

Church Leaders Defend Greatest Reorganization Since 1901

by Bryan Zervos

Proposals for changing how delegates are selected to the General Conference Session were being adjusted by committees at General Conference Headquarters as late as June 2, 1995. The next day, Sabbath, June 3, world leaders of the Adventist Church met with lay leaders and more than 90 members of the Washington area chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums for three-and-a-half hours of intense discussion of two topics: ordination of women, and what has been called the most far-reaching changes in church organization adopted since 1901.

Athal Tolhurst, undersecretary of the General Conference, said that if the General Conference Session did not approve the request of the North American Division that divisions be permitted to ordain women, and then, if a local conference and/or union in North America went ahead and ordained women pastors, he personally did not think they would be in "apostasy." They would therefore not be subject, he thought, to the discipline from higher levels of church structure just approved at the 1995 Spring Council of the General Conference Executive Committee. However, Neal Wilson, the immediate past president of the General Conference, suggested that perhaps such a conference or union would be in a state of "rebellion."

Wilson also complimented the leadership of the church in the room for making adjustments "this

week" in reorganization proposals. These adjustments would go a considerable way in meeting the concerns of those who objected to proposed major changes in how delegates to the GC Session will be selected.

Tolhurst and Wilson were part of a panel, chaired by Bryan Zervos, that included Bert Beach, director of the General Conference Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, and Susan Sickler, a member of the General Conference Commission on World Church Organization and author of a widely noticed article in *Spectrum* on church structure. Also, Robert Folkenberg, president of the General Conference, attended the meeting. At one point he came to the front to provide an extended explanation of what the church has approved in terms of "linkage" of different levels of church structure.

Folkenberg also underscored that adjustments of church reorganization approved at Spring Council were continuing. He specifically agreed with Susan Sickler that possible action by the General Conference to discipline or even dissolve a union probably ought to be taken by the General Conference Session, not just the General Conference Executive Committee. After all, the session was the constituency meeting of the General Conference. However, Folkenberg and Sickler clearly continued to disagree as to whether the changes in church structure already approved made the

Adventist Church more hierarchical.

On the ordination of women, Folkenberg said that for those in the room—who he assumed favored the ordination of women—there was good news and bad news. The good news was that an increasing number of leaders and members outside the United States were beginning to realize how strongly some in America felt about ordaining women as pastors. The bad news was that, although he was not predicting how the vote at the General Conference would go, the proposal from North America that divisions be permitted to proceed to ordain women may be "about 10 years too early."

Charles Scriven, president of Columbia Union College, challenged the president of the General Conference to speak out at the GC Session and to lead the Adventist Church to understand that treating women fairly, including their ordination, was a part of "what it meant to follow the gospel." Roy Branson, director of the Washington Institute, warned that the demoralizing consequences in North America would be far greater than many leaders realized, if the General Conference Session, in effect, officially declared that simply because of a person's gender the Adventist Church was required to discriminate against her. It would cause the same "moral pain" as the church officially requiring that certain Adventist preachers, no matter how committed or effective, must never be ordained simply because they were black.

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