

Dispatch From the Governance Wars

The layperson who received an ovation at the 1994 Annual Council looks ahead to the 1995 General Conference Session.

by Susan Sickler

A MAJOR ISSUE FACING DELEGATES TO THE 1995 General Conference Session of the world church in Utrecht is church authority. More precisely, they will have to decide whether or not to give the General Conference and its divisions more authority over unions and conferences than ever before in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

A commission on which I served, chaired by the General Conference president, made several proposals to the 1994 Annual Council of the General Conference Committee that caused major controversy. The first, a recommendation that higher levels would hold the credentials for officers of lower levels, would have seriously undercut the authority of a local union or conference constituency. This was changed to exclude local conferences and unions.

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Second, under current policy, the General Conference holds credentials for division presidents because the division is considered a branch office of the General Conference. The proposal going to Utrecht would extend this policy to the division officers, but not to lower levels. The recommendation that higher levels be free to intervene in credentials disputes at lower levels was changed: officers of higher levels may be invited in by the executive committee of the lower level, but they cannot intervene without an invitation.

The third, and most potentially divisive recommendation, declares that higher levels of church structure can merge or dissolve lower levels. When the other two proposals were significantly weakened on the floor of Annual Council, this one was left to be dealt with at the Spring Council of the General Conference Committee, which is a smaller meeting with less lower-level representation. I expect Spring Council will adopt the third recommendation of the commission, leading, no doubt, to a most interesting discussion on the floor of the 1995 General Conference Session.

Leaders admit privately that they realize that much of the North American Division will never adopt the constitution and by-laws provisions necessary to implement the linkages. In fact, the areas of the world church where leaders most want the linkages are the very parts of the world that would never consider adopting them. The obvious question becomes, "Will the world church in Utrecht vote for itself a level of subservience to higher authority that the United States will never adopt for itself?" To understand the significance of what is being proposed, it may be helpful to review how these proposals came into existence; how they reflect the views of a small group of denominational leaders; and why I believe these proposals should be rejected at the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht.

Commission on Church Governance (1990-1991)

Given Robert Folkenberg's excellent article on church structure in *Ministry Magazine*, it is not surprising that one of his first actions as president of the General Conference was to establish a Commission on Church Governance. Consisting of 22 members and chaired by Robert Kloosterhuis, a general vice president of the General Conference, this commission dealt only with operations within the General Conference office complex in Silver Spring, Maryland. The commission's report was adopted at the Annual Council held in Perth, Australia in 1991.

I will always remember several things about members of this commission. They had the ability to disagree strongly without being disagreeable. Robert Kloosterhuis had a gracious but careful commitment to process. We worked each issue through until a clear majority agreed and formally adopted each recommendation. Fred Thomas, then the under-

secretary of the General Conference and the secretary of the commission, had an incredible gift for writing clear and unbiased minutes, even when he had strong opinions about the subject. Gordon Bietz and others put together a final report that was clear and concise and stated the rationale for each recommendation.

There is one item in the first governance commission report that runs dramatically counter to centralized authority, and it is something Robert Folkenberg supported enthusiastically. Because of this commission, there is now in place a new Strategic Planning and Budget Committee, with a carefully defined planning and budget cycle. Now, the world church can have wide input into the process. Previously, when two people—the General Conference president and the under-treasurer—controlled the budget process, they had awesome power. By opening up the process to include all division presidents, it removed the possibility of a president of the General Conference attempting to trade appropriations for support on certain issues. Of course, whether or not this ever happened is a matter of conjecture, but it is always good to close any loopholes that could tempt someone to abuse power. A minimal amount of networking by division presidents and others on the expanded committee should be enough to assure voting freedom for all.

Commission on World Church Organization (1992-1994)

Because it was inappropriate for North Americans to be making suggestions about world church governance without wider representation, Elder Folkenberg formed a second group, the Commission on World Church Organization, that included all of the division presidents plus other representatives from the world field. This group was more than twice as large as the first commission, with consid-

erably more ecclesiastically prominent members. Robert Folkenberg chaired this commission, and the secretary was Maurice Battle, an associate secretary of the General Conference. The initial meeting was at the General Conference headquarters, but then the group moved twice to Cohutta Springs Conference Center, near Atlanta, Georgia, and once to a motel in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Getting to know leaders from around the world was a very special experience: some of the most spirited discussions took place during hikes around the lake. We all gained a deeper appreciation for the complexities inherent in leading a world church. Discussion was quite open, both in the meetings and in small groups, at meals, and on breaks.

We worked through three areas with a good degree of harmony. First, the General Conference Executive Committee was reduced in size from more than 376 members to 240 and restructured to increase representation from the world field. The General Conference will pay for committee members to attend Annual Council, so the meeting will become more diverse and representative than in the past.

Second, it was recommended that the size of future General Conference Session delegations be capped both to reduce cost (now estimated at more than \$15 million) and to keep the size from becoming so unwieldy as to make transacting business more difficult than it already is.

Third, we dismantled the Church Ministries Department back into individual departments responsible to different general vice presidents. This last action was taken in response

to a survey sent around the world to evaluate whether people felt that the Church Ministries' concept was working well or whether they preferred individual departments. Regarding these three recommendations, while there was minor disagreement on details, it is fair to say that there was a consensus.

However, a clear split within the group did develop toward the end of the Gettysburg meeting regarding *linkages*, a term chosen by Robert Folkenberg. *Linkage* refers to how authority flows between the various levels of church structure. Bluntly translated, it means giving higher levels more authority over lower

levels. Based on speeches made before the group and from private conversations, I would estimate that about one-fourth of the members of the commission had a strong desire to "strengthen the linkages." About one-fourth were appalled by the idea, and about one-half either never spoke to the issue or fell into the cat-

egory of, "Well, we do need to do something, but I am not sure of the best solution."

Although there is an unwritten rule among Adventist committees that open discussion of topics stays within the room, denominational administration itself broke the rule when they took certain items from the general discussion and turned them into recommendations in the final report without an authorizing vote of the commission. Therefore, a discussion here of other items favored by those wishing stronger linkages is appropriate. Suggestions from this group included: higher levels having the power to merge or dissolve lower levels of structure; higher levels holding the credentials for officers of lower

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levels; higher levels being free to intervene in credentials' disputes at lower levels; higher levels revoking a pastor's membership when his credentials are taken for cause; and last, but certainly not least, moving controversial decisions concerning an individual's membership in the Adventist Church away from the local church congregation.

Differences of opinion on these proposals were not a North American Division vs. world church split. There were North American leaders who argued strongly for more centralized control and, leaders from outside North America who argued passionately against it. On these proposals no consensus ever emerged, nor did the commission ever vote on any of the proposals. On one point, however, a clear message was heard. Any attempt to take from the local churches in the North American Division final say on membership would necessarily force the Biblical Research Institute to reassign labels for the protagonists in Armageddon.

Indeed, the commission adjourned its last meeting without ever having voted any of the linkage proposals. Furthermore, it never discussed how the final report would be developed. Subsequently, General Conference administration assigned the writing of the final report, not to the secretary of the commission, Maurice Battle, who had done a good job of producing the minutes up to this point, but to Athal Tolhurst, the under-secretary of the General Conference. Tolhurst was far more sympathetic to strong linkages.

Annual Council (1994)

The resulting report to the 1994 Annual Council bore no resemblance to the simple, clear format of the first governance report, and it did not give any rationale for the recommendations as the first report did. While it is unclear just how many members of the com-

mission were shown a copy of the report prior to Annual Council, it is clear that quite a few were not. At no point was the report presented to the 1994 Annual Council ever voted by the commission.

Having been a member of the Commission on World Organization and having listened to the 1994 Annual Council debate, I offer the following generalizations about those who argue for more centralized control: First, the higher one's position on the hierarchical ladder, the higher value one tends to place on church authority. This is, in part, understandable because these are the people who have the big picture of all of the problems and feel keenly the burden of leadership laid upon them. Under stressful conditions like this, the fine line between leading the church and controlling it tends to blur.

The second category of supporters of greater "linkage" is more difficult to describe. Leading free peoples in emerging democracies or, in the case of North America—exasperated democracies—is a very difficult assignment. It requires advanced skills in mediation and consensus building that are not always present in all leaders. We live in an age when people are rejecting institutional authority and forcing leaders to rely on personal authority that must be earned; it is not automatically given. This sea change is highly traumatic for leaders who have developed either by nature or by nurture an authoritarian management style that worked quite well in times past. Local constituencies in the North American Division have developed effective problem-solving strategies for dealing with this type of leader, but sometimes the higher levels of church structure undermine the process by promoting people just prior to their constituency sessions.

Third, there are people who have a conservative theological agenda that they wish to impose upon the entire church. Many of these people sincerely believe that, if only we could disfellowship a few liberals and clean house in

several college theology departments, all of the people who are currently following conservative dissidents would come flooding back into the main church, bringing their tithe dollars with them.

The 1995 GC Session: One Commissioner's Views

At this point, having analyzed what has already happened on the road to Utrecht concerning reorganization, let me frankly express my own opinions. The thinking of those who advocate greater "linkage" or centralizing control be adopted at the 1995 General Conference Session is well intended but seriously flawed in two key areas. First, they grossly underestimate the diversity of the membership in the North American Division; second, they have little understanding of the psychology and sociology of dissident movements.

Southern College takes pride in having the most conservative theology department in any North American Division college, and I applaud them for this. If we are to keep as many of our young people in Adventist colleges as possible, we need to diversify our offerings, and they meet a very real need in the intellectual marketplace. However, if that is what all Adventist parents want for their children, how does one account for the high enrollment at several of our more liberal colleges in North America? If Southern were the answer for everyone, they could fire all of their recruiters

and simply select students from a long waiting list. Obviously, this is not what is happening.

Also, the people with this mindset do not seem to comprehend that the quickest and most efficient way to destroy a conservative school is to force more liberal students to attend there. Such students tend to refuse to conform and thus undermine the conservative atmosphere. Therefore, if we want all Adventist students to be in Adventist colleges, more liberal schools are necessary to protect the chosen culture of the conservative schools as well as meeting the needs of more liberal students.

Throughout history, dissident movements have usually, if not always, centered around very charismatic, individualistic leaders. The more pages we add to the policy manual, the more we define our creed, the more we centralize authority, the more we tempt creative, charismatic, individualistic people to step outside church structure. When they do step outside, they quickly attract follow-

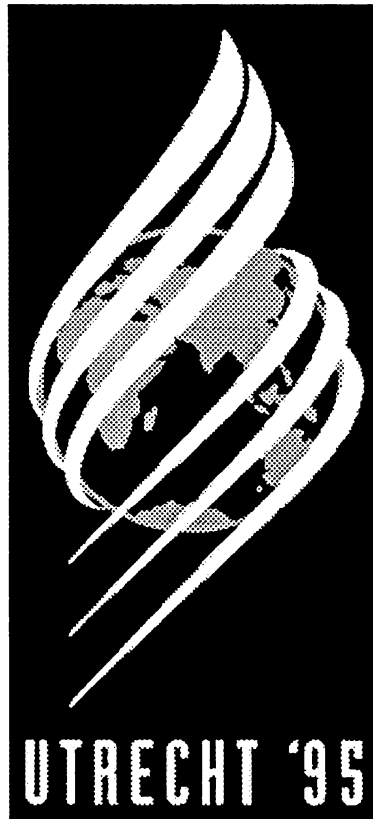
ers who believe in them passionately, give to them generously, and demand no accounting of how the money is spent. They have increased power, increased income, and no one telling them what they can and can't do. "Calling the church to repentance" from outside the system is much easier and more lucrative than attempting to do it from inside. Should the church move to the right, these charismatic, individualistic leaders will just move further to the right, and the dance goes on. An excellent example of this fact is that dissidents are still picketing Southern College

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for having a theology department that they believe is too liberal.

I also wish to respond to two statements Robert Folkenberg made in his "From the President" message for November 28, 1994. One is that the report does not seek to centralize authority at higher levels. There is no possible gymnastic of logic that allows one to ask that higher levels hold credentials for officers of lower levels; that higher levels be able to intervene in lower-level credentials disputes; and that higher levels can merge or dissolve lower-levels and in the next breath claim one isn't advocating the centralizing of authority. Centralizing authority at higher levels of structure in a church has a proper name in any dictionary—it is hierarchical authority. There is no way one can have the increased power without inheriting the label.

The second statement of President Folkenberg's with which I disagree is that people who oppose the report are advocating a congregational form of church governance and that they reject all authority above the local church level. Whatever happened to a representative democracy? Just because someone believes that the higher levels of church structure have all of the power that they need to appropriately lead the church, are they suddenly congregationalists? With all due respect, I believe that those of us at the grassroots level have a far clearer understanding than do the General Conference officers of the forces that are propelling the North American Anglo church toward congregationalism. If I believed in congregationalism, I would *not* be opposing this report.



The move to congregationalism is not a conscious decision by local churches. Rather, individual members, feeling powerless, are shifting their focus and financial support from the leadership of a world church whose concerns, agenda, and view of church authority seem very far removed from the needs and views of their local church.

Our young adults, from the baby boom and baby bust generations, have a very low opinion of institutions in general and hierarchical institutions in particular. They have watched their parents' generation seek to change the corporate church. They have seen their parents fail to downsize bureaucracy so as to get more funds to the local churches around the world. These young North American Adventists see no reason to repeat their parents' mistakes. Instead of seeking to change the corporate church, they will focus their efforts on creating local churches that meet their needs.

To vote a more hierarchical church structure, such as the brethren are proposing, works directly into the hands of those who insist that "leadership just doesn't get the message." It will be tossing gasoline on the coals of congregational thinking and hasten a process that the brethren have every reason to fear.

Those of us on the General Conference nominating committee in 1990 saw Neal Wilson trampled under the thundering hoofs of those rejecting hierarchalism. What was rejected there was not a person but a management style that was perceived as too controlling. The committee made a deliberate choice to move toward what we believed, at that point, would be a more democratic style of administration. As unrestricted North American dollars decrease

and the divisions and other lower levels gather strength and increasing administrative sophistication, the time may come when they will choose to vote less hierarchical authority for the General Conference. It may become more of a coordinating body to facilitate the transfer of ideas and resources. But vote it more authority? Not likely.

As a church family, we are a victim of our own success. We have become one of the most heterogeneous groups on the earth, and that is obviously a key part of God's plan. If he needs to get a crucial message out to a diverse world, it is logical that he would call together a diverse group of people to do the job. Because heterogeneous groups are inherently unstable, leadership is incredibly difficult. Such groups can be led if leaders can keep everyone focused on mission and shared goals. Try to control them too tightly and they shatter into an appalling number of pieces. Only God can give us the wisdom to know how tight is tight enough to get the job done but loose enough to prevent rebellion.

Perhaps the real question is how much authority is necessary to lead the church, and how much is necessary to control it. Pressures for institutional control are always incremental. At what point do we draw the line

and say, "No more; you have enough to power to lead, and if we give you any more, we will start down the slippery slope to control"?

One of the greatest spiritual insights that we learn from parenting is the awful price that God was willing to pay in order to create beings who were free to accept or reject him. As the parents of teenagers, we tend to have moments when we think it would have been so much easier if he had compromised just a bit in the freedom area. Surely church leaders who struggle daily with terrible problems around the world can be forgiven for having nostalgic thoughts about how much easier it would be to lead if they just had more power in certain situations. However, if God was willing to give his own Son to preserve his relationship with free beings, even ones who were clearly in rebellion, should we not be very careful about how we use or abuse freedom and authority in the church?

In the end, each delegate to the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht is going to have to search his or her soul, and pray for wisdom that God will give us the balance we need on this important issue. The good news is that he has promised to do exactly that. We are not alone!