

Analysis of the 1976 Annual Council

by Tom Dybdahl

Among the 260 agenda items acted on at the 1976 Annual Council in Takoma Park, actions on divorce and remarriage, on licensed ministers and on the use of the tithe, together with a long proposal for “finishing God’s work” are especially interesting. Although most Annual Council business has been reported in the *Review*, these four items deserve a closer look.

The theme for the meeting was “Together, for a Finished Work.” The first agenda item was a 15-page, single-spaced proposal entitled “Evangelism and Finishing God’s Work.” Briefly, it described the current crises in the church, including “failure to fully implement God’s plan,” “serious slippage in standards” and “delay of our Lord’s return.” But the main portion was a plan of action for “finishing the work.”*

One cannot find fault with the intent of the proposal. We would not be Adventists if we did not look forward to the return of Christ, and work and pray that it may be soon. The church should be greatly concerned about doing God’s

work. But a more careful examination of this document raises some questions.

First, it paints a very bleak picture of the church. “Not only is our membership failing to fit into God’s redemptive plan of personal spiritual growth and service, but more regrettable still, far too many leaders are occupied with lesser things. To say that the church is in crisis is to express it only mildly and the crisis is brought on by our inexcusable delinquency in failing to adopt God’s plan for finishing the work.”

Consequently, the main portion of the proposal contains a plan of action. There are ten points in this plan which focus on organizing both pastors and lay people to do effective witnessing and using all the resources of the church to accomplish this goal. Each division is also requested to set up a Primacy of Evangelism Committee to meet quarterly and study the local progress of this plan, and help insure that it is properly implemented.

But in order to have a plan for finishing the work, of course, there must be a clear definition of what “the work” is. And a very specific

Tom Dybdahl, press aide to a New York congressman and graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism, is on the Editorial Board of SPECTRUM.

*Quotations from Annual Council actions are from the meeting minutes.

definition is given: "It is the reaching of every person on earth with the claims and promises of God's message of love and salvation, so that this generation may have opportunity to be restored in His image, now and forever. Thus, the 'finishing of the work' means one thing: communicating God's message through the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit to all of earth's population so that God can proclaim His work finished. When this happens, Jesus will come."

But is it that simple, that mechanical? If we simply confront everyone with the gospel, will that mean the work is done?

God has commanded us to share the gospel with our fellowmen. And He has promised that He will come again. But He is not bound by our actions. If we could guarantee a way of reaching everyone with the gospel tomorrow, He would not *have* to come tomorrow night. We do not bring in the second coming. God is Lord of history, and He will bring it to its consummation, not the church.

Further, this approach tends to produce severe ups and downs in experience. People gear up for great efforts, and reach high levels of emotion that cannot be sustained. And if these efforts do not get fairly immediate results, they cause cynicism and further doubt about God's promises. We need a level of experience that is active, but that can also be maintained over the long haul.

Another problem with this proposal is that it opts for a restricted definition of evangelism. "Evangelism is the communicating of the essential elements of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the setting of the three angels' messages in such a way as to make possible a response in the hearts of the hearers to accept God's provision of salvation from sin."

Thus, by default, anything that does not fall within this definition is not evangelism. Specifically, such "excellent programs and projects" that are concerned with diet, health, welfare and "other social benefits" are labelled "pre-evangelistic." And "worthy as they may be, if they do not lead to the new-birth experience in Christ and acceptance of the doctrinal tenets of God's remnant church, they consume the time, attention and money of the church and its working force without achieving God's ultimate objective of saving a man for eternity."

But is this definition biblical? (Interestingly,

"Evangelism and Finishing God's Work" quotes the Bible twice and Ellen White 34 times.) Is a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name not evangelism? What about the judgment scene in Matthew 25 where the only criterion is what we have done in Christ's name for the poor, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned?

And what happens to those whose talents and interests do not lie in the area of public evangelism? Should they feel that unless they force themselves to take part in these activities that there is no place for them in the church? Hopefully, these problems will be faced as this document is implemented.

Among the other agenda items, three are of particular interest. These were actions on divorce and remarriage, on licensed ministers and on the use of the tithe.

On divorce and remarriage, the council voted to set up a basic structure to deal with these problems on a case-by-case basis. This action was based on recommendations by an *ad hoc* committee that had been studying the issue for two years. They suggested that each conference set up a standing committee on divorce and remarriage, and that all readmission requests be referred to this committee. In addition, each union conference is to set up a similar committee, to deal with appeals.

With licensed ministers, it was decided that in North America they could perform all the functions of the ordained minister, provided they had two years of seminary study or one year of seminary training and one year of pastoral experience.

On the use of tithe, it was agreed to allow tithe money to be used for some purposes that had previously been funded by non-tithe money. Under the new plan, tithe money can be used to pay up to 30 percent of the salary of the church schoolteacher. This figure is based on a rough approximation of the amount of time the average teacher spends in Bible teaching and spiritual counseling.

But these actions are also interesting because each one shows a trend, namely, the accommodation of the policies and standards of the church to existing practices or current situations. A look at the reasons behind these actions makes that clear.

With divorce and remarriage, the biggest problem was a lack of consistency in dealing with church members. In some areas, people who divorced and remarried contrary to church doctrine were disfellowshipped and refused readmission; in other churches, they were hardly disciplined at all.

To deal with this inconsistency, the council voted not only to set up machinery for individual cases to be considered, but also proposed guidelines to help committees, as well as local pastors and churches, make decisions.

Specifically, these guidelines suggest that "a period of years shall be required between the time of divorce and application for readmission to church membership where there has been no remarriage or between remarriage and application for readmission to church membership."

"Anything that does not fall within this definition is not evangelism. Such 'excellent programs and projects' that are concerned with diet, health, welfare, and 'other social benefits' are labeled 'pre-evangelistic.'"

The purpose of this time period is to show "renewed Christian experience," to show the healing of wounds from the old marriage and the stability of the new one, and also to be regarded as a "disciplinary" period. How long this period should be is not spelled out.

In some places, the "waiting period" is already practiced. This action will help the church deal with divorced and remarried individuals in a regular and orderly manner everywhere. Thus, we can take a more positive and helpful view of people and their problems, and still uphold the current church standards.

In the situation of licensed ministers, the catalyst for change was the United States Internal Revenue Service. Under IRS regulations, ministers are entitled to special tax treatment only if they are full-fledged ministers, able to perform all the functions of the church's ministry. And since in the past licensed ministers were

not able to baptize, perform marriages, or celebrate communion, they were not technically eligible for IRS considerations, even though most of them claimed this right.

The 1974 Annual Council dealt with this problem by ambiguously defining the rights and privileges of a licensed minister. But this was not really a satisfactory arrangement, and some individual licensed ministers still faced problems with the IRS.

As a result, it was voted that licensed ministers, given the training qualifications, could perform all the functions of ordained ministers. There was some opposition to this change, but when it was limited to North America, and when it was indicated that special consideration would be given in unusual cases, the change was voted.

This action, however, carries some additional implications. Will setting this special ministerial policy for North America establish any precedent for other changes? The ordination of women comes immediately to mind. A major objection to this has been that while it may be acceptable to ordain women as ministers in some areas of the world, it would be completely unacceptable in other places. Will various fields now be able to have different policies on this question?

There is also an important theological point here. What is the specific point of ordination? Does giving a licensed minister all the rights and privileges of the ordained minister change the value or meaning of ordination? These questions will need to be considered.

Perhaps the most interesting change had to do with the use of the tithe. A growing problem in the church had been that while tithe income had increased regularly, free-will offerings had not increased proportionately. Treasurers often found themselves with more tithe money than they could use, and with too little non-tithe money for their needs.

To deal with this problem, the tithe exchange program was developed to launder these funds. A union with an excess of tithe money could send this money (up to a certain amount) to the General Conference, and receive in return an equal amount of non-tithe funds. This proved to be a great blessing, and helped solve a financial problem.

But in recent years, even this program was not sufficient to keep up with needs. Consequently, General Conference treasurers found themselves sending back tithe for tithe, and this money was then used for non-tithe purposes. This particularly became clear as fund accounting—with its careful separation of accounts—was phased in. The treasurers were unhappy with this situation, and so they brought the question out into the open.

As a result, a group began to study the problem in terms of what the Scriptures and Ellen White said about the use of tithe money. The old policy had restricted tithe to the exclusive use of “the ministry,” and a few support personnel. But there were some inconsistencies, because sustentation funds, some of which came from tithe money, went not only to ministers but to teachers, secretaries and other workers. Further, overseas fields had not all made a careful distinction between tithe and non-tithe monies, and used tithe for almost anything that supported the work of the church. After a lengthy study, the group concluded that a broader use of tithe was appropriate.

There were, however, differences of opinion. Some at the council felt that the use of the tithe should not be changed. Others felt that it could be used to pay for the full salaries of church schoolteachers. And in the end, a compromise of sorts prevailed.

Specifically, it was decided that tithe money could be used for up to 30 percent of a church schoolteacher’s salary. Also, it was agreed that “personnel in a supportive role who directly relate to the work of soul-winning agencies” could also be paid from the tithe. These changes are expected to ease the financial bind.

But this action also represented to some degree a particular understanding of how inspiration works. An important question was whether this tithe-use change represented a real change in interpretation of Scripture and Ellen White, or whether it simply represented a policy change as a result of financial pressure. The official view, of course, was that while the problem may have prompted further study, this broader plan for

use of tithe was certainly legitimate. And the fact that the problem had been studied for three years supports that view.

But that meant, in some sense, a tacit admission that revelation is progressive—that some “new light” had been discovered. As one administrator put it: “Sister White made some modifications in her position during her lifetime. We felt an administrative responsibility to take the counsel we had and apply it to our current setting.” And so they did.

Yet, this raises questions about whether or not the same thing might happen in other areas of church practice and policy, such as Sabbath-keeping, standards, etc. Might there be changes that should be made in these areas? Some present pointed out that this action might set a dangerous precedent within the church.

But this point of view did not prevail, and for the time being that question has not been answered. But the change in tithe-use policy has raised it in a concrete way and, no doubt, there will be more discussion in the future.

One other item is worth mentioning, a tentative statement on the Adventist position on creation. The statement was prepared, but some brethren came to feel that it was not in a form appropriate for presentation to Annual Council, so in the end it was not introduced for discussion. Nevertheless, it has received considerable circulation. (This statement appears on page 58.)

This working document was prepared by a committee under the direction of General Conference Vice President Willis J. Hackett, chairman of the board of the Geoscience Institute. It has been revised a number of times, and more drafts are likely. The purpose of the statement is to clarify the church’s official position on such thorny problems as the age of the earth, the fiat creation of the earth in six literal days, the relationship of creation to the Sabbath, etc. Some, however, see it as an effort to put pressure on those who have serious questions about some of the specific points of this issue, so they will make a commitment one way or the other.

This statement is still being worked on by Hackett’s committee. It will probably be re-introduced at some point in the future.

Tentative Creation Statement

1. In harmony with the basic position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, we accept the historical accuracy of the book of Genesis (including chapters 1-11) as providing the only authentic account of the divine creation of this earth and the creation of life upon it in six literal days, of the fall of man, of the early history of the human race and that of the noachian flood of worldwide dimensions. (See *Medical Ministry* p. 89; *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 135, 136.)

2. We accept the chronological data of the first eleven chapters of Genesis as providing the basis for our belief in the biblical chronology.

3. We accept the Bible teaching that the earth was unorganized and void (Gen. 1:2) at the commencement of the creation of living things during the creation week. The fossil record of past life is largely the product of the catastrophic worldwide deluge (Gen. 7:21-23) rather than being the result of a gradual or sequential development over vast periods of time.

4. We believe that in the divine plan the weekly Sabbath, the observance of which was instituted by the Creator Himself at the end of the literal creation week, has great significance. It is a continual reminder to men, especially since the entrance of sin, of their Creator and their relation to Him as His creatures. Its observance is a perpetual sign of their loyalty and their allegiance to Him. Its rest is a sign of His recreative and redemptive power, in human lives in this age, and of the whole earth in the age to come.

Note: The above version of the creation statement is the third draft, revised in the fall of 1976.

5. We believe furthermore that an understanding of the creation and nature of man and of his salvation rests on the recognition of the literal intent and factual account of Genesis. Man was divinely created in the image of God as a unique being, capable of fellowship with God. The harmonious God-man relationship was broken through the historical event of sin in Eden when man became unfaithful to the divine command and followed the suggestions of Satan to place allegiance in someone or something other than God Himself. The fall brought about for the first time the entry of sin into this world with its effects upon men and nature. "...the moral image of God was almost obliterated by the sin of Adam, . . ." (Ellen G. White, *Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6, p. 1078.)

6. We also believe the Bible teaching that man's separation from God could only be remedied through the substitutionary atoning death of Christ. The cross is the basis of Christ's continuing heavenly ministry of reconciliation which will climax in the eradication of sin, the restoration of the image of God in man, and the reestablishment of complete harmony between God and man on the recreated new earth.

7. We believe that there is a consistent linking, in Scripture, of a literal creation, a factual fall, and an adequate redemption at the Cross with a short chronology of man on the earth and a biblical eschatology that looks for the imminent return of Christ. Then God's plan for total reconciliation with and recreation of His people will be complete. If any one of these Scriptural teachings is denied, the tendency to deny others will be equally strong, and ultimately irresistible.