

The Need for Structural Change

by James W. Walters

Both the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the world in which it exists have changed in important ways since 1901, when the last major church reorganization occurred. The world has seen more societal change in the last 80 years than it witnessed in the previous 19 centuries, and the church has surely not remained static.

Because of a growing belief that the present church structure is inadequate, the board of the Association of Adventist Forums created and funded the Task Force on Church Structure which is releasing its report in the following pages of this issue of *Spectrum*. The task force is composed of members representing various areas of expertise: the pastorate, theology, ethics, political science, law, and systems analysis. While most members of the task force live in Southern California, the study group has consulted with individuals throughout North America.

The purpose of the task force (which was first titled the Task Force on Lay Participation) was to examine the nature of lay involvement in the governance of the church and to make recommendations. In the course of its study and discussion, the

task force concluded that lay participation could best be facilitated by modifications in church structure. Further, believing that church structure—like all organization—is most effective when it coincides with a particular people's cultural expectations, the task force restricted its study to the North American Division.

The central documents in this task force report, the general statement and the model conference constitution, are the product of hundreds of hours of work by individuals, over a score of committee meetings, and broad consultation with clerical and lay thought leaders. Yet the task force fully realizes that its documents are not the last word. It does think its work is a carefully considered first word. The task force accepts full responsibility for any deficiencies in the documents; it shares all the merits in those statements with the many consultants who made substantive contributions.

The proposal for change in the structure of the Adventist denomination, as put forth recently by the Pacific Union Conference Study Committee, is primarily based on ideas and models drawn from management. The task force applauds this illuminating proposal as well as the study underway by the North Pacific Union Conference Commission on Governance and Management Structure, and by the recently established

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General Conference Committee on Church Structure. A distinctive feature of the task force's work is its governmental approach. The management and governmental approaches are not in opposition, but are highly complementary. Common sense suggests the need for efficient management, and church operating policy has long recognized the governmental basis of Adventist church organization. The *Church Manual*, indeed indicates a particular type of church governance: "The representative form of church government is that which prevails in the SDA church." In reality, the representativeness of Adventist church government has often been more symbolic than real. Today's challenge is to develop a truly representative structure which can, with maximum effectiveness, be the vehicle for living and spreading the gospel in contemporary North America.

In 1901 the total church membership stood at 78,000, less than the combined membership in 1983 of the two largest conferences in the North American Division. Today a small group of New England Adventists has evolved into a large multinational corporate body. Membership is now more than four million and over 80 percent of these members live outside North America. Total assets of the Adventist

Church have grown to over \$4 billion; the church now employs more than 120,000 people—a work force larger in number than that of Chrysler Corporation.

The members of the church in North America, as elsewhere, now represent a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, educational, and economic backgrounds and have many different needs and concerns. They have become more sophisticated in their perceptions and expectations of their church. They are becoming apathetic toward a church organization which they perceive as distant and beyond meaningful lay participation. The expectations of North American members are also changing. In addition to evangelism, worship and nurture are seen as vital to a fulfilling church life. Further, the increasingly educated North American Division constituency has a variety of professional and social interests which occupy time and energy. If these members are to continue to closely identify with their church, it must increasingly reflect their distinctive involvement in its life and mission.

In modern America, the substantially centralized form of Adventist government appears anachronistic compared to the increasing emphasis on local control of governmental problems, participatory de-

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Thomas Mostert, president of the Southeastern California Conference, was a most helpful and insightful consultant. Although substantive differences of opinion made it impossible for him to join in the report, the task force is grateful for his comments, which improved its work.

cision-making in business, and high lay involvement in other representatively governed denominations.

The 1901 church reorganization had the benefit of direct prophetic guidance, and the reorganization was eminently suited to the needs of the fledgling church of a century ago. But even a prophetically blessed church structure of a bygone era can be a detriment to the modern church if structural policies are solidified and mistaken for eternal Christian principles.

Certainly no mere structural changes will suffice in dealing with modern societal living or directly address fundamental spiritual problems facing the church—spiritual apathy, lack of evangelistic growth, or doctrinal laxity/rigidity. However, the task force contends that the form of structure a church adopts says much to the world and to itself about its principles and its God. To a surprising extent, “The medium is the message.”

In discussing the ways by which to put forward recommendations on these matters, the task force concluded that two basic documents were needed: a general statement of principles, and a model conference constitution which embodies these principles. The general statement develops basic principles of representative church government, indicates how current church practice falls short of these principles, and points toward the form of church structure implied by the principles. The context of discussion is the North American Division and how it relates to the local conferences and churches.

The model conference constitution specifies how the principles can be expressed concretely in procedures and institutions of church structure. This constitution could also be used to revise higher levels of church organization. It addresses the local confer-

ence directly, because that is where transferral of authority from lay members to church officials presently takes place, and because the task force expects that in the future, local conferences will be even more important than they currently are.

In writing the model constitution, the task force was concerned that the constitution authentically embody basic principles held in common by North American Division church members. The constitution is a “model” in the sense of a teaching device. If adopted by a particular conference, the constitution would no doubt be adjusted for unique local needs. Nevertheless, the task force has tried to produce a document that is adapted to the reality of the Adventist ethos in North America.

As an aid to understanding the reasons for the task force’s proposals in the model constitution, George Colvin has produced a commentary on the constitution. Although the statements in the commentary are those of a single writer, they attempt to reflect the thinking of the task force.

The two articles which conclude this cluster come from a larger group of general or preliminary studies out of which the general statement and the model constitution grew.* Raymond Cottrell, in “Comparative Church Politics,” surveys the organizational structure of 12 denominations in North America and compares the results to Adventist structure. Interestingly, almost all the representative denominations surveyed, except those of a hierarchical or congregational nature, have formal mechanisms of judicial appeal. Hence, the task force advocates an adjudicatory commission in the model constitution.

Ellen White, in 1901, called for decentralization: “What we need now is a reorganization. We want to begin at the foundation, and to build upon a different principle.” The task force’s call is timid by comparison. We call the church back to its ideals. We call the church to make real its commitment to representiveness. We call the church to live out its high valuation of the laity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

*Unpublished background papers of the Task Force may be requested from the AAF office in Takoma Park, Md.

George Colvin, "Principles for Church Reorganization," and "On the Moral Basis of Democratic Government."

Gary Land, "Layman and Denomination in Seventh-day Adventist History."

David R. Larson and James W. Walters, "Individual, Community, and Adventist Polity."

Task Force Proposals

Although the basic principles undergirding church government are given in Scripture, the form of government varies according to culture and needs. At least in North America, the representative form of church government is appropriate. Accordingly, the task force makes the following proposals.

1. A genuine North American Division should be established, with its own constituency that elects its own division officers.

2. Union conferences should be eliminated and local conferences strengthened as the key administrative units. A few regional offices staffed by appointees of the elected officers of the North American Division would aid conference coordination.

3. Laypeople should be thoroughly involved in all decision-making bodies, and comprise at least 50 percent of every permanent committee, commission, and board. At least half of the voting delegates of constituency sessions should be laypeople.

4. Information should be freely provided. All documents should be available for inspection, except for those whose confidentiality is necessary for proper conduct of church operations; church committees and commissions are open except when an executive session is called.

5. A board of information should be established within each local conference and within the North American Division to foster full communication of church programs and news. In addition, the boards should provide a medium for responsible discussion of church thought and life

to ensure the possibility of genuine representative church government.

6. Permanent adjudicatory commissions should be established within each conference and within the North American Division to decide constitutional questions and to review cases of intra-church dispute. These commissions should alleviate the need to use secular courts by the church and its members.

7. A session booklet should be compiled and sent out to delegates before meetings of the constituency. It would contain, among other items, an agenda and an assessment of each proposal: background information, a statement of fiscal impact, and brief arguments pro and con.

8. A conference nominating committee could be appointed two months before the meeting of the constituency. The committee could nominate two people for each conference officer position, and it may nominate more than the number of people needed to fill vacancies on all permanent boards, commissions, and committees.

9. Only conference officers should be elected. The conference president, in conjunction with the executive committee, would appoint all conference staff.

10. The General Conference should initiate a North American Division constitutional commission to conduct an in-depth study of North American polity. After widespread discussion in the conferences and congregations, a North American Division session should convene to adopt the proposed constitution, pending General Conference approval.