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On Church Structure

Don't Eliminate the Unions

by Earl W. Amundson

The Association of Adventist Forums (AAF) is to be commended for its contribution to the current discussion on structural change in the Adventist church. This writer welcomes organizational studies by other groups as well, e.g., the Pacific Union Conference, the North Pacific Union Conference, and the General Conference. I anticipate that a synthesis of these studies will reveal the truth about our church's administrative performance. The church needs to be known for its search for the truth about ourselves, instead of by our avoidance of it. When a people openly discuss ideas, commitments, concerns, and expectations, and searches together for mutually satisfying answers, we see a people who are active, vigorous, and energetic. This kind of activity is in itself a witness for others.

The church has struggled with its

organizational problems since apostolic times. While I Corinthians 12 declares the dependency of the parts upon each other and upon the head, Jesus Christ, for wholeness and health, too frequently the various members rush in all directions, duplicating functions, wasting resources, and ignoring the needs, skills, and resources of the entire body.

The sentiment of church membership in North America clearly calls for leadership to help laity reflect about the church itself. This call cannot be dismissed with a "let's close our debate and get on with the work" answer. Leaders and members alike should be agents of institutional change in order to more appropriately express our distinctive faith and doctrines. The church does not have a mission—but it must care for itself as well as for the world. In fact, it must care for itself in order that it may care for the world.

Max Weber wrote a description of the Prussian Army and the Roman Catholic Church that characterizes other church organizations. He described a mechanical, hierarchical, impersonal organization in

which every person had his niche. Innovation, initiation, and energy for responding to challenges moved primarily from the top, down through the echelons of workers, soldiers, and priests. People in the organizations he described seemed incapable of revolt, thwarted creativity, and felt the meaninglessness of their work or their position in the organization.¹ The various groups currently studying church structure are significant in that the church, facing multiple challenges internal and external, can do so only as it reforms its own understanding of organization and leadership. Transforming the present climate of the church will require knowledge, skill, and a great amount of energy.

The AAF Task Force on Church Structure proposes to eliminate union conferences and to replace them with a few regional offices “sensitive to the needs and interests of their respective regions,” and staffed by appointees of the elected officers of the North American Division. The Pacific Union Conference Special Commission on Church Structure also called for the dissolution of the unions, or at least the elimination of the departments (which function best at the local levels). Both groups appeal for a greater participation of lay members in the church structure and its decision-making processes, and for certain structural changes, in order to make church government truly representative.

Substituting “regional offices” for union conferences would essentially mean the merging of eight unions into five “regions” with appointees instead of elected personnel. Five large regions would be less “sensitive to the needs and interests of their respective regions” than the present unions are to their areas. The present union structure is acutely aware of the needs of the conferences and institutions. When a conference has financial problems, they turn to the union for help. In scores of ways, the union is there to coordinate and respond to needs on the local level. The union represents the General Conference in a

given geographic area and secures unity of action.

The suggestion to have the North American Division direct the local conferences is not new. That was essentially the type of organization that existed from 1863 to 1901—two recognized organizational levels—the local conference and the General Conference.² It was to this type of organization that Ellen White referred when she called for “a renovation, a reorganization.”³ The leading brethren, in close counsel with White, led out in developing a form of organization that would bind the local conferences together in union conferences,⁴ with the union president being a member of the General Conference Committee. Of this plan, White said, “I want to say that from the light given me by God, there should have been years ago organizations such as are now proposed.”⁵ The proposed Forum plan for the future actually was effective for “the fledgling church of a century ago,” but not satisfactory for a growing church that could best function under God with responsibility shared on a broader base. Decentralization was the theme of the 1901 General Conference Session.

While most of the departmental relationships of the church could function out of the North American Division office, the union can more effectively direct the publishing, educational, and religious liberty work than can the local conference. For instance, it is impractical for a local conference to operate its own Home, Health, Education Service, even for a large conference to, but a union can. Many conferences do nothing for their teachers by way of in-service programs, education councils, workshops, curriculum, and code development, etc. But a union can do all of this, and more. These functions would not be duplicated anywhere else, and the other departmental work being done on the division and local levels would eliminate duplication and save on costs.

The union conference is the “building block” of the General Conference—not the division. The division is the General Conference in a certain geographic area, and the union forms the connecting link between the General Conference and the local field. Eliminating unions would centralize authority in the General Conference more than under the present arrangement.

On that subject Ellen White made this interesting observation: “There is need of a most earnest, thorough work to be now carried forward in all our churches. We are now to understand whether all our printing plants and all our sanitariums are to be under the control of the General Conference. I answer, Nay. It has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences. The power vested in the conference is not to be centered in one man, or two men, or six men; there is to be a council of men over the separate division.”⁶

While decentralization provides a degree of local autonomy, a central thrust for the overall mission must be maintained. Without strong and autonomous local leadership no institution can properly function. But without strong central leadership no institution can be unified. The division of power is thus a problem every institution has to solve and involves two things: (1) the development of independent command at the lowest level possible, and (2) the development of an objective yardstick to measure performance in these local commands.⁷

Earl W. Amundson is currently president of the Atlantic Union Conference and a consulting editor for *Spectrum*.

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Church Should Support the Independent Press

by Bonnie Dwyer

Controversy surrounding the release of information to church members about Ellen White, Ron Graybill, and various officers involved with Davenport funds has drawn attention to the serious communication problems in the church. Thus the AAF task force model constitution with its section on freedom of information comes at an important time and provides a good basis for discussion of internal church communication.

In the United States, such a discussion must first acknowledge that we live in a society which holds freedom of speech sacred, and which by law seeks to encourage a marketplace of ideas. Expectations for free-flowing information in the church are established by these American traditions. Article 7 (Freedom of Information) holds as much importance for the task force constitution as the First Amendment does for the U.S. Constitution.

Whether or not any other structural changes proposed by the model constitution are made, Article 7 deserves to be included in every conference constitution. It makes three particularly important points: conferences shall recognize that information must be made available to church members, documents shall be available for public inspection, and all conference meetings (except executive sessions) shall be open to the public. This article would let sunshine into the denomination as never before, just as U.S. “sunshine” laws opened up government files to all citizens—not just to the press.

The proposals made by the task force for the establishment of a Board of Information