

Money, Mergers, And Marriage—The 1983 Annual Council

by Penelope Kellogg Winkler

In any other year, a sharp decline in offerings and ingathering, such as the church is currently experiencing, might easily have been the most significant issue at the Annual Council. But in 1983, an issue of even greater concern than church finances consumed most of the time and passion of the delegates—power and authority in the Adventist church. Delegates to the 1983 Annual Council surprised themselves by voting down, in a straw ballot, a major proposal from the General Conference officers, and were surprised again later by the officers' implementing a major organizational change after it had been approved by only the narrowest of majorities.

Lance Butler, treasurer of the General Conference, reported that total tithe income is increasing, but at a dramatically slower rate. From 1979 to 1980 tithe went up 11.13 percent; from 1980 to 1981 it increased 6 percent; from 1981 to 1982 it rose by only 1.15 percent—an actual decline in buying power, given the rate of inflation. Even

without reference to inflation, both Sabbath School offerings and Ingathering collections have declined worldwide in absolute amounts: Sabbath School offerings dropped from \$35 million in 1981 to \$33 million in 1982; Ingathering has continued to slide from a high in 1980 of \$16.6 million to \$15.8 million in 1981 and to \$15.2 million in 1982.

The desire to save on both capital expenditures (\$1.5 million for a new division headquarters in Africa) and operating expenses (\$900,000 annually) consumed a significant part of the time the delegates spent in deciding whether or not to have two African divisions instead of three. On the other hand, it took the Annual Council only half an hour to approve spending up to \$6 million for a General Conference building that will cost a total of \$20 million.

While money was, as usual, a central issue of debate, most of the Annual Council was taken up with questions of church structure and authority. The question of how church policies should be devised and implemented, and by whom, ranged over a broad spectrum of issues, including the merger of two African unions, the proposed relocation of General Conference headquarters, the creation of a separate North American Division, the reorganization of SAWS, our policy toward women in the church, and the scope

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of freedom and accountability for denominational employees.

The African Merger

The first proposal presented to the Annual Council delegates was the controversial African division merger and reorganization. Although the proposal contained six separate items, three of the six occasioned the most debate:

1. That we proceed immediately to combine the Eastern Africa Division with the Trans-Africa Division.
2. That both the Southern Union and the South African Union continue as distinct organizations.
3. That the new division headquarters be at Harare, Zimbabwe.

Reorganizing the African Division structure has been a matter under discussion for several years. After the political upheavals which took place in Africa from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, emerging African nations demanded that they no longer be run by European-based divisions which reflected out-of-date colonial relationships. Eventually, sub-sahara Africa will be divided into a western, largely French-speaking Africa-Indian Ocean Division, and an eastern, largely English-speaking Eastern Africa Division.

The Eastern Africa Division, now merged with the Trans-Africa Division, consisted of the Adventist churches in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, which made up its three unions. The Trans-Africa Division had five unions, made up of the territories of Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, southwest Africa, Swaziland, and South Africa. South Africa itself contained two unions: the South Africa Union, composed of the white, "colored," and Asian workers; and the Southern Union, composed of the black workers.

Because of its apartheid policies, which legally segregate blacks from whites, travel

in and out of South Africa is limited. Many black African countries, including Kenya, prevent their own citizens from traveling to South Africa, and do not allow South Africans permission to cross their borders. Placing South Africa into a division with these black African countries was seen as nearly impossible.

Reasons for proposing the merger were given in an hour-long presentation by Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference. Wilson's most convincing arguments were the financial advantages of the plan. In addition to the roughly \$900,000 savings in operating costs each year, merging the divisions would allow the new division to occupy the Trans-Africa headquarters buildings in Harare, Zimbabwe (once called Salisbury, Rhodesia), saving \$1.5 million in capital investments.

Black and white delegates from both the Eastern Africa Division and the Trans-Africa Division (including South Africa) opposed the merger, but on different grounds. The Eastern Africa Division representatives objected to any merger which included South Africa in the new division, and the Trans-Africa speakers objected to the arrangements for excluding South Africa and for making its two unions detached unions, directly under General Conference administrative supervision.

Black leaders in Eastern Africa also protested establishing the headquarters of the new division at Harare, should the merger be approved. They preferred Nairobi, Kenya, the previous headquarters of the Eastern Africa Division. They argued that Nairobi has better communication and transportation facilities and reminded Neal Wilson that Eastern Africa personnel had only recently opened the headquarters in Nairobi, in 1980, with the encouragement of the General Conference. They further suggested that the Kenyan government, which has often given the church special treatment, might feel betrayed if the division headquarters were moved out of the country. However, had the headquarters of the

new division been established in Nairobi, South Africans would not have been able to serve in administrative positions within the new division. Since Zimbabwe allows South Africans to live within its borders, choosing Harare as division headquarters allows South Africans to be part of the division leadership.

Conceding the financial advantages of the merger, some speakers remarked that perhaps administrative expenses were not too great a price to pay to demonstrate the unity of the church in Africa. In one of his two eloquent speeches on the proposal, Duncan Eva, former General Conference vice president and a South African who spent over 30 years in the work in South Africa, cautioned the Annual Council that "more harm has been done in the name of obedience than was ever done in the name of disobedience."

Race was definitely a significant factor in the issue of the two African divisions. Pastor Swanepoel, president of the white South African Union, pointed out that administratively isolating South Africa may destroy the communication that currently exists between South Africa and her neighbors. Alf Birch, secretary of the Trans-Africa Division and a citizen of South Africa, begged to keep South Africa within the division in order to continue the church's work of breaking down apartheid. Other speakers referred to the fact that churches of both unions accept members of any race. President Wilson replied that the church has to work within existing political realities, that the church must address the situation in South Africa as it is, not as we hope it will be, and that we must consider the greater good of the church in Africa as a whole.

Despite Wilson's strongly instructing delegates not to vote according to emotion, they rejected the proposal in a straw vote 152 to 117: 60 percent to 40 percent. The chairman decided that the vote was too close to take the official ballot at that time.

Formal debate was then suspended until the following Sunday.

Some delegates thought that the defeat of the General Conference in the initial, non-

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binding vote was partially the result of North American delegates not wanting to encourage the General Conference officers to disregard the views of division leaders about policies in their own territories. However, Elder Wilson, on Sunday, October 9, apologized for his speech prior to the straw ballot which, he conceded, seemed to some delegates an unfair attempt to influence their votes.

Finally, on Sunday afternoon, the Annual Council delegates approved, by a narrow margin of only nine votes, 145 to 136, the proposal to combine the Eastern Africa Division with the Trans-Africa Division. Gary Ross, the General Conference representative in the United States Congress, asked if it was usual to proceed with such a major decision when the margin for approval was so small. The chairman of Sunday's session Lowell Bock, vice president of the General Conference, replied simply that the decision would stand.

Within a few hours the nominating committee began to select officers for the new division. Bekele Heye, president of the present Eastern Africa Division, became head of the new division. Kenneth Mittleider, the American president of the Trans-Africa Division who did not make any speeches opposing the reduction of his division to two unattached unions, became a General Conference vice-president with special responsibilities for overseeing the Southern and South African unions. The question now remains whether disrupting

the existing African unity will be justified by a stronger and more economical Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa.

General Conference Headquarters

Mid-way through the Annual Council, Lance Butler, treasurer of the General Conference, informed the delegates that plans to build new General Conference headquarters were being delayed. It was proving difficult to sell the present General Conference property for a price that would equal the cost of building a new headquarters. The only property appealing to prospective buyers was the ten-story, high-rise North Building. But even with the other buildings and property added, the General Conference would probably receive only \$14 million, which is not enough to construct the new building.

Butler said that a survey of space needs and a projection of continued increases in General Conference staff showed that the General Conference will need 250,000 square feet of space in the new building, an increase from the 187,000 square feet of its present quarters. The General Conference officers estimated they would need another \$3 to \$4 million beyond the projected \$14 million sales price for the present property. Merle Mills, a general field secretary of the General Conference, quickly moved that the Annual Council approve an expenditure for that amount.

Before a vote could be taken, Alex Bassinia, a building contractor from New Jersey who was invited as a lay delegate to the Annual Council, made a speech assuring the other delegates that an additional \$3 to \$4 million would not be enough. According to Bassinia, the new building would cost at least \$20 million, requiring an additional \$6 million beyond the sales price of the present property.

Walter Blehm, president of the Pacific Union, made a short speech saying he

wished that a vote on appropriating funds could be postponed until an actual bid on the present property was secured, and until documents outlining space needs and costs had been distributed to the delegates. After all, a decision on the issue of separate headquarters for the North American Division might reduce the size of the proposed General Conference headquarters. In light of the concern lay persons were showing about the finances of the church, Blehm also voiced the hope that the Annual Council could avoid "flying blind" on an expenditure of this size.

A few speeches were made in favor of the proposal and a voice vote called for. Although a sizeable volume of "no's" was heard, Charles Hirsch, chairman of the session, declared that the vote had been approved. No one called for a tabulated vote.

Just where the new General Conference building will be located is still not clear. It was announced that a committee is looking at many sites in Maryland and Virginia, causing some to wonder if perhaps the General Conference headquarters would eventually be built on the large property owned by the Review and Herald in Hagerstown, Maryland, approximately 65 miles from Washington, D.C.

North American Division

For the first time in years, the topic of creating a North American Division came to the floor of the Annual Council. However, no formal actions were taken. In fact, at the climactic moment of the discussion, the vice president for North America, Charles Bradford, would not entertain motions from either a union president or local conference president to establish a commission to at least study the possibility of creating a genuine North American Division (NAD). Other General Conference officers were surprised at Bradford's decision.

The tone of the discussion was set by Bradford's written statement, "How I View the North American Division."

It is not something separate and apart from the General Conference. Its mission is to facilitate and expedite. It is operational, functional. The General Conference works *through* the North American Division. . . . The NAD is not an entity of its own. It has no constituency base. It is the servant of the General Conference—to do the General Conference's bidding in the geographical territory known as North America. It is to make the plans and programs of the General Conference operational in North America (here is the functional idea again). It is solely at the pleasure of the General Conference.

Neal Wilson, president of the General Conference and the immediate past vice president for North America, declared that making the General Conference in North America as independent as other divisions would become a jurisdictional problem. The General Conference leadership itself resides within North America, but division leaders are also administrators of the General Conference and it is impossible to have two General Conference leaderships in one territory.

The union and local conference presidents who spoke were grateful that the North American Division had finally become an item on the Annual Council agenda, but they wished to move ahead. Earl Amundson, president of the Atlantic Union, wanted some group to study the possibility of locating the headquarters of the North American Division in a building other than the \$20 million complex discussed the previous evening. He suggested that it might even be built somewhere other than the Washington, D.C., area.

Walter Blehm, president of the Pacific Union, who had vigorously questioned appropriating the \$6 million for the new General Conference building before questions about a North American Division had been settled, urged that a committee be established right away to devise a new organizational structure for North America. But when A. C. McClure, president of the Southern Union, asked if Elder Bradford would entertain a motion that such a com-

mission be appointed, the chairman suggested instead that the matter be referred to a meeting of the union presidents. McClure acquiesced. When Gary Patterson, president of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference, said that he was ready to move that a committee study the possibility of creating a North American Division with authority equal to that enjoyed by divisions in other parts of the world, Bradford again declined to accept a motion.

Speeches in favor of developing the North American Division did not include support

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for eliminating the unions. In fact, speaker after speaker went out of his way to reaffirm the need for union conferences in North America. Ben Leach, president of the Southwestern Union, made the most colorful speech. He acknowledged that "unions should be lean, seen, and clean," but emphasized that they are the basic unit of the General Conference: "The Lord wants unions."

The union issue raised some debate, and the strident characterizations which some delegates used to describe those who wished to do away with unions led Warren Banfield, director of the General Conference department of Human Relations, to urge that the Annual Council not regard those who honestly want change as enemies.

ADRA International

The reorganization of the Seventh-day Adventist World Service (SAWS) under a new agency, Adventist Development and Relief

Agency (ADRA), concentrates power more directly in the hands of the General Conference. The director of SAWS will now report not to the board of SAWS, but to the executive director of ADRA, an associate treasurer of the General Conference. While internal personal conflicts may have contributed to the change, many administrators in the divisions did not appreciate the fact that SAWS representatives reported to SAWS officers in Washington as much as to the division or union administrators. The reorganization will also probably shift the emphasis of the denomination from the grassroots development projects favored by SAWS (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 12, No. 3).

The General Conference voted ADRA as an umbrella organization encompassing SAWS and also funding efforts to secure international financing for large Adventist institutions. For example, ADRA is negotiating \$21 million in interest-free loans for Adventist universities from the African Development Bank, a multi-national institution with 51 member countries including the United States. The bank has earmarked \$9 million for the establishment of the Adventist University of East Africa in Kenya, and an estimated \$12 million for the development of the Adventist University of Central Africa in Rwanda. These interest-free loans will be repaid over a 60-year period, the first ten years of which require no loan repayment.

Roberto Drachanberg, the new ADRA executive director, Lance Butler, General Conference treasurer, and Neal Wilson, General Conference president, responded to concerns expressed by delegates. They maintained that ADRA will be an organization controlling SAWS, not replacing it; the legal SAWS name need not be changed or dropped, allowing donors to continue their support. The General Conference Treasury was definitely not taking the agency over; much of the work of SAWS should be able to continue as before.

The chairman of the board of directors of ADRA is Kenneth Mittleider, a newly-

appointed vice-president of the General Conference. Each division will be assigned an ADRA director who will serve on the 21-member executive committee chaired by Lance Butler. Also on the board will be prominent lay-people from all over the world, as well as the top three executive officers from each world division, in addition to the General Conference president, secretary, and treasurer. Other members on the 55-member board are representatives from each of the major General Conference departments. There seems little doubt that ADRA will be a very tightly managed and controlled entity.

Women

Women in the Adventist church will be affected by decisions made at Annual Council. For one thing, the General Conference officers decided that a proposal recommending that the North American Division be allowed to ordain women should not reach the Annual Council for discussion. An *ad hoc* committee appointed by the General Conference Committee, Expanded Chaplaincy Study, had met July 19 and 20 and decided on several recommendations to reorganize the National Service Organization and other denominational activities into a separate office, Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries. The final recommendation of the *ad hoc* committee, which was subsequently approved by the union presidents in North America and sent by them to the General Conference Officers for placement on the Annual Council agenda, said: "Women offer a unique contribution ministering in chaplaincy services and are being actively sought by the military, prisons, health-care institutions, and others. Ordination is a requirement and a prerequisite for serving in these areas, therefore it was voted to recommend that in the NAD women be ordained." The

entire set of recommendations concerning chaplaincy were placed on the Annual Council agenda, and ultimately approved by the delegates, except the provision regarding ordination of women. The officers had prevented the delegates from even seeing it.

The Annual Council did approve the creation of an *ad hoc* advisory subcommittee of the General Conference Office of Human Relations to examine the role of women in the North American Adventist church. The Association of Adventist Women had proposed to the office of human relations that it establish a commission to further equal access to education and employment and the elimination of discrimination towards women in the Adventist church. The *ad hoc* advisory subcommittee was the response.

Members have been invited to Washington for an initial meeting in March, 1984. There are five denominational employees and four lay persons on the committee. Most are professionally trained women: Gaylah Cantrell, a certified public accountant, is associate treasurer of the Atlantic Union Conference; Jan Daffern, associate pastor of Sligo Church, is presently completing her Master of Divinity degree from the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University; Andree DuPuis, a homemaker, is a member of the Quebec Conference executive committee as well as a member of the Kingsway College Board; (She was previously a Bible worker and colporteur.); Delphine Gates is a member of the Education Board of the Mid-America Union in Denver, Colorado; Thesba Johnston, professor of psychology at Andrews University, has an Ed.D. in counseling psychology and has been teaching at Andrews University for the past six years. (She is also first elder of All Nations Church at Andrews University in Berrien Springs.); Lourdes Silva is chairperson of the office management of Loma Linda University, La Sierra Campus. Alice Smith, now retired, was formerly associate director of the General Conference health department. She presently lives in North Carolina and does consulting for the General

Conference and Orlando Hospital. Helen Turner, treasurer of the Southwest Region Conference since 1982, is the first black woman to become treasurer of a conference. She has an M.B.A. in management, administrative sciences, and accounting, and is presently working on her Ph.D. Dorothy Williams lives in Olney, Maryland, where she has had her own insurance agency for the past 26 years. She is head deaconess of the Takoma Park Church.

While Annual Council did not discuss the possibility of North America acting on its own to ordain women, it did hear Neal Wilson discuss the possibility that Adventist policy might change regarding Adventist converts in Africa and muslim societies who are already living in polygamy. Proposals from an already active committee, with members from all over the world, may come as early as the 1984 Annual Council. At present, a man with many wives must divorce all but one of them in order to be eligible for baptism, although wives may be baptized and remain in a polygamous marriage.

Wilson pointed out several problems in the present policy. The church now forces Adventists who are legally married to become divorced. These divorced wives are stigmatized, frequently left with no means of support, and thereby forced into prostitution. Children of divorced women are considered illegitimate and cannot inherit land, a vitally important right in an agrarian society.

The church's policy on plural marriages has changed from time to time (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 13, No. 1). In 1913, the first statement on the issue was that a man with more than one wife ought not to be baptized. However, in 1930, a policy was voted at Annual Council which permitted the baptism of men married to more than one woman, but forbade already baptized members from entering into such marriages. In 1941, the General Conference reverted to the strict policy that persists today.

Wilson emphasized very strongly that our

policy regarding plural marriages is just that, a policy. Polygamy is not a doctrinal issue, Wilson said, pointing out that the twenty-seven articles of faith voted at Dallas in 1980 are silent on the subject.

Freedom and Accountability

The General Conference officers recommended that a "Theological Statement on Freedom and Accountability," which proposed a policy that would "apply to all licensed and credentialed denominational employees in all categories," be adopted. But they failed in their attempt to have those disciplinary procedures adopted as guidelines. Led by academic administrators, the delegates sent the statement back for further study.

Although the Board of Higher Education established a committee of academic and school administrators to make recommendations, the actual statement was produced by a group of General Conference officers (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 14, No. 2). This statement recommended procedures for disciplining all church employees and removing their credentials, although the termination of an academic's employment would remain in the hands of the school's board of trustees (removing credentials and terminating employment are not technically the same, although the end results are identical).

A key paragraphy in the document provided the rationale for discipline:

It is understood that the disciplining of a church employee (or church institutional employee) who persists in propagating (or expressing) doctrinal views differing from those of the Church is viewed not as a violation of his freedom, but rather as a necessary protection of the Church's integrity and identity. There are corporate church rights as well as individual freedoms. The worker's freedom does not include the license to express views that may injure or destroy the very community that supports and provides for him (wording applying specifically to denominationally employed academics has been provided in parenthesis).

If the chief executive officer of a conference (or church institution) is convinced that an employee advocates "doctrinal

views divergent from accepted Adventist theology and is unwilling to refrain from their recital," then he refers the matter to the conference or institutional executive committee, which then appoints a committee to review the situation.

One aspect of the policy that academic administrators in North America objected to was the possibility that a teacher might lose credentials (and therefore his or her denominational employability) through a process that bypassed the college administration. When the statement was read to the delegates, Grady Smoot, president of Andrews University, said that the document on academic freedom had been wrongly titled; it really was a statement on withdrawing credentials. Richard Hammill, Smoot's predecessor as president of Andrews and a retired vice-president of the General Conference, agreed.

Although Charles Hirsch, the vice-president of the General Conference who advises the General Conference Department of Education, pointed out that approving guidelines is different from adopting policy. Robert Carter, president of the Lake Union Conference and vice-chairman of the board of Andrews University, said that he had noticed that guidelines often became policy. Carter preferred that it remain a study document.

Robert Reynolds, executive secretary of the Board of Higher Education, also urged that the statement not be adopted at this Annual Council, but rewritten and returned as two statements, one dealing with academics and one with ministers. Agreeing, the Annual Council voted to accept the statement on theological freedom and accountability as a study document and give further study to the document and to the possibility of presenting it in the form of two documents for consideration by the 1984 Annual Council. Suggestions for additions, deletions, or changes should be addressed to the vice-president, advisor to the Education Department, before March 1, 1984.