
An Independent North American Division: Current Opinion at the General Conference

by Geri Ann Fuller

This Fall, for the first time, North American delegates to the General Conference Annual Council will have their own separate session. They will meet in Washington, D.C., following the Annual Council in the Philippines. At the request of certain union presidents in North America, one item on the agenda of this North American Division Council will be the development of an independent North American Division.

Also, for the first time, the General Conference is planning to provide North American representatives within each General Conference department with their own 1983 operating budgets, separate from general departmental budgets. These and other events during recent months have suggested movement towards a genuine North American Division. Les Pitton, director of North American Youth Ministries and an associate director of the General Conference Department of Youth Ministry,

could say in August that "more has been accomplished towards a North American Division in the last six months than during the previous two years."

But many General Conference officials do not yet agree on whether such a North American Division would more fairly represent the membership in North American, or the world field; allocate human and financial resources more justly and effectively; and contribute to denominational strength and unity. Some think that North America should never have the same structural separation that the world divisions have. Others predict a true North American Division must—and will—be organized at the next General Conference session in New Orleans, in 1985. This ambivalence at the highest levels of the General Conference is reflected in the written response of Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference, to a question about his view of the likelihood that a separate North American Division will be formed. "No separation is taking place and there is no action authorizing anything like this. We're pulling together; we're one unit. We are trying to give greater latitude to the

Geri Ann Fuller, a graduate of Columbia Union College, received a master of arts degree in journalism from American University. She lives in Washington, D.C.

North American Division on an operational level. This is my position.”

How North American affairs could best be administered has been debated ever since the division concept was first introduced to the General Conference in 1912. (see elsewhere in this issue of SPECTRUM “The Case for an Independent North American Division,” by Ray Cottrell). But when J. G. Smoot, president of Andrews University, reporting the actions of the nominating committee, read off the names of the 21 men who would be elected by the 1980 General Conference session to serve as North American representatives in General Conference departments, many thought a significant step had been taken towards the possibility of a distinct North American Division. At the same 1980 session, the General Conference By-laws were amended, allowing North American representatives on the nominating committee to recommend the officers and departmental directors assigned to their division.

Each of the newly elected departmental representatives for North America was given staff responsibility within the General Conference department to which he was assigned, but also a direct line responsibility to the General Conference vice-president for North America. According to the General Conference document, “General Conference—North American Division Relationship”:

The North American Departmental representative should work closely with the General Conference departmental director, sharing freely with him all plans and programs. . . (he) should consider himself an integral part of the staff, attending all meetings, seeking to reflect the world view and manifesting an unsectioned interest in the general work. He will at the same time keep the staff informed as to plans and policies for North America and seek their counsel on the same. . . will work closely with the director and staff in responding to requests from the North American field.

In a General Conference organizational chart, the relationship of the departmental director to his department chairmen, is represented by a dotted line and his accountability to the General Conference vice-president for North America with a solid line. The same document also provided for the vice-president of the General Conference for North America calling and presiding at meetings of those representatives assigned to North America from among the General Conference treasury, secretariat and other departments. Every Wednesday, its 21-or-so members gather from 10:30 a.m. to Noon in the General Conference Central Building. Since the 1980 General Conference session, this group has increasingly established its identity as the North American Division staff. By now, most General Conference departments have accepted the North American Division staff as a reality, with the Education and Youth Departments regarding it most favorably, and the Communications, Public Affairs, and Sabbath School Departments remaining somewhat less than enthusiastic.

Tom Ashlock, the associate director of the General Conference Sabbath School Department assigned to North America, for one, thinks the North American Division staff is a reality and has already made a difference. “Meeting with other North American departmental people gives me a more holistic view of the work and makes me more useful to the individual, local churches, because we are not divided in our approach to them. Ashlock cites, as an example, the new *Cornerstone Connections* Sabbath School quarterly series for youth. The North American representatives of the Sabbath School, Youth, and Educational Departments cooperated in designing a complete program of creative posters, activity sheets, audio cassette tapes, and a teacher-leader packet to be distributed to local churches, in addition to a new contemporary Sabbath School quarterly for youth.

Other developments since the 1980 Gen-

eral Conference session, besides the emergence of a North American Division staff, have contributed to the sense that a North American Division may actually emerge. In February 1981, the General Conference Executive Committee, on the recommendation of Charles Bradford, vice-president for North America, approved the creation of a 48-member Faith, Action, Advance Committee, to meet as often as necessary to suggest new approaches for revival and evangelism in North America. The committee was also empowered to review and evaluate the performance of conferences and unions in implementing such programs. Because the committee has a broadly defined scope, and because its members include not only North American Division staff, but some union officers, pastors, and lay persons, it has increasingly served as a way for the North American Division officers and staff to influence key leaders regarding direction of the church in North America. In January 1982, for the first time ever, the North American Division staff met with North American union officers and departmental directors to exchange ideas on a coordinated approach to the North American church ministries, personal ministries, Sabbath School, youth, health and temperance programs.

However, no one should be misled. Increasing evidence for a distinct North American identity at the General Conference does not mean that a separate budget for North America is now voted by a North American Division. In fact, the North American staff at the General Conference only recently convinced the General Conference to give them the right to determine their own operating budgets in 1983, three years after their appointment at the Dallas General Conference session.

Comments by General Conference leaders about creating an independent North American Division, with its own budget,

revolve around a few central issues. The first is representation. As of 1980, only 17 percent of the denomination's membership lived in North America—600,000 members out of a world-wide membership of 3,500,000. Overseas divisions are increasingly insistent on General Conference leadership reflecting the shifting trends in denominational membership.

“As the General Conference leadership becomes increasingly internationalized, the church in North America will come to be dominated by General Conference officers, unfamiliar with North American problems.”

“There is a feeling that the world is not fully represented at the General Conference level,” according to Bekele Heye, a citizen of Ethiopia and the president of the Afro-Mideast Division. “The church has been making progress in recent years in developing national leadership, yet with close to 1,000,000 members in the African continent, it has no indigenous representation at the General Conference.” He thinks men from overseas should serve in all key areas. “North America has an obligation to make the Seventh-day Adventist movement succeed as a world movement and to train the world work force.” An officer of a European division noted that at Annual Councils, where General Conference budgets are voted, North American union and conference leaders have disproportionately large voting power because they can attend the annual councils that are almost always convened in the United States, whereas very few union presidents and no conference presidents from outside North America can afford to attend.

North American leaders acknowledge the

force of the representation argument, and believe that as the General Conference leadership becomes increasingly internationalized, reflecting trends in membership, the church in North America will come to be dominated by General Conference officers, unfamiliar with North American problems. Unless, of course, the direction of North America is separated from the General Conference through the establishment of a North American Division.

In addition to representation, money has been an issue fundamental to debates about a North American Division. With a division, North America could simultaneously stop worrying about losing influence at the General Conference and increase its freedom and ability to address North American problems. One General Conference officer in the Education Department, favoring a North American Division, gave as an example the possibility of more quickly addressing the urgent task of evaluating the number and location of Adventist colleges in North America.

A standard justification for maintaining disproportionate representation of North America at the General Conference has been the continued high percentage of General Conference income that comes from North America. More than 20 percent of the tithe collected in North America goes to the General Conference. In addition, North American members contribute to Ingathering, Investment, Sabbath School, and mission offerings, much of which goes to the world church. As a result, in 1982, \$103 million, or 67 percent of the General Conference budget, will have come from North America.

A General Conference officer in the Treasury Department, who is an American, but served overseas, expressed deep concern that if North America had its own division, and therefore the liberty to reduce its appropriations to the General Conference, areas of the world field heavily dependent on General Conference appropriations would suffer—places such as Africa and

Southern Asia. The officer of a European Division who objected to North American votes counting disproportionately at Annual Councils still did not want a separate North American Division, because of the possibility that North America would reduce its contributions to the world budget. He and others also cite the expenses of establishing a new bureaucracy as a potential drain from appropriations for overseas and North American projects.

Those who favor a North American Division attack the question of finances head on. They point out that while North America contributes 67 percent of the world budget, its programs and institutions in North America also absorb 53.3 percent of the General Conference budget. They stress that five of the ten world divisions are self-supporting, or nearly so, and that is without the one percent of their tithe that they send to the General Conference. The five divisions needing assistance include three in Africa and two in Asia.

Owen Troy of the Communications Department, raises a separate point concerning money. He thinks separating the North American Division would financially strengthen the world church. "I was overseas in Africa and the West Indies," he said. "I've seen the difference in the mission field when members understood that they were responsible for their own finances. When the first African black conference was formed from a mission, and members elected their own officers, the whole character of the field changed. Ghana had approximately 10,000 members when I was there in 1966. Now they've spawned two separate missions, with a combined membership of more than 8,000, and what's left of the conference has nearly 29,000 members. That's growth through African leadership when the missions themselves contributed."

As for the charge that a North American Division bureaucracy would increase costs,

several General Conference officials, including one vice-president, pointed out that the recent designation of an associate director of each department who is responsible for all activities having to do with North America has revealed that, in some General Conference departments, the North American representative was handling 70 percent of the work. The rest of the staff had to busy themselves with 30–40 percent of the remaining tasks. In other words, some General Conference departments are overstaffed. Presumably, creating a North American Division could save the expense of their salaries.

Furthermore, the discussion of a North American Division has led to a review of the role of the union conferences in North America. Both the Pacific and North Pacific Unions have officially created committees carefully examining whether such large staffs are needed at the union level. There is serious discussion that a North American Division might make it possible to reduce the number of unions, or even eliminate them completely. Annual savings in operating by elimination of the unions could easily run into millions of dollars (see article on Mid-American Union by Jiggs Gallagher, in this issue of SPECTRUM).

“There is serious discussion that a North American Division might make it possible to reduce the number of unions, or even eliminate them completely.”

Finally, apart from representation and finances, there are genuine differences at the General Conference concerning the effect on the unity and cohesion of the denomination as a whole if North America were a separate division. One director of a General Conference department emphasized that “North American involvement has made a contribution to the Adventist genius.” For

example, individuals from outside North America who come to the General Conference are able to receive vital training that they can take with them when they return to enhanced leadership positions in their homelands.

Others in Washington, including some from overseas, point out that, especially in departments preoccupied with North American affairs, directors and associate directors from overseas waste valuable time having to adjust to American culture, value systems, and methods of problem-solving. They think departmental directors would better serve the denomination by working in their home divisions, rather than accepting General Conference titles in departments spending 60–70 percent of their time on North American issues.

Is an independent North American Division likely to come into existence in the foreseeable future? It is very hard to predict. General Conference vice-presidents for North America have traditionally supported the formation of a more clearly defined North American Division. At least one person a few years ago declined the job of vice-president for North America because he could not receive assurances that its organizational structure would become more distinct from the General Conference.

But the present vice-president for North America, Charles Bradford, cautions that he would prefer to see the church move slowly towards any action on the North American Division. “We need to assess it and evaluate it and ask how it’s wearing—give it some fine-tuning and adjustments,” he says. “We’re just wobbly on our legs like a just-born colt. We can’t very well raise a big cry about more autonomy until we’ve done our best to succeed with the arrangement we’ve had since 1980. I would like what we’re already doing to be fully accepted and to have a consensus on the matter by all General Conference personnel.”

Interestingly, one indication that despite the caution of some, a North American Division may actually come into being, is the support for a genuinely independent division expressed by some leaders who have served much of their professional lives overseas. The North American Division staff includes former missionaries who are now fully committed to creation of a North American Division.

Even more intriguing are views of a vice-president of the General Conference, who until his election two years ago at the Dallas General Conference session, was the president of the large South American Division. Enoch Oliveira was born, raised, and served his entire ministry in South America. He shares the insistence of overseas leaders that the selection of General Conference officers should reflect the increased membership of Adventism outside North America. He agrees with those who want the world field to benefit from North American financial resources. He most emphatically sees North America as the historic and continuing source for organizational cohesion within a world-wide denomination. But he does not now see the creation of a North American Division as necessarily opposed to accomplishing those goals.

While leadership of the General Conference should reflect the diversity of the world membership, he thinks General Conference departments do not need to be large. "Each division has leaders with their own specialization, aware of the needs of their area. They don't need General Conference departments filled with specialists." Financially, the world fields, with some clear exceptions, are becoming less dependent on North American gifts. "Most divisions are not that concerned about the loss of support from the General Conference in the future," he says. Besides, Adventists in North America would continue to give to missions, whether or not they were in a North American Division, he believes.

At the same time that Oliveira sees no major organizational harms to the world

church from creation of a North American Division, he thinks there are very important reasons why substantial progress in North America is imperative for the well-being of the entire denomination. "North America functions as a center of influence for the world church which helps to maintain a cohesiveness in the church structure. The genius of the Adventist movement has been that unity in spite of cultural diversity." He notes that the Adventist church in North America has not grown at a rate anywhere near that in other parts of the world. He is convinced that "if the influence of North America continues to decrease, whether through lack of growth, or theological, or other problems which have beset it, the end result will be a lack of cohesiveness and unity for the whole world church." Therefore, he is willing to entertain organizational diversity in the form of a genuine North American Division, if that will bring substantive unity. "I don't know if separate division status for North America would be the solution, but something must be done to help North America grow more in harmony with its amazing potential."

Some cannot resist speculating about details of headquarters locations if a North American Division were actually to come into existence. Some conjecture that one result would be relocation of the General Conference headquarters outside of the United States. Switzerland has been mentioned as a politically neutral location which would also foster a more international image of the world church than does the United States. But Jean Zurcher, secretary of the Euro-African Division, points out that the positive contact the General Conference now enjoys with American political authorities could not exist in Europe. Although reduced travel costs might favor a central U.S. location such as Denver for a North American Division headquarters, many don't really expect either the General Conference or the North American Division to move farther from the Washington, D.C., area than perhaps nearby

Columbia, Maryland. Others point out that even if the North American Division were to be totally separated from the General Conference, there is no reason why both organizations couldn't continue to operate out of the same building, with the North

American Division perhaps occupying its own wing.

But such conjectures are premature. As of now, a consensus has not yet emerged that is strong enough to ensure the organization of a North American Division.

Merging Unions and Conferences: The Example of Mid-America

by Jiggs Gallagher

If a Seventh-day Adventist church administrator was seeking advice on conference mergers, he would have to look to the Midwest. In the last three years, two unions and eight of their local conferences have consolidated. The Northern Union (then the smallest, with 15,000 members), and the Central Union (then the eighth largest with 37,000 members), combined in May 1980 to form the new 55,000-member Mid-American Union, making it one of North America's middle-sized unions. At present, all the local conferences in the new union, except for two, have merged. As a result of these mergers, the church is saving nearly \$1 million annually. In addition, money was

injected into church accounts from the sale of the vacated five offices and two academies.

A decreasing tithe dollar and the increasingly apparent inefficient organizational structure prompted the consolidations. The national economic slowdown of the late 1970s inevitably decreased the flow of tithe dollars and led conference administrators in the Midwest to consider the advantages of merger. The Midwest, with its small population and large territories, could not disregard diminishing funds and glaring organizational inefficiencies. For example, two of the conferences involved in the mergers—Wyoming Conference with 2,020 members, and the South Dakota Conference, with 1,931 members—each had a constituency smaller than the members of the College View Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. It was obvious that maintaining a complete support staff for such small

Jiggs Gallagher, Director of College Relations, Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, received a master of arts degree from the Columbia School of Journalism.