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# Laity Transform North Pacific Constitution

by Terrie Dopp Aamodt

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On Sunday, Sept. 16, 1984, delegates to a special constituency meeting of the North Pacific Union Conference voted sweeping changes in the union's organizational structure and form of governance. The changes were recommended by the 15-member Commission on Governance and Management Structure, which had been set up in the wake of the Davenport discipline proceedings and had worked for a year to develop a new union constitution and make related recommendations. Commission chairperson Morris Brusett, director of administration for the state of Montana, called the changes "a major step in bringing representative government to the union level."

During the summer of 1984, as the commission finished its report to the special constituency session, the implications sent ripples of concern through the union office all the way to the General Conference. Although the commission chose to retain the union and work within its structure, the changes outlined in its report were comprehensive: they affected almost every phase of the union conference organization. The report called for streamlining the union,

retaining only those functions that were best performed on a regional basis, and recommended the reassignment of the responsibilities of many of the union departments to the local conference level. Items in the commission's report that received the most attention from the delegates to the special constituency session, however, were constitutional issues dealing with the way the union was to be governed. When the session was over, a number of significant modifications had been put in place:

- Lay representation to union constituency meetings and on the union executive committee was significantly increased;
- The origin of the selection process for union executive committee members was moved from the union constituency session to the local conference level;
- The nominating committee for choosing union officers at union constituency meetings was eliminated, and the union executive committee became the nominating committee; the executive committee was also empowered to regularly evaluate union officers and to discipline or terminate them when it deems necessary;
- Of the union staff, only the union officers (president, secretary, and treasurer) were retained as voting members of the union executive committee (eight seats previously filled by union departmental directors were redistributed);
- Broader, more accessible provisions

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were made for calling special sessions of the union constituency.

In general, the changes recommended by the commission were designed to operate the union as a crisp administrative unit and to create an independent, disinterested union executive committee free from conflicts of interest.

### First Major Change Since 1901

These changes were particularly significant because they marked the first substantial modification of the union conference structure since it was established at the General Conference Session of 1901, a structure that Ellen White declared to be "God's arrangement" (*Testimonies*, Vol. 8, p. 232). The delegates to the constituency session were reminded of this fact by keynote devotional speaker William Bothe, secretary of the North American Division and one of the three representatives from the General Conference at the session: "I say this morning how thankful we ought to be for the principles of organization given to this church by God. These principles are scripturally sound and, I believe, will endure to the very close of the church's work here upon this earth . . . From the earliest history of our church, the counsels of the Spirit of Prophecy have guided and directed in the development and in the application of these principles. Consequently, we can say with the utmost conviction that the basic principles of church organization followed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church are as truly inspired as are the basic beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that we hold so dearly." Also, according to Bothe, any proposal that counters the General Conference working policy is counter to the desires of the church as a whole, since working policy is developed by representatives from the entire world church: "the working policy becomes the voice of the entire church."

The commission had anticipated and addressed this issue in its final report: "One

of the lessons of sacred history is that the structures God uses in dealing with mankind have not remained static . . . Ellen G. White led in the organization of the church in the 1860s, but in 1901 she urged reorganization because of changing times and conditions. Thus a particular form of organization is not to be insulated from the need for future modification or refinement."<sup>1</sup>

### Union Streamlining Already Underway

The commission was not the first body to suggest streamlining union structure. That movement began in the North Pacific Union at the regular 1981 constituency meeting, when delegates voted to establish the North Pacific Union Conference Department Restructure Study Subcommittee. That subcommittee issued its recommendations in 1982, and as a result the union began a program that was to pare departmental staff by nearly a third over three years.

The movement to restructure the union further, however, gained momentum in the wake of the Davenport discipline proceedings.<sup>2</sup> The Davenport affair helped focus the attention of many North Pacific Union church members on a range of issues broader than mere economic efficiency, including holding union officers more accountable, a workable mechanism for administering discipline, periodic review of administrative performance, increased lay involvement in union governance, besides a more closely monitored system of financial management. These concerns became so strong in the spring of 1983 that the Davenport discipline committee, consisting of the union executive committee plus 18 additional lay members and four retired ministers, called a special meeting to address them. At the recommendation of this expanded committee, the Union Executive Committee voted to form a Commission on Governance and Management Structure and

voted to call a special constituency meeting for Sept. 16, 1984, to act on the commission's recommendations.

The commission, established primarily by local conference executive committees, was made up of 15 members, eight of them church employees. When the group met for the first time in September 1983, it recognized the need to address and resolve "the widening credibility gap and the need for healing" that existed in the North Pacific Union at that time. Probably neither the commission members nor the union conference officers realized at the outset how far that task would take them.

The commission created four subcommittees: structure, management, constitution, and theological considerations, which spent six months developing their proposals. The union officers cooperated with the commission by hiring its vice chairperson, Connie Lysinger, a management consultant from Portland, Ore., while the report was being prepared in order to coordinate the information generated by the commission and its subcommittees.

### *The Proposals and the Response*

As the commission completed its preliminary work in the spring of 1984 and reported to the union executive committee and to officers of the General Conference, it became immediately apparent that the solutions it proposed consisted of much more than adjustments here and there. General Conference officers noted that the changes had implications for the entire world field, and tried to persuade the commission (and the union officers) to postpone the union special constituency meeting until after Autumn Council 1984. This would have enabled the General Conference at Autumn Council to adopt the report from its own study commission, the Commission on the Role and Function of Denominational Organizations, and to coordinate

reorganization throughout the world field. Many members of the North Pacific Union Commission feared that the General Conference commission would not go as far as was necessary to change the decision-making process, or that a non-substantive General Conference report would be used to discourage changes. The postponement of the special constituency meeting was vigorously debated in a union executive committee meeting in the spring of 1984, but eventually the original timetable was retained.

During the summer, commission members consulted with the GC Role and Function Commission and modified their preliminary report. Charles Bradford and Neal Wilson also responded to the June report in a telex to Morris Brusett dated Aug. 17. After commending the devotion and commitment of the commission members to their task and to their church, the writers continued: "In several areas we see dangerous departures from the accepted recommendations of the General Conference *Working Policy* . . . While some minor variations may be acceptable, we resist anything which would tend to create disharmony in our world organization now or in the future."

The memo went on to clarify the position of the General Conference on church organization:

The authority of the General Conference is to be the authority of the entire church. . . . The union represents a united body of conferences within a larger territory. (While the General Conference and its divisions embrace all unions and churches in all parts of the world and join together the whole worldwide fellowship into a united body.) A union speaks on behalf of the General Conference or its division and must reflect the actions and recommendations of the General Conference, thus uniting all local organizations.

The unions do not create themselves. They are created in counsel with the General Conference and are ultimately accepted by actions of the General Conference in session and can be decertified

as a member of the world sisterhood of unions by action of the General Conference in session.

Among several parts of the proposed constitution that concerned General Conference officers was one crucial item: the way the union executive committee was selected. With the local conferences selecting committee members, instead of their being selected at union constituency sessions, the flow of authority between the local conference and the union conference was altered. Bradford and Wilson stated that the proposed method bypassed the constituency system of government.

### *The Final Report*

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The North Pacific Union commission held its final meeting after the release of the GC Role and Function Commission report. It used this report and the suggestions from the Bradford/Wilson memo to modify its first draft in an attempt to cooperate as fully as possible with the General Conference. The method of selecting the members of the union executive committee, however, remained the same. The commissioners felt that this measure was essential to ensure the existence of an executive committee that would be responsive to the local conferences funding them.

In addition, the commission retained its recommendation that the newly constituted executive committee serve as the nominating committee at union constituency sessions. The commission saw the existing nominating committee method as basically unworkable at the union level; the territory was too large for a reasonable proportion of the nominating committee to vote knowledgeably. The constitutional changes were finished on Aug. 24 and the report was mailed to the delegates. The stage was set for the Sept. 16 meeting.

The delegates had done their homework. Many had attended regional briefing sessions held by commission members and union officers during the summer. It was

important that the delegates had time to study and digest the proposals, which filled over 100 pages of the final report. In addition to the streamlining procedures already mentioned, the report also recommended merging the union conference and that part of the union association that managed church-owned assets, and it provided for the possibility of combining the offices of union secretary and treasurer in the future.

The commission recommended that four departments be retained at the union level: public relations, human relations (ethnic affairs), religious liberty, and education, with the provision that precise staffing levels be determined after further study. It advised that various support departments be retained, at least for the time being. Finally, it recommended that the functions of several departments be shifted entirely to the local level: loss control, ministerial, physician and dentist recruitment, stewardship, health and temperance, personal ministries, Sabbath school, and youth. The commission adopted the suggestion of the GC Role and Function Commission that any union-level functions of the outreach departments should be supervised by one individual, the director of church ministries. The publishing department was left untouched for the time being, since other studies of the Home Health Education Service are currently being conducted.

In both the union constituency delegations and the union executive committee, not less than 50 percent of the membership would consist of those who were not church administrators, departmental secretaries, or pastors. This "lay" category was defined to include denominational teachers and hospital employees, who had not been provided for in existing representation schemes.

### *The Constituency Session*

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Richard Fearing, North Pacific Union Conference president, introduced the chairperson for the day: Dr. Jack Bergman, academic dean

of Western Oregon State College and member of the Oregon Conference committee and Walla Walla College board of trustees.

The first substantive discussion occurred when the delegates began considering Article VII, Section 2b, which states that the General Conference would be limited to no more than 10 percent of the total delegates at a union constituency session (the proportion recommended by the model constitution in the General Conference *Working Policy*). Several delegates questioned the change in the language (from five percent to 10 percent) between the preliminary report and the revised report, and an amendment was made to the original motion, restoring the five percent amount. Elder Bothe protested that this change would be "contrary to the spirit and the basic organization philosophy when it comes to the relationship between the General Conference and the unions." When the vote was taken, however, the amendment passed, restoring the five percent figure.

### *The Sticking Point*

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**D**uring the early afternoon, the main issue of the day came up for consideration. Article IX, Section 1e, spelled out how executive committee members were to be chosen. The constitution defined three groups of committee members: the ex-officio members (union officers, the Walla Walla College president, and local conference presidents); representatives of institutions; and the local conference representatives, determined by a formula based on conference membership and including a substantial number of lay members. The new constitution stipulated that these local representatives be selected by the local conferences. This marked a major change from the model constitution, which has been closely followed in the past by the union conferences. The commission pointed out that under the previous system, the

choice actually lay in the hands of as few as two nominating committee members from a given conference at a union constituency meeting. Furthermore, the nominating committee existed for only a few hours—there was no permanent body to be held account-

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able for less than ideal choices. The local conferences know their own people better and are better equipped to evaluate their qualifications, the commission maintained.

At this point, F.W. Wernick, vice-president of the General Conference and chairperson of the Role and Function Commission, took the floor to warn delegates against adopting a measure different from the rest of the church. In a speech of about 15 minutes, Wernick outlined the General Conference view of how authority operates in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

"The body that elects is of greater authority than those who are elected by it," he said. Thus, using the local conference to select the union executive committee diminishes the authority of the union committee.

"The union executive committee should have more authority than the officers," he added. But when the president is chosen by the union constituency and the committee by the local conferences, his superior, the committee, is selected by an inferior body.

Then a dialogue occurred between Wernick and Oregon delegate Dr. Gordon Miller. The exchange illustrated the frustrations of some of the North Pacific Union constituents on the one hand and the General Conference's concerns for unity on the other.

Miller first asked if the union had authority over the conference.

Wernick said yes: "This delegation here has been appointed by your conference com-

mittee to act as a body. When it created it, it gave it authority to act on behalf of all the conferences. When this body creates an executive committee to act on its behalf, then the local committees are responsible to it. If that weren't true, you wouldn't really have a union."

Miller's second question was whether the General Conference had the same authority over the unions.

Again, Wernick said yes.

Miller then asked a third question. "Why is it, then, that after the General Conference stated it would put out disciplinary measures in a previous problem, that when it came down to the final act that they found out that they did not have the authority to discipline the people in the union?"

"That's a very good question," Wernick replied, "and that's a very interesting part of our structure." Then he explained that although there is a direct line of authority flowing from the local church to the General Conference, the only authority the General Conference has is to guide the world field. He said the GC's authority "is the acknowledgement on the part of all the unions that the General Conference represents and is the sum of all the churches, and we voluntarily give that authority our allegiance. It's not a line authority. The line authority between a union and a local conference is a dotted line; it's not a line authority. But we would hope that if we're going to have unity in the world field that we would be willing to work together with those bodies that have been created to give us guidance and counsel. That's what I mean by authority—not the usual authority as you think of it in a corporate body."

### *The Last Word*

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After more than an hour of discussion, a delegate moved to end discussion and conduct a vote. The chair, since he had already acknowledged him, gave Fearing the floor before accepting the motion. Fearing said

that he would make a few comments, and then the delegates would have to vote as their convictions led. While acknowledging weakness in the present system, he said, "I am not in harmony with the philosophy behind the commission report [on this point]. . . . A committee selected this way would really not be independent from the local field and able to give that responsibility. . . . If you decide that you want to vote this today, you know that it is out of harmony with working policy of the General Conference. . . . We don't want to be out of step with the world body of our churches."

When the issue came to a vote, it needed 143 votes for the necessary two thirds majority. The measure received only 124 votes.

### *Another Try*

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After some discussion and failed motions, a motion was presented by Gerald Winslow, professor of theology at Walla Walla College, and Henry Lamberton, also from the Walla Walla College theology department and a commission member as well: the local conferences would "nominate" (rather than "select") potential union executive committee members; each conference delegation at the union constituency meeting would vote on these names in caucus; the names would then be taken to the floor for confirmation; and vacancies occurring in mid-session would be filled by the local conferences, in order to avoid the conflict of interest that would occur if the union committee filled its own vacancies.

Richard Fearing announced his "complete harmony" with this amendment because it preserved "the constituency principle while still greatly enhancing the information and recommendatory process." Richard Hammill, retired GC vice president, praised the amendment as "a good compromise . . . one that will keep us more in harmony with denominational policy as a whole and yet

give plenty of opportunity for the input by the local conferences.'"

## *Finishing the Work*

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The amendment passed easily. During the next hour several more sections of the constitution were passed; another long discussion occurred over the issue of having the executive committee serve in place of the eliminated nominating committee at the union constituency meetings. Again the question of violating General Conference policy was raised. Commission member Alvin Kwiram, chairman of the chemistry department at the University of Washington, responded: "It's not clear to me that it is [major]. We're talking here about procedural things. The basic elements of all those aspects of the organization have been preserved. We were very sensitive to that. We think this is a modest change, and all of the changes that have been recommended here are extraordinarily modest. They have been designed to make the system work more effectively, to involve more of the membership of the church, in order to accomplish the task that we're all about."

This amendment passed, and soon afterward the delegates passed the rest of the constitution and the remainder of the recommendations as a whole. A transition

document drawn up by Jim Balkins, an attorney on the commission, and Dave Dunca, legal counsel for the North Pacific Union, spelled out the details of how the governance of the union would be conducted during the changeover from the old constitution to the new one.

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The transit document stated that the new constitution would take effect immediately, and that most of the changes will be in place by the next regular union constituency meeting, scheduled for 1986. Because of the revision of the process for nominating and ratifying members for the union executive committee, the committee will be chosen at the 1986 constituency session. That fact will make it necessary for the outgoing executive committee to serve as the nominating committee for that session. During the 1986 session, all union employees on the outgoing executive committee will be replaced by nominees from the local conferences to avoid the potential conflict of interest involved. The new executive committee will be put in place during the session and will then function under the new constitution.