

# Explaining Participation: A Commentary

by George Colvin

---

From its inception, the model conference constitution was intended to illustrate the way in which principles of structure could be put into practice. Of the many principles that appear in the constitution, four seem particularly important: (1) the importance of opportunity for participation in church governance; (2) the need for improved information; (3) the necessity for leaders to be accountable to the members; and (4) the desirability of balance among the parts of the structure. All of these principles are suggested in the preamble to the constitution. This topical discussion provides reasons for major proposals in the constitution and explains their interrelatedness. For example, freedom of information about conference operations is important in itself, but also affects implementation of the other three principles. However, this commentary cannot replace a careful reading of the constitution itself.

## *Participation*

The task force believed that opportunities for participation at all levels of church structure should be opened as widely

as possible. Involvement of members should be informed and meaningful. All conference positions except the presidency are equally open to all members (Article 3). The constitution promotes participation by remaining rigorously sex-neutral. Because the task force thought that the conference president should be someone who had made the intensive commitment to the work of the church that ordination involves and ordination is now restricted by the denomination to males, the unintended effect of the task force's recommendation is to limit conference presidencies to men.

In many ways, the constitution opens ways for laypeople to participate decisively in conference operations. At least half of the executive committee must be lay, and laity are heavily involved on the other four committees, commissions, or boards (Articles 5 and 6). The requirement that executive committee agendas be made available ahead of time (Article 5) is primarily informational, but taken together with the requirement for open committee meetings (Article 7) it allows members to know in advance which committee meetings they wish to attend. Retention of local church delegates as delegates between sessions decisively increases the influence of laypeople. The substantial reduction of *ex officio* voting delegates to the session also increases opportunities for participation by laypeople who are delegates from local

---

George Colvin is a doctoral candidate in government at Claremont Graduate School and secretary of the Association of Adventist Forums Task Force on Church Structure.

churches. The provisions regarding availability of information would also improve the equality of participation.

Various features of the constituency meeting procedures would make participation more meaningful. For example, the constitution suggests several methods delegates may use to introduce names into election contests or place matters on the session agenda (Article 2).

Participation by minorities of all kinds is heavily protected. The various petitioning requirements (Article 2) permit minorities of the session delegates to put matters on the agenda, to call for a special session, or to call for a vote without a session meeting. One-third of the session nominating committee is sufficient to put a name on the session ballot for vote (Article 2). Each of the 16 executive committee members may place an item on the executive committee agenda, and five members may call a special meeting (Article 5). Although the task force rejected the idea of specific quotas, the constitution protects groups that are often neglected by specifying that the session organizing and nominating committees "shall . . . consider the diversity of members within the Conference" (Article 2).

## *Information*

---

**B**ecause it believed better information to be both a pressing need within the Adventist Church and an important support to all effective structure, the task force placed great emphasis on this principle in the constitution. Although church members will continue to be unequally informed, the information provisions are intended to improve both the quality and quantity of information available. Some of these provisions are relatively minor, such as the requirements for education and professional knowledge by some members of conference bodies. These requirements are intended to bring relevant professional information to

these bodies and to improve their ability to deal with other information in their deliberations. The three most important provisions related to information are the session procedures (Article 2), the Board of Information (Article 6), and the Freedom of Information article (Article 7).

The session procedures provide for high levels of information. The delegates are elected well ahead of time, and pre-session meetings (already in place in the South-eastern California Conference) permit delegates to become informed. The elaborate procedures for agenda proposals are intended largely to improve the quality of information available about agenda items. The session booklet (which is *not* intended to be the only information available to the delegates) is a device to provide general information on agenda items and other session-related matters. It should be fairly short, cheaply printed, and widely available. The organizing and nominating committees would meet well ahead of the session to permit the nominating committee enough time to gain the information necessary for an informed choice. The nominating committee would be assisted by the availability of conference information, although the task force did not address the issue of improving information from outside the conference.

The principle undergirding the Board of Information is that those who make the news are not the best persons to report it. The powers and composition given the board give it appropriate freedom of action, while keeping it an organic part of the conference's work. The task force believed that this arrangement would allow the board to increase the flow of information while maintaining its credibility. The task force believes that increasing credible communication will increase the involvement of members in the conference and thereby strengthen their loyalty.

Article 7 is intended to raise confidence in the conference among both members and the public by demonstrating that the

conference has nothing to hide. It also permits the development of an information base on which accountability can rest.

## *Accountability*

---

Aside from the triennial sessions and the review and reporting requirements, the principal means of making elected and appointed people accountable to the members are freedom of information, the Board of Information, and the provision that local church delegates retain their delegate status between sessions.

The current practice of selecting a body of local church leaders to be session delegates and then discharging them after one day's work was considered wasteful. Conference operations should be continually responsive to these local church leaders. The authority of the delegates to remove elected or appointed officials at special or regular sessions and to act outside of constituency meetings on other matters helps to maintain accountability. The task force believes that increasing the responsibility of the delegates will improve the motivation and performance of delegates.

In one way conference personnel might seem to be less responsive under the constitution than in present practice. Conference departmental directors are now generally chosen by the session directly. Under the constitution, they would be nominated by the president and approved by the executive committee. The task force made this change because the departmental positions increasingly require specialized expertise and therefore are best filled by a non-elective method. The task force also believed that departmental directors should not have electoral standing independent of the three top elected conference officers. Finally, the task force wished to provide the president with an opportunity to compose his own "team" to manage conference activities.

At the same time, the task force did not want to require the session delegates to remove the president in order to obtain replacement of a departmental director, and it did want to make the departmental directors somewhat responsible and accountable to the members they ultimately serve. Therefore the constitution provides (Article 2) that appointed officials may be removed, although not replaced, by a special or regular session. (The resulting vacancy would be filled by the executive committee.) The constitution also aims to provide substantial job security for secretaries and other support personnel who are hired (rather than appointed or elected).

## *Balance*

---

In any organization where authority is not to be completely centralized and unlimited, some forms of balance (formal or informal) must exist. Yet these balances are often the hardest things to perceive, precisely because (as in the model constitution) they are so pervasive. As a fundamental principle, the task force tried to balance the need for administration to operate efficiently with the need to prevent authority from being abused.

A complete explication of the balances provided by the constitution would be excessively lengthy. A few examples, drawn from various portions of the document, should suggest the forms of balance that were thought desirable.

The constitution (Articles 4 and 5) grants the officers and a majority of the Executive Committee substantial authority. In practice, the executive committee and conference officers would probably accrue greater authority. However, their authority is balanced in various ways: the requirements for information; the various provisions for responsibility and accountability; the authority of the Adjudicatory Commission to interpret the constitution (Article 6); the Ministerial Commission's advisory author-

ity concerning the ministerial staff (Article 6); and the ability of special sessions to remove elective or appointive personnel (Article 2).

Because of concern that congregational ownership would lead to organizational splintering, the constitution proposes that the conference (not the conference association) retain ownership of local church real property. The substantial authority involved in this provision is balanced by the requirements that the conference must act "in harmony with the will of its constituent congregations" (Article 1), that the executive committee must consult with local congregations and companies about pastoral assignments (Article 5), and that local churches are directly involved in ratification of constitutional amendments (Article 8).

Although the constitution presumes that the local conference will retain a substantial degree of autonomy from higher levels of the church structure, the conference's financial policies are brought under division and General Conference guidelines (Article 4). The conference is explicitly said to be "an integral part of the world church" (Article 1).

Balances also exist between the officers and the executive committee. The officers have primary power over budgets, appointments, and other administrative areas (Article 4); but the executive committee, on which they sit, has power to remove them between sessions for "misconduct in office" (Article 5) and must approve their budgets and appointments (Articles 4 and 5).

The Adjudicatory Commission was based on the belief that a body separate from the

policy process was needed to handle some tasks. The commission's authority over constitutional interpretation, disfellowship, appointment of session personnel, and disputes about classification of documents (Articles 2 and 6) balances the power of many other bodies. At the same time, the Adjudicatory Commission is itself balanced by the power of the executive committee and the session (special or regular) to remove commission members (Articles 2 and 5); the executive's committee's control over funding of the commission; *ex officio* membership of the conference president (Article 6); and the requirements for openness applicable to all conference agencies (Article 7). The Board of Information similarly balances and is balanced by other groups.

Several general concerns should be considered in reading the constitution. The task force envisioned the conference as the most important organizational unit in North America and believed the number of conferences should be reduced. Consequently, conference administrations would have a larger field of operations and exercise much more "vertical" authority. As a result "horizontal" balances are more appropriate and necessary. Also, the constitution in some ways gives conference leaders more powers than they now have. It is interesting to note that secular governmental executives function well with many more balances and limits than the constitution proposes for conference leadership.

In writing the constitution, the task force did not intend to end discussion. Rather, it hopes that the constitution it proposes will inspire others to surpass its vision.