

Pastors Call For Changes

by Julie Tilton-Ling

Twenty-four pastors from across North America gathered at the General Conference offices in March of 1981 at the invitation of C.E. Bradford, vice president of the General Conference for North America. They proposed major changes in church structure and financial policy. Although specific recommendations were made at this unprecedented gathering, in the intervening two years little or nothing has been done to implement those suggestions. The meeting of pastors—carefully drawn in equal proportions from multi-church districts, large multi-staff churches and big city churches with one assistant—deserves greater notice than it has received.

According to a candid report in *Ministry* magazine,* published by the General Conference ministerial department, the pastors proposed radical changes in church finances, administration, and perception of their roles.¹ Those pastors at the meeting focusing on finances recommended “that a percentage of the tithe be retained by each local congregation to enhance that church’s outreach efforts. Careful study should be given as to the exact percentages and procedures, but 10 percent should be a starting point

with a gradual increase as overhead structures are eliminated.” Congregations send all their tithe to their local conference. In North America, the local conference keeps 70 percent. The unions receive 10 percent, and the General Conference 20 percent. “We find it incredible,” said the pastors, “that the tithe dollar supports the entire church structure, including plant and equipment and secretary’s salary—conference, union, General Conference—but not (with the exception of the pastor’s salary) the local congregation that gives it. So the local church that is supposed to be the focal point of ministry is poorly funded and crippled while organizational overhead has grown and grown.”

The pastors also proposed that “a minimum of 10 percent of all trusts and annuities, upon maturity, automatically be returned to the local congregation of which the donor was a member at the time of contractual agreement.”

Reduction of tithe sent to higher levels of organization was related to proposed reductions in administrative staff, “especially at the union conference level.” All 24 pastors agreed that “at the present time in North America there is almost a one-to-one ratio of administrative workers to workers in the field.” The pastors said flatly that “this costly structure—departmental secretaries duplicated in conference, unions, and the General Conference—is not useful.” They

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recommended specifically that “instead of office-based departmental secretaries in each conference, pastors should be recognized as field-based specialists to whom others may come and learn from.”

Another area of concern at the meeting was the role of the pastor. The pastors set out in clear terms priorities for ministry that differ from what some might expect. Assuming fundamental commitment to the Lord and the body of Christ, they affirmed “a pastor’s concern to be first his family, then the local congregation and outreach to the world.” Pointing to the stress—on both themselves and their families—inherent in their role, the pastors requested that counseling outside the administrative ranks be made available.

The pastors were also concerned about their place in the work of the church. As Bradford explains, “in Adventism, it seems, there is a pecking order, and unless you are called to the conference office, you aren’t entirely fulfilled; you haven’t really ‘made it.’” And yet, theoretically, the pastor is praised by his superiors like Bradford, as the real key to the Adventist structure. The pastors concluded that since “the pastor’s role is considered by administration as most important, this concept should be reflected in the pastor’s wage scale in comparison to that of those in administration and departmental position.” In his *Ministry* editorial on the conference, Spangler reinforced the pastors’ point: “I have to agree that our present system of pay is more status oriented

than service oriented.” Further reflecting a desire to enhance their role were recommendations that pastors be provided with regular sabbaticals and other opportunities for professional growth through specialized continuing education.

The pastors made several recommendations for change in one central aspect of the local church’s life—the Sabbath school. They proposed that alternative formats for classes should be approved, for a more diverse Sabbath school could be used as a “golden opportunity for church outreach.”

Two pastors who attended the 1981 meeting, J. Redfield of Merrill, Wisconsin, and David Osborne of the Atlantic Union College Church in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, praise Bradford for organizing the meeting of pastors. However, both are concerned that if the changes suggested by the pastors are not quickly implemented by leadership, particularly in the area of finances, change may come forcibly in the midst of crisis. Both point to increasing awareness of the laity, particularly in the area of tithe distribution, as a force that must be reckoned with by church administrators. Redfield, Osborne, and other pastors attending the 1981 meetings look forward to more such discussions. But the lack of tangible change since the first gathering makes one of those who attended concerned that further discussions may be “an exercise in futility.”

*Quotations of the pastors’ comments are dependent on a *Ministry* article: by J.R. Spangler, “Concerns of 24 Pastors,” *Ministry* (August, 1981).