



Congregationalism— Our SDA Future?

The power of the General Conference will shrink to a small, coordinating body. The Holy Spirit will hold us together.

by Susan Sickler

CONGREGATIONALISM—THE MOST OBSCENE WORD in the Seventh-day Adventist administrative vocabulary. The tone of voice with which it is uttered is the same as one would use to announce a major outbreak of the Eboli virus. It is widely accepted that if congregationalism is not the end of the world, it is, at the very least, the end of the church.

To understand this panic, it is necessary to look at the power structure of the Adventist Church. After my five years of wandering in the structural wilderness of two General Conference Governance Commissions, two concepts stand out. First, the power structure is actually very fragile. That is why administrators are so paranoid about anything that threatens it. Second, the General Conference rests on just two things: (1) the consent of the governed, and (2) the freely given North American Division tithe dollar.

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If we feel that we have created an administrative monster, we must remember it is definitely *our* monster. Without our financial support it would cease to exist. The likelihood of the rest of the world church giving generously to support a large, centralized structure is not great. Many members outside North America resent what they feel to be colonial aspects of Adventism. Ironically, many of those members in the North American Division pleading for streamlining of the structure have been the very same people paying the bills to keep the current structure in place. We give the structure its power, then complain that it has power.

I would suggest that the church changes in only three ways. Most dramatically and most expensively, someone files a lawsuit and wins—as in the Pacific Press case. Second, policies ignored long enough by enough people quietly disappear. They may remain on the books, but no one attempts to enforce them; in fact, they no longer exist. The last, and by far the most common way, that change comes is that we cannot meet a payroll.

Church authority means vastly different things in different parts of the world. If you are a high church official, come from a Catholic tradition, or live in a dictatorship, you tend to have a high view of church authority. If you come from a country with generations of democracy or with a Protestant tradition, your view of church authority will be much lower. Currently, the votes in the General Conference Committee or Session come from areas with a high view of church authority; the money comes from areas with a low view of church authority. This is a surefire recipe for gridlock.

Of course, in a volunteer organization such as a church, the only real authority is moral authority. For many years now, the trend in all organizations has been away from institutional authority and toward personal authority. This is why what happened in Utrecht was so devastating to church authority. North Americans grew up with Uncle Arthur assuring them that the most important value in life was to stand for the right though the heavens fall. His readers always trusted God to take care of the consequences. At the Utrecht General Conference Session, we listened to many of our leaders, whom we knew were deeply convicted that ordaining women was the morally right thing to do, tell us no. When it came to deciding between doing what we all believed to be morally right and keeping the church together, church officials chose unity as the highest good. So much for the idea that if we do what is morally right we can trust God to take care of the consequences. Any

organization that values loyalty more than it values integrity will soon find that it has neither.

Is the megatrend toward congregationalism in the North American Division a spiritual problem, or is it what one high church official is fond of calling “collective selfishness”? I believe congregationalism is not a spirituality issue. Congregationalism arises for a variety of reasons.

By far the strongest influence is history. Loren Mead, in his excellent book, *The Once*

And Future Church (The Alban Institute, 1991), divides the history of the Christian church into three periods.

In the Apostolic period, just after Christ's ascension, church members told everyone about Jesus. They had close-knit local congregations, with only a loose association of churches to coordinate the mission of the individual members and apostles.

Loren says that, in the longest historical

period, the heyday of institutional religion, people saw mission as something that was done far away from the local church, by professionals hired by church institutions. The role of the local church was to provide money and personnel for the mission fields.

The third model, says Loren, returns us to the Apostolic period. The church is once again local, something in which every member participates. This third model needs fewer institutions and redeploys financial emphasis to the local church level for “the equipping of the saints” for mission, and for the nurture of new members.

So, is this the end of the church as we know it? I don't think so. The trend toward congregationalism will be tempered; the structure will shrink enormously, and the power of the General Conference will dwindle. The Holy Spirit, surely, has ways of holding us together that are cheaper and more effective than any we have discovered so far.

I suggest that the Adventist Church has gone through all of those paradigms in its 150-year history. Early Adventist pioneers told their friends and neighbors about the Second Coming. Then Adventists sent professionals to operate foreign missions. Now, in the third stage, we are refocusing on our friends and neighbors. But it costs money to have attractive churches with the variety of programs that meet the needs of people.

Another major reason for congregationalism in North America is the attempt of all healthy organizations to find balance. High church officials are actually producing just what they fear most.

An additional reason for congregationalism is cultural diversity. Some members find it stressful to associate with members from a different culture. They tend to withdraw into a group where they feel more comfortable. Sometimes this has a racial component.

Congregationalism also arises from American Adventists suffering compassion fatigue. We feel that we give and give and give into the black hole of Adventism's world problems, but there seems to be no end, no progress, and no gratitude. In many cases, there is outright resentment. More and more American Adventists declare that they no longer need that grief in their lives. Furthermore, the changing demographics of the membership in the North American Division means that fewer people have less financial resources to pay the bills for increasing needs. The North American Division is far more of a financial mission field than it used to be.

Finally, congregationalism has increased in North America because more members have begun to give up on the system. They see it as something that causes problems,

rather than solving them. The younger generation in particular sees very little use for much of the structure, and has very little interest in funding it.

It is not local churches that are going congregational, but individuals. This is far harder to combat. Individuals are redirecting their tithe funds to local church and school needs. They believe that tithing is a moral issue, but distribution of those tithe dollars is open to prayerful individual interpretation.

For the church to pressure pastors to fight the trend toward congregationalism is probably useless. Many pastors are sick and tired of never having enough money to carry out their dreams for local mission. Off the record, many pastors are not inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth. Besides, tracking just who pays a "faithful tithe" would require all members to submit their IRS forms, which would meet with mass rebellion. Scattered attempts to get pastors to submit such documentation has already caused serious conflict.

So, is this the end of the church as we know it? I don't think so. The trend toward congregationalism, like all other trends, will be tempered. Members in the North American Division will never go to the extreme of a truly congregational structure. Underneath all their frustrations, they do have a world view. In the years to come, the structure will shrink enormously, and the power of the General Conference will dwindle. There will simply be little money to pass on, so fewer employees needed to distribute it. Those who think that this will automatically destroy the church may be in for a surprise. Unity is far more a spiritual quality than an administrative policy. The Holy Spirit, surely, has ways of holding us together that are far cheaper and more effective than anything we have discovered so far.