

Responses To AAF Report on Church Structure

A Conference President: No

To the Editors: When I was first invited to meet with the Task Force on Church Structure, I accepted because of my great interest in finding ways to expand lay involvement within the church. However, the task force concluded that lay participation could best be facilitated by modifying existing church structure. In fact, church structure is not the major factor influencing lay involvement in the church's mission.

A careful look at other churches organized along the lines of the model shows less, not more, lay involvement in the outreach of the church than is shown in the present Adventist Church. The model draws heavily on United Methodist, United Presbyterian, and Lutheran organizational concepts; yet these are churches in decline, accomplishing far less, in almost any category you wish to compare, than the Adventist Church does. You may have greater percentages of lay members involved in operating the church, but what is it all accomplishing in reaching people for God's kingdom?

I have great respect for the integrity, good intentions, and wisdom of the Task Force members and find myself in agreement on many of the ideas proposed in the model. But I am strongly convinced the proposed model constitution, as a whole, will destroy many of the present strengths of this church. I have time to mention just a few of the many examples that illustrate my concerns.

First, the hidden agenda, behind this proposed constitution is the assumption you cannot trust clergy or teachers to lead the church, even when they are devoted to it full time. I see reflected an accumulation of all the failings of leadership through the years wrapped up into one composite picture of a leader who is not responsible, fair, or trustworthy; who controls the press; oppresses ministers; and deceives the laity. I submit that the norms are nowhere near this composite model. Leaders do not need the heavy restraints and the divided powers proposed in order to successfully lead. As a pastor, I worked under five different presidents in three different conferences, none of whom reflected the composite

model characteristics. For this reason I believe the model represents organizational overkill that will be slow, cumbersome, and ineffective.

Second, the proposed constitution moves away from a world church to an autonomous conference unit claiming to be an integral part of the world church, yet deriving its power solely from the constituent churches which it recognizes as its highest authority. World policies of the church are optional and all church leaders above the conference level are non-voting guests. This is actually a congregational form of government with a conference flavor, very little different from what Southern Baptists have now in their convention structure. Both Old and New Testament church models support recognized authority beyond the local congregation.

Third, this structure destroys meaningful and effective leadership. Proposals brought to sessions must be presented with no indication of leadership thinking. Committees systematically exclude full-time church workers who are in the best position to be knowledgeable on the issues and know the background of qualified people. For instance, the nominating committee is composed of two-thirds laypeople, most of whom will have little or no information beyond their own perceptions, what they read in compiled material, and have gained from campaign speeches.

Four commissions or boards operating between sessions with self-contained power and authority are actually in charge of all conference operations and activities. The president is simply a figurehead coordinator surrounded by part-time lay members who control everything. Try as I might, I cannot imagine what criteria would be used to evaluate the president's job performance. He is simply an advisor to committees, and is not even included on the board of information. The fact remains that even in the governmental approach on which this model is based, in order to have a dynamic, moving organization, there must be strong leadership given sufficient authority to get the job done. Responsibility without authority is the ultimate frustration for leader and people.

In this model no one person is really in charge, setting direction. The potential is strong for competing chairpeople struggling for power and sending the conference in many directions at once.

Fourth, the Adjudicatory Commission is a contradiction to the whole concept of an "open church" where "each (member) will have a meaningful role in the decision-making process." Here are seven people serving six-year terms, making their own rules and regulations, determining their own jurisdiction (within the broad

framework of the constitution) with more power than the local churches who elected them. Seven people can veto the membership decision of a 5,000-member congregation. They have more power than the 16-member executive committee, more power than the constitution committee, more power than the board of information. They have access to *any* and *all* information they deem necessary, and hold the final determination as to what documents can be published. These seven people make decisions that are final and beyond appeal.

Fifth, I have saved my greatest concern over this model constitution until last—running several candidates against one another. Picture, if you can, the church running a political campaign. For two months, candidates for 46 positions will campaign. That means a minimum of 92 people, and as many as 100 or more, engaged in personal appearances at our churches, spending thousands of dollars on mailings, wooing members, (especially those with money and influence), courting pastors and church boards for access to pulpits and other meetings. Two months of debates, with focus on researched weaknesses of opponents, putting others down, criticism, division, choosing sides, and backroom deals.

"It's unavoidable," said John Sears, who was campaign manager in 1976 and 1980 for Ronald Reagan. "You can't have a race without attacking opponents, and to the degree that the attacks are sharp, people hurt each other."

Charisma will be more important than commitment and the controversial issues will be set aside. Large centers are bound to dominate the process, and minorities who are unknown and without money won't stand a chance. Imagine the atmosphere at the session: sessions will be known for their political infighting rather than for focusing on the spiritual objectives.

I find the whole picture out of harmony with heaven's principles of love, humility, and unselfishness. How could a dedicated leader committed to Romans 12:10, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves," possibly go around the conference bragging about himself and criticizing his opponents? Will a hundred people involved in this process end up with the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17? Will leaders critical of one another be able to work together later? Or will we end up with warring camps, as have other churches that use this process? Others survive because they are basically congregational and need not work together in between elections. That is not God's plan for this church. What little you gain in openness you more than lose in divisiveness!

It has been suggested one way to avoid the campaign aspect of the electoral process is to not announce the names until the session. Such a solution is both impossible and in conflict with the openness so important to church life.

Although I commend the Task Force for their many hours of research, discussion, thought, and improvements of the document as it developed, the government-based model is more subject to manipulation and control by a few than what we have now. It will cause an administrative nightmare less effective in accomplishing our mission than what we have now. Adversary relationships will abound. Unity will be impossible. Career church workers will be forced to the side and will have little or no

influence on the very church to which they have devoted their lives. Instead of increasing lay involvement, few church members will be interested in serving under these conditions. Why trade our present success for a formula that is bound to prove *less* successful?

Thomas J. Mostert
President of the
Southeastern California Conference.

The AAF Task Force Replies

To the Editors: Pastor Mostert makes a general criticism of the Task Force: its work, he says, was motivated by distrust of church leadership. The Task Force did not distrust individual clergy. Rather, it recognized that when humans (even clergy) occupy positions of authority they may well, unless checks are placed upon their power, misuse their authority. Mostert is 100 percent correct in asserting that "leaders do not need the heavy restraint and divided powers of a constitution in order to successfully lead"—unless, of course, they lead organizations that purport to be representative. Pastor Mostert is right in the short run; centralization of power may well make the church more efficient and effective. But in the long run, if representative structures are to be maintained, meaningful checks and balances are absolutely necessary. Without them there is a great danger that office holders in the organization will arrogate to themselves as much power as possible, all in the name of furthering the mission of the church.

In its infancy, the church's mission evolved from lively exchanges between individuals spiritually bound together by the expectations of 1844 and the experiences that immediately followed. Different and incompatible missions often grew side by side. As the movement became more institutionalized, it appears that strong leaders either assumed offices within the organization or were driven out. The high credibility of Ellen White was used by denominational leaders to strengthen their own positions.

Pastor Mostert seems to assume that the church now has a mission which exists independent of the laity, that the mission of the church is actually dependent upon the ability of its leaders to wield political power. From this perspective, it is easy to understand his fear that decentralization of power will destroy effective leadership and thereby weaken our mission. Pastor Mostert ignores the fact that God's church has never been solely dependent upon organizational office holders for leadership. The checks and balances in church structure the Task Force proposed will ideally facilitate the emergence of more of the prophetic, non-institutional leadership the church desperately needs.

When Mostert makes more specific criticisms he sets up straw men, substituting for analysis, depiction of

hypothetical disasters resulting from implementation of the task force proposals. For example, Pastor Mostert paints a horrifying picture of political campaigning, with dozens of candidates running about, tearing each other down in a divisive process terribly destructive to the church. Perhaps if Mostert examined the existing political processes in other churches he would be assured that his fears are groundless. Besides, does he seriously contend that backstabbing, divisiveness, and backroom deals are not now a part of present Seventh-day Adventist church politics? In other churches, opening the political process has reduced rather than increased destructive politicking.

Mostert makes another specific charge. Unfortunately, his statement that the seven-member Adjudicatory Commission has too much power because it can veto the decision of a 5,000-member congregation is simply inaccurate. The commission can review only the decision of a local congregation to disfellowship. If the commission disagrees with the congregation, the congregation is not forced to retain the person as a member in the local church. Rather, a member can be given membership in the conference church. Administrative reactions to the evangelical movement in the Seventh-day Adventist Church have amply demonstrated the need for such a safeguard.

The modest structural changes proposed in the model constitution come with no guarantees, but they are predicated on the belief that legitimate authority in the church rises from the most basic unit—the member. The task force insists that changes are needed if church administrators at all levels are going to truly represent the membership. Pastor Mostert has hurled the loaded term “congregational” at the proposals of the Task Force. While the model constitution is less hierarchical than the present structure, it is far from being congregational. The proposed constitution actually makes proposals that emphasize the power of the local conference constituency, not the individual congregation.

As Pastor Mostert must well know, the Task Force has not proposed congregationalism. Actually, what he objects to is the Task Force taking representative government too seriously. The Task Force has suggested concrete ways Adventism can achieve what the *Church Manual* says the denomination has already committed itself to: “a representative form of church government.” It is the hope of the task force that the church will truly become what it claims to be.

E. Nathan Schilt
Member of AAF
Task Force on Church Structure

Hospital Administrator: No

To the Editors: This is not to discourage the desire of the Task Force to improve the discharge of God’s affairs on earth, but the call to “open” the church raises some apprehension. I fear any changes that would tend to make the clergy more subject to popular opinion and current whim than they already are.

As important as the independence before God of the membership, is the equal need for an independent clergy. The ideal church government is that which the Holy Spirit can most easily control. Those aspects of our present form of church government which may make it too responsive to a church leader’s manipulation, also can make it more responsive to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Those procedures which presently make the church structure seem unresponsive to the membership may also help protect us from a politicised and fawning clergy.

A clergy who as individuals have felt God’s call to His service, validated by the membership who also see evidence of that call, must be allowed a lot more freedom to direct and lead the church than we would allow, say, the officers in charge of a consumer’s co-op.

The ache for a purified and God-directed church must not tempt us to solve an apparent lack of the Holy Spirit by substitution of democratic procedures and expanded lay participation, as “the next best thing.” Let us leave him a system that he could relatively easily control, and concentrate on removing the abusers or abuses of that system.

John B. Hoehn, M.D.
Mwami Adventist Hospital
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A North Pacific Layperson: Yes

To the Editors: Hats off to the AAF Task Force for its masterful work in developing a model constitution. It speaks to the heart of basic issues and is to be seriously considered at this time when the church is searching for ways to increase participation and accountability at all levels of denominational organization. Forms of structure can be argued successfully from many angles. However, participation and accountability, the lifeblood of every excellent organization, are not optional.

The relationship that most often exists between church administrators and laypeople is suggested by the old rhyme:

“Mother may I go to swim?”
“Oh yes, my darling daughter.
Hang your clothes on yonder limb,
But don’t go near the water.”

Plenty of support is voiced for the idea that laypeople are an asset to the church—and indeed they are. The church’s papers speak warmly of “dedicated laymen.” Just give them a financial, baptismal, or subscription goal to reach, laypeople will make their pastors look good almost every time. More often than not they do it willingly and unquestioningly. In these situations, no one ever suggests the need for a constitution, representation, or for adjudication.

However, along comes a Merikay who asks for more than words of support, who asks only that she be given what the policy already states is hers, and the church administrators cry “foul!” Making good those promises of support is where the current administration falters, not on making the promises themselves. The Task Force Report provides another look at what those promises are or

should be; the primary weakness of the church today is the lack of understanding and trust between administration and laypeople.

Our church administrators—even on a world scale—were far too often the same age, were reared in the same communities, have spouses who were college roommates, and children who are married to their colleagues' children. They don't have to listen to each other in committee because they have been sitting together in a variety of committees for so long that they know each other's thoughts. The local congregation, on the other hand, is a far more heterogeneous group. They are bankers, farmers, market analysts, advertising executives, engineers, teachers, researchers, economists, carpenters, insurance salesmen, and secretaries. They were born in different places, educated in different schools, have spouses who have yet another whole set of different backgrounds. Some are fourth- and fifth-generation Adventists, but some have just been baptized.

While the members of the local congregation share an intense love of the church with their administrative brethren, their participation and expertise are not sought by those same brethren, and if given are not appreciated, let alone used by the brethren. A typical committee has administrators who have known each other for years but who don't know the laypeople sitting on the committee. On the other hand, the laypeople sitting on a committee are frequently younger than the administrative brethren, their spouses are completely unknown to anyone the administrators or their spouses know; perhaps the laypeople have been Adventists for only 10 years. Maybe they weren't educated in Adventist schools and they now work for companies none of the administrators have ever even heard of. A typical layperson might be awed by the committee itself and not know how to speak in Adventist cliché. Of course the administrative brethren reason that since laypeople work in "outside firms," they will not understand the workings of the church; consequently, they cannot be taken seriously around a boardroom table. A very simple example of Adventist administrative thinking is that the reason given why the General Conference does not turn over its books for an audit by an independent Certified Public Accountant firm is that "outside firms" don't understand our financial structure.

Constitutions have mandated "lay representation" at all levels of church structure for many years. But, Donald J. Davenport did not become a household word for lack of lay representation on various boards and committees. He became a household word because representation does not mean the same as participation. Too often those who were chosen as representatives came after the fact. The money was already sent—all that was needed was a vote in favor recorded in committee minutes. Which all brings me to the point. Good policies exist. Good constitutions exist. The words that are written and spoken are just fine. But attitudes and entrenched traditions cannot be changed by the tpe strokes on paper. Neither can accountability be legislated. Accountability is comparable to keeping the law—supreme love of God makes the law no burden. Trusting church administration makes accountability a by-product, not an issue.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, accountability is a two-way street. If we execute our responsibilities prop-

erly, accountability is academic and hiding behind political skirts is unnecessary. Trust should be mutual in order to build accountability. Developing this trust requires increased lay participation at all levels of the organization, particularly the union and division levels, by tapping the resources that are vital for an organization whose mission it is to tell the Good News and to nurture those doing the telling.

The time is ripe to revise the system. Perhaps the best "model constitution" of all can be found in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul's homely illustration of the human body is obvious and yet profound. The head cannot go anywhere without the feet, and if the feet hurt, the head certainly knows it. Paul reminds us that the nose is of no more value than the hands and "if the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing?"

How long will those in the pew continue to distrust church administrators? How long will church administrators continue to call them "just laymen?"

Len Harms
Vice chairman, North Pacific Union
Commission on Church Structure

Chastizing A Beloved Son: Oliveira on Weiss

To the Editors: After a stormy night, some people enjoy the beauty of a sunny morning, while others complain about the mud left behind by the storm. When Dr. Weiss visited his home country after an absence of 30 years, he failed to see the bright aspects of a church motivated by a strong sense of direction and purpose.

He failed to see the beauty of a church on fire with a contagious sense of mission, in which the family is still a monolithic unit (the divorce rate is almost zero), homosexuality is almost unknown, and our historical theological views remain unchallenged.

He failed to appreciate the wonderful work performed by dozens of dedicated physicians, among them his own brother, who serve the Lord with intense dedication for the same salary as a regular worker. It would be a source of inspiration for him to see them working tirelessly in our institutions without being affected by the materialistic philosophy of monetary reward.

It appears that he also failed to grasp the widespread influence of the Granix Food Factory and its vegetarian restaurants which comprise one of the most successful financial operations of its kind in our denomination. Is it possible that a man like Dr. Weiss, with his bright perceptions, is more concerned with mud than with the sunshine?

While it is true that our lay members in Argentina have little participation in the decision-making process of the church, Dr. Weiss overlooks the important fact that they are so involved in the church's mission that they have no desire to spend time on administrative problems.

Evidently Dr. Weiss wants to see more hands on the helm of the church, thus reducing the number of hands on

the oars. Is he implying that there is need to reduce the speed at which the ship of Zion is moving forward in his country? If so, he will find that the members will not agree. They are more concerned with the dynamics of the church than with its mechanics.

In his article, the author mentioned the name of Elder John Livingstone, who was his Bible teacher at River Plate College more than 30 years ago. While it is true that his knowledge on righteousness by faith was inaccurate, we owe him a tribute of respect and affection because he was able to mold and inspire a generation of preachers who are still proclaiming the gospel with power and contagious conviction.

We do not deny that in Argentina some faithful church members, because of their high regard for God's law, feel uncomfortable with the idea that we are saved by the doing and dying of Christ alone. But is the church in Argentina unique on this important point? How many church members in North America or other places have a real understanding of the meaning of Christ's completed atonement on Calvary? If Dr. Weiss believes that the majority of lay members in the North American Division are free from legalistic influences, we must conclude that he is living confined in his theological ivory tower, completely isolated from grass roots realities.

I am positive that Dr. Weiss is capable of describing in a more fair and accurate way the accomplishments of our church in his home country, Argentina, the cradle of our message in South America. In writing this response to his article I have no intention of being defensive or apologetic. I am not from Argentina. My only purpose is to correct as much as possible the distorted image of the church in Argentina as presented by one of its beloved sons.

Enoch Oliveira

Vice-president of the General Conference and
former President of the South American Division

Outrage At Graybill's Departure

To the Editors: In an ancient barbaric age, the messenger who brought bad tidings about the tide of the battle to the king was promptly killed. Ronald Graybill, has been a respected member of the General Conference-affiliated, Ellen G. White Estate. Over many years, he has had daily access to the archives of White memorabilia. Drawing on a wealth of research material, he has recently written a biography of Ellen White, as part of a doctoral dissertation for Johns Hopkins University.

At last, we have an authentic, well-documented biography that reveals a flesh and blood woman, with all her foibles and human frailties. The General Conference, like the ancient kings, has not looked kindly on the adverse information contained in the biography. They have fired Graybill. What next? Will the General Conference mandate a new version of the Scriptures, with the frailties of the prophets carefully expunged? Shall we censor the story of David and Bathsheba?

The church has, unfortunately, consciously fostered and promulgated, over all these decades, a totally false, "Virgin Mary" infallibility for Mrs. White. The firing of an honest biographer, in an inept attempt to throw doubt on his research, will surely compound the problems already resulting from the previous course of action. Graybill is to be commended, instead of censured, for an honestly researched and scholarly study of a church prophet.

As the spate of adverse evidence against E.G. White escalates to a cumulative flood, the dissident members among us find ready ammunition for their assertions that they have been fraudulently used. Those of us who are loyal, mainstream Adventists cannot refute their allegations.

Most Adventist laypeople are mature enough to accept the fact that the church's prophet had feet of clay. What we cannot stomach is the dismaying discernment that the official church body is engaged in a massive cover-up and whitewash of the now well-documented evidence. Just as loyal Republicans deplored Nixon's devious dealings during Watergate, so loyal Adventist laypeople repudiate the lack of candor on these matters by the church body. Watergate was disastrous for Nixon. We fear that a less than open and candid approach by the brethren, will be equally disastrous for the church we love.

If, as it now appears, we have labored for many decades under misconceptions about Ellen G. White, it is certainly high time that the authentic, true facts emerge.

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