swing the constituency in any direction it wanted to take it.

It is true, however, that there is resistance to change. While people should not be so gullible as to swallow every suggestion for change, we should not be so staid and so protective and so cautious and defensive that we can't see that some changes may be desirable. I think we have come to a time when some modifications should be made.

ALEXANDER: In the beginning, many of the people coming into the

church were of the lower middle class, and the pastors were the "hierarchy type." Where the people have not been helped to understand how the church is structured and how it functions, so that the local church selects the right kind of delegates to the meetings where the business of the church is done, the church automatically falls into the hands of ministers who have been prepared largely to preach. This is a historical problem that perhaps we can't quite solve at this point.

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ILES: If we would give the pastors the opportunity — in fact, require them — to have an understanding of the organization of the church, we would be taking a large first step toward having a more effective organization. And I think a young man going into the ministry should have an understanding of management — how to conduct a meeting, how to set up bank accounts, how to keep a set of church books and analyze a balance sheet, how to transfer real estate. Sometimes a fine young man comes into a local church and is immediately propelled into the position of chairman of the board, and then brings contempt upon himself and his education by his complete lack of understanding. His total experience is what he learned in the dormitory men's club.

WILSON: This type of education should not be limited to pastors. The church ought to develop an ongoing program of education in group dynamics and leadership not only for pastors but also for administrators — conference and union conference presidents — and everyone else who deals with people. It is true that some individuals have natural ability in the art of leading people and maximizing the strength of organization, but this can always be enhanced by summer courses, workshops, and the like.

STOKES: One of the sins of the church in North America is that we have developed a civil-service mentality. We have made it appear that unless a man is promoted first to a better church (whatever that means), then to a conference position, then up the line, he really isn't successful.

WILSON: I want to assure you that there are a great many men in North America who are not seeking a conference office. There are too many who are, but a great many are not. Unfortunately, the church has hurt itself by making it appear that it's a reward or promotion to be given a particular responsibility, and people think that if they are ever going to "succeed," they must get appointed to an office. We have probably given the wrong emphasis, and we ought to develop new perspectives and values.

#### IV

BARCLAY: Let's move now to the subject of authority in the church, and whether it comes from the top down or is generated from the bottom up. We are told that a General Conference in session is the highest authority; but then we say that the authority in the church rests in the church membership, with the executive responsibility delegated to representative bodies and administrative officers. Can we clarify or reconcile these two concepts?

WILSON: Personally, I see no real conflict. The basic authority (which is the constitutional authority, since we are talking about organization) comes from below. But that authority is delegated by the constituency to organizational leaders because that appears to be the best way for the constituency to carry out its objectives. Thus it sometimes appears that this authority is coming from the top.

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Something that has concerned me a good deal is the matter of understanding what responsibility and authority resides on the various levels. We have been guilty of almost carelessly insulting people by calling them to a constituency meeting without giving them any information about the items that are going to be discussed. We are really asking them to come and just sit and listen and nod their heads and applaud and go home. I think the delegates should know, well in advance, what issues may be coming up at the meeting, and they should have a paragraph or two of background information on each item so that they can do a little personal research if they want to. Furthermore, I think they ought to have a copy of the constitution and bylaws, so that they will know what their authority is, what their limitations are, and what possibilities are open to them. And after the meeting, they ought to be kept informed on what progress has been made on these matters which they determined should be given priority. These things could greatly strengthen the constitutional base of authority.

Some of us really want to see greater participation by laymen who are knowledgeable, interested, and willing to get involved. At the last session of the Central Union Conference, the constituency amended the constitution so that the delegations to the next session will have to include at least twenty percent laymen.

ILES: I know of churches where we have to go out and turn over rocks to find people willing to be delegates.

JONES: For a recent constituency meeting, one conference in the Lake Union sent out the entire program booklet and the constitution at least two weeks ahead of time. And the union conference has done the same thing.

RANDALL: But in a still different area, one conference sent out a letter instructing the delegates not to have any meetings among themselves, or give any thought as to what should be considered or what their position should be; they were to wait for the Holy Spirit to guide them at the time of the meeting. That infuriated many of the folks, because what the letter apparently meant was that they should let the president decide what was to be discussed and get his program approved before anybody else had a chance to think about it.

But evidently this is not the case everywhere. In fact, it is my opinion that the quality and manner of conference administration is not the same in all parts of the country. A number of policies are being administered quite differently in different places. This is one of the things that ought to be straightened out. But I don't know of any way to bring this about.

BARCLAY: Should the recommendations of the General Conference be followed by all the local conferences? How should these policies be enforced?

WILSON: I think the recommendations should be followed, but I would hate to see machinery set up to enforce them. Unless the local people can be persuaded that the General Conference policy is the better way, we accomplish very little in the end. The strength of the church is its dedication to a world mission and the loyalty of individuals to common objectives and goals. Machinery to enforce policies would take the spirit out of the church. I have found that where the church leadership levels with the people, gives them all the facts, and tells them what the alternatives are, about eighty percent of the people see the light and say, "It makes sense. Let's go with it."

There have been union and local conferences that have taken a rather independent attitude: "Well, we're on our own. We're financially independent. We don't have to follow those antiquated policies. We're an enlightened group here." And they have gotten themselves into some serious difficulty. With proper counsel it is good to experiment with changes in a given location, but an independent course by a union or local conference can give the wrong example to the churches. Some local churches are saying, "Well, we're independent too. After all, we're supplying the finances and looking after ourselves, and we don't have to listen to the conference." If this attitude were to take hold, we would defeat the very purpose of our church organization.

RANDALL: This is one of the most delicate issues confronting the church. I agree with the importance of voluntary cooperation, with everybody having his heart in the work. But it is very uneconomical to spend thou-

sands of dollars having a Fall Council make recommendations that are then ignored in certain places. It seems to me that there should be some way in which the people — the laymen, the local pastors or teachers — could get redress if their conference administration is not following the official church policy. This would increase the unity that is so desirable.

To have the basic authority in the local constituency is fine. But then we could elect delegates to a top authority, such as the General Conference, which would then see that its official policies were carried out in the union and local conferences. If they were not, we could have the proper constitutional means to deal with the situation without having to wait two or three years for a constituency meeting.

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STOKES: We have stressed the structure of our local and union conferences and the General Conference. Yet we are, after all, a group of local churches. And it seems to me that it is precisely here that we are weakest. Is it any wonder that the power has tended to migrate elsewhere?

There are problems at the local church level that make it difficult for authority to rest where it ought to. For example, the frequent change of ministers means that in many churches there is no continuing leadership except that provided by laymen; and frequently the laymen, because of this change, are left uninstructed and wonder what comes next. The smaller the church, and often the smaller the conference, the more likely this is to be the case. And we have a large number of churches that do not have a regular minister at all; the average conference has only about half as many pastors as it has churches. I see no reason why we could not provide a pastor for every church in North America — we could well afford it — and continue pastors for much longer periods, making changes far less frequently than we do. Though the top looks quite impressive, the bottom of the pyramid is weak indeed.

JONES: This reminds me of a story about two fellows who wanted to drive a big tractor-trailer truck. But they didn't have the right kind of license. They went to the ICC office and asked why they couldn't drive the big trucks, since they had driven all the other kinds. One of the examiners said, "Well, what would you and your pal do if you were in a truck going down a hill, with the truck going as fast as possible, and all of a sudden someone pulled out in front of you?" "Well," one of the fellows said after he had thought a while, "I wouldn't do but one thing. I'd wake up my partner and say, 'You ain't never seen a wreck like we gonna have now!'"

From what I have seen recently, I think that if we don't make a turn, the Adventist church is "gonna have a wreck like we ain't never seen." I believe we have to start at the bottom and strengthen the people to believe that they are part of this program — partners with the ministers.

ALEXANDER: We have been stressing the relationship of the pastor to the local congregation — where, I think we have stated, the authority really lies. One of the biggest problems facing the church is that individuals see themselves brought into the church and recognize some spiritual relationships here, but do not know what it means to be *the church*. If they would see this responsibility, even if they never had a pastor, they could still be a functioning group, taking seriously what it means to be a church.

This may sound a bit protective of ministers, but we have asked the ministry to do just about everything that everybody else does. If there is going to be a change, there must be a division of labor here, in which the lay person (and he is a lay person in the sense that he is not professionally trained and ordained to preach) does his part.

ILES: That is all too true. We are asking our ministers to be architects, fund raisers, contractors, baby-sitters, and handholders; and I am afraid that some of them are leaving the ministry because they are having to do all these things when they really entered the ministry so that they could be preachers and pastors. One of the things we have failed to teach our ministers is to recognize the talents in the churches and make use of them by delegating authority.

ALEXANDER: Is it possible that the reason this happens is that the lay person still doesn't know his responsibility in the church? The pastor has been asked by the conference committee to be the leader of the church. He has been taught, we hope, to delegate responsibility. But when he steps into the church situation and finds the saints so busy that they are not able to take that responsibility except here and there, he has to take over some things himself. And when he does, they seem to be glad to let him do it.

ILES: The whole world is made up of those who turn the wheel and those who let others turn the wheel. But I say again that there are more who could become wheel turners if the pastors would give them the opportunity and then encourage them along. The laity is not going to come forward spontaneously to do the job. The pastor has to be the catalyst.

RANDALL: It would be very helpful if the conferences, back of the pastors, would encourage this sort of attitude.

STOKES: There is a problem here to which we need to refer: What is the mission of the church — not just overall, but in Berrien Springs, Michigan,

or in Bridgeport, Connecticut? Does our overall structure really permit enough differentiation so that we can look at the mission of the individual church? With all the programs that come down the line, we need to be thinking very seriously about reaching the people in the next block, about meeting specific needs in specific areas.

I recognize that this is not entirely the job of the pastor. My plea was that the pastor remain long enough to become familiar with the needs and learn how to meet them. But beyond that, it seems to me, the conference should help draw out the lay leadership. Perhaps with constant training sessions, our conference sessions would be more meaningful in terms of what needs to be done in particular places. In effect, this is already going on in South America. One of the reasons for the success of the church in Brazil is the concentration on specific problems in particular places and the alerting of the laymen to their responsibility. In North America we have a good organization at the top, but the job must be completed at the local level — by the pastor and all the members. If that's where the authority really is, that is also where we have been failing as a church.

One other element in the church organizational structure (and another source of our problems) is the institution — the school, the hospital, and the like. In the Southern New England Conference, one in every four dollars received by the conference goes directly or indirectly into the institutions. These institutions have very definite roles to play in the development of the church. Some see them as dangerous; some see them as great sources of strength. In any case, they are very important seats of power — whatever that means.

## VI

BARCLAY: The next question is, What is the role of the ministry in church organization and administration?

ILES: I would like to repeat that a pastor should be a catalyst in his church. Even in a small church the laity should be assigned chores, and I think lay persons can be depended on to do these chores. People come up to what is expected of them. I don't think we are giving to our young men coming into the ministry a sufficient understanding of church administration.

On the other hand, our administrative processes lack a way to evaluate ministers. Are they producers or nonproducers? If they are nonproducers, how can they become producers? And if they refuse to become producers, how can we move them on? It seems that ordination is tantamount to job security for the rest of one's life.

STOKES: I am wondering just what we mean by "production." We can

look at the amount of tithe received from a church, or the number of baptisms there, or the Ingathering report. I agree that there must be some measure for evaluation, but I am afraid that we are using only statistical measures. As an economist I could hardly reject these, but they are only the beginning. We need to rethink the task of the church in each place, or its "productivity" tends to become a matter of one report after another. I don't think that we have really prepared our pastors for the most important task they have — the ministry of the gospel.

ALEXANDER: The role of the minister is changing from what it was when our church first began. His role as spiritual leader has not changed a great deal; but with the local, union, and general conferences preparing and promoting various programs, his role in the church organization has become that of a pastoral director. He is also a liaison person between the church members and the conference, representing the church to the conference, and is also responsible to the conference committee for the various programs of the church. He is, in a way, "caught" between the conference and the people to whom he ministers; and in preparing him for this ministry, we have to take account of both sides.

One way in which we could use the developing organization of the church to help the pastors is to have the various departmental secretaries — youth activities, stewardship, Sabbath School, and so on — serve as resource persons who would go to the various churches to help the people meet their responsibilities. Then the pastor could do more of his own work.

STOKES: I hope I can say this with love and understanding. There are very few local departmental men who really take their responsibilities as seriously as they ought to. I think we could remove many of them and not miss them.

When we have a sick teacher, I have called the educational superintendent and said, "What shall we do?" And he said, "That's your problem, brother, I'm busy. You get someone locally and take care of it." Or when we are in trouble in the Ingathering campaign, what we get is, "I'm awfully sorry, but my schedule is filled up, and I can't make it down to Bridgeport. But we'll be praying for you." Or there is a serious problem coming up with respect to our dealings with another church. "I hope you come out all right, but we can't make it there. You are a little out of the way, you understand." That happens over and over again.

People resent being left alone. If you are going to say to the laymen, "This is what you ought to do," then you have to help them, you have to guide them. You have to know what will actually work in Dowagiac, or in



South Bend, or in New York City, so that you make sense when you say, "This is what you should do." And you have to stay with them a little bit.

If that were happening, I think there would be a little more satisfaction, and a little more success. If we have this wreck to which Elder Jones referred, it will occur at the local level. And it will occur in spite of our sincerity, despite our hard work, partly because we have very, very difficult assignments given to us. Carrying the gospel to the central city, for example, is a very tough task.

ALEXANDER: As to statistics, I hope there will be a swing to a whole new philosophy, as we have had in regard to stewardship. At first we looked at Madison Avenue, and we got some money out of our people; but we hurt our churches. Then we moved to the principles of stewardship we had all the time, voiced by Ellen White, and we have had great revival.

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RANDALL: Along with this, we ought not to overlook Mrs. White's statement that the administration of business matters in the church should be turned over to business people. In a small church a pastor has to do all of these things himself; but in large churches we need to divide the responsibilities between ministers of the gospel and administrators. Let's keep in mind that our primary mission is spiritual work, and that's what the ministers are ordained to do. When they are looking after the church books and fixing up the lights and the plumbing, they are not doing their main work. Wherever possible, we should free them from that sort of work by providing competent administrators to whom they can turn over these responsibilities.

STOKES: There are some crucial issues here. Let's take a medium-sized church and suppose that we need a business manager. No layman could do this job without some financial assistance. Should we use the tithe for this purpose? Should we use these funds to build the kind of staff that a pastor needs so that he can do his work? Should all the staff be ordained? If the conferences can exchange tithe funds for nontithe funds to support institutional and other programs, shouldn't the local church have this same option to exchange funds? This would make it possible for some churches to strengthen their administrative staff.

## VII

BARCLAY: The next question concerns the role of the laymen and their responsibilities and rights in the church structure.

RANDALL: The laymen have the responsibility of doing the best they can to support the church. But different laymen have different capacities. In some churches there is not very much lay capacity, and so the laymen there

are not going to have very much responsibility or very much authority. But in other churches there is a good deal of lay capacity, and the laymen there should be responsible for a lot of things. They have a duty to help the church, and they should have some authority to go with it.

This brings up the related question of the organization's attitude toward these laymen, and here administrative flexibility is extremely important.

A conference president, for example, might deal with a church of a thousand members differently from the way he would deal with a church of sixty-three members. Also, some laymen, by virtue of their education and experience, are entitled to be listened to. It's our policy now that at all levels of organization laymen are included in committees, and that's good. The organization men should see to it that the laymen are given the responsibility and authority for which they are competent. Surely the writings of Ellen White are clear that we should turn over as much work as possible to persons other than the preachers.

ALEXANDER: There is sometimes a fear on the part of lay members that may stop them from exercising either their responsibilities or their rights. "We should not touch the Lord's anointed. He's ordained, he's been called to speak the word to us, and we must listen." It's hard for some laymen to perceive the minister as another member of the body in which they too are members.

A process of education is needed here, so that every person coming into the church — not after he gets in, and begins to wander around and wonder who he is and what his rights are — understands what church membership means, in terms of its structure and its work. Here, I think, the ministry may have failed, for we have taken our own role too seriously.

RANDALL: I would like to say that the little book *Christian Service* is a gold mine of instruction for laymen's activities. Its message, basically, is that the ministry will never finish the work of the church; the work will be finished by concerned, dedicated, working laymen, with the ministry guiding them in the various areas of their work.

Now, as lay activities leader in our little church I took this idea to our advisory group, made up of our minister (who is an older man) and some young seminary graduates (who are studying at the University of Chicago) and said, "Do you think this is a credible plan?" They said, "Definitely. We will buy it." I said, "Okay, if you will buy it, will you act as counselors to help every one of our laymen know how he can use his ability in his own working, social environment to be a more practical Christian witness?" They said, "Stop right there. We have never been trained to do this kind of

counseling.” I was flabbergasted. I hadn’t realized that we have in the church an army of officers who are unable to train the troops. We must come to grips with this problem. We must come to a point where the ministry has the capacity and the time to train every individual layman to do his job according to his ability.

Thinking of the responsibilities and the rights of laymen, some time ago I worked on this subject to see what I could develop. I will read off to you the results, for whatever value they are. The responsibilities of a layman: (1) to strive consistently to improve his relationship with Christ; (2) to make a total commitment to the soul-winning objective of the church; (3) to qualify himself in at least one service area for the church; (4) to advance God’s cause through the judicious use of his time and money, applying the principles of economy and sacrifice; (5) to participate actively in the decision-making processes of the church at whatever level he is qualified.

In the area of the rights of the layman, I concluded that (1) he should have free access to information about the church, including (a) financial matters, (b) major problems and proposed alternative solutions, (c) working policy, and (d) committee actions; (2) he should have freedom of speech and the opportunity and time to respond to the information he receives; (3) there should be representation by qualified laymen at all policy-making levels, in equal numbers with qualified church administrators; (4) he should be able to expect denominational employees at all levels to accept, follow, and teach the principles set forth in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White; (5) he should be taught how the church structure actually functions.

## VIII

BARCLAY: The next question is whether there should be a reduction or an increase in the number of levels of church administration in North America. Should the present sixty-one local conferences and ten union conferences be continued as they are now structured? Could the union conferences be eliminated? Could the local conferences be eliminated?

STOKES: My overall proposal is that we pretty well scrap the local conferences and replace them with smaller, more local units that would bring churches together for the discussion of local problems. We could have perhaps a thousand such conferences in North America, without very much authority and with more temporary personnel. The job of president would be only for a year or two, and might circulate among the pastors in an area; but it would have no great honor and no great power and would not be something to be sought after. The union conferences would perform the

essential administrative functions; and it would have the role of guiding, setting the pace, and providing technical direction. Since there would be relatively few union conferences and many, many local conferences, presumably there wouldn't be the struggle to get on top, and we could focus on the task which we have to do. As it is, the local conference is a fifth wheel — basically unnecessary in carrying on the task of the church, and it has complicated the problem of evangelism. We have developed an organization that has become top-heavy and has shifted us away from our basic task. Therefore, I am prepared to make a radical suggestion: we should downgrade the local conference to the minimum essentials.

Now in order for this to happen, we have to do something about the handling of funds, because this is the source of power. What happens to our money? Where does it go? We must face the problem of what we do with the tithe. We also have to face the problem of the institutions. We have too many colleges in North America. Possibly we have too many of many kinds of things. We cannot afford them at the current level, and they are not essential to the performance of our task.

WILSON: There are many, many things that could be said on the other side of this question. But this is a very real issue, which we must not shrug off or take lightly. We are becoming almost muscle-bound with organization. There is perhaps too much superstructure, and it is going to topple one of these days if we are not careful.

At present we have a task force reviewing and assessing the entire church program in North America — the geographical and numerical size of various units, their financial strength, their efficiency, their interrelationships, their problems of communication and transportation. All of these things are being looked at, and we have asked this task force to come up with several options.

Personally, I am very reluctant to see the conference weakened in any way. There needs to be a point of reference to which the local churches tie. There needs to be a combat unit big enough, strong enough, effective enough to pull together the various elements needed to do the job. It may be that some of these combat units are now much too small, and we may be able to enlarge these conferences considerably.

There are other areas that we ought to look at. The union conferences came into existence for a particular purpose, and I think that purpose might be accomplished with less than ten of them. And there may be areas of overlapping or duplication in departmental work that can be trimmed. If you have any ideas, share them; we need all the help we can get.

## IX

BARCLAY: To close our discussion, I have asked Doctor Alexander to talk about the role of the Holy Spirit in church organization.

ALEXANDER: In the preface of his translation of the Book of Acts, J. B. Phillips says that before the church was fat and muscle-bound from over-organization, a group of people were open to the Holy Spirit in such a way that even their enemies had to say, "These men have turned the world upside down."

A Baptist preacher once said to a group of his fellow ministers, "Ninety-five percent of what the church is doing could go on if there were no Holy Spirit, and we would still be building a vast institution and getting the credit. But what we must be concerned about is that other five percent."

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We have talked about solidarity and unity, about authority, about the life and vitality of the church. Historically, whenever something other than the Holy Spirit has brought these things, the church has suffered and its mission has not been accomplished. The Catholic church had institutional authority; the Protestant Reformation found its authority in Scripture, but soon transferred it to doctrine. The enthusiasts and Pentecostals, tired of organization and institution, have gone for experience. I think that we can see that something has happened in our own church; we have tried by organization and education and promotion to carry on the work of the church.

The church is an organization, but it is also an organism that depends for its life and vitality on the Holy Spirit, to whom every church member and every committee should come for guidance. We have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget how the Spirit has led in the past.