
Right Turn On The Road To General Conference

by Bonnie Dwyer

The General Conference solidified its authority during the 1984 Annual Council in what some observers called one of the most significant Annual Councils in the history of the church. Two General Conference officers independently praised the Annual Council for bringing the church back to "basics." A North American conference president said this Annual Council had, by tightening policies, re-established church authority.

"Brakes were applied to liberal tendencies," said Robert W. Olson, secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate. "There was retrenchment theologically, financially, and organizationally. And I would estimate that 95 percent of the attendees were happy with this trend toward conservatism." In an action unusual for a General Conference president, Neal Wilson underscored this trend in two documents he wrote and presented at Annual Council. The paper concerning North America was officially incorporated into the Annual Council document on church structure, and the other paper, which concerned the Association of Adventist Forums and *Spectrum*, was included in the minutes of the council (see appendices A and B).

Three hundred pages of material accom-

panied a full agenda. Judging by the amount of discussion they aroused, the two topics of greatest interest were the role and function of denominational organizations and the role of women in the church.

Role and Function of Church Organizations

The importance of unity in the church was emphasized early. The core of the first document discussed at Annual Council—the report of the commission on the role and function of denominational organizations—was unity, which, according to the commission "is basic to the nature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church." The report was adopted by the Annual Council. The 1985 General Conference Session will be asked to adopt an enabling action, which will enact the recommendations, starting with the 1985 General Conference Session.

The document explains that divisions are not to consider themselves independent entities: "As its name 'division' implies, it is a section of the General Conference, not an 'association' or 'joining' of church organizations, as is the case for unions or conferences."

Although North America will be able, like other divisions, to refer to a president, officers, and committee of the North American Division, "it is unwise to plan for North

Bonnie Dwyer holds a masters degree in journalism from California State University, Fullerton, and is the news editor of *Spectrum*. This report was written with the assistance of other *Spectrum* writers and editors.

America's becoming a division 'like all other divisions.' North America, in the Seventh-day Adventist setting, is unique." The 12-page document on a "Special Relationship" between North America and the General Conference, written by Neal Wilson, stresses that "we should not regularize" the North American Division, because, among other reasons, "people expect the General Conference to have the last word and to speak for the church with ultimate authority." (see Appendix A, pages 22 to 24).

The need to strengthen the authority of church leadership was reflected in the remarks of others on the floor of Annual Council. Walter D. Blehm, president of the Pacific Union, said that the church faces the real challenge of congregationalism. He pointed out that referring to "model constitutions" for unions and conferences implied that they were optional: "We have to have constitutions we can't play with." He reminded the delegates that the Pacific Union was going to have a constituency meeting in 1985, and in 1986, five conferences in his union would also be having constituency meetings.

However, Blehm did not at this point, nor did anyone else at any other moment during the plenary sessions, refer to either the report of the Pacific Union Commission on Church Structure or the recent actions of the North Pacific Union Constituency in adopting a new union conference constitution. In fact, the issue of representation was not explored to any extent.

The primary change in structure approved by the Annual Council was the merging of four existing departments—personal ministries, stewardship, youth, and Sabbath school—into one new department called "Church Ministries." According to Les H. Pitton, associate director of the General Conference youth department, the North American Division Committee has considered recommending that the department of church ministries be organized according to age groups: children, youth, young adults, and adults.

The Ordination of Women

Maintaining the unity of the world church remained a theme throughout the second major discussion of Annual Council. With the adoption of the form and function document, the Annual Council had also affirmed that unity must be preserved by having "one ordained ministry serving the worldwide church." That, said Neal Wilson, allowed very little flexibility for some parts of the world to ordain women pastors before other areas did.

Consequently, delegates were asked by the General Conference officers to approve the establishment of a commission with two representatives from each world division that would meet in the spring of 1985 to recommend to the 1985 General Conference whether or not the church should ordain women. The decision of the 1985 General Conference Session would "be definitive and should be accepted as such by the church worldwide."

The subject was on the Annual Council agenda because of activities in North America. During 1984, three women pastors in the Potomac Conference baptized 12 people in six different baptismal services. The General Conference officers had met in September with the Potomac Conference executive committee to convey their concern about these baptisms. (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, Nos. 2 and 3)

When the subject came up for discussion at Annual Council, an unusually large number of visitors filed into the balcony of the Takoma Park Church. On the main floor many delegates had copies of an anonymous document titled "Equally Different—The Other Side," which argued that ordaining women was "un-Biblical according to God's divine ordering of all things in His universe." Neal Wilson started his hour-long introduction of the subject by noting that in the previous few hours his office had received many phone calls from across the country concerning women in the ministry.

The relationship of North America to the rest of the world quickly re-emerged in this discussion. Charles Bradford emphasized that the entire church had voted many actions that had encouraged women in North America to enter ministerial training in college, continue their studies at the Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary (some on scholarships approved for any ministerial student), and then devote years of their lives to the pastorate. The world field he said, must appreciate the feeling of these qualified, experienced women—and their male colleagues—when these fine gospel ministers were not allowed to be ordained along with their classmates and fellow workers.

Ronald Wisbey, president of the Potomac Conference, said that the young women who were pastoring in his conference included individuals who had been in seminary classes with his son, and that he considered that they had as sincere a call as his son had to gospel ministry. He wanted to make it plain to the delegates that the Potomac Conference was not requesting that the women pastors in the conference be

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ordained at this time, but that they be authorized to baptize. In his final comment of the day, he wished that other delegates could be with him the following Sabbath when he would ordain only the male half of a husband and wife pastoring team. They had been classmates at the seminary where she graduated at the head of her class. They had each pastored churches successfully, but only he would be ordained. "Pray for us," Wisbey concluded.

At one point, Earl Amundsen, president of the Atlantic Union, attempted to amend the motion to specify that certain types of

people be included on the commission. Wilson intervened to say that some of the people to which Amundsen referred were on a list of some 45 to 50 people (including some 10 women) that he already had in mind, "but if you are going to load this with North Americans, then we will have a problem, because 80 percent of the membership is outside of North America. I hope that you defeat this amendment." The delegates did.

Some of the presidents from overseas tried to reassure North America that the world might not be as opposed as North America thought to the full participation of women in ministry. Dennis K. Bazarra, president of the 187,000-member East African Union Mission, said that he had just met with a woman in his field who had brought in over 1,000 members. She and others would like to become ordained ministers. Gerald J. Christo, president of the Southern Asia Division, said that he would be recommending that his division committee send a woman as one of its representatives to the commission. Listening to the discussion at Annual Council he had heard more opposition from North America to ordaining women than from abroad.

Several retired officers of the General Conference spoke to the issue. None of them—or any other speaker, for that matter—spoke against the ordination of women. Duncan Eva, a former vice president, suggested that the few months before the General Conference Session was too short a time for the church to inform and educate itself. He was concerned that closing the doors at the 1985 session would divide the church. He then went on to declare that he hoped the church would move on this issue. According to Eva, as one looks at the history of the church, one can see that it took a couple of hundred years to achieve the first part of Galatians 3:28: "There is no Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." It took another 1800 years for the church to conclude that Paul's injunction prohibited slavery. He hoped that now, in

the 20th-century, the church would recognize that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Richard Hammill, another former vice president, asked if the Biblical Research Institute documents on the subject would be distributed widely. Wilson replied that they were available on request, but no decision had yet been made to actively disseminate the essays.

Even though there were six or seven speakers waiting to approach microphones, a motion to end discussion was successfully adopted by over two-thirds of the delegates. In his extended final remarks, Wilson pointed out that neither the Bible nor Ellen White clearly said yes or no to ordaining women. In Wilson's opinion, the church would have to make a decision one way or the other, but that some feel that it is difficult for the church to approve an action without clear support from Scripture.

Incorporating the 27 Beliefs Into the Baptismal Vow

In a relatively quiet session, the Annual Council took a significant step toward expanding the beliefs individuals must affirm to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Annual Council approved the concept of printing the 27 fundamental beliefs on each baptismal certificate. The Fundamental Beliefs and Baptismal Certificate Harmonization Committee also recommended that the baptismal certificate be revised "with only the slight adaptation necessary to phrase it as a personal response to the *Fundamental Beliefs*." During the discussion, Walter J. Scragg, president of the Australasian Division, pointed out that such a step could be seen by some as asking new converts to personally affirm an extended statement, which might be interpreted as affirmation of a creed. The Annual Council adopted the recommendation, but before new members will be confronted with the

revised baptismal form asking them to avow the 27 fundamental beliefs, the world divisions will provide suggestions, to be considered by the Biblical Research Institute, "before final approval" by the 1985 Annual Council.

The Annual Council also voted to delete from the *Church Manual*, chapter 18: "Appendix: Outlines of Doctrinal Beliefs," a listing of 28 points written before the 27 fundamental beliefs were adopted by the 1980 General Conference Session.

The differences between the baptismal vow now affirmed by new members and the 27 fundamental beliefs are substantial. The statement of fundamental beliefs is over four-and-a-half times the length of the present baptismal vow. Several of the 27 fundamental beliefs expand what already appears in the baptismal vow, but some 11 sections of the fundamental beliefs are barely mentioned in the baptismal vow, for example: creation, spiritual gifts and ministries, and the Millennium and the end of sin.

Interestingly, the baptismal vow does not even mention Ellen White's name. The fundamental beliefs does, saying that "her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction." The baptismal vow uses the word sanctuary once, but never refers to 1844 or the 2300 days. The fundamental beliefs has a 252-word statement on Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

Association of Adventist Forums and Spectrum

Tuesday morning, Oct. 16, Neal Wilson, speaking on behalf of himself as president of the General Conference, read a prepared statement giving his reasons for resigning as denominational consultant to the board of the Association of Adventist Forums (see Appendix B, pages 25 to 27).

A few days before Annual Council, Wilson had informed the association's executive committee of his intentions. He made it plain at that time that the essay, "A Church Of, By, and For the People," (Vol. 15, No. 2), was the straw that had broken the camel's back. He listened intently to points made by members of the executive committee, but repeated his intention to make a statement concerning the Association of Adventist Forums and *Spectrum* to the 1984 Annual Council.

In his statement, Wilson argued that the Association of Adventist Forum and *Spectrum* had strayed from their original purposes, to the point where it was necessary for him to make what was in effect an indictment of them both. A theme throughout the statement was a concern that the association and its journal were undermining confidence in the organization and leadership of the church. Neal Wilson went further, saying that he does not agree that it is necessary or productive to listen to or discuss all viewpoints, whether positive or negative. He also deplored the fact that *Spectrum* seems to advocate pluralism.

At several places in the statement, Wilson made qualifying and clarifying comments. He made plain that he was not suggesting that people stop reading *Spectrum* or stop participating. (He pointed out that he himself reads *Spectrum*.) He also emphasized that many, if not most, of those involved with the Adventist Forums and *Spectrum* are not radicals, but actively support the work of the church, including its outreach and soul-winning activities, and that they should not be condemned for their involvement with the association.

Although Neal Wilson said at the outset that he did not want any discussion or action by the Annual Council; at the end of Wilson's speech Robert Olson, executive secretary of the White Estate, moved that the statement be adopted. The chairperson of Annual Council repeated Neal Wilson's wish that no action be taken. Olson then moved, and it was voted, that the statement be

included in the minutes of the Annual Council (see pp. 28 to 30 for a response by the board of the Association of Adventist Forums).

Theological Freedom and Accountability

Annual Council, culminating a process extending over several years, adopted statements providing guidelines for assessing divergent views and for disciplining dissidents.

The first statement concerned employees in churches, conferences (including kindergarten to grade 12 institutions), and non-academic institutions: "It is understood that disciplining . . . a church employee who persists in propagating doctrinal views differing from those of the church is viewed not as a violation of his freedom, but rather as a necessary protection of the church's integrity and identity."

The recommended procedure for disciplining an employee moves from private consultation between the chief executive officer and the worker to a seven-person review committee, two of whom are selected from five people suggested by the worker.

The second statement concerns employees in Adventist colleges and universities. It says that in church-related institutions of higher education, academic freedom "is more important than it is in the secular institution, not less, for it is essential to the well-being of the church itself."

The statement also recognizes that freedoms are never absolutes. The statement does not call for teachers to sign any creedal statements, but says that the *Fundamental Beliefs* define the doctrinal position of the church and "it is expected that a teacher in one of the church's educational institutions will not teach as truth what is contrary to those fundamental truths."

Rather than spelling out discipline procedures for dissidents, the statement

acknowledges that each college and university should have its own clearly stated procedures to follow in dealing with such grievances.

Literature Ministry Coordinating Board

In a potentially far-reaching action for North America, Annual Council established a Literature Ministry Coordinating Board. Its mandate is broad: "To coordinate all phases of the literature ministry in the North American Division." To ensure that it supervises both production and distribution, the action says that the board's responsibilities specifically include "coordination, supervision and evaluation of all areas of the literature ministry, such as publishing houses, Adventist Book Centers, subscription liter-

ature field programs, and its Family Health Education Services and Home Health Education Services."

The constituency selecting the 37-person board will be the General Conference committee, with the General Conference vice president for North America serving as chairperson. A full-time executive secretary will be chosen by the constituency. Members of the board must include the general managers of both the Review and Herald and the Pacific Press Publishing associations, and all the North American Division union presidents and publishing directors.

Few specifics were provided at Annual Council as to the substance of what the board will do, but it is specifically instructed to evaluate and report on the execution of recommendations made by the North American Division Publishing Work Taskforce. Some observers expect that the board

A Church on the Move

The Adventist Church is in motion. In the last few years, yearly baptisms have significantly increased, as has the number of people able to hear the message. The Thousand Days of Reaping, which ends at the General Conference Session next June, 1985, will be a success. But it is only part of a trend which will carry on long past next June. A few revealing statistics follow:

- *Membership:* 4,261,116 (as of June, 1984). The membership as of June of 1985 is projected to be over 4,500,000.
- *Baptisms:* If the current rate of baptisms continues, the church will be able to count 1,100,000 new members for the Thousand Days of Reaping (which began on Oct. 1, 1982). Included among the baptisms are 10,000 new Adventist Church members in China in the last four years (with 3,000 to 4,000 baptisms in one province alone). In North America, 60 non-Adventist ministers have been baptized into the Seventh-day

Adventist Church—an average of one a month for the last five years.

- *Media:* When the radio station the denomination is building on Guam is finished, 2,500,000,000 people—more than half the world's population—will be able to hear its signal. All of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China will be within its reach.

- *Adventist Health Systems/US:* Gross revenue for its 10,517 hospital beds last year was \$1.8 billion, which includes a profit of \$59 million.

- *BECA:* Business Executive's Challenge to Alumni has raised \$4.9 million over the last four years by asking Adventist college alumni to match challenge grants to their alma matters. Over those four years, the percentage of alumni supporting North American Adventist colleges has quadrupled, from 6.5% (16.5% less than the national average) to 25.4% (1.4% over the national average); the total amount of money given has tripled. BECA predicts that \$1.4 million will be donated for the 1983-1984 academic year alone.

will eventually create a new system for printing, selling, and distributing Adventist books and magazines in North America; others question whether the committee, given its composition, will be able to make significant changes.

Financial Affairs

William A. Murrill, undertreasurer of the General Conference, told Annual Council that the 1985 world budget of \$148.7 million is a decrease of \$9.3 million, or 6 percent from the 1984 budget. General Conference treasurer Lance L. Butler said the strong United States dollar is a major reason for the decrease.

Butler said tithe in North America increased more than \$16.8 million in 1983 to a total of \$292.7 million—an increase of 6.09 percent from 1982. Overall giving for missions has remained relatively steady.

However, Butler pointed out that on the world scene, world mission funds have declined steadily from a high point in 1930 of 33.2 percent of the tithe dollar to 9.2 percent at present. Actual dollars have declined since 1980. By contrast, the internal funds used locally, and not appearing in the world budget, have been fairly constant.

Other observers cited the level of debt in the Adventist Health System as a potential problem. The total debt for the Adventist Health System/U.S. is reportedly approaching one billion dollars.

Tithing

A document outlining Aguidelines for routing tithe aroused some vigorous discussion. The heart of the document insists that, regardless of the expressed wishes of the tithe-payer, the pre-determined percentages of tithe must be paid to various levels of church administration: "The local church only has authority to accept and remit tithe funds to its local conference/mission treasury," and tithe paid directly to higher levels of administration must be returned to the appropriate local conference. If a person refuses to allow his or her tithe to be allotted in the approved manner, then "the tithe shall be returned with an appropriate explanation and an appeal to the person to be reconciled to his church and/or conference so that his tithe can be returned to the Lord's storehouse in the usual way."

The church continues to grow in number of members—well over four million. There seems to be little question that the delegates to the General Conference Session in 1985 will be able to celebrate 1,000 days of 1,000 baptisms a day. Tithe and offerings in North America remain constant, and more and more of the world divisions are becoming financially self-sufficient. The organized church would appear to have every reason to be confident of its strength.

Nevertheless, if the 1984 Annual Council is any indication, many leaders of the church are determined to use the 1985 General Conference Session to protect the church against possible threats. The road to New Orleans should prove to be a conservative one.

The Rationale For A "Special Relationship"

by Neal Wilson

Historical Background

The relationship between the General Conference and its North American section (division) must be seen and understood in light of the historical development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is our belief that the Advent Movement came into existence as the direct result of God's plan and His own prophetic timetable; and that the Lord, by divine design and providence, selected the place for the Advent Movement to be born and anchored. We also believe that God specified the mission and the message that should be taken to the world as a final appeal. Then to make sure that the Seventh-day Adventist Church would accomplish its mission in proclaiming the gospel to all the world, we believe that the hand of God was visible in the establishment of an organization and structure to achieve His purpose and eternal design of preparing a "people" for the second coming of Christ.

The Lord does not leave anything to chance. Only God, who knows the end from the beginning, could have foreseen the dramatic developments on the North American continent. It was from this new continent, the home of two young nations, Canada and the United States, and each composed of diverse peoples from many countries, that heaven's final global mission was to be launched. It must be remembered that the United States of America was a land of religious liberty, a land of freedom of conscience, a land of opportunity, a land where slavery was denounced and a Civil War was fought to establish the value of each person; a land of uncalculated natural resources; a land of enormous financial strength—and a land of world influence.

As Elder Bradford so strikingly stated in a recent article entitled "North America at Midpoint," "Something altogether new was happening on this virgin continent toward the end of the 1260 days of the church's wilderness journeyings. The way was being prepared for God's final movements on earth. His last appeal to the human family. The end-time message must be cradled, nurtured, and brought to term. If the new nation was 'conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,' it was for the purpose of providing fertile soil where the plant of the final message and mission might quickly take root. Seventh-day Adventists have always felt this way, whatever their citizenship or national origin. They have felt that God worked a miracle in bringing about the perfect environment for the 'woman' to emerge from the wilderness to speak to the last generation of earth's history. The

rest of the story is well known. Sturdy New England farmers, learned clergymen, and ordinary citizens joined in intensive Bible study and came under the unshakable conviction that the hour had struck. The work must be given. . . . Audacious, daring, bold, they did exploits for God. They believed in the divine mandate and claimed the whole land for the kingdom of God."—*The Adventist Review*, August 9, 1984.

Controversy Over Formal Organization

A series of unusual events led up to the historic and prophetic date of 1844—a resurgence of Bible study, an interest in prophecy, the "Millerite" movement, the great Advent awakening, and a recognition of the beginning of the hour of God's investigative judgment. As a result companies and groups of Seventh-day Adventist believers emerged and then came the organized churches. Because the pioneers were afraid of falling into the pattern of formalism, spiritual weakness, loss of sense of mission, as seen in the established and organized churches of their day, it was some time before they were willing to organize their churches and companies into conferences.

Those who opposed organization or "order" argued that it would trespass upon the believer's individual Christian liberty and some even said that such a church organization would immediately become Babylon. Those who set forth the benefits of organization pointed out that it would, (a) prevent confusion, (b) control fanaticism, (c) unify the standards for acceptance into the gospel ministry, (d) facilitate the holding of prophecy [sic], and (e) make provision for the support of the work.

Ellen White, as early as 1853, urged the establishing of the church upon "gospel order". After almost a decade of lively discussion, the Michigan Conference, the first of the state conferences, was organized October 6, 1861. In 1862 four other conferences were organized—North and South Iowa, Wisconsin/Illinois, and New York. In January of 1863, Iowa was combined into a single conference and Ohio and Minnesota were also added to the sisterhood of conferences.

Significance of 1863

The General Conference was organized on May 21, 1863 in Battle Creek, Michigan. Delegates from six state conferences gathered for this historic meeting—Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, New York, Ohio, Minnesota. The constitution, after being discussed item by item, was adopted in its entirety. The introduction and the first Article read as follows: "For the

purpose of securing unity and efficiency in labor and promoting the general interest of the cause of present truth, and of perfecting the organization of the Seventh-day Adventists, we, the delegates from the several State Conferences, hereby proceed to organize a General Conference and adopt the following constitution for the government thereof:

“Article I. This Conference shall be called the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

As one reads the constitution it becomes clear that it was an unincorporated body brought into existence to administer the general affairs of the church and especially to pursue its evangelistic aim, “to teach all nations the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and the commandments of God.” This body was to coordinate, to guide and to administer the work of the conferences in the North American Division in order to achieve the objectives of carrying the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people. (See *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10, p. 495.)

Formation of Unions and Division

The North American church and the General Conference have enjoyed a mutuality and a close partnership that has continued for 120 years. The General Conference had an exclusive and direct operational relationship with the conferences of North America for almost forty years. Then in 1901 unions were introduced to assist the General Conference in administering the growing world work. Finally in 1919 there is reference to the North America Division, even though nothing had been formally organized.

Unions are accepted and voted into existence by the General Conference in session. They do not create themselves as independent, free-standing entities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The General Conference in session decides how it will relate to, and coordinate, the activities of unions, which are a part of the General Conference world family of unions and which form the basis and constituency upon which the General Conference itself exists. At no time must any other organizational structure “short-circuit” the relationship between the General Conference/Divisions and the unions upon which the General Conference/Divisions constituency is built.

In the development of the world church and growing out of the 1901 reorganization, it was clearly recognized that a “special relationship” should continue to exist between the General Conference and its North American Division. There was an interesting experiment with a North American Division Conference between 1913 and 1918. It soon became evident, however, that this was an unworkable arrangement. In 1922 the General Conference Session finally established what appears to be God’s leading and providence in connection with the relationship between the General Conference and its divisions.

Uniqueness of North America

At this time the General Conference decided to oversee and administer the work in the North American Division and established what has come to be known as a “special relationship.”

Quoting once more from Elder Bradford’s article: “He planted His last-day movement in North American soil. The work developed progressively—first there were churches, congregations, little flocks scattered here and there. Then there were districts and state conferences, groupings, sisterhoods of churches. At the same time institutions—publishing houses and sanitariums—were developing and organization was growing. The time came when organization must be further perfected, and there was the General Conference, a marvelous organization that brought the branches together in a united whole. The branches of the great tree that first flourished in North America soon spread to other parts of the globe, penetrating its land masses and island communities. But always the North American church provided resources—both personnel and material—until now we see ten great world divisions, all of them sections of the one General Conference.”—*Ibid.*

The relationship that exists between the General Conference and its North American Division is not one that is shared by any other division. In a sense, it is a privileged relationship and one that has served this church well. For that reason, it seems unwise to alter this arrangement. For the reasons already expressed and for others that are yet to be shared, we feel that “the special relationship” should be maintained and strengthened and that we should not “regularize” the North American Division. To one who is willing to carefully review the historical background, it must be evident that the North American phenomena is unique and cannot be equated with any other section/division of the General Conference.

If the General Conference, with headquarters physically located in North America, wishes to relate to the North American unions in a way that differs slightly from unions in other parts of the world, it should not be considered strange. It should be admitted, as a statement of fact, that the General Conference needs North America! The resources in terms of manpower, finance, and leadership influence are important in carrying on a world program. The General Conference needs a base of strength in order to adequately perform its function of holding together a world organization and structure which is being attacked from within and from without.

And so, it seems to follow that the General Conference should take the responsibility and initiative in working out how it will relate to the unions and the activities in the North American Division. This decision should not be determined by popular opinion or plebiscite.

Ultimately, relational decisions must be based on what is perceived to be the best approach in order to fulfill our world mission. Our fathers and

predecessors in denominational leadership showed great wisdom when they recommended this "special relationship". As they sought divine guidance, the conviction developed that the General Conference could not give successful and harmonious leadership to the world church if, in a given division territory, there were two centers of final appeal and authority. The present consensus seems to indicate that time has not changed this basic principle. This is especially true when it comes to the North American Division, but would also obtain if the General Conference world headquarters had been located in the territory of one of the other General Conference division territories.

There are a number of factors that constitute valid and logical reasons as to why a "special relationship" exists. To illustrate, let me identify the following items:

1. Shared office building.
2. The North American Division staff is a part of the General Conference staff and not separate from it.
3. Combined budget.
4. A mutually administered retirement fund.
5. Unified financial system and record keeping.
6. Only in the NAD does the General Conference operate certain major institutions.
7. The General Conference needs, and has always had, direct access to the manpower pool and human resources in the NAD. This is vital in order to recruit an adequate number of missionary appointees.
8. The NAD Board of Higher Education serves as a coordinating body for General Conference institutions of higher education.
9. The NAD Publishing Council gives coordination to General Conference publishing houses.
10. The NAD Adventist Health System/US offers help and guidance to health care institutions operated by the General Conference.

It is obvious that we are interlocked in a "special relationship". The fact that the world headquarters of the church is located in the North American Division territory and has been here from its inception, makes it impossible for the world headquarters to be silent on issues that exist or arise within the church or in the public arena. Public authorities and church leaders expect the General Conference to take positions on matters of current interest and controversy. People expect the General Conference to have the last word and to speak for the church with ultimate authority. This demands a close working relationship between those in the General Conference (world headquarters) and those assigned to give leadership to the North American Division.

Conclusion

The General Conference is the *highest authority* and the sum of *all the parts*, not only philosophically, but also (1) organizationally, (2) legislatively, (3) adminis-

tratively, (4) judicially, (5) in terms of policy and (6) church standards. This being the case, it seems that it should be the desire of the conferences, unions, and any other organizations to do everything possible to weld the whole family together and strengthen the hands of the General Conference. It is reassuring to note that in the interviews conducted by teams sent out by the Role and Function Commission to all parts of the world, there was a theme which was universally endorsed—keep the General Conference strong!

It would be folly to do anything or say anything that would in any way weaken the influence and limit the leadership capabilities of the General Conference. If the nature of our structure is changed, it could very easily fragment the Seventh-day Adventist movement and lead towards regional or national churches. This human, and rather natural, tendency must be avoided. To do anything that would encourage congregational government would be a move in the direction of disintegration, and the inability to achieve our divine mission.

The General Conference is not something isolated from administration and leadership. It must not become just a "United Nations General Assembly" or a Council of Seventh-day Adventist Churches. It must have the ability to influence and motivate and also require accountability. The church must remain united, and this requires strong, centralized authority derived from all of its parts.

When I visited the spiritual and tribal leader of the Ashanti people in Kumasi, Ghana, I learned much from the philosophy shared by this great statesman. As I left the palace, he gave me a very interesting memento to take with me. It was a carving made from the heart of a tree that grows in the Ashanti forests. His Highness the Asanthe, Nana Opoku Ware II, told me the significance of this carving. It depicts the five fingers of a human hand securely holding an egg. The moral of this is that one who is in authority must hold the egg securely enough so that it does not fall to the ground and be destroyed, but at the same time not hold it so tightly or carelessly that the egg might be crushed within the hand of the holder. This, I think, represents the type of protective authority which the General Conference needs to exercise, and it also cautions against being overly authoritarian.

At the very foundation of Adventism is unity, cohesion and oneness. We feel that the "special relationship" which exists between the General Conference and its North American Division is vital to maintaining world unity.

We believe that the message, the mission, and the organization go hand in hand. To remove any one of these three items would seriously threaten the redemptive effectiveness of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in fulfilling the destiny of God's global prophetic movement. The counsel of the Lord is that we should "Press together, press together, press together."

Statement On Association of Adventist Forums and Spectrum

by Neal Wilson

This statement is intended to clarify the relationship between the Association of Adventist Forums (the AAF) and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Apparently considerable ambiguity and misunderstanding exist at the present time. This being true, it is both necessary and wise to make this statement, and also because so many individuals and groups have asked if Church leadership has given approval or endorsement to the activities of the AAF and its journal, *Spectrum*, and if so, why?

To begin with, perhaps a little historical background will help.

In early 1967 a small group of Seventh-day Adventist graduate students and a few college and university teachers felt that they needed a forum in which to discuss perplexing questions that arose as a result of research and scholarly pursuits.

In addition they expressed disappointment that their church seemed slow or reluctant to express itself with regard to some of the social issues and injustices typical of the 60s. In reaching out for answers and in order to formulate suggestions and possible solutions that might be useful to the Church, they felt the need to organize loosely structured discussion groups. They stated that some young people felt that there were no existing Church channels where controversial subjects could be discussed. Some of these young people were discouraged and were being alienated through frustration and isolation. It was felt that an organization such as was being proposed could provide fellowship and also offer a forum for discussing such subjects and in this way serve a redemptive purpose. A little later in 1967 the initiators of the AAF came to Washington, DC and discussed this matter with me and several in the North American Division and General Conference. They indicated they were anxious to work in harmony with the Church and did not want to create problems or be misunderstood. They were seeking counsel from Church leadership and wanted to maintain a proper relationship with the Church.

The stated aims and objectives of the proposed association were:

1. To provide an organization which will facilitate fellowship between graduate students in different geographical areas of the United States.
2. To stimulate evangelistic contact through cultural interaction with non-Seventh-day Adventist scholars.
3. To serve as a point of contact between graduate students and the Seventh-day Adventist organization, and to encourage and facilitate the service of these students to the church.

4. To encourage pastoral guidance for Seventh-day Adventist students on non-Seventh-day Adventist campuses.

5. To maintain an organ of communication wherein Seventh-day Adventist scholars may exchange academic information, thoughts, and opinions.

Membership in the association, in one form or another, was to be open to all Adventist teachers, graduate and undergraduate students, and persons with professional interest.

Knowing most of these early organizers as committed Seventh-day Adventists and believing that their motives were honorable, we were impressed that perhaps this could be a useful venture. When I presented this matter to the General Conference Officers and North American union presidents at the time of the 1967 Annual Council, it was not felt wise to take any official action authorizing, or approving, or opposing this new organization. We reasoned that the group could organize such an association without even discussing it with us. Since they wanted to stay in close touch with Church leadership in order to avoid misunderstanding, and since they were seeking counsel and guidance, we felt it was desirable to maintain contact with them on an unofficial basis.

The record of our discussion at the 1967 North American Division Committee on Administration, reads as follows:

1. That we express our interest in strengthening the relationship of graduate students to the church and our desire to cooperate as far as possible to the development of any means which will serve to make this relationship more meaningful and mutually beneficial.
2. That we express our sympathy with the stated aims and objectives of the proposed association.
3. That we express our opinion that presently these objectives can be better served if the church leadership were to serve the Association in an advisory capacity and at its invitation.

As you can see, this was a position of sympathy, of maintaining an advisory relationship and of suspended judgment until the 'fruits' of an organization of this kind could emerge and be tested.

Seventeen years have gone by, and the AAF has now grown in membership and the number of subscribers to *Spectrum* has increased. In spite of this growth, the AAF and its publication *Spectrum* are still unknown to the majority of our members in most parts of the world. Several of us, as denominational leaders, have served as consultants to the officers of the AAF. My role has been strictly advisory and I have never been a board member as some have erro-

neously stated. My attitude has been consistently friendly and sympathetic in spite of the fact that in my opinion, my counsel has seldom been accepted, and some things sponsored by the AAF have embarrassed and perplexed me.

It is no secret to my fellow General Conference leaders and to certain officers of the AAF that in the past few years I have grown more and more troubled over what appears to be a decided shift away from some of the original attitudes, aims, and objectives of the AAF for which we expressed sympathy. I fully expected that the Association would follow the pattern established by other professional associations of Seventh-day Adventists and be positive and supportive of the Church's teachings and programs, even when not in agreement with everything that happens in the Church. Instead, in my view the Association and its publication *Spectrum* have followed an increasingly controversial course of speech and recommended action.

The vast majority of elected Church leadership invite and appreciate the input of thinking and supportive lay persons. Most of us are able to profit from criticism provided it is constructive and not destructive. In the opinion of many, there has been a noticeable drift, on the part of the AAF, in the direction of undermining leadership and criticizing the Church, and at times in a cynical manner. Some feel that because some of us have 'smiled' on the AAF instead of 'frowning,' it has been taken as license. The opinion seems to prevail that since General Conference leadership has not made a public disclaimer concerning the AAF, we must actually condone what the organization does, what it says, and what it publishes. Unfortunately, our silence has been misinterpreted.

On various occasions I have privately remonstrated with the AAF leaders and have strongly protested certain articles and items which have appeared in *Spectrum*. On the other hand, and to be fair, I have also expressed appreciation for the quality and content of certain other articles. I want to register the fact that, in my opinion, not all that has been done by the AAF or what has appeared in *Spectrum* has been negative or bad. On the contrary, much has been good! However, as is true in life, the wholesome and the pure can be contaminated, polluted, or destroyed by mixing just a little error or poison with the good. Repeatedly I have been requested to make a statement disassociating myself and the Church from the AAF and officially denouncing *Spectrum*. In good conscience, I have been reluctant to do this, because, especially at the outset, the AAF did participate in helping to anchor some lives to the Church. I refrained from responding to these requests to make a public statement because I hoped that if given a little more time it might never become necessary.

Unfortunately, with the passing of time, it has become more and more evident that the emphasis of *Spectrum* has not been on nurturing evangelism or on providing positive, inspirational, yet scholarly, interaction between academicians and their Church

organization. In the opinion of many, the 'fruits' have not been the building of faith, confidence and trust in an atmosphere of apostolic optimism. Subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, faultfinding has not helped to build up confidence in the authority of the Word, in the Spirit of Prophecy, and the role and function of church organization. To the casual reader the material is perceived as planting seeds of criticism, polarization, negative questioning, undermining confidence in Church organization and lessening respect for the legitimacy and authority of Church leadership.

It is evident that the time has come when we need to reexamine our relationship with the AAF and our 1967 expression of 'sympathy.' Among our concerns are the following:

1. We do not agree with what appears to be a practice, and basic approach of the AAF; namely, that it is necessary or productive to listen to and discuss all viewpoints, whether positive or negative, truth or error. We cannot accept the premise that our journals and pulpits should give equal time and exposure to all viewpoints with the idea that ultimately truth will prevail. We have a distinctive message that needs to be presented with emphasis and conviction.

2. It seems to us that the AAF and *Spectrum* do not take any definite or clearly stated positions regarding doctrinal subjects and issues. Much seems to be rationalized and left tentative. Pluralism seems to be advocated, and even some spiritual values seem to be negotiable.

3. We weary of always being told what is wrong with the Church! Why do we not hear about some positive, workable, and tested solutions and alternatives? Especially do we feel this way when negative comments come from individuals who appear to pose as experts, but who have never had Church leadership responsibility or the more awesome and sacred responsibility of trying to maintain unity in a spiritual world family.

4. We are disappointed that the AAF takes the initiative to provide a platform and arrange meetings for known and declared dissident individuals and groups within the Church.

5. We reject the implication or inference that *Spectrum* is the most authentic source of information regarding Church affairs. We hope it is obvious to many readers that *Spectrum* not infrequently contains factual inaccuracies and faulty conclusions.

6. We observe with concern the persistent involvement of the AAF and *Spectrum* in actively urging what appears to us to be irresponsible concepts of, and changes in, denominational administration, operations, structure, and organization. Unfortunately these ideas are propagated with little apparent concern for what the results might be.

7. Finally, we find it difficult to explain why the pages of *Spectrum* so seldom defend or endorse positions of the Church or say anything positive about its evangelistic thrust.

In addition to these concerns, people often remind us that the name, 'Association of Adventist Forums,'

can be misleading. When the word 'Adventist' is used to qualify a particular organization, it usually denotes that such an organization is promoted by the Church and enjoys at least a semi-official status.

In summation, we find it necessary to state that the activities of the AAF and the content of *Spectrum* do not carry the endorsement of Church leadership, and we seriously question that they are helpful in proclaiming the message of the Church or in fulfilling its mission. Those who participate in the activities of the AAF and who read *Spectrum* should be aware of the foregoing. Realizing the above, and to avoid being the cause of stumbling, I must, at least for the present, no longer serve as advisor and consultant. On the other hand, I do not wish to be severed from my friends, and if requested will always be willing to offer personal counsel. This decision is made with a heavy heart, but with a settled sense of duty.

After counseling with the General Conference Officers and the Division Presidents, I wish to record and make clear that:

1. The AAF is not a denominationally sponsored or endorsed organization.
2. The Seventh-day Adventist Church encourages honest and balanced research and discussion. In fact, creative discussion is welcome, but not divisive and destructive criticism which tends to undermine our message and church organization and impedes the successful accomplishment of the mission of God's prophetic movement.
3. *Spectrum* is not a publication of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
4. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has at no time endorsed *Spectrum* or given approval to its content.

5. We do not consider *Spectrum* to be the voice for the Seventh-day Adventist academic world, but rather, we consider it the voice for a relatively small, self-appointed segment.

6. Any Adventist institution which distributes *Spectrum* does so without Church approval.

Having said all of this, I would now like to conclude with an earnest and personal appeal to the AAF. In the name of our Lord and Saviour, I urge the AAF to reconsider its priorities and return to its original spiritual, pastoral, fellowship, and evangelistic aims. If the AAF and *Spectrum* would exalt Christ and His saving grace and make known His soon coming, they could become a valuable adjunct in the Church. Nothing would make me happier than to see healing take place, but this cannot be at the expense of truth and principle.

I have a further important appeal. Please do not condemn individuals because of their association with an organization. Please be slow to judge the motives of individuals based on their participation with the AAF. In my opinion, many, if not most, of these individuals are not radicals, but are supporters of the Church, participate in soul winning, are active in community outreach and uphold the teachings and standards of the Church.

Finally, we are living in the time when the watchmen on the walls are expected to give the trumpet a certain sound, or otherwise the people will be confused and quickly become vulnerable to every wind that blows. In the relationship of the church with the AAF or any other organization or publication, the Biblical principle identified by Christ is worthy of consideration: 'He that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.' (Matthew 12:30).