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# North American Laity, the World is Watching

by Jay Du Nesme

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**I**n several areas the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America needs to declare bankruptcy. Bankruptcy does not necessarily signal complete failure. Rather, it means recognizing failures for what they are, and no longer tolerating or defending outdated, unneeded, or inefficient practices and programs. It means taking extraordinary actions to solve exceptional problems. Here, we will focus on just one area crying out for decisive action—improving the structure of the North American Church at the division level.

Unfortunately, for almost 90 years virtually no fundamental reorganizing has taken place within Adventism. The most significant cause of problems within the church's structure is the lack of trust. Most administrators, from the General Conference to the local conferences, would argue strongly that they do trust the laity. The facts speak otherwise. Even in "progressive" North American conferences, where lay people comprise a majority of the executive committees, lay people have never been in line-authority positions, where they made significant executive decisions. Lay people have also rarely been an integral part of the dreaming and long-range, strategic planning process of the church.

Yet, management experts teach that successful

organizations not only actively involve all layers in decision-making. They also advocate pushing responsibility down the structural ladder as far as possible. This is not presently the case within the North American Division. In spite of the significant changes in the structure of the North American Division approved at the 1989 Autumn council, the General Conference can still ultimately control the selection of leaders for the North American Division, as well as the flow of funds.

Lay people are largely at fault for accepting a minor and passive role in directing and carrying out the mission of the church. With few exceptions we have accepted the status quo and not insisted on a major voice in church affairs. That must change. There are three innovations that urgently need to take effect if there is to be a genuine North American Division response to an active laity.

First, lay members should make their presence felt as early as the 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis. Lay delegates can urge that North America, like all the other divisions, meet from the beginning of the session as a caucus. Now, North America is the only division that does not meet as a division to select the names of individuals it wishes to have as its leaders.

Delegates from North America meet only by groupings of unions, and typically pick clergy to serve on the nominating committee. In that committee, the North American clergy, along with the president of the General Conference, decide by themselves, without further consultation with the North American delegates, who will lead the

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division. All the delegates from North America—from the first night on—should caucus and pick by secret ballot the names of division leaders the entire delegation feels will respond most effectively to the needs of North America.

Second, the North American Division should move toward a representative, or constituency-based form of organization. Lay members could participate far more in helping to set the direction for North America if the division leadership were to be chosen, not at the General Conference Session, but at a constituency meeting of the North American Division. Members of such a constituency could be selected at the local conference constituency meetings, the level of church structure where lay members are most fully represented. The responsibilities and activities of the division constituency could be modeled after the triennial local conference constituency meetings. With a constituency-based North American Division, lay members could more effectively bring about the changes needed to reinvigorate North American Adventism.

Third, financial decisions need to be brought closer to those giving the funds. Like the other divisions, North America should be able to control its own income, and pass on fixed percentages to the General Conference just as all other divisions do. Presently, North America, and only North America, is required to send its income directly to the General Conference. The General Conference Committee then decides how much to turn back to North America. These practices must change, so that the North American Division operates the way every other division does.

Of course, this will insure that North America, through its constituency-chosen division leadership, will more directly control how much money the General Conference headquarters will have for its own operations. The division could well

decide to continue appropriating as much money as before for the overseas divisions, while placing a cap on the amount or percentage of money from North America going to the General Conference,

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just to operate its Silver Spring, Maryland headquarters. Because of financial problems in North America, local and union conferences are being forced, much more than most members realize, to reduce their own personnel and services. Still, given the long tradition of giving by North American members for the world-wide work of Adventism, if lay members were told that the North American Division had successfully reduced the amount of money going to operate the General Conference headquarters, it is likely that the North American laity would actually increase their giving for overseas missions.

Such fundamental reorganization may appear challenging to some North American clergy, but inaction will have dire, even catastrophic consequences. Only by taking decisive action can trust be restored between the laity and the leadership of the North American Division. As a result, the North American Division can be renewed and rejuvenated. Much is at stake, for the entire Adventist denomination still expects the support, financially and institutionally, of a strong and buoyant North American Division. It is time, North American lay members, to act. The world is watching.

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# Australia--A Time for Women to Lead in Education

by Wilfred Rieger

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*"Dear God,  
Are boys better than girls? I know you are one,  
but please try to be fair.*

*Love,  
Samantha."*

This small girl's diary entry gets quickly to the heart of the issue. Her petition reflects the norms of her society and its culture, including her acquired notion of personhood. It appears to Samantha that, where she is living, girls are not "getting the breaks."

That same uncomfortable feeling is experienced by people within the Seventh-day Adventist Church who perceive gender-exclusiveness as a persisting problem.<sup>1</sup> The seriousness of the problem was acknowledged by the 1985 General Conference session, in calling on the church worldwide to "open up leadership positions to women."<sup>2</sup> This study demonstrates that few Seventh-day Adventist elementary schools and high schools in the South Pacific Division employ women in leadership positions. Several strategies for implementation are suggested below.

## *Australian Society*

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Australian education generally exhibits ambivalence about equal opportunity programs. For instance, reports from public schools in New South Wales indicate that 40 percent of the promotions have been set aside

for women teachers<sup>3</sup> and that the federal government is emphasizing a national policy that

recognizes the need to provide a supportive school environment in which girls and boys are equally valued and challenged as learners and their needs are equitably catered for.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Yates<sup>5</sup> claims that much of the attention given to sexism, gender, and equal opportunity is illusory. Equally disheartening are articles in the Australian press that describe politics as "still a man's game in which men set the rules."<sup>6</sup> Women remain an expedient and "are manipulated as a 'gender requirement' when it suits men to do so. . . . Women in politics get only what the men want to give them."<sup>7</sup>

## *South Pacific Division 1985-1988*

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Where does the Seventh-day Adventist system in the South Pacific Division fit into this wider picture? During 1985-1988, the number of women serving as principals in South Pacific Division schools is disproportionate to the number of women teachers in those schools. Consequently, principalships, during at least the years covered by my study, are heavily weighted *against* women and in favor of men.

Data analysis also reveals that, with one exception, all high school principals are male. Furthermore, while a representative number of women work under the direction of women principals, a maximum of only five men in the entire South

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Pacific Division education system worked under women principals during any one year in the survey period.

Educational administration ratios at conference, union, or division levels are no better. Except for some remedial and curriculum consultants, women are conspicuous by their absence. Recently Loma Linda University, in conjunction with the South Pacific Division Education Department, began offering an M.A. (Education) degree as part of a summer school program at Avondale College. The Loma Linda coordinators

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(according to unofficial reports) were surprised that the division sponsored 10 men, but no women, for the "administration strand" of the 1986-1987 M.A. program. Twelve men and three women were sponsored for the "curriculum strand" during the following year. Under the division's older policy of sending full-time, employee-sponsored students to overseas postgraduate study programs, men are still receiving benefits, but no women from either the elementary or high school sector are presently being sponsored for overseas postgraduate studies.

In the years 1985 through 1988, the number of male/female one-teacher school principals was *not* disproportionate. This can be perceived as an encouraging sign. However, research indicates that more than 50 percent of final year elementary-level teacher education students viewed appointments to a one-teacher school as either "negative" or "highly negative."<sup>8</sup> Major reasons given were: (1) Excessive work load<sup>9</sup> coupled with disproportionate financial remuneration; (2) lack of opportunity for social contact and professional development; (3) "small town" atmosphere.<sup>10</sup>

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## *Defending the Status Quo*

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**W**e will now consider some of the arguments for maintaining male dominance in school administration. A common one claims that it is pointless to employ young women because they always get married and leave to have babies. In other words, women are poor long-term organizational investments. In fact, not all women get married, or have children.

It is understandable for an employer to be disappointed when an employee leaves work, especially if she or he is doing a good job. But it isn't just young women having children who leave a job. Men and women of all ages leave jobs, mostly to go to new ones. To say, "I won't employ [promote] a woman because she'll only leave to have a baby," is the same as saying "I won't employ [promote] a man because he'll only leave to take another job."<sup>11</sup>

The level of frustration experienced by some female church teachers is illustrated by one female respondent in a survey [in response to a written request for maternity leave]: "A letter came back accepting my resignation! I never resigned!"<sup>12</sup>

A second argument alleges that women do not apply for leadership positions in denominational schools. When pressed, most women decline promotions. Even if accurate, this may be so because many women have become so discouraged because of past policies and experiences that they are reconciled to submissive roles within the organization. Women are also unlikely to seek principalships because they believe the training available prior to appointment is inadequate.<sup>13</sup>

Third, defenders of the division's record suggest that the position of women in Adventist schools is no worse than that of women in state education systems. Comparisons of 1983 public school figures,<sup>14</sup> with Adventist figures for 1984,

show similar percentages of women principals in each system. The answer to this point is simply that two wrongs don't make a right. Rather, the church should heed the admonition of the apostle Paul: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold."<sup>15</sup> The church needs to provide a model that challenges the thinking and practices of the world.

## *Proposing a New Future*

**C**an we learn anything from the current situation? How should we respond? Here are some suggestions:

1.) Corporately and individually we need to acknowledge that gender exclusiveness exists in South Pacific Division school leadership positions. This problem is highlighted by the continuing use of discriminatory language in policy statements and administrative procedures found in current division documents:

1.210:89 The school principal is responsible to the employing organization for the management of the school. He receives *his* directions through its ranking officer the Conference President. . . .<sup>16</sup>

2.710:89 It is expected that the principal will use *his* authority for the control of school property.<sup>17</sup>

Job Description Union Education Director, Functions and Responsibilities:

2. Assist division education director in *his* evaluation of the union colleges . . .<sup>18</sup>

Are these examples merely lapses in proofreading, or significant indicators of the "deep thought structure" of church administrators?

2.) Men should repent of monopolizing denominational power structures, and recognize their need of the Spirit of Jesus when it comes to power relationships.<sup>19</sup>

3.) We must reaffirm the 1985 General Conference Session's call for opening leadership positions to women. (Greater incentive would exist if the General Conference followed its own advice.) We also need to provide the means for accomplishing this by initiating "enabling strategies."

These strategies might include specific requests to nominating committees (and the many

other decision-making committees relating to education) to utilize the resources and leadership

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talents of women in education and the church at large. Moreover, the church needs to carefully review the composition of committees, because as long as selection panels are directed and composed largely of men, or women who are not professionally active and qualified, and as long as no account is taken of arguments about role models of women for girls (and for boys), nor of evidence of outstanding female leadership and participation in education, the situation can only get worse.<sup>20</sup>

For instance, the validity of recommendations by the Adventist Commission on Women's Roles<sup>21</sup> might be questioned because 80 percent of its members are men. Hence, as part of this process of change, women must represent themselves.

4.) McMahon<sup>22</sup> directs our attention to a number of career tactics useful for denominationally employed women: Work out values and pursue them; gain qualifications equal to those held by men; display endurance, integrity, and assertiveness; develop and use support groups and networks; understand the system; have long-term career goals; and don't be afraid to work on committees if the opportunity arises.<sup>23</sup>

5.) As pointed out by Guy,<sup>24</sup> we should change a number of Adventist schooling practices (e.g. curriculum content, instructional practices) in order to "nip the problem in the bud."

6.) Qualitative and quantitative research paradigms might offer new insights into the problem.

7.) Finally (although these suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive), we need to review and evaluate progress, or the lack of it, to see whether strategies have been effectively implemented and

whether they are helping us reach our goals. This procedure should be part of an ongoing process in an organization where leadership has a "vision."

What, then, of the future? Vyhmeister (in a spirit of kindness, no doubt) entitled her study about Adventist women in church leadership positions: "Not Weary in Well Doing."<sup>25</sup> However, data for the Adventist education system in the South Pacific Division indicates that the reality of women in leadership positions is more accurately

described as "not doing well, and weary."

But this is not a time for despondency. The origin of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was marked by the creative, cooperative, caring, and energetic endeavors of a group of relatively young people. The latter phase of the development of the church will be no less challenging or exciting. According to Scripture,<sup>26</sup> there will be no room for gender exclusiveness. However, for this to happen, we must step out in faith.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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