

Atlantic Union President Proposes Elimination of Regional Conference

by Debra Gainer Nelson

For the first time since black regional conferences were first established in 1944, a union president has proposed to an official church body that the black conference in his union be abolished. Earl W. Amundson, president of the Atlantic Union Conference, submitted to the General Conference Human Relations Advisory Committee a written comment outlining how and why the Greater New York Conference and regional Northeastern Conference in his union could and should be merged.

Although the merger proposal appears to be derailed for now, the discussion it has produced provides an interesting microcosm of opposing attitudes toward regional conferences. Amundson feels that the presence of segregated organizations in the church is a major problem that in the near future will have to be addressed throughout North America.

Black Adventist church leaders have opposed the suggestions in Amundson's paper, "Concepts in Social Pluralism." An editorial in the *Regional Voice*, a monthly paper published by the regional conferences, denounced the plan as "a badly calculated scheme offered under the guise of 'integration and brotherhood.'" Warren Banfield, chairman of the Human Relations Advisory, says the Northeastern Conference's vocal opposition to its proposed demise is only typical of the reaction regional conferences would have to any pros-

pect of being merged with white conferences. Merlin Kretschmar, president of the Greater New York Conference, although less concerned, dismisses the proposal as "merely academic," a matter of "no great urgency" that has been tabled in the face of unfavorable reaction.

In the Atlantic Union, which covers New England and the Bermuda Islands, the Northeastern Conference includes the black constituency of the whole territory except Bermuda. Its members comprise 50 percent of the union's membership. However, most of its members are congregated in New York City and surrounding counties; thus its greatest overlap is with the metropolitan Greater New York Conference, itself comprised of a predominantly minority constituency of Hispanic members.

In its attempts to deal with this ethnic diversity, the Atlantic Union has taken several steps "in the area of human relations," which Amundson documents in his proposal, including: establishment of a conciliation panel to deal with racial issues, development of a set of guidelines for an "interrelational ministry," and the addition of minority personnel to union staff. Amundson felt that his proposal to eliminate a separate regional conference and merge the overlapping territories into one conference serving the metropolitan area would be in keeping with his union's attempt to "bring about a better understanding among all our peoples."

According to the proposal, all Northeastern churches in the New York City area would become part of the new conference. Regional churches in other areas would be incorporated into other local conferences. This arrangement would result in five conferences in the Atlantic Union instead of the present six, but, says Amundson, "it would

be a truer organizational alignment than that which we have at present." For leadership in the new conference, Amundson recommended a black president (since the largest membership in the metropolitan area is black), a Hispanic secretary, and a Causasian treasurer.

Amundson's primary stated motivation for the merger is to rectify the prejudice inherent in the existence of regional conferences. "It was prejudice that caused the regional conferences in the first place," he says. Besides racial integration, Amundson foresees other advantages if the proposed reorganization were to take place: three conferences would be enlarged and strengthened; the operational costs of one conference would be saved; and integration would lead to greater respect both in the church and in the world. In fact, Amundson told *Spectrum* that he doesn't foresee any disadvantages to his proposal at all.

The Human Relations Advisory took no official stand on the proposal, but Elder G. H. Earle, president of the Northeastern Conference, went public with his rebuttal in the June 1983 *Regional Voice*. In spite of Amundson's claim for effective human relations in the Atlantic Union, Earle declares that "there are no acceptable or successful demonstrations of integration in the Adventist Church in North America," and that blacks on the Atlantic Union staff have been elected "only after bitter battles" at committee and constituency meetings.

In Earle's opinion, the Northeastern Conference has been effective under its present structure, showing the largest growth in the past 35 years of any Atlantic Union conference. He is not pacified by Amundson's offer to place a black in the presidency of the merged conference. He points out that Amundson asks to reserve the position of treasurer for a white worker, representing only 9.7 percent of the expanded conference membership. But in the other enlarged conferences, where black membership would be about 30 percent, no black ex-

ecutive position is recommended. Earle says that the proposal "seems to imply that nothing will run well under black leadership except they be supervised by whites."

Channeling their opposition to Amundson's proposal into a specific counter-proposal, the leaders of the Northeastern Conference proposed that Greater New York be absorbed into the Northeastern Conference. Earle, the president, recommends that officers be elected according to "constitutional guidelines" and a "coordinator" be appointed to look after the interests of white and other minority groups.

However, Elder Kretschmar firmly squelches the whole controversy by stating, "At this time the various proposals and counter-proposals for mergers and re-alignments of the conferences in the Atlantic Union do not seem to have widespread support and consequently will not come to fruition."

Kretschmar feels that since Amundson presented his proposal to the Human Relations Advisory before consulting with either conference president involved, he meant it to be an academic "idea" rather than an actual plan for implementation. Kretschmar feels that both conferences are operating effectively at present and that reorganization would be counter-productive rather than beneficial. Amundson confirms that as yet he has made no effort to start processing the proposal through committee machinery. Kretschmar does not doubt that it would be rejected if he did.

Nevertheless, though Amundson acknowledges that "the response in the two conferences has been less than enthusiastic," he believes that many other administrators support the idea and that "things can't continue as they are." However, he does concede that his proposed merger "must be done on a voluntary basis" in order to "succeed in harmonious fashion."

So far, neither conference is sending forward any volunteers.

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