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*From the Editor*

# A Church Of, By And For the People

by Roy Branson

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In a few weeks Annual Council will be asked by a commission chaired by Francis D. Wernick, vice president of the General Conference, to recommend to the 1985 General Conference Session alterations in the way the church carries out its business. The reports of the commissions on church structure established by the Pacific and North Pacific Unions, various local conferences and the Association of Adventist Forums have already made a chorus of suggestions for improving the church (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 14, No. 4). What emerges at General Conference must be more than cosmetic, half-way measures. What is necessary is nothing less than completely reestablishing the basis for the authority of church leadership.

Adventists want to respect their elected leaders. But those officials themselves now wonder if they actually have the authority they supposed. General Conference leaders could not remove union conference officials involved with Davenport (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 13, No. 4). A local conference committee has authorized granting ministerial licenses to women, even when some General Conference officials objected (see pages 7 to 13).

Legitimation of authority differs according to which model of the church prevails. At least three have been important in

Adventism: the historical, the corporate, and the representative. Recently, denominational leadership has had difficulty continuing to claim authority on the basis of historical or corporate models. Careful analysis of the structure of the church reveals that denominational leaders can also no longer say that their authority is based on the church being representative. Now, the higher the officers the less representative their selection, and in a church that claims to be "truly representative," the less legitimate their authority.

## *Historical Model*

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The historical model places authority in the hands of those providing persuasive interpretations of the inspired writings on which the church was founded. In early Adventism, those with the most convincing interpretations of the Bible were often acknowledged as the leaders of the movement. Even Ellen White usually waited until James White and other students of Scripture came to a consensus before she publicly endorsed their views. After Ellen White's death, the president of the General Conference, A.G. Daniells, continued to buttress his positions by citing his personal

knowledge of Ellen White's thinking. To a significant degree, subsequent presidents based their authority on conforming to Ellen White's writings, housed within the Ellen G. White Estate at General Conference headquarters.

However, authority to interpret Scripture and the writings of Ellen White has spread beyond the top administrators of the denomination. Milestones include the publication of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* in the 1950s; it was clearly the work of Adventist scholars, not church executives. Not only the establishment of a seminary, but the requirement in the 1960s that every pastoral candidate in North America should be instructed by professors at the Seminary, acknowledged the central role of theologians in the church. A small, quiet committee on "defense literature" eventually became, in the 1970s, the Biblical Research Institute, staffed and headed by academics. The Glacier View Conference on Desmond Ford's theological views and theological Consultations I and II in the 1980s, relied on presentations by academics. Indeed, much of the subsequent controversy about those conferences revolved around just what the scholars attending them actually said and believed.

Over the last decade, interpretation of Ellen White's writings has extended beyond the personnel of the White Estate at General Conference headquarters to trained historians at Adventist colleges writing to the membership at large. However they may quarrel with a given professor, administrators have recognized that, increasingly, church members consider trained academics to have authority in interpreting inspired writings, authority distinct from that of church executives.

### *Corporate Model*

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**A**t the 1983 Annual Council, B.B. Beach, a former history professor, who now is the director of the General Conference depart-

ment of public affairs, warned that the Adventist church was more and more often being referred to as a corporation. The church, he said, must never forget that it is first and foremost a church, not a business. But Adventism, committed to spreading the gospel as widely and rapidly as possible, easily puts premiums on the corporate values of effectiveness and efficiency. Pastors and evangelists have long been evaluated in terms of numbers. The development during the 1970s and 1980s of Adventist Health Systems, U.S.—the seventh largest health system in America, after New York City's Municipal Health and Hospitals Corporation—provided the church with a concrete example of how the corporate model can foster growth. Aggressive conference administrators listened more attentively to Adventist business executives and began reading the literature of corporate America.

Within such a framework, the church, like the corporation, is understood as an organization that must achieve clearly defined—even quantifiable—goals. The church has a bottom line: baptisms, tithes and offerings, and returns on investments. Some conferences have adopted the nomenclature of the corporation and now call their secretary and treasurer "vice president for administration" and "vice president for financial affairs." The emphasis subtly underscores the hierarchical relation of all other officers to the president, rather than to the conference committee or constituency. Indeed, hierarchical relationships are not so much justified as they are assumed. If objectives are going to be achieved, decisions sometimes need to be made quickly by someone clearly in charge. If they prove to be right, an administrator is promoted to a higher position, with more people implementing his decisions. If the decisions are wrong, he is replaced.

Management-by-objective, taken from corporate America, was adopted by progressive church executives. Systems analysis has become popular. More symbolically, but

just as revealingly, local and union conference headquarters are built to the dimensions of corporate headquarters. The planned General Conference building is being placed in an industrial park setting, next to several headquarters of corporations. The General Conference building, after all, should be as impressive as any other multinational organization with total assets of over \$5 billion, larger than many Fortune 500 corporations. When church officials laud each other for their sacrifices on behalf of the church, they do not refer to the prominent non-Adventist pulpits or television ministries they could have held, but to the high-salaried, corporate jobs they could have filled.

However, for the foreseeable future, church members in North America will not be able to respect church officials for their management skills. For one thing, members have come to realize that in the area of publishing, hundreds of thousands of dollars are lost every year because of duplication in Adventist printing facilities in North America and unimaginative means of distribution. If denominational leaders were to persist in trying to rest their church authority on their managerial acumen, there is the Davenport case. Not only was so much money lost in certain parts of North America that salary increases of pastors and teachers have been imperiled, but some of the most prominent leaders of the denomination violated the minimum moral standards practiced in American corporations.

### *Representative Model*

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Recent developments make it difficult for church leaders to find legitimation within historical or corporate models, but the present church structure also prevents them from truly “representing the world field.” The *Church Manual* says that “a representa-

tive form of government is that which prevails in the Seventh-day Adventist church.” It is not surprising that the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were committed to a structure similar to that of the United States, a nation they thought God had guided in its adoption of republicanism and a constitution guaranteeing self-government to its citizens. When the church was much smaller, fewer layers of administration came between the members and the General Conference leadership. The will of members could be expressed more directly than it can be at present.

Now, if the church has a “representative form of government,” it is a form unknown to the democracies of Western Europe, North America, or Australasia. At least six levels separate members from the highest leaders of the church.\* Members do not choose delegates to local conference constituencies of the unions; the local conference committees make those selections. The delegates chosen by conference committees to union constituencies are predominately clergy (two-thirds to three-fourths are typical ratios). The union committees elected are even more heavily dominated by church employees, and in North America, it is these clerical union committees that select delegates to the General conference Session. In preparation for the last General Conference in 1980, it was necessary to urge committees selecting delegates to at least try to see that 10 percent of the delegates elected to the General Conference Session were laypeople. Finally, the General Conference Committee also selects delegates. As recently as the 1975 General Conference Session, just those delegates selected by the General Conference comprised 40 percent of those eligible to vote at the General Conference Session.

The structure of the church beyond the local conference could be described as a representative democracy only if one thought the United States could be called a representative democracy if the governors of the 50 states (elected by people the

governors had helped to get their jobs), together with their cabinets, designated their subordinates in the state governments as 60 percent of the delegates to a convention that elected the President of the United States. The remaining 40 percent of the delegates would have been selected by the incumbent president, his staff, and cabinet, or would be delegates because they occupied certain positions in the federal government. Finally, the convention delegates—all of whom belonged to one party—would vote on only one name.

The parallel to the way the top leadership of the church is elected today is not Western representative democracy. A closer comparison is the forms of government found in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the People's Republic of China. No doubt these governments achieve goals. But whatever else those regimes are, they are not representative democracies—neither is the present structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Right now, the members of the church have virtually nothing to say about selecting those who decide denomination-wide policies and the allocation of the largest percentage of their tithes and offerings.

## *The Future*

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**I**n the wake of the Davenport case, it may be tempting for church leaders to recommend to the General Conference Session that the central authority of the church should be strengthened; that, for example, the General Conference Committee should be able to convene a meeting of a union conference constituency, even if a recalcitrant union executive committee objects.

Certainly, duly-elected officials of the church must have the power to carry out their responsibilities. But the greater their

power, the more imperative it becomes that denominational officials be democratically elected. Greater concentration of power in fewer hands never prevents its abuse. Instead, those in power must be made accountable. The greater the ability of lay members to determine which of their

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employees will lead them, the more information members will have and the less likely the secret abuse of power will become.

Fortunately, a more representative church structure will not only reflect the will of its members; it will also allow leaders to be more effective. Denominational leaders will be able to convince better well-informed members to support major, long-overdue changes without threatening the unity of the church. Now, leaders sometimes hesitate to take the decisive actions any corporate executive would put into effect to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of his organization. (One example is the long postponed reorganization of Adventist publishing, including the role and function of colporteurs.) A more representative church will bring discussion into the open more quickly and force action earlier.

The leadership of this denomination should be influential. But that influence can no longer be based on definitive interpretations of Scripture or the writings of Ellen G. White. Nor, at least for a long time in North America, can leadership expect to be followed because it enjoys a reputation for sound, corporate management.

The fastest way for denominational leaders to regain the widespread respect and confidence of Adventist members is to go directly to the people. To accomplish this,

three basic changes need to be made in the present structure of the church.

- One step is to reduce the levels of administration between the members and the General Conference (for example, in North America, eliminating union conferences).
- Another badly needed change is to see that laypeople—those not employed by the denomination—comprise at least 50 percent of constituencies electing officers at each level of the church, including the General Conference Session.
- Third, and very importantly, delegates to the General Conference Session should be elected by local conference constituencies.

Adopting the three proposals made here would overnight make the highest levels of the church leadership accountable to the membership, instead of a narrow group of fellow employees. At the same time, General Conference leaders, since they would be elected as directly by the people as any other level of church administrators, would have greater assurance they do indeed speak for the church.

**I**mproving the structure of the church will not by itself bring a resurgence of the Adventist movement—any more than re-

important than institutional frameworks is the quality of life the family of faith embodies—its sacrificial service to others, powerful preaching, and moving theology. But even if reforming structure is insufficient, it is necessary. How we act as a group significantly defines our identity as Adventists. Our structure must reflect and express our faith. Members should have an equal opportunity to participate in selecting those who lead the church because our fundamental beliefs affirm the equality of members.

God the Creator gives all members a capacity to perceive truth, to know the good. Unfortunately, the freedom given by the Creator allows us to reject Him, and to dominate and manipulate others. All of us have the capacity for insights; yet none—even in the church—can be trusted with unchecked power. God the Savior offers grace to all, equally. All respond directly to the offer of salvation; none is closer to God than another because of his or her position in the church. God the Spirit came as tongues of fire to all the disciples, and the spirit now endows all believers with gifts, calling all to be part of the priesthood of believers. As our Protestant forebears insisted, members have the right to participate in interpreting God's will for the church; indeed, as much as anyone, they are the church.

We must renew the Protestant and Adventist vision of a truly representative church. We must be faithful to our heritage.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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\*First level: Local conference constituency (electing local conference officers and executive committee).

Second level: Local conference conference executive committee (selecting members of union conference constituency).

Third level: Union conference constituency (electing union conference officers and executive committee).

Fourth level: Union conference executive committee (selecting delegates to General Conference Session).

Fifth level: General Conference Session (electing General Conference officers and General Conference Committee).

Sixth level: General Conference officers and General Conference Committee