

# A Layperson in Church Wonderland: Annual Council Held Down Under

by Susan Sickler



*Susan Sickler received a B.S. in nursing from Columbia Union College, and an M.P.H. from Loma Linda University. She serves on the Columbia Union executive committee, and paid her own way to Annual Council.*

What was it like for a female layperson from the North American Division to attend Annual Council in Perth, Australia, as an uninvited observer? It was major culture shock, but it was also a very rewarding learning experience. As a member of Elder Folkenberg's Commission on Governance, I had devoted 23 days over a period of eight months to putting together a plan for the reorganization of the General Conference headquarters operation. Because we were painfully aware of the fate of previous attempts at bureaucratic reform within the church, I decided to go to Perth at my own expense to observe firsthand the fate of our report. I had no illusions that my presence would affect the outcome in any way, but I had a personal need to observe the process to its end—to see if we would deliver a stillborn or a viable baby.

Readers of *Spectrum* will find much to celebrate in the two major issues decided in Perth—a unification plan for the church in South Africa that is far more inclusive than what we have evolved in North America, and the acceptance of the recommendations of Phase I of the Governance Commission. The Annual Council also voted to proceed with Phase II, which is to be known as the Commission on Church Orga-

nization. It includes world church representation, will be chaired by Folkenberg personally, and has extremely broad terms of reference. Beyond these two major issues, the only way to distill nine days of non-stop meetings, conversations, and worship experiences is to share some of the strongest impressions that I brought back with me.

- *The wonderful friendliness and no-nonsense attitude of the Australian people.* The phrase "G'day, mate," will be special to me for a very long time.

- *The gracious way that church leaders treated an uninvited guest.* I was made to feel welcome and included in many activities.

- *My new respect for the stresses involved in the itinerant lifestyle of world church leaders.* Twenty-five hours in a tourist-class seat on four successive aircraft, plus intervening hours in assorted airports, not to mention ingesting what the airlines euphemistically refer to as "food," will do things to one's biological clock and gastrointestinal tract that should never happen to mortals.

- *The lack of representation.* While Annual Council is the most representative meeting apart from a General Conference Session, world church leadership does not reflect the diversity of world church mem-

bership. The most under-represented groups were laypersons, young people, and women.

- *The group dynamic.* There is a totally different dynamic in a group with negligible lay representation. I heard very few challenging questions or other evidence of committee members' holding officers accountable. The General Conference Committee, as it is presently constituted, resembles a congregation more than an executive committee.

- *The "housekeeping" nature of the agenda.* There is something very sad about a large group of intelligent, committed people coming together at great expense to deal with an agenda that devotes far more time to housekeeping items than to visioning sessions on major issues. The devil has little to fear from a church that spends more time revising its policy manual than it devotes to Global Mission. One lay delegate, a mental health therapist, made a profound observation: "What these people do when they get together is not nearly as important as the fact that they are meeting together in dialogue and fellowship." If that is the case, and I strongly suspect that it is, wouldn't we get far more for our

money if the meetings were structured differently?

- *The new model in South Africa.* The debate on South Africa produced a wonderful gift for North America. When our brothers from South Africa politely but firmly announced that they had devised a plan that met their needs far better than "the North American model," many of us wanted to shout, "Praise the Lord!" Being constantly told that we must do this or we can't do that because we are a model for the world church has caused just as much resentment in North America as it has caused overseas when people there are pointed to "the American model."

- *Coping with independent ministries.* We sometimes think that stridently critical independent ministries are a burden confined to North America. Not so! I was amazed to hear the desperation expressed by world church leaders over some of our less-constructive exports. These people are getting the worst of both worlds. Their appropriations are cut because of the money flowing to independent ministries; consequently, the General Conference is less able to provide resources for their pastors. Then the independent

ministries use the diverted tithe dollars to flood these fields with literature that distorts church doctrines and is devastatingly critical of church leaders. The end result is not a major step forward for Global Mission. This situation was the impetus for the Perth Affirmation (see box).

- *Exuberance overwhelms caution.* Everyone is celebrating freedom and the opportunities that recent political changes present for the church. No one seems to be concerned about the implications of increased freedom for church governance.

- *The church as family.* By far the best part of any Adventist meeting is the people that you meet and the amazing way that you can feel like family after just a short conversation. We are held together by our shared values and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not by a policy manual.

When all is said and done, the fact that I can feel so incredibly close to people that I just met, who share neither my race nor my cultural background, is what makes me believe in heaven. I long to be there soon with all of my brothers and sisters from around the world and the Father who calls us to be one family throughout all eternity.

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## The Perth Declaration

*Approved during the Annual Council session in Perth, Australia, the following document was considered by world leaders as a significant appeal to church members and leaders to pull together in unity and to proclaim the fundamental doctrines of Adventism.*

We representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church assembled in Annual Council believe

that momentous social, economic, and religious developments now occurring signal the approaching fulfillment of events described by the Bible prophecies of the end-time.

Being involved in the final struggle between Christ and Satan that we call the great controversy, we find the enemy of truth exercising every agency to subvert and keep

the church in a Laodicean condition. During this council we sense a special moving of the Holy Spirit that leads us to acknowledge our need for His outpouring of power to complete God's work on earth.

**We reaffirm** confidence in Christ our righteous Redeemer and in the fundamental truths that bind us together as a people. Among these are belief in Christ, the Lord of Creation, in His mighty acts as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, and in His atoning death at Calvary that made possible our salvation and final restora-

tion in eternal life. We rejoice in full assurance of our salvation as a gift from God, and in victory over temptation and sin by His overcoming power. We accept the Scriptures as our teacher and final authority, and respond to His limitless love in grateful obedience. We affirm as well our confidence in His leading through the Spirit of Prophecy.

**We believe** the Seventh-day Adventist Church to be a prophetic movement more than an institution, the remnant people called of God to bear a unique message to earth's last generations, to announce the imminent return of Christ in power and glory. Being firmly convinced we live in the hour of His judgment, we are dedicated to the task of unitedly carrying Christ's final invitation to every inhabitant of the earth.

**We note** with regret that there are some among us who wish to participate in and be thought of as contributing to the Adventist work, while at the same time denying or ignoring fundamental components of our message and work. Their influence weakens efforts to build faith and unity. Others exercise a separatist spirit to present themselves as defenders of the authentic Adventist faith, the correctors of others, often elevating to importance issues not agreed upon by the body as vital.

Still others advance speculative prophetic interpretations or organize meetings without consultation and in competition with those of the church. Many circulate private publications and electronic media presentations among the believers in a manner to suggest they represent the authentic teachings of the body as a whole. Whatever the original intent, such activities are producing distrust and division that hinder the work of God.

**We appeal** to those who promote private programs to set aside divisive side issues and join with the organized church in affirming the fundamentals of our message. In unity we can rededicate ourselves, our abilities, and our efforts in cooperative service to God, pressing forward the work in the brief time that remains. We include in this appeal a call for personal spiritual renewal, for prayer, worship, Bible study, and committed lives. This means renewed preaching and teaching of the core truths with their timeless message of hope, and outreach in personal witness to those about us.

**We call** for a new commitment on the part of all members and every worker in the Adventist movement. We include writers and editors of our publications, pastors, administrators, boards, leaders, and staff

members of our institutions, whether educational, health-care, or other, lay leaders and members of all our congregations—in short, every believer in the three angels' messages. We acknowledge that in the past we have not done all we could, but in the conviction that earth's time is short and much remains to be accomplished, a new dedication is imperative. Despite her weaknesses, we believe the church remains God's special agency on earth.

**We challenge** all leaders, especially our pastors as the primary spiritual leaders of our people, to lift high the fundamental truths of our message from the pages of the Scriptures. In pulpit discourses, in personal instruction, in ministers' meetings as guided by the Ministerial Association and administrators in every field, in presentations for the public, we must present Jesus in the setting of present truth as the answer to every human need. We must lay aside all traces of cynicism, self-advancement, of party spirit and distrust to unite as one people carrying the everlasting gospel to all the world.

**We commit** ourselves to this great purpose, praying that the Holy Spirit will use us as one dedicated people, together at work in preparation for Christ's return.