

Lay Representation in Union Constituency Meetings

by Janice Eiseman Daffern

Lay representation became a prominent issue at some of the meetings of the nine North American union conference constituencies held early in 1981. Several unions significantly increased the number of lay persons on their executive committees. More dramatically, one, the Columbia Union, revised its constitution and bylaws to insure greater lay representation in the union constituency, constitutionally the highest authority within a union. The Columbia Union now requires that a minimum of 35 percent of the delegates to constituency sessions must be lay persons, that is, individuals not employed by church organizations or institutions.

Union constituencies are important because they select the officers of the union, including, of course, the president. The presidents of the unions in North America have traditionally been regarded as some of the most powerful and influential leaders within the Adventist Church. They not only

chair the boards of North American senior colleges and conference constituency meetings selecting local conference officers, but also are assumed to have influence beyond their numbers at General Conference sessions electing General Conference presidents. It is constitutionally the case that the union executive committees (chaired by the presidents) are the administrative units in North America that select delegates to General Conference sessions. On more than one occasion, the chairman of the nominating committee at a General Conference session has been a union conference president.

In preparation for the round of union constituency meetings held the year after the General Conference session, the secretariat of the General Conference presented to union administrators attending the 1980 Annual Council a "model" constitution and bylaws. As their constituency meetings approached, the unions adapted the model to their specific needs and sent it out this spring to delegates.

The Columbia Union constituency meeting, March 8-9, 1981, revealed how lay representation has emerged as an important concern. Delegates immediately noted that while the constitution, reflecting the model, proposed by the Columbia Union men-

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tioned the possibility of electing lay persons to the executive committee, it did not recommend a percentage. Nor did it propose levels of lay representation at the quinquennial meetings of the union constituency. The proposal from the Columbia Union did suggest that the number of delegates for the General Conference be limited to 10 percent of the union constituency.

Although the 1976 Columbia Union constituency delegates had voted to have at least 20 percent lay representation to the session, the new proposed constitution from the Columbia Union passed over the issue. A separate sheet was included in the packets sent to the delegates, that said:

The local conference is directly responsible to the laity within that conference. The union conference is directly responsible to the local conferences within the union. In other words, the union conference staff primarily services the local conference leadership and clergy.

While it is true that the laity predominate at a local session, in a union session, normally, pastors have a larger representation in a business meeting which covers the wider area of the union.

Local congregations choose delegates to a local conference session. The local conference executive committee is the body which names delegates to the union wide session.

Several delegates wrote to the Columbia Union in advance of the constituency meeting questioning the de-emphasis of lay responsibility. The discussion continued on the floor of the session where it was referred to the constitution and bylaws committee for further study.

The chairman of the committee was a lay person, Allan Buller, vice president of Worthington Foods. He especially invited two of the pastors advocating greater lay involvement to sit in on the meeting. When the group gathered, the two pastors were joined by more than 30 observers, a majority of whom were young pastors from the constituent conferences. General Conference associate secretary Don Christman was also present. Although Christman warned that

they were not following the General Conference approved model, the committee, in its three hours of work, recommended two major revisions to the full constituency. First, no more than 65 percent of the delegates to union sessions could be denominational employees. Second, one-third of the executive committee would consist of lay members, with a specific number of pastors and representatives of the educational work selected as well. The committee, in its recommendations, expressly excluded directors of the union departments from serving on the union executive committee. (Most local conference executive committees do not include departmental directors.) The committee's proposal never reached the floor.

That afternoon, the committee was recalled to meet with W. O. Coe, the union conference president, and C. E. Bradford, vice president of the General Conference for

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North America. Coe expressed fear of a morale problem in his administration if departmental directors were not made members of the executive committee in the Columbia Union when their counterparts in all other North American unions are members. He went further to say he did not want the Columbia Union to be the first to make such a move.

Bradford, in a strongly worded statement, said the idea that union session and executive committees were the place for sizable lay representation was widely held, but a misconception. He warned that such a practice would cause confusion because lay people are not initiated in the working of unions and that this work should be “left to pros.”

After hearing from Coe and Bradford, the constitution and bylaws committee reworked its proposal regarding the composition of the executive committee to reinstate

departmental directors. The committee's final proposal adopted by the full constituency created a large executive committee: 23 *ex officio* members—union administrators, pastors (one from each conference) and four other persons, two of whom must represent the interests of K-12 education. As for the important issue of lay representation in the union constituency, the session adopted the committee's suggested figure of 35 percent.

Although no specific percentage of lay delegates of a constituency meeting was written into the constitution and bylaws of the Southwestern Union, the makeup of its executive committee was changed to include 10 lay persons and five pastors. Although W. R. May, secretary of the union, does not recall who was the author, he says that the union leadership received a letter from the General Conference suggesting that 30 percent of the delegates to the 1981 session of the union constituency be lay persons. The leadership of the union passed that request on to the local conference executive committees choosing the union constituency. May says that the Southwestern Union would cheerfully increase lay representation in the union constituency to 50 percent if there were a desire on the part of the membership to do so.

Major White, secretary of the Pacific Union Conference, said that the union constituency meeting this spring accented not only lay participation, but also representation from ethnic and racial groups. The bylaws only read that two-thirds of the delegates to the quinquennial session of the constituency be pastors and lay persons and that there be a "fair representation" of lay people and ethnic groups. White conceded that interpreting "fair representation" was left to the conference committees making up the delegate list. As for the makeup of the executive committee, 10 of the 50 members are lay persons and another 10 are local pastors.

H. F. Roll, secretary of the Southern Union, indicates that at its constituency meeting this spring the number of lay persons on the executive committee rose from

five to 14. However, the bylaws of the union gives no specific percentage for selecting lay members of the union constituency. The trend to specify the number of lay members of the executive committee but not of the union constituency was shared by the North Pacific Union as well.

That leaves the Columbia Union as the only one in North America to adopt in its constitution and bylaws minimum levels of lay representation on both the executive committee and union constituency. When asked to comment on why this meeting of the Columbia Union constituency was so active in changing patterns of representation, Monte Sahlin, a pastor in the Pennsylvania conference, listed four factors. First, the delegates were able to study the proposed constitution and bylaws before they came to the constituency session and were prepared to discuss the issues. Second, the constitution and bylaws committee invited observers to make suggestions. Third, though W. O. Coe resisted the removal of departmental directors from the executive committee, he expressed support for increased lay involvement and suggested accomplishing that by enlarging the committee. Fourth, a significant number of local pastors united to speak forcefully in favor of equitable representation in the decision-making processes of the church.

Sahlin also noted that a new generation of Adventist pastors is emerging in the church. Whereas in the past they often understood their pastoral role as a steppingstone to administrative positions, these pastors are developing a high degree of identification with the congregations they serve. With recognition of the gifts given to all in the body of Christ, the pastors are developing a heightened sense of responsibility to make certain those gifts are used in the work of the church at all levels.

Certainly those who construct models for North American Division organization in the future must consider the meaning of the actions taken by North American union constituencies in the spring of 1981. It may just be that this year's sessions will come to be regarded as the loudest cry for lay participation in the church's recent history.