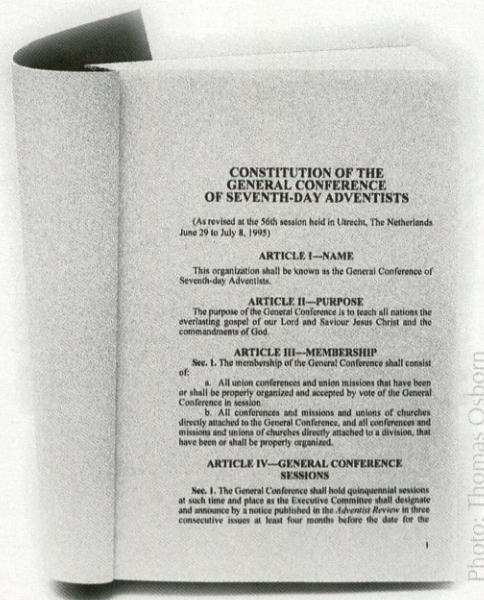


One Size Fits All?

Church Manual Changes at the Toronto Session

by John Brunt



INTRODUCTION

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church members are no longer disfellowshipped, they are “removed from membership.” We no longer have an “outline” of fundamental beliefs, but a “summary.” And treasurers are no longer instructed to paste invoices on ledger sheets. These are only a few of many less-than-earthshaking revisions that delegates to the Toronto General Conference voted to incorporate in the *Church Manual*.

Significant changes also occurred, however. The most important of these was the adoption of a new chapter in the *Church Manual* on divorce and remarriage. After being discussed for hours, and referred back to committee for reappearance at the 2005 General Conference Session in St. Louis, the proposal rose from the ashes like a phoenix on the final day to become a part of the newly revised *Church Manual*.

The *Church Manual* can only be revised each five years when delegates come together in full session, although this policy was partially modified at this General Conference. This change creates a cumbersome process that raises questions about the role and function of the *Church Manual*. Lowell Cooper, general vice president of the General Conference and chair of the *Church Manual* Committee, used an interesting metaphor in his introduction to the discussion on *Church Manual* issues. He said that the *Church Manual* is like a baptismal robe, where one size fits all.¹ Said Cooper, “It is made to fit everybody, and therefore, in any one particular situation it may not seem to fit very comfortably, but it is one of the instruments by which we affirm and express our worldwide oneness.”

The intensity of the discussion that surrounds many of the *Church Manual* issues, especially those that relate to marriage and divorce, raises questions about whether a complex, global church such as ours can truly have one *Manual* where one size fits everyone. Is it possible for such detailed instructions as appear in the *Manual* to be an instrument of worldwide oneness, or does it become an instrument of worldwide contention?

We will withhold reflection on these questions until we have surveyed what happened in the discussions in Toronto relating to the *Church Manual*. We will first look at the most important issue, the "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage" chapter that was adopted, move on to issues relating to the role and function of the *Church Manual*, then survey two additional items. Finally, we will offer some concluding reflections.

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

History and Background

On the fourth of July 1995, during the General Conference Session in Utrecht, The Netherlands, Gerald Winslow, dean of the Faculty of Religion at Loma Linda University, moved that a commission from the world field be formed to study the issue of marriage and divorce, suggest revisions to the *Church Manual*, and report back to the General Conference in 2000.

The motion passed and a commission was formed. It was chaired by Matthew Bediako, who was at that time a general vice president of the General Conference and has now been elected General Conference secretary. A report of this commission was made in April 1999 that was sent to the General Conference Committee and then to the Annual Council. Winslow expressed disappointment that not all of the provisions of the commission document were accepted, but nevertheless felt that the proposals from Annual Council and the *Church Manual* Committee to the General Conference were an improvement over the present chapter in the *Manual*.

The proposed chapter is not a radical change from present wording in the *Church Manual*, but it does offer the following modifications. First, it begins with a new statement of biblical and theological background on marriage and divorce that puts the rules of the *Manual* into a broader context, and ends

with a new section on the Church's responsibility to support families. These new sections give the chapter a quite different tone.

As for specifics, incest and child sexual abuse are included as sexual perversions that should be included in the Greek term *porneia* (fornication or sexual infidelity) in Matthew 5, which limits the right of divorce and remarriage to *porneia* committed by the spouse. The new proposal also adds the abandonment of a believer by an unbelieving spouse as grounds for divorce. Paul clearly allows for this in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, a passage that has not received attention in the *Church Manual* in the past. In addition, much of the language has been changed to produce a more redemptive tone. For instance, the document no longer speaks about innocent and guilty parties.

Due to the complexity of the debate we will begin with a discussion of procedure, then move to issues of content.

Procedure

Even before the proposed new chapter on marriage and divorce was introduced on Tuesday morning of the session, procedural controversy began. During the session on Monday afternoon, Larry Caviness, president of the Southern California Conference, rose to request that the commission document itself, not merely the proposed *Church Manual* revisions, be presented to the delegates.² He then asked if this should be made a motion.

Ironically, Matthew Bediako, who chaired the commission, was then chairing the session and ruled that the motion was not in order; what would be discussed was already in the agenda books. Caviness countered that if the delegates had the commission report, they would be better informed on background material related to the issue. He asked if it would be possible for the delegates to have a copy of the commission report.

Bediako responded that commissions generally report to the Administrative Committee of the General Conference (ADCOM), which it had done, and that it would not be appropriate to give the delegates the commission report.

Alvin Kibble supported Larry Caviness's request. Said Kibble: "This is a very sensitive issue that many of us feel needs to be considered very carefully and thoughtfully before a final decision is made, and in all due respect to our chair, we would like to ask that it be

given further consideration.”³

Chair Bediako asked for patience and requested that delegates wait until the issue arose the next day. Kibble responded that there would be logistic constraints in making the document available, so if it were to be done the night would be needed to prepare the document. Delegate Brian Bull argued that ADCOM had not appointed the commission, but that the General Conference in session had. Therefore, the commission report should logically come back to the session. The chair finally said that he would consult and that a decision would be announced on Tuesday.

On Tuesday morning, the president of the General Conference, Jan Paulsen, rose and expressed his belief that there are no secrets in the Church. The commission report was in the public domain and the leaders would be happy to let delegates see it. However, Paulsen plead that delegates not refer to it, because that particular document was not under consideration. They should respond instead to the proposal from the *Church Manual* committee; matters would be confused if the delegates discussed two documents on the floor at the same time.⁴ At that point, the chair, General Conference vice president Robert Kloosterhuis said that he was ready to receive suggestions from the assembly. Gerald Winslow, who had made the initial motion five years earlier, moved that the report be made available to delegates who requested it. This motion was seconded and voted.

The discussion of the actual document began. Lowell Cooper, chair of the *Church Manual* Committee, suggested what appeared to be a reasonable procedure. First, the document would be read, which would allow delegates to become familiar with its scope, tone, and flow. After that, time would be set aside for questions, answers, and comments, but no motions would be accepted. After a period of input, the document would be placed formally before the body for discussion and approval.⁵

Robert Kloosterhuis, who chaired this particular session, followed this procedure. The document was read, then a number of general comments were made. Mario Veloso, secretary of the *Church Manual* Committee, moved adoption of the document and delegates began to work through it section by section offering amendments, three of which passed.

However, when discussion continued on Wednesday morning, the new chair, outgoing North American Division president Al McClure, changed the procedure. He suggested that action taken at the beginning of the session prevented changes from being made

from the floor due to the difficulty of editing a document in such a large group. Furthermore, he said that delegates were limited to accepting or referring the document. He would not allow individual items to be referred, only the whole.

This created a frustrating situation. Delegates could make speeches regarding specific issues but could not vote to amend or refer specifics. Therefore, committee members would lack guidance as to the significance of speeches. Would the words represent the will of the delegates or only the opinion of one person? No one knew. The whole session seemed unproductive in terms of moving toward any kind of vote.

Finally, one delegate suggested that the procedure seemed destined to secure the document's rejection, because, without the ability to amend, the delegates would probably defeat it. The chair assured the delegate that he did not intend such a purpose, but that he was simply trying to follow the voted procedure. A motion was then made to rescind the adopted procedure and allow individual amendments. The chair ruled that the motion to rescind required a two-thirds majority, which it failed to receive, and therefore lost.

At the Wednesday afternoon session, yet another chair presided, General Conference vice president Calvin Rock. Rock began by confessing that there had not been a vote to disallow amendments from the floor—it was only a suggestion made on the first night. He said that the chair for the Wednesday morning session had adopted the rule, which was his right, but that the session had not voted it as a policy. Rock then went on to admit that the body was in something of a dilemma. How would it arrive at a vote? If it approved the document, it would ratify a document to which delegates had made many suggestions and referrals, but that was not what the body wanted.

Rock gave the delegates two options. On one hand, they could go on as they had in the morning, expecting the whole matter to be referred back to delegates later to absorb all of the suggestions. This would clearly take longer than possible during the current session and require reconsideration at the next General Conference Session in 2005.

The second option was to allow amendments and work through the document so that delegates could vote on the final document. Here, too, Rock was less than encouraging that the process could be finished during the course of the session. He then allowed about one hour of discussion about the options, without allowing any motions.

Finally, Brian Bull moved that the amendments

be accepted, that discussion be allowed on each amendment, and that if two-thirds of the delegates approved, discussion be ended. If it did not end, ten more delegates would be allowed to speak and they would again strive for closure. This motion was defeated. Peter Roennfeldt then moved to refer the entire document back to the *Church Manual* Committee. In response, Lowell Cooper asked if it should come back at this session or the next, to which Roennfeldt responded in 2005. After some discussion about the makeup of the committee over the next five years—especially in terms of gender and age—delegates voted to refer the entire document back to the *Church Manual* Committee for reappearance in 2005. Apparently, no changes would be made at this session, and five more years would pass before any of the commission's work would come to fruition.

However, the end of the session brought a dramatic turnaround. On Thursday afternoon, Australian delegate Gary Hodgkin announced that the following morning he planned to enter a motion to rescind the referral of the proposed chapter on marriage and divorce and asked that the revised chapter be considered. The chair ruled that course of action permissible, and the following morning the motion to rescind was put forth. With amazingly little debate and in a surprisingly short time, delegates voted to adopt the document as presented, with the three minor revisions made on Tuesday afternoon. Thus, the newly revised chapter will appear in the forthcoming edition of the *Church Manual*.

Issues of Content

It is hardly surprising that two sides attacked the new chapter. Some felt it did not go far enough to change the Church's long-standing policies, whereas others considered it too radical a departure from the past.

On the former side, delegate James Dick suggested that the first part of the document was much more redemptive and positive, but that the second half retained the statement's former legislative attitude. He argued that the second half of the commission's document would have been much better. Bill Richardson, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Andrews University, spoke to the difficulty of linking legislation to redemption, and called for dealing with individuals in a pastoral and personal way. Several delegates objected to the language already present in the *Manual* that requires some who violate marriage

vows to be removed from membership—even if there is evidence of repentance—because of the public reproach they bring on the cause of God.

On the other hand, other delegates felt that the policy in the newly revised chapter lowered standards. Paul Ratsara said, "This document is no other than a way of introducing another grounds for divorce and remarriage." After citing its inclusion of abandonment by the unbelieving partner, in accordance with 1 Corinthians 7, he added, "So this document, if adopted, will lower the standards of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."⁶

Perhaps the greatest objections arose against inclusion of Paul's counsel in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. Although the passage clearly permits divorce whenever an unbelieving spouse leaves a believer, many delegates balked, as if Paul's standards are not high enough for the *Church Manual*. Manuel Torilla Jr. said that, clearly, the only ground for divorce that Ellen White permits is adultery. John Fowler of the General Conference Education Department argued that the passage in Corinthians is simply too difficult to understand or to exegete, and that to allow abandonment by an unbelieving partner as grounds for divorce carried the passage too far and read too much into it.

Some even objected to the redemptive tone and affirmation of equality in marriage. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, a worker in the Michigan Conference but a delegate from Africa, accused the document of "fuzzy thinking" by presenting a view of partnership in marriage that was not biblical and that opened the way for women's ordination. According to him, the document introduced a view of marriage that did not recognize distinctive roles that God had instituted.

In spite of objections from both sides, however, only three small revisions were made in the chapter as proposed by the *Church Manual* Committee. (1) At the beginning of the document, the word "still" was deleted from the following sentence: "Marriage is a divine institution established by God himself before the Fall when everything, including marriage, was still very good." (2) A text in parentheses that supported the idea of partnership in marriage, Ephesians 5:22-28, was expanded to include Ephesians 5:21, as well. (3) The following sentence was deleted: "As part of the curse of sin, rulership was given to the husband." Ironically, some objected to this sentence because it gave rulership to the husband at all, whereas others objected because it relegated the husband's leadership to the period after the Fall, rather than making it God's original intention at Creation.

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH MANUAL

We have already mentioned Lowell Cooper's metaphor of the *Church Manual* as a baptismal robe where one size fits all. Discussion at the session proved that one size does not, in fact, fit everyone comfortably. Considerable discussion centered on the role of the *Manual* itself. The first proposed revision suggested a new chapter entitled "Church Manual Authority." Included was a sentence that read: "The covenanted authority of the *Church Manual* makes its content binding for every local church/company and every level of its organization throughout the world."⁷ This statement was eventually referred back to the committee and the words "binding authority" were deleted from the revised proposal that actually passed.

These words, however, enabled delegates to express opposing views on the reach of the *Church Manual*. On one hand, delegate Dan Jackson argued that, by making the contents of the *Manual* binding on every congregation, the Church might inadvertently promote Congregationalism because churches would simply ignore the *Manual* if not given sufficient ability to exercise discretion. On the other hand, Onaolapo Ajibade argued that there can be no unity unless provisions of the *Church Manual* are binding on all Adventist congregations throughout the world.

Some delegates expected the *Manual* to provide total uniformity. Violeto Bocala expressed discomfort with permission that the *Manual* gives congregations to decide whether to elect officers for either one or two years. On the other side, during the discussion on divorce and remarriage Herman Bauman expressed a different kind of expectation, arguing that it was unrealistic to expect members from the western United States to western Africa and from South America to South Dakota to do things exactly the same. Bauman suggested that general statements could be made in the basic *Manual*, followed by more detailed provisions in division supplements.

An interesting example of difficulties encountered when trying to make one size fit all arose on Sunday afternoon, when a seemingly intuitive and self-evident statement was discussed. The statement simply said that only church members could be church officers. Exception was made for licensed and credentialed ministers who pastored in a district.

Immediately, however, delegates raised possible

exceptions. Ken Corkum, a district pastor, pointed out that his spouse could only hold membership in one of the churches he pastors, yet her talents are desired by all of them and all want her to hold office. Andrea Luxton, a college president, pointed out that colleges like to include students as church officers, even though many do not transfer membership. Delegate Martin Feldbush added that there are women who pastor districts, but that often they are commissioned rather than licensed or credentialed as ministers. Another pastor said that his congregation includes graduate students from other countries who do not wish to transfer membership, yet are valuable leaders in their adopted church. So complicated did this seemingly obvious statement become that it was eventually referred back to the committee.

One action taken to address the challenge of covering an entire world church in one *Church Manual* was to separate some of its material and place it at the end of chapters as explanatory material, rather than as voted *Church Manual* policy. Thus, in the future the entire General Conference in session will not need to consider changes in each tiny detail.

OTHER INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

It would be impossible to cover all of the discussions about and changes made in the *Church Manual* at this session. At the beginning, delegates received a notebook of business meeting agenda items. Items 401-89 on pages 70-240 covered proposed changes to the *Church Manual*, most of which were voted. Topics ranged from the marriage and divorce policy to the role of church officers and the way treasurers of local churches make reports. Many of these proposals were voted with no discussion. What follows are examples of two items that delegates debated.

The Remnant Church

Delegate Sigrid Schulz questioned the statement that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church. He argued that other Christians will also be in heaven and proposed changing the *Church Manual* to read, "I accept and believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is part of the remnant church." Several delegates objected strenuously, however. Oregon Conference president Alf Birch suggested that it was not appropriate to discuss this issue be-

cause the original statement represented one of the Church's fundamental doctrines. The amendment was overwhelmingly defeated. Ron Bissell, from the SDA seminary in the Philippines, then offered another amendment that would have added the word "visible" in front of "remnant." However, Lassew Raelly, outgoing president of the Eastern Africa Division, countered that the new amendment simply restated the one that delegates had just defeated, and that amendment failed, as well.

Age for Baptism

The following new statement was also proposed for the *Manual*: "While there is no stated minimum age for baptism, it is recommended that children who express a desire to be baptized should be recognized and encouraged by including them in Bible study classes which may lead to baptism when appropriate."⁸ Some felt that this would open the way for baptism at any age. Others objected to the word "minimum." Finally, Calvin Rock proposed a compromise that passed.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It is clear that revising a *Church Manual* in a committee that includes hundreds of delegates can be messy and unwieldy. Yet in some ways it can also be inspiring, for seldom in the world does one see people from many different nations sitting together discussing issues often central to their values, values that bind them together as a community.

Part of the process was intensely interesting, yet part was incredibly tedious and boring. One afternoon, I sat in the press box next to a communication intern, a college student, who said, "This is so boring. I need a remote to fast forward through it." At least she stayed through the discussion, but many delegates did not. At some sessions, there were as few as four hundred out of a possible two thousand who remained in attendance.⁹

The quality of leadership among session chairs varied greatly. Some were always on top of complex issues and amendments, and others were not. Sitting beside the presiding chair, ready to answer questions, was Lowell Cooper, chair of the *Church Manual* Committee, who always seemed well informed and on top of the issues, no matter how complex.

Clearly, the move to put some of the *Church*

Manual material in a secondary category is on the right track. However, it is hard not to wonder whether *enough* has been placed in that category. As the Church becomes more global and complex, it needs to maintain unity, but unity can never be a matter of uniform details in a multicultural world. As Lowell Cooper repeatedly reminded delegates, the *Manual* has an educative function necessary and desirable in a world church. Yet delegate Dan Jackson, who expressed concern that too much uniformity could bring about the opposite reaction and promote congregationalism, also expressed a legitimate concern.

Unless our unity is based on common commitment to Jesus Christ, the teaching of his word, and our commitment to love each other and join each other in fulfilling Jesus' mission to the world, no amount of uniformity in practice can achieve unity. Perhaps the day will come when a proposal such as Herman Bauman's—for a much smaller *Church Manual* with division supplements—might prove helpful.

I am a large person who often finds that clothing advertised as "one size fits all" does not actually fit me. My impression is that if the *Church Manual* will be truly a one-size-fits-all document, it will need more elastic than it now has.

Notes and References

1. This article is based on my own notes at the session and on *Bulletins* issued by the *Adventist Review*. Footnotes refer to issue number (ten in all) of the *Bulletin* and its page. Lowell Cooper's initial speech can be seen in *Bulletin* 4: 29. Readers can find summaries of discussions in each business session and a list of all actions at the *Adventist Review* Web site <www.adventistreview.org>.

2. *Bulletin* 7: 22.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 8: 23.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 8: 24.

7. *Ibid.*, 4: 29.

8. *Ibid.*, 4: 30.

9. It is true that other committees, such as the 194-member Nominating Committee, also met during the business sessions, but such occurrences account for only a minority of the absent delegates.

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