
A Call for an Open Church

Enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed a representative form of government. Representation encourages members to work together for the fulfillment of the church's mission of preparing for Christ's soon return by inviting all men and women everywhere into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

This form of government is especially desirable for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The denomination began as a lay movement, and the great Adventist pioneers chose a representative form of order for Adventism. This form was supported in the first and every subsequent edition of the official *Church Manual*.

A representative church structure is also closely related to the historic Protestant principle of the "priesthood of all believers." The concept that the Holy Spirit works constructively and creatively in the minds and lives of all members of the community, enlightening and guiding them as they cooperate together to fulfill the gospel commission, implies that church structure should be representative rather than hierarchical. The New Testament doctrine of spiritual gifts, which teaches that each member expects to contribute his or her understanding and skills to the community of faith, also implies that church structure should be representative. The Holy Spirit has blessed the members of the community with a variety of gifts, all of which are important for the health of the corporate body. Within the Adventist Church, the strong emphasis on education has enhanced these gifts among the members, many of whom desire more extensive

and meaningful involvement in their church. A representative church can draw all of these abundant gifts together into appropriate ministries, which will upbuild and strengthen the community.

In addition to permitting the church to obtain the benefit of its members' excellencies, a representative church structure takes into account the universal condition of human sinfulness by placing limits on authority and making those in authority accountable. It thereby reduces the tendency to abuse power.

Although the appropriateness of a representative structure has always been accepted in the Adventist Church, the form of its realization has varied. Structures and processes thought to be desirable at one stage of development may later prove superfluous. Changing needs and circumstances have led to minor adjustments and on a few occasions to major changes.

Increasingly, Adventists in North America are concerned that the church must restudy both its structures and its operating procedures. North America, at least, needs to re-examine how a more complete realization of representative government may serve its own members and fulfill the sacred mission Christ has entrusted to it. This conviction, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is finding expression among dedicated Seventh-day Adventists at all levels of church organization. This conviction does not imply that the individuals who administer the church's affairs should be condemned. It is simply that the church has outgrown a structure and mode of operation that once served it well. In the world and the church, circumstances today are vastly different from what they were 25 or even 10

years ago. The principle of "the priesthood of all believers," the concept of spiritual gifts, and the amazing development of the denomination summon all members of the Adventist community of faith to explore ways to make widespread opportunity to participate in the governance of the church, according to each member's gifts, a reality. It is hoped that such participation will help Adventism in North America develop a greater commitment to a sense of mission: a mission that not only responds to the needs of the present but also presents a vision of a future where all both serve and are served.

I. Principles of Representative Church Government

Understanding representative church government is important both for evaluating the present system and for proposing changes that will make it more representative. The following principles are fundamental for such understanding:

1. The church is both a spiritual fellowship and a temporal organization.

2. Church government has to do with establishing authority in a community. In the sacred community as in other communities, authority must be both just and effective and must be just to be effective.

3. Because basic human characteristics affect all institutions, the same dynamics and processes that operate in other institutions also operate in the church; and church operations may be understood, at least in part, by the same methods that apply to other institutions. The well-being of the church requires acknowledging these similarities among human organizations and using them to benefit the church's self-understanding.

4. As the *Church Manual* affirms, the ultimate temporal authority of the church is vested in the whole body of members, the people of God, who are mutually responsible for its welfare. Adventist church government, if it is to be just and

responsible, must arise from the free and informed consent of the whole body of members. In view of the fact that in large communities, direct vote of the people on all issues is unworkable, the appropriate mode of structure for the church is a representative one which respects the rights of all full members.

5. The right to participate in the choice of one's representatives is the heart of any representational system. Relinquishment of this right to an elite few, at any level of church government, tends to result in leaders who are insensitive and a government that is self-perpetuating. By participating in the selection of their leaders, the members are exercising their responsibility for the church's welfare. To this end, opportunities for participation must be made numerous and effective, and participation must be encouraged. Open discussion is essential for responsible participation.

6. The need for wide participation and the human tendency to abuse power both require the diffusion of power through a modest separation of powers within the church.

7. The extent and quality of participation in a representative community are closely related to the availability and quality of information.

8. The most effective form of representative government for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America will be one that recognizes both the world-wide mission of the church and the need for and right to self-government within its component units.

9. The way in which authority in the church is distributed and exercised is a form of witness. This form of witness is vital to the relationship of employees to the church. To safeguard this witness, the rights of both members and employees should be clearly defined and protected.

10. Representative government does not usually rise above the level of understanding of its constituents. Education of the members of the church in the principles and

practice of a representative church order is therefore of great importance for establishing and maintaining representativeness.¹

II. The State of Adventist Church Structure

The present structure of the Adventist Church was established in 1901. At that time the church had 78,000 members, the vast majority of whom lived in North America. There were relatively few institutions, and the educational system in particular was only in process of formation. Since that time, the church has increased greatly in membership, institutions, and financial resources. These internal changes have been accompanied by great changes in the world in which the church exists. However, no important structural alterations have been made to help the church adapt to these substantial internal and external changes. A static structure has begun to cripple the church in North America and to deprive it of representative government.

Apart from historical factors that suggest the need for change, both the Scriptural evidence for divine approval of a New Testament church order very different from the order of the Old Testament church and the important principle of progressive revelation suggest that the Holy Spirit may lead toward new insights that permit more efficient and appropriate methods of achieving goals. That such changes may be needed in Adventist operations does not deny the enormous debt owed to the founders of the church, including Ellen G. White. Their efforts in establishing the church have helped the church to prosper up to the present time. Instead, such changes would only acknowledge that the church's structure, like its members and its environment, exist in the realm of change.

Several conditions in the Adventist Church in North America suggest the imperative need for willingness to recon-

sider present methods. Among these conditions are the following:

1. For practical purposes, communication functions are controlled by church administrators, whose position inevitably limits their objectivity and perspective. The undesirable consequences of this situation are already being recognized by some within the church.²

2. The large number of electoral levels in the Adventist Church and the increasing concentration of decision-making authority in the upper levels have combined to separate the principal decision-makers from the members by at least six electoral stages, counting each point at which selection or voting occurs as one level.³ As a result of this wide separation, those who make the basic decisions may not believe they are responsible or accountable to the members collectively.

3. Laypeople, especially women, are excluded from effective participation at most levels of Adventist church structure. Although other factors (such as race and ethnic background) may also exclude members from participation, limiting authority to the administrative clergy is the principal restriction.

4. Ultimate decision-making authority for the church in North America is vested in the General Conference Executive Committee. As the proportion of Adventists outside of North America has increased (to about 83 percent at present), the General Conference Executive Committee has properly been internationalized. Today, the General Conference Executive Committee is more representative of the world church and less representative or understanding of the church in North America. This internationalization of the General Conference Executive Committee, coupled with the fact that it controls the church in North America (in contrast to the other world divisions, which to a greater degree administer their own affairs) results in serious injury to the life and mission of the church in North America.

5. Effective participation in decision-making, beyond the local conference level, remains with a very small group of people, practically all of whom are administrative clergy. These people often meet in closed committees and in other settings where their actions and views as individuals are unknown to those whom they are supposed to represent. Beyond the local conference, they are not elected by the church at large and are not sufficiently accountable to it.

6. In some areas of the Adventist church structure, meaningful checks and balances within the church structure either do not exist or are ineffective—a situation which can and sometimes does result in abuses of power. Other mechanisms that have proven useful in making elected leaders accountable to their constituents are often absent from Adventist church government.

7. Church statements about the rights of members and employees often remain unclear. Methods for dealing in a procedurally fair way with grievances arising from appeals to such rights also are not firmly in place.

8. Although participation by church members is greatest at the local level of the church, present structures and policies tend to remove real control of resources and decision-making authority even in details of management to higher levels of the church that are more distant from the members. This process tends to diminish participation by the members, responsibility to the members on the part of church leaders, and ability of local units to respond to local conditions.

III. Proposals for a More Representative Adventist Church Structure

Scripture sets forth universally applicable principles on which the church should be organized and operated. However, the

institutional forms in which these principles find expression may vary from one age and culture to another. Being of divine origin, the principles themselves are sacred; the forms, being of human design, may be adapted to the needs and preferences of the people they serve.

In North America, the form of church structure will be representative. To realize the benefits of a truly representative church, substantial changes in the structure of the Adventist Church in North America are needed. The following changes would tend to make the Adventist Church more representative and more effective.

Circumstances today are vastly different from what they were 25 or even 10 years ago. The church has simply outgrown a structure and mode of operation that once served it well.

1. The needs of the Adventist Church in North America urgently require the establishment of a fully functioning North American Division, whose officers would be more responsible and responsive to the needs of their constituents in North America. The division would have its own constituency and elect its own officers, who would be directly responsible and responsive to the members of the church in North America. Such a structure appropriately bridges the span between the local conferences and the General Conference. Further, it is necessary if a more representative, responsible church is to exist in North America. Because voluntary loyalty brings greater strength to the world church than what may be perceived as compulsory loyalty, giving North American Adventists a greater voice in the affairs of the North American church would improve their loyalty to the world church. It would also

free the General Conference officers to deal solely with concerns affecting the whole church.

2. The union conferences should be eliminated. They should be replaced by no more than five North American Division regional support offices sensitive to the needs and interests of their respective regions. Local conferences would become the principal governing units of the church in North America. This arrangement would bring decision-making closer to a level at which local conference administration, local congregations, and individual members could influence events. Because the local conferences are intended to be substantially self-governing units, and because such a result is difficult to achieve

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without a sufficient membership and financial base, local conferences in North America should be consolidated to obtain a maximum of 20 to 30 local conferences. Local congregations would thus relate directly to the conferences, and conferences would relate directly to the North American Division. Delegates to a North American Division constituency meeting and to the General Conference session would be elected by local conference constituencies. At least half of these delegates should be people who are not employed by the church and do not have a business relationship with the church. Efforts should be made at all levels to limit the number of *ex officio* voting delegates and increase the proportion of elected voting delegates.

In such a reorganization, entities now managed by the union conference could be transferred either to the local conferences in which they are located or to division-wide

governing boards. (An example is the Board of Higher Education, which could be strengthened.) Such reorganization would necessarily consider and where possible retain local and regional affiliations and interests.

These changes, together with the establishment of a fully functioning North American Division and the use of modern communications and transportation, would result in a more effective coordination of the resources of North America and a decrease in administrative staff. Major staff functions, such as religious liberty, could be most effectively provided to the local conferences from the division level. They would increase the openness, representativeness, and responsibility of church government. These changes would also permit substantial savings of resources and an appropriate redistribution of talent from administration to "front line" activities.

3. Mechanisms assuring administrative accountability should be established at all levels. At the conference level, these mechanisms could be initiated by or assigned to delegates from local congregations, who should retain their position as delegates between constituency meetings. At the North American Division level, these mechanisms could be initiated by the local conference committees, which would have at least a majority of laity.

4. In any reorganization, attention should be given to removing electoral levels between the members of the local churches and the officers of the North American Division. This approach would bring leaders closer to the members and greatly simplify the organizational structure.

Reorganizational efforts should place power, including financing, on the lowest appropriate levels. Such efforts should recognize the need for resources to match responsibilities. Bringing church government as close as possible to the members will be more effective in creating a sense of responsibility for the success of the church's efforts among the membership as a whole.

5. The North American Division and local conferences should operate on a principle of openness. General organs of information should be established and given sufficient independence and funding to provide responsible reporting and discussion of issues. A division-wide board of information and general informational organ should be established similar to those proposed in the task force's model conference constitution, many of whose provisions could be modified to apply to the division.

6. The rights of church members and employees should be protected by reliable means not directly controlled by administration. These means should include division-wide adjudicatory, constitutional, and ministerial commissions similar to those proposed in the model conference constitution.

7. The composition and operation of constituency sessions is important to effective representation. Delegates to North American Division constituency meetings should be elected by the local church delegates in the local conferences, by local conference executive committees, and from North American Division institutions. At least half of the voting delegates should be people not employed by the church or having a business relationship with the church. The delegates should be provided well in advance of the session with a manual containing the agenda, an outline of the organization and procedures of the session, their responsibilities as delegates, and other information necessary for them to discharge their responsibilities effectively. Area meetings of the delegates should be conducted well before the constituency session; and provision should be made for these meetings to place items on the agenda of the session. All proposals placed before the delegates at a session should be accompanied by explanatory material, including but not limited to arguments for and against each proposal, an unbiased statement of the background of the proposal, and an unbiased estimate of its financial effect.

IV. Achieving Structural Change in North America

Any changes in the structure of the Adventist Church in North America should be developed and instituted appropriately. An orderly process by which to restructure the church in North America could proceed as follows:

Upon authorization by the General Conference, the North American Division would appoint a constitutional commission to conduct an in-depth study of church polity and to formulate a tentative constitution for the North American Division adapted to the needs of the church in North America. The commission would be selected from nominees submitted by each local conference. The commission would be broadly representative of the entire church in its various aspects and phases of ministry. It would consist of an equal number of ordained ministers and laypeople selected for their knowledge and expertise in areas that qualify them for membership on this commission. The commission would be given a year to complete this part of its assignment. For another year, the entire church in North America would be involved in in-depth study of the proposed constitution. The commission would lead out in the study, which would include seminars, panel discussions, and open discussion in the church press. It would receive suggestions and incorporate them into the constitution as these suggestions are deemed of value.

At the close of the second year, a North American Division constitutional convention would be convened. The delegates to this convention would be chosen by a special session in each conference. The number of delegates elected by each conference would be proportionate to the number of members in the conference. At least half of the delegates would be people not employed by the church or having a business relationship

with the church. This convention would amend the proposed constitution, as it might deem appropriate, and adopt it on a provisional basis for two years. At the close of that time the constitutional convention would reconvene and make whatever adjustments the trial period might indicate as desirable. After such adjustments have been made, the constitution would become the effective constitution for the North American Division, pending General Conference approval.

The North American Division would remain a loyal, integral segment of the world church, while assuming its place as an equal partner with other divisions in the world church. It would continue to contribute sacrificially to the world mission of the church in both personnel and means, but it would have developed an internal structure and method of operations that would be adapted to its needs. As a result, the North American Division would more effectively fulfill its mission to its own members, to the people of North America, and to the world church.

The church of Christ on earth should always be open to change. These proposals are part of a continuing effort to build up the Christian community on earth. The proposals come from a particular vision: the necessity to make the Adventist Church as responsible, representative, and participatory as possible. Widespread involvement and participation are essential elements in the air of the Christian community. The church should settle for nothing less than the best possible church structure, and church structure at its best can be realized in the Adventist Church. Participation, responsibility, and Christian freedom need to become ever more characteristic of the witness of the Adventist Church to a world so often lacking these blessings. It is with the conviction that such a vision and such a church is what Scripture means by "the body of Christ" that these proposals are submitted to Adventists in North America.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Insights related to points 1, 2, 3, and 10 of this section were obtained from: Keith R. Bridston, *Church Politics* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1969); and Harry V. Jaffa, *The Conditions of Freedom: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

2. George W. Reid, "Time to Reorder the Church?", *The Adventist Review* (July 28, 1983), p. 15.

3. Counting each point at which selection or

voting occurs as one level, the local conference executive committee is separated from the members by at least two levels: (1) the selection of conference session delegates by the local churches; and (2) the selection of the executive committee by the delegates through their approval of the work of the "large" or organizing committee and the nominating committee. These two committees may or may not be considered additional levels.