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# The Case for an Independent North American Division

Raymond F. Cottrell

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The time has come for a bona fide, truly independent North American Division, operating on democratic principles, and linked to a genuinely international General Conference. The General Conference should establish the same relationship to North America that it maintains with all other segments of the world church. The term North American Division is misleading; North America is not a true division. The present relationship of North America to the General Conference is unique—and objectionable. It affords the church in North America little voice in its own affairs, and thereby impedes fulfillment of the church's mission to the people of North America. It must be changed.

Under the special General Conference arrangement now existing for North America, the General Conference has focused its efforts on the world field and not allowed North America to explore its own ways of pursuing the church's mission in its part of the world. Full division status in the other world divisions is unquestionably an important factor contributing to the phenomenal growth of the church outside North America. In no small measure, the lack of

participation by the North American church in a genuine North American Division is responsible for its painfully slow growth—3.3 percent per year in North America, compared with a 5.8 percent average in the overseas divisions.<sup>1</sup>

With all due respect for the laudable intentions of those who formulated, and those who perpetuate, the current relationship of the General Conference to North America, it has worked to the serious disadvantage of the North American church and hindered its mission to the people of North America.

One bar to an independent North American Division has been concern that North America might use its financial resources to pursue its own priorities and undermine the unity of the world church. But true unity around the world can be more real and enduring when the General Conference recognizes and respects the need and right of the church in different parts of the world—including North America—to do things differently. The world mission of the church should not be hindered by demanding worldwide uniformity. Rigid uniformity is self-defeating, whereas flexibility and adaptability enable a church to take maximum advantage of opportunities that vary from one part of the world to another. No part of the world, even North America, should be inhibited from adapting policies, methods,

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and procedures appropriate to its cultural milieu.

In this essay, I will first narrate how the division structure developed, then recount how a genuine North American Division equivalent to other divisions has not emerged, and, finally, set forth reasons why a truly independent North American Division must come into existence.

## Development of Divisions

In order to understand how the North American Division is different in important respects from the ten independent world divisions, it is necessary to review the different structures divisions have had, which, in turn, requires briefly going back to the origins of the General Conference. This historical recounting will show that divisions today are less independent of the General Conference than they sometimes were. When we come to examine specifically what is called the North American Division, we will see that it does not even have the degree of self-government that has been conceded to the other divisions.

The first church administrative structure above that of the local congregation came into being when the congregations of Michigan united to form the Michigan Conference in 1861<sup>2</sup>. At the time the General Conference was organized two years later, in 1863, the church had approximately 3,500 members, all in North America, and the General Conference Committee consisted of three members.<sup>3</sup> As the Adventist message found its way to other continents—to Europe in 1874, to Australia and South America in 1885, to Africa in 1887, and to Asia in 1884<sup>4</sup>—these areas, also, were administered by the General Conference Committee from Battle Creek, Michigan.<sup>5</sup> This pattern continued until the reorganization of the General Conference in 1901. By then there were 78,188 Seventh-day Adventists in 55 countries around the world,<sup>6</sup> in 57 local conferences and 41 missions.<sup>7</sup>

The first significant step toward a division of General Conference administrative authority took place at the close of the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis.<sup>8</sup> Local conferences in the United States and Canada were grouped into four supervisory “districts” of the General Conference; the following year, the number was increased to six.<sup>9</sup> In 1893, Australia and Europe became the seventh and eighth districts.<sup>10</sup> The Australian “Union Conference,” organized in 1894,<sup>11</sup> later became the model for similar administrative entities in North America and elsewhere. In 1897, the General Conference established North America, Europe, and Australia as three supervisory “sections” of the General Conference, with a mission board to supervise the rest of the world field. The General Conference Committee was increased to 13 members.<sup>12</sup>

Major reorganization of the General Conference, however, took place in 1901.<sup>13</sup> Rapid growth overseas had made it impossible for a small group of men in Battle Creek, with little direct knowledge of the circumstances and needs of the church outside of North America, to administer the work around the world. It was time for a division of responsibility and authority. For 13 years the church had been experimenting with various types of regional entities—“districts,” “sections,” “unions”—to administer as integral units of the world church the work in their respective areas.

The 1901 General Conference session chose, as a general policy, to form “unions” composed of several conferences each, with the unions directly responsible to the General Conference Committee. The General Conference in session assigned responsibility for the details of the work in each union to General Conference Committee members “located where the work is to be done.”<sup>14</sup> The General Conference Committee was enlarged from 13 to 25 members, and vice-presidents were elected to supervise the work in Europe and North America. The structural reorganization, accomplished in 1901, played an important role in

the phenomenal growth of the church around the world over the next two or three decades.

At the 1912 Autumn Council, the European delegates proposed dividing the world church into division conferences. The plan was approved, and at a special council early in 1913, the Europeans were authorized to organize a "European Division Conference."<sup>15</sup> At the General Conference session in May, the 12 North American union conference presidents requested, and were authorized, to meet and organize a "North American Division of the General Conference" as a "full official organization." With North America administering its own affairs, it was explained, the General Conference headquarters staff would be "free to give their attention to the great fields composing the world."<sup>16</sup> Other divisions, recognized as such in 1913, were the Far Eastern and South American Divisions.<sup>17</sup> The essential difference between the 1913 divisions and those of 1922 and today was that each 1913 division organized itself, elected its own officers, and was thus, in a sense, independent of the General Conference.

In part, because World War I made it impossible for the new European Division to function, and, in part, because some church leaders began to fear that the new divisions posed a potential threat to the unity of the church, the 1918 General Conference session abolished the division conferences as genuine administrative units, making the division officers, departmental staffs, and even their unions, directly responsible to the General Conference rather than to the respective division committees.<sup>18</sup> The General Conference vice-presidents were still to have general supervision of the work in their respective divisions, and members of the General Conference Committee resident in each division territory were to constitute an

"executive board" (instead of an "executive committee") to transact business.

Reasons for abolishing the division structure, established only five years earlier, were set forth in the preamble to the recommendation presented by the *ad hoc* committee on organization, and in comments by the delegates. They are important to an understanding of the special General Conference-North American Division relationship that developed later. The preamble states:

In order that the unity of our work may be maintained: that economy of administration may best be preserved; that the largest possible amount of funds may be made available for the prosecution of our work in all parts of the field; that all believers everywhere may be constant contributors of their means to the regions beyond; that the General Conference may have direct control and management of its bases of supplies, both of men and of means; that we may meet, and as far as possible overcome the unfortunate international constitutions thrust upon large sections of our constituency by this world war, we would

*Recommend, 1.* That the organizations known as Division conferences be discontinued. . .<sup>19</sup>

When a further explanation of the reasons for abolishing the division administrative structure, established only five years earlier, was requested, I. H. Evans explained that the chief purpose was "to preserve the unity of the work" and to avoid the possibility that one of the divisions might "break away from the general body." The second "primary purpose" was that the General Conference might "have direct control" of North America as its primary source of funds and personnel for conducting the world mission of the church.<sup>20</sup> E. T. Russell cited the fear that "a strong man, with a strong personality," in one of the divisions might "convert people to himself" and that the General Conference would be "powerless" to do anything about

it—as the reason why the General Conference should take back the “elective power” from the divisions.<sup>21</sup> When General Conference president A. G. Daniells put the recommendation to a standing vote at the 1918 General Conference, all but two of the delegates voted to discontinue the divisions as truly independent jurisdictions.<sup>22</sup>

Although the divisions remained in name, the General Conference withdrew from them the right to elect their own officers and considerably reduced their administrative authority. In effect the power structure reverted to what it had been five years before, with the General Conference dealing directly with the unions.

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By 1922, the inadequacy of the 1918 arrangement had become evident. It overloaded the General Conference headquarters staff with administrative decisions that could be better made in the field. Accordingly, the 1922 General Conference session returned administrative jurisdiction to the divisions, but retained the 1918 principle that the General Conference would elect the division officers and departmental personnel, whose primary responsibility would thus be to the General Conference, rather than to their respective divisions.

As defined by the General Conference Bylaws adopted in 1922,<sup>23</sup> the General Conference conducts its worldwide work in “division sections,” with the union conferences and missions in each division responsible to the division executive committee. The word “division” identified the

“sections” as administrative units, with jurisdiction over their internal affairs, subject to General Conference policy. The word “sections”—used from 1897 to 1913 to express the idea that the areas so designated were supervisory segments of the General Conference and not independent entities—identified the divisions as integral units of the General Conference. The ambiguous term “division sections” implied sufficient authority for each division to function effectively within its own territory, but limited that authority and defined it as subject to that of the General Conference.

According to these by-laws, each vice-president of the General Conference for a particular division is to be at the same time “president” of his division.<sup>24</sup> A full complement of officers and departmental secretaries form the nucleus of its “executive committee,” which functions in effect as a subcommittee of the General Conference for that division.<sup>25</sup> Each vice-president/president is to be chairman of his division committee and administer the division under its jurisdiction.<sup>26</sup>

The 1922 restructuring of the world divisions applied to all of them, except North America, for which the General Conference retained the relationship of 1918. With minor modifications, the 1922 General Conference-Division relationship remains in effect today, 60 years later.

## Internationalization of the General Conference

By this time the Seventh-day Adventists had been a world church for many years. During 1922, the number of overseas members surpassed that in North America, and today constitutes 83 percent of the total, a ratio of more than four to one.<sup>27</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist concept of world mission and the church’s worldwide presence will eventually require full internationalization of both the General Conference and

the General Conference Committee, including its headquarters staff. This means the participation of non-North Americans, as well as Americans, in the decision-making processes and in the staffing of General Conference headquarters. This section considers the significance of this internationalization. A later section will deal with its effect on the church in North America.<sup>28</sup>

The principal purpose of the fundamental reorganization of the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1901 was to decentralize, and thus, in a sense, internationalize, decision-making and administration. But international influence on church policy and administration first became impressively

evident at the 1975 General Conference session in Vienna. It was the first such convocation held outside of North America; German, as well as English, was recognized as an official language of the session; and more non-North Americans than before participated in policy-making, including the crucial deliberations of the nominating committee.

For the first time in the history of the church, the overseas divisions controlled the election of a General Conference president. The nominating committee reelected a man whose administrative experience, prior to his first becoming president in 1966, had been almost exclusively outside of North America. Also, for the first time, five of seven

## A Short Primer on Adventist

The administrative structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is as follows: congregations in a local region form the constituency of a "conference," a group of local conferences form a "union conference," and a number of union conferences covering a large geographical area form a "division"; the divisions, now 11 in number, constitute the General Conference.

### General Conference

Structurally speaking, the General Conference is the world church. It is through elected and appointed representatives meeting in plenary session that the world church determines what it wants to be and do. In these sessions, which occur every five years, the church also selects the members of its highest administrative body, the General Conference Executive Committee, generally referred to as the General Conference Committee, formulates policy, amends its constitution and bylaws, decides matters of church doctrine, and considers other business appropriate to its jurisdiction.

### General Conference Committee

The General Conference Committee through its subcommittees and boards administers the affairs of the world church; the term of office for each member is from one plenary session of the General Conference to the next. At present, the General Conference Committee consists of: (1) a headquarters staff of 99 who conduct the routine business of the world church, (2) the 172 members of the 11 division administrative staffs (each of which, in effect, constitutes an executive subcommittee of the General Conference Committee for its designated part of the world), (3) 79 presidents of union conferences and missions, (4) 30 ranking administrators of specified church institutions and organizations, and (5) 46 miscellaneous members, such as laymen and past General Conference presidents. Since some persons may be found in several categories, the most accurate total number of members of the General Conference Committee is 380.

The union conference and mission presidents and the administrators of church institutions and organizations are elected by their respective constituencies. All other members of the General Conference Committee are elected at a plenary session of the General Conference. In common parlance, the General Conference Committee headquarters staff is usually referred to as "the General Conference," or simply "the GC," though, strictly speaking, the headquarters segment of the General Conference Committee is the administrative agent of the committee, and is not the General Conference.

general vice-presidents of the General Conference for the divisions were non-North Americans.<sup>29</sup> Several additional non-North American members were added to the General Conference headquarters staff.

Since the 1975 General Conference session, the proportion of non-North American members on the General Conference Committee continues to increase.<sup>30</sup> More than half of the 380 members of the General Conference Committee now reside overseas. The 1980 General Conference session implemented a recommendation "to more fully internationalize the activities of the church,"<sup>31</sup> by making certain "that the internationalization of the General Conference [headquarters] staff be largely from

people who have moved up through the various channels of the work in the divisions, prior to being invited to serve on the General Conference staff" in Washington, D.C.

Such internationalization of personnel and administration is essential to the unity of the church around the world. At the same time, a measure of diversity is implicit in internationalization. True unity in the church around the world will consist in faithfulness to basic principles, while recognizing the necessity of diversity of administrative structure, methods of operation, and adaptations to different cultural environments.

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## Church Structure

The General Conference Committee convenes in a plenary session each October known as the Annual Council (formerly Autumn Council), giving special attention to the world budget for the following fiscal year; it meets also in an annual Spring Meeting. Available members of the committee meet every Thursday morning to transact routine business.

### World Divisions

Each of the world divisions has an officer and departmental staff, elected at a plenary session of the General Conference, who are, by virtue of their election, also *ex officio* members of the General Conference Committee. The president, secretary, and treasurer, with their assistants, constitute the administrative staff of the division. The departmental staff consists of departmental directors, elected at a plenary session of the General Conference, and assistants appointed by the division committee. In their respective divisions (except in North America) they constitute the nucleus of the division "executive committee." That committee includes, in addition to division officers, presidents of unions within the division and other persons the division committee may appoint. If they conform to the General Conference Constitution, Bylaws, and *Working Policy*, actions taken by the division executive committee are final. Union conferences within the division are responsible to the division committee, according to the General Conference Constitution. Each person elected a vice-president of the General Conference for a particular division is, *ex officio*, its president. In this role, he is chairman of the division committee and has charge of the division under its direction.

### North American Division

The North American Division officers and staff are elected at a plenary session of the General Conference: a vice-president of the General Conference who serves as the ranking North American Division administrator, a secretary and his Associate, a treasurer and his assistant, and three field secretaries. There are nine departmental directors and four associates. The full staff thus consists of nine officers and 13 departmental directors and associates assigned to North America, plus five appointees. Each staff member of the North American Division is concurrently a staff member of the General Conference in the same capacity, elected to the General Conference headquarters staff specifically to administer the North American Division for the General Conference.

## North America's 'Special Relationship'

At the same 1922 General Conference session that established the present role and authority of the divisions, North America was given the different relationship with the General Conference that it still has; a relationship referred to variously in contemporary parlance as "unique," "peculiar," "special," or "historic."<sup>32</sup> The essential feature of this unique relationship is the fact that the General Conference Committee administers the North American Division, whereas the other divisions administer their own affairs through their division executive committees.

The General Conference has given several reasons for withdrawing administrative jurisdiction from the divisions in 1918, and for retaining it over North America since 1922: (1) To effect "efficiency" and "economy" of administration, including capital investment and operating cost; (2) to foster maximum giving to the world mission of the church; (3) to give the General Conference "direct control and management of its bases of supplies, both of men and of means," (especially North America), for conducting its world mission; (4) to keep "the elective power [the election of division officers and staff] . . . in the hands of the General Conference." (5) to preserve the unity of the church around the world and to avoid the danger of schism.<sup>33</sup>

It is important to note that none of the reasons the General Conference has given for initiating and continuing the special General Conference-North American Division relationship suggest any way in which the North American Division or the church in North America would benefit from the relationship. The stated advantages were all advantageous to General Conference.

The "special," or "unique" relationship between the General Conference and the North American Division is rooted in the fact that the church in North America gave

birth to the General Conference and nurtured it, and that North America is the homeland of the General Conference and the Advent movement. As explained in the *General Conference Working Policy*, this unique relationship is due to the fact that the division administration is centered at the world headquarters, and it is this that "makes advisable some modifications of the usual mode of division organization and operation."<sup>34</sup> Originally, the General Conference was designed to serve and administer the church in North America,<sup>35</sup> but when the General Conference fell heir to the concept of world mission, its primary function gradually became that of coordinating the fulfillment of this mission.

It is important to review the principal differences between the North American Division and other divisions. Except for his election as vice-president of the General Conference for North America (like the other division vice-presidents of the General Conference for their respective divisions), the vice-president for North America functions, in his relationship to the president of the General Conference and to the General Conference Committee, more like one of the general vice-presidents than a president of one of the divisions. The *General Conference Working Policy* provides that he "shall carry the chief responsibility of leadership in the administration of the work in the division, in counsel with the General Conference president."<sup>36</sup>

Instead of working under the direction of a division executive committee, like the other vice-presidents of the General Conference for their respective divisions, he works under the direction of the General Conference Executive Committee, of which the General Conference president is chairman, and the North American vice-president is responsible to it and to him.<sup>37</sup> Instead of being designated president of the North American Division, like the other vice-

presidents in their respective divisions, he remains vice-president of the General Conference for North America.

Technically, the North American Division has no president: the General Conference Constitution provides for no such office, and no one is elected to that office. However, the administrative relationship of the vice-president for North America to the president of the General Conference is such as to make the latter, *de facto* and *ex officio*, also president of the North American Division—in which capacity the president of the General Conference does, as a matter of fact, function. The appropriate and justifiable internationalization of the General Conference means a person with minimal experience in North America could be elected president of the General Conference and automatically function as president of the North American Division.

The General Conference Committee serves as the executive committee for the North American Division, but it has established a permanent sub-committee known as the North American Division Committee on Administration (NADCA), to which it has delegated responsibility for the routine administration of the North American Division.<sup>38</sup> The *General Conference Working Policy* provides that “actions of this committee shall be considered final, subject to general limitations imposed by the General Conference Bylaws on division committees.”<sup>39</sup> NADCA membership is limited to persons who are already members of the General Conference Committee, by virtue of which fact they serve on NADCA *ex officio*.

The 21 General Conference headquarters personnel who are members of the North American Division administrative-departmental staff are, of course, members of NADCA, but every other member of the General Conference Committee, including the 238 members who reside overseas and administer their respective divisions, are *also* eligible to participate and vote when present, as are all of the union presidents as

well.<sup>40</sup> NADCA meets in plenary session only at a plenary session of the General Conference, at an Annual Council, or (possibly) at a Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee.<sup>41</sup>

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Routinely, NADCA meets in the General Conference headquarters chapel immediately following the weekly Thursday morning meeting of the General Conference Committee. With the vice-president of the General Conference Committee for North America taking the chair, the General Conference Committee members remain and function *ex officio* as members of NADCA. Those present and voting are identical for both committees, and only headquarters members of the General Conference committee are usually present at these routine meetings. Since the North American union conference presidents are not present, actions taken at these meetings are adopted for North America solely by individuals elected by the General Conference, not by any of the jurisdictions within North America. Minutes of both the General Conference Committee and NADCA are circulated together to the same recipients.

The officers and departmental staff elected to serve a normal world division are, by virtue of election to their division posts, also *ex officio* members of the General Conference Committee by that election. However, the priorities are reversed in North America. The officers and staff of the North American Division are all elected to the General Conference, and also *ex officio* serve the North American Division.<sup>42</sup> Too often, as presently constituted, NADCA is



the General Conference administering the affairs of the North American Division to meet General Conference requirements for serving the world field, not primarily to meet the needs of the church in North America. Finally, the North American Division has no headquarters of its own.<sup>43</sup> Structurally and functionally, North America is not a division in the sense that the other world divisions are. It is unique.

### Progress Toward An Independent Division

Over the years since 1922, discussion of the anomalous status of the North American Division at the General Conference headquarters has always foundered over the specter of losing financial control of North America. Recently the General Conference formally explored the possibility of restoring North American Division to full division status, but again dismissed the idea. The 1978 Annual Council, anticipating the 1980 session of the General Conference, requested that the General Conference headquarters staff "thoroughly explore the advisability of restructuring the relationship between the North American Division and the General Conference, including the creation of a separate division organization structured along the same lines as the present world divisions."<sup>44</sup>

In response, the General Conference presented the 1979 Annual Council with a report that cited four "disadvantages" of giving the North American full division status: (1) the "capital expenditure" required, (2) the "cost of operation," (3) "lessened efficiency," and (4) "reduced awareness of and reduced interest in the needs of both North America and the world divisions."<sup>45</sup> No advantages were mentioned. The report recommended the desirability of retaining the "unique relationship," but proposed giving the North American Division delegation at a General

Conference session the opportunity to recommend personnel who might be elected to the General Conference headquarters staff to serve the North American Division, rather than leave to the headquarters staff the assignment of such personnel from among persons already elected to the staff, as in the past.

The 1979 Annual Council report on the North American Division leaves the reader to guess about the thinking behind the purported disadvantages the General Conference saw in according North America full division status. By capital expenditure, it doubtless referred to a headquarters plant, which would require several million dollars. Any difference between the cost of operating the North American Division in its own headquarters or at the General Conference headquarters would be nominal: personnel and office space would be essentially the same. Of course a North American Division with the same status as other divisions would reduce the efficiency of the General Conference control of the North American Division, but it would significantly increase the efficiency by which a divisional administrative and departmental staff would take an interest in, and provide for, the needs of the church in North America.

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Accepting the report, the 1979 Annual Council voted to retain the "peculiar and special" General Conference-North American Division relationship and authorized the North American Division caucus at the 1980 General Conference session to recommend eligible personnel for election to the General Conference headquarters staff

specifically to serve North America. Departmental personnel thus selected were to have a “line relationship” to the North American Division administration and a “staff relationship” to their respective General Conference departments.<sup>46</sup> In line with this recommendation, the 1980 General Conference provided a full complement of nine officers, including the vice-president of the General Conference for North America and 12 departmental directors and assistants.<sup>47</sup> Upon the reading of the full General Conference/North American Division staff thus elected, W. J. Hackett commented: “The North American Division is making progress”.<sup>48</sup> Actually the change in 1980 was procedural rather than substantive and was designed to preserve, rather than alter, the old, 1922 relationship between the General Conference and North America. Structurally, the General Conference continues its complete control. The North American Division is still a division only in name, not in fact.

### Evaluation of the Special Relationship

Some of the factors originally cited to justify such direct control of the North American Division have proven illusory. General Conference control of North America was supposed to increase giving to missions.<sup>49</sup> In fact, while other elements are doubtless involved, under the special relationship the North American ratio of mission offerings to the tithe has steadily decreased from 67 percent in 1922 to 10 percent in 1980.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, six overseas divisions (with full division status) have increased their giving, proportionate to North America, by 57 percent, and several have become largely, if not altogether, self-sustaining.<sup>51</sup>

Increasing deterioration of confidence in the General Conference has led many members in North America, especially some

with more than average income, to channel their contributions, and in some instances their tithe, to projects of their own choice, rather than to those designated by the General Conference.<sup>52</sup> Instead of increased giving, the special General Conference-North American Division relationship seems, if anything, to have diminished it.

It was also argued in 1918 and 1922 that direct General Conference control of the North American Division, by enabling the General Conference to deal directly with the union conferences of North America, would facilitate recruitment of personnel for overseas service.<sup>53</sup> However, the General Conference processes calls to overseas service through NADCA—rather than directly with the union conferences as then proposed—and there is no evidence that the process would be more difficult or otherwise impaired if NADCA were replaced by a bona fide North American Division executive committee, as in the other world divisions.<sup>54</sup> In 1922, most of the personnel recruited for mission service came from North America, whereas today other divisions (with bona fide division status and executive committees) provide an increasingly large number.<sup>55</sup> The noteworthy way in which these overseas divisions are contributing personnel for mission service, likewise, further discredits the notion that division status and structure inhibit recruitment for mission service.

Disunity was cited as the General Conference’s “primary reason” for resuming direct control of all divisions in 1918. The same reason was given in 1922 when the General Conference, while retaining administrative authority to the other divisions, retained direct control of North America.<sup>56</sup> But if this was not necessary with respect to the other divisions, why should it be with respect to North America?

Just as the other divisions have been permitted to develop their own approaches to missions, North America must be allowed to find its own ways to increase its rate of growth. It must develop its own ways to

communicate with the contemporary North American mind. People in North America do not think as they did 80 years ago. Therefore, evangelistic approaches addressed to the 11 percent of the population who are Bible-believing Protestants leave the other 89 percent of North Americans virtually untouched. True unity in the church will be advanced by North America discovering its own distinctive responses appropriate to its social, cultural, and religious environment.

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**“It is time for the church in North America to have its own. . . headquarters, president, executive committee, and budget.”**

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Nothing that has been said in this section about the special General Conference-North American Division relationship in any way depreciates the able ministry of the vice-president of the General Conference for North America and his staff, individually or collectively. They are able to be commended for yeoman service under difficult circumstances, sometimes beyond the call of duty. The problem is inherent in the system, not in those who administer it.

### Full Division Status: A Concept Whose Time has Come

Deeply rooted in the social consciousness of the people of North America is the conviction that government should be “of the people, by the people, and for the people,”<sup>57</sup> that those who govern should do so with the consent and continuing approval of the governed.

Yet the church in North America has substantially less voice in the administration of its affairs as a division than any other world division, and no voice in the electoral

process or in the formulation of church policy above the local conference level. The General Conference administers the North American Division on an authoritarian, paternalistic basis. In the full import of the term, the structure and operation of the Seventh-day Adventist church government above the local conference level qualifies it as a hierarchy.<sup>58</sup>

Knowledgeable North American Seventh-day Adventists believe that they have a legitimate concern in matters directly affecting them; a concern altogether consistent and compatible with loyalty to the church and its leaders. They believe that church members should have a meaningful voice in the election of church leaders and setting of policy at all levels, including that of the division. Otherwise affirmation of the rubric, “the priesthood of all believers,” takes on a hollow ring. This concern is especially strong among members with advanced education and/or professional or technical training, whose expertise in various areas could be of significant value to the church. Imperfect though all human structures and processes are, democracy, in its best expression, seems—to the modern Christian—to reflect the principles of the gospel more faithfully than that of any other available option. It is time for the church in North America to have its own division administration with its own headquarters, president, executive committee, and budget.

Further important adaptations to the needs of the North American church could also be considered: separation of administrative and judicial functions, institution of a system of checks and balances, and provision for initiative, referendum, and recall procedures.

Concurrently, the time has also come for the General Conference to become a truly international organization. By dissociating itself from any special relationship to North America, and with headquarters in a neutral country such as Switzerland, the General Conference would become a truly international organization. In many lands today,

Seventh-day Adventists are thought of, even by church members, as an American church: and, in some parts of the world, it certainly is not an advantage to be identified as an American.

Full division status for North America could facilitate other needed changes. For example, more serious study could be devoted to consideration of dispensing with the union conference administrative structure. Unions served a useful purpose at a time when communication and transportation were relatively primitive by today's standards, and when administrators with experience were relatively few. Today, the union conferences are an expensive luxury.

Some of their functions could be absorbed into the new North American Division and others into the local conferences which

would then operate directly under the North American Division. This would bring the local congregations and conferences of North America closer together in a more concerted and effective endeavor to fulfill their mission to the people of North America. Merging the union conference structure into an independent North American Division would provide the necessary capital for establishing and operating the division, and would release a very considerable budget for more effective and productive use.

A bona fide, independent North American Division, organized and operating according to democratic principles, and loyally linked to a truly international General Conference, is a concept whose time has come.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Comparing membership for all of the divisions at the close of 1980 with the close of 1979, based on statistics in the *Statistical Report-1980*, p. 20.

2. "Organization, Development of, in SDA Church," Sec. II.3, *SDA Encyclopedia*.

3. The General Conference Committee was enlarged to five members in 1883, to seven in 1886, and to 13 in 1897. *Ibid.*, Sec. II.4-5; III.1.5. Clarence Creager Crisler, *Organization* (Takoma Park: Review and Herald, 1938), pp. 103-110.

4. *SDA Encyclopedia* articles on the church in the respective geographical areas give these dates for the first acceptance of the Advent Message by indigenous residents of each area, and not necessarily the formal opening of work by the church.

5. Battle Creek became headquarters of the church when James and Ellen White moved there from Rochester, New York, in 1855, and remained the headquarters until the move to Washington, D.C., in 1903.

6. "SDA Church," *SDA Encyclopedia*.

7. *Statistical Report-1905*, p. 8.

8. "Organization," Sec. III.1, *SDA Encyclopedia*; Crisler, pp. 135-155. In 1882 the European conferences and missions formed what they called the European Conference, later the European Council of SDA Missions. There were other tentative steps prior to 1901.

9. "Organization," Sec. III.1.

10. "Organization," Sec. III.2. (or *Ibid.*, Sec. III.2.)

11. *Ibid.*, Sec. III.4.

12. *Ibid.*, Sec. III.5.

13. See Crisler, pp. 157-176; "Organization," Sec. IV.2.

14. A. G. Daniells, "A Statement of Facts Concerning Our Present Situation—No. 8," *Review and Herald*, March 29, 1906, pp. 6-7.

15. "Organization," Sec. V.1; *General Conference Bulletin*, May 27, 1913, p. 145.

16. Crisler, pp. 158 ff; *General Conference Bulletin*, May 27, 1913, p. 145.

17. Crisler, p. 184; *General Conference Bulletin*, May 27, 1913, p. 145.

18. *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1918, pp. 39-40.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. General Conference Constitution and By-laws, Article I; *General Conference Bulletin*, May 25, 1922, p. 245.

24. General Conference Constitution and By-laws, Article III.4; "SDA Church," *SDA Encyclopedia*.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *General Conference Bulletin*, May 25, 1922, p. 245.

27. See *Statistical Report-1922*, p. 10; *Statistical Report-1980*, p. 20.

28. See subdivision, Evaluation of the Special Relationship, this article.

29. *SDA Yearbook*, 1976, p. 15.

30. The 238 members of the ten overseas divisions and their 72 union conference and mission presidents, a total of 310, or 63 percent of the 490 members.

31. "Annual Council of the General Conference Committee, General Actions," October 10–18, 1978, p. 20; October 9–17, 1979, p. 18.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 1979, p. 17; *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1918, p. 39.

34. *General Conference Working Policy*, rev. 1980, ss C 50.

35. "Organization," Sec. II.4.

36. *General Conference Working Policy*, rev. 1980, ss C 50 05.

37. *General Conference Constitution and By-laws*, Article III.3; *General Conference Bulletin*, May 25, 1922, p. 245.

38. "General Conference Executive Committee," *SDA Encyclopedia*.

39. *General Conference Working Policy*, rev. 1980, ss C 50 05.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, ss C 50 45.

42. North American Division staff members at General Conference headquarters are elected to the General Conference headquarters staff and serve North America by virtue of that election; overseas division staff members are elected to serve their respective divisions and are members of the General Conference Committee by virtue of that fact. The North American union conference presidents are elected by their respective union constituencies to serve their unions; their service on the General Conference Committee and the North American Division Committee on Administration is *ex officio*. The fact that every member of NADCA serves *ex officio* in that capacity means that the North American has no one on its division committee who was specifically elected to represent the church in North America on the division level.

43. "North American Division," *SDA Encyclopedia*.

44. "1978 Annual Council," p. 20.

45. "1979 Annual Council," p. 17.

46. *Ibid.* p. 18.

47. *Adventist Review*, May 1, 1980, p. 23 (615).

48. *Ibid.*

49. *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1918, pp. 39–40.

50. Latest available figures, from *Statistical Report—1980*, p. 33.

51. *Statistical Report—1922*, pp. 2, 5, 33; *SDA Yearbook*, 1982, p. 4.

52. Firm figures are not yet available for the amount involved in the collapse of Donald Davenport's investment empire. One recent estimate gives a total of approximately \$55 million, of which \$35 million were church funds and \$20 million those of individual investors. The former were funds donated or in trust from members, and the latter, personal funds of members who trusted the judgement of church leaders who had invested their own or church funds with him, sometimes at a higher rate of interest than given church members generally.

53. *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1918, pp. 39–40.

54. North American Division Committee minutes on Administration are replete with such items.

55. Precise comparative figures are not available.

56. *General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1918, pp. 39–40.

57. United States Constitution.

58. Hierarchy: "A form of government administered by an authoritarian group," "an authoritarian body of religious officials organized by rank and jurisdiction," esp., "control exercised by a priesthood." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. Literally, "having the character of priestly rule and authority."