Need for Organizational Change in the Adventist Church

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Since the conditions of the world and the composition of the Seventh-day Adventist church, both, are changing rapidly, the church must be willing to address itself to the question of adaptation. The geometric advance in the rate of change presents a challenge to all of today's institutions. To the extent that an organization learns to adapt to rapid change, it will influence the events of the future. Conversely, those social institutions that adapt slowly, or fail to change at all, lose relevance to the course of events.

Primary factors in adaptability are the organizational structure of authority and the responsibility relationships that can encourage or discourage innovation. The dynamic nature of the world demands that an organization examine itself to ensure that it is structured so as to be responsive to change. An enterprise should not be static. New techniques become available; social, political, and economic settings change, both internally and externally. Thus, realignment may be essential if the organization is to accommodate itself to the pace of its times.[1]

The pioneer leaders of the church repeatedly called for a new look at organization, giving as a reason the continuing growth in church membership and institutions.[2] Should we do less today?

The present organizational system of the Adventist church (developed between 1900 and 1903)[3] was designed for circumstances different from those in which the church now finds itself. Numerically and geographically the church was small: the total world membership was 76,000, there were 1,500 workers, the total overseas budget was $150,000, and in all there were 58 institutions. Comparably, 1970 figures are: 2,052,000 members, 66,000 workers, a mission budget of $27.2 million, and 910 institutions.

Total annual expenditures have grown from $662,000 to $211.2 million — an increase of 320 times.[4]

The rate of change at the beginning of the century was significantly slower. The brainpower available to solve church problems was concentrated largely in the formal structure itself. Most of the important decisions pertained to local conference matters. Although suited for turn-of-the-century problems, the structure adopted seventy years ago is not adequately responsive to the membership of today and does not adapt readily to changing conditions. The plan developed then, basically a good one, should not necessarily be discarded. But timely modification is needed in the interests of overall efficiency and of providing members the means of significantly influencing decisions.

WHERE IS THE AUTHORITY?

Theoretically, authority within the Seventh-day Adventist church rises from the membership through the local church organization. The local church elects delegates to a conference constituency session, which in turn elects local conference officers. The reasoning is that authority originates with the body of members, and the elected officers are responsible to the body of members.[5]

This basis of authority in the church is somewhat similar to that of nearly all large American business corporations. At the corporate stockholders' meeting, the shareholders elect management officers. In many cases, however, corporate management's control of selection procedures leaves virtually no alternatives available to stockholders. In situations where members or stockholders have little voice, authority can be said to perpetuate itself.

This procedure does not work badly for business corporations, because competition is an "invisible hand" that guides, and because profits measure efficiency and effectiveness. Inefficient or unresponsive management will ultimately be replaced.[6] Unfortunately, no comparable forces are at work in the church to ensure constant attention to the church's ultimate goals and to search for economical methods of achieving them. When a significant choice must be made, the most effective route may have little to recommend it if it is not popular at the management level. Is there anything that pushes the church administration toward innovative solutions?

Another explanation for church authority is provided by what management students call "acceptance theory." This theory suggests that authority originates with membership acceptance of the direction given by leadership. Those who participate are those who grant authority.[7] This may come close

to an explanation of the nature of authority in the Seventh-day Adventist church. To the extent that members participate in the program of the church, there is acceptance of the authority of the church administration. Membership participation being somewhat less than ideal, one must conclude that acceptance is reduced, and thus there is valid reason to seek organizational change.

Undoubtedly, the constituency session in which church representatives elect local conference officers has an influence on decision-making within the church. But at present this influence is not large. There are two reasons that it is diminished: (1) the officers elected by the constituency are not the primary policy-making or decision-making body of the church; and (2) the few hours devoted to a constituency meeting do not allow for the development of viable alternatives to the proposed officers or plans — or even an intelligent understanding of the problems of conference administration. The delegate who seeks orderly progress has no effective choice but to accept the suggestions of the leaders who have prepared their case. To do otherwise would be to make an uninformed decision or at best (if the delegates are informed) to disrupt the proceedings by proposing alternatives.

Because of these impediments to the intelligent exercise of the authority of members, significant influence on decisions is denied church members, who theoretically are the source of church authority. This is particularly unfortunate in a church that subscribes to the principle that a few men should not control the whole church, and that every person in the church should unite in planning.[8]

On the other hand, the circumstances that an elected church leader finds in his office are not always those he would choose. Many times he is a captive of the organizational structure. A union conference president, for example, might desire to allow participation in the choice of local conference officers at a constituency session, but to do so would be to invite disorder. Within the present organizational pattern, he is left with virtually no alternative but to retain control of the selection procedures. If he approached a local conference constituency session without positive recommendations for local conference officers, he would be classified as an unwise or incompetent administrator. Thus he has very little choice about an authority so broad as virtually to exclude effective participation by the church members, because of the time limits involved and the selection procedures that have become traditional.

The present authority structure in the church calls for decisions to be made by committees at all levels. These committees are usually made up of

persons in effect selected by the president, or chairman, of the committee, since the president's support is all-important in the choice of all conference employees. In most cases, therefore, opposition to the chairman's views is unlikely. If unexpected opposition should arise, it would need to be highly organized in order to be successful. And that is even less likely, since the members of the conference committee, to a great extent, are replaced at the pleasure of the committee chairman.

Thus, the system concentrates authority in a few persons. I am not advocating that a committee chairman should not have a voice in selecting the committee members. I am saying that a method must be developed by which the committee, including the chairman, is directly responsible to the church body. The church does not subscribe to a self-perpetuating hierarchy. If one accepts the fact that at present the decision-making influence of church members is severely limited, then the question that arises is: Where does authority actually lie within the church?

Careful observation will reinforce the conclusion that in North America the power to influence decisions is now largely concentrated at the middle levels of church administration — that is, the union conference officers. The course of action that the church takes is largely dictated by (*a*) ability to influence the election of subordinates, (*b*) opportunity to select those who choose the church's top leaders, and (*c*) control over the flow of funds.

Local conference presidents are recommended to the constituency by union conference officers. Union conference officers also appoint the delegates to the General Conference session. The flow of funds is through the union conferences.

Thus the union conference officers, the middle-level administrators, are the principal decision-makers within the church in North America. Top-level administrators find themselves severely limited by the need for support both in election and in revenue. Decisions on the overall educational problems of the North American Division, for example, depend on those middle-level administrators who have control over higher education funds. Continent-wide solutions cannot be effected until, and unless, the necessary funds are made available by the union conferences.

Many years ago the concept was stated that "the message which Seventh-day Adventists are giving is a world-wide message: and the General Conference Committee has the oversight of the work the world over."[9] In practice, however, the role of the General Conference officers is advisory in the North American Division, not that of program planning.

At a time when the church is confronted by a global challenge, the need

for global planning is imperative. Planners of a worldwide program should devote their energies to informing themselves and planning for the needs; should be accountable directly to the church members for that planning; and should be able to draw extensively on input from many sources.

Does this concept mean return to "kingly power" within the church? It is not proposed as such. Kings receive their authority by inherited right — or by self-perpetuation. Kingly power does not exist when leaders are answerable directly to the members. Officers at all levels who become responsible to members then become amenable to the ideas of the members to whom they are accountable.

PRINCIPLES FOR CHURCH ORGANIZATION

For any individual to suppose that an organization will necessarily be improved by following his personal recommendations for organizational structure is a mistake. The best structure will result from extensive input of fertile ideas from many people, examination of those ideas based on sound principles, and selection of those concepts that will contribute to increased organizational efficiency in responsiveness to the needs of progress. The following statements are offered in that setting and spirit.

1. WIDE PARTICIPATION

Behavioral scientists generally accept that one of the primary means of securing participation in *achieving objectives* is to begin with participation in *decision-making*.[10] This is also a biblical principle: "Where no counsel is, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). One who assists in defining goals and developing programs can be expected to contribute to the activities called for by plans that he has helped develop, for people work hard when they have a stake in the outcome of a program.

Adventists (leaders and members alike) have long believed that the task of the church cannot be accomplished by ministers alone. It follows, then, that decision-making should not be the private preserve of church administrators. "The labor, care, and responsibility of this great work does not rest alone upon a few preachers." "There are to be no kings . . . in any conference that is formed."[11]

The driving force for change will come from concerned members of the church. The organizational plan that will best contribute to the accomplishment of the objectives of the church will be a plan which members participate in developing and by which they will have a continuing and significant

decision-making influence. And they will know it, for people have a sense of whether or not they really have an influence.

An effort to create the impression that the people influence decisions, when in fact they do not, will not be a satisfactory substitute. Pseudo-decision-making and pseudo-participation deceive no one. When administrators have already decided on a particular course, but attempt to convince members that the decision is theirs, the make-believe approaches hypocrisy.[12] The time has come when the church needs to draw on its reservoir of talent to meet the challenges of the world in which we live.

2. ADMINISTRATION BY PLAN, NOT CRISIS

Although it cannot be said that the church as now structured does not respond at all to changing conditions nor that the church is unable to change, change is usually effected belatedly and as a result of irresistible pressure. A problem arises, pressures mount, a committee of leaders is appointed to study the problem, and a solution is eventually adopted.

Two approaches to the conduct of an enterprise are diametrically opposed. One is to await the appearance of problems, allow them to achieve major proportions, and then seek solutions. The preferred approach, however, is to develop a system that defines objectives and then plans in advance for the accomplishment of them. This method of operation depends on extensive and continuing efforts to foresee events and to provide for a number of alternative events. Specialists in the field of management generally agree that a purposeful, planned approach is better than a problem-solution approach. "Proper management rules out management by crisis and drives."[13]

The present pattern of authority relationships in the church hampers the effective use of this preferred approach. Overall plans cannot be developed until structural relationships and responsibility definitions are such that the church's central governing body is *authorized* to plan, and then is held accountable for achieving results. Decision-making by consensus of special interest groups lends itself to the crisis approach to problem-solving.

3. REALISTIC SPAN OF CONTROL

A basic element of church organization that deserves attention is the number of subordinates that are directly responsible to any one superior. There is no formula for the "perfect" number of subordinates to be responsible to one person, but there are guidelines for effectiveness. According to organization specialists, normally five to fifteen persons should report to one supervisor.[14] A wide span of control (often with resulting diversity of responsibilities and ill-defined delegation of authority) necessitates infrequent con-

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tacts between superior and subordinate, heavy reliance on policy decisions, demand for extremely well prepared subordinates, and acceptance of a slow rate of change.

By accident or design, the church has adopted extremely wide spans of control. It is not unusual for thirty or more pastors, eight department secretaries, and five institution heads to be responsible to one conference president. In the union conferences, the situation is similar, with the substitution of local conference presidents for pastors, and larger numbers of persons in other categories. A small army reports to the General Conference president.

When the organizational foundations of the church were laid, Adventists were counseled to spread the work and share the responsibility.[15] An improved organization can provide reasonable spans of control in keeping with the need for dynamic action and can recognize the limitations of administrators and the need to reach beyond "policy-type" solutions.

4. USE OF STAFF

When a business sets out to make a better automobile, the executives usually recognize the need to surround themselves with staff specialists whose responsibility is to give "expert" advice. These specialists do not make operational decisions; their task is to seek out alternatives that line executives do not have the time or knowhow to discover. Each staff specialist concentrates on one area of expertise, so that the enterprise will not miss new ideas or opportunities.

"The appearance of staffs is usually proportional to the size of the enterprise."[16] An enterprise need not be very large, however, before it recognizes the necessity for specialized assistance on such matters as economic decisions, taxation, government relations, personnel policy, contracts, and legal matters. In general, however, it can be said that the staff concept as a standard organizational element is practically nonexistent in the administrative hierarchy of the Adventist church (with its present decision-making structure and broad spans of control).

This type of counsel should not be confused with departmental interest in a program or activity, of course. With programs and goals that are measurable in their direct impact on the church, department secretaries have functional authority. In contrast, a staff person is one whose responsibility is to give specialized advice, not to produce direct results. In this sense, here is an opportunity for the Lord to use men's minds.

The need for such counsel is self-evident. The church has grown to the place where a legal error has been known to cost large sums of money or

force an organization into a venture that it would prefer not to participate in. It will be a major step forward when the church structure includes adequate use of staff persons who can advise the decision-makers.

SUMMARY

Wide participation, adequate planning, appropriate span of administrative control, and the use of staff expertise are some of the organizational techniques to which attention should be directed in the search for improvements that will make the Adventist church system more effective. The church has at its service many persons who are able to help determine the questions that should be answered in the process of restructuring.

I believe that the Adventist church should establish a study group to propose a plan for improving the decision-making structure. Such a group should be composed primarily (if not entirely) of persons without personal or political interest in the outcome of such a reorganization, for the historical pattern of the church has been one of resistance to organizational improvements: "There is everywhere someone to hold back, they have not valid reasons for so doing, still they hold back."[17]

Seeming support of the church leaders should not be interpreted as satisfaction with operational aspects of the church. Many church members and organizational personnel have a great deal of faith in the leaders at all levels and in general in the members. But at the same time they recognize that the present structure is not adequately responsive to members because it does not provide for significant participation.

Many responsible members would welcome the opportunity to be informed about choices for church leaders, to have leaders who will be responsible to the members, and to support those leaders who present realistic plans for accomplishment. These members are people who want to strengthen the church, not weaken it. Their intention is to build on the foundations laid in 1863, 1888, 1901, and 1913 in order to uphold the original purposes and plans adopted by the pioneers of the church.

Organizational change is now being considered by church leaders. These leaders must avoid tokenism in participation and tokenism in application of concepts or techniques that have been offered as solutions to some church problems. Not just any reshuffling of authority will accomplish what needs to be done. The fundamental problems need to be addressed. All elements of the church need to be involved. The Seventh-day Adventist church must become accustomed to frequent upgrading and must adapt to a society that is experiencing an ever-quickening pace of change.

A church that is a worldwide church needs a worldwide approach to planning which results from an organization structured according to principles that are compatible with concepts drawn from the Bible, from the counsels of Ellen G. White, and from the best practices thus far learned by specialists in organizational management. Participation in goal-setting and program-planning should be provided for those whose active support is essential. The church has been counseled to seek improvements in the organizational system. "As we near the final crisis . . . we should be more systematic than heretofore."[18]

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