

Thoughts After the Andrews March Madness

More care goes into the choosing of an elementary school principal than for the highest positions in the Church,” Richard Osborn, president of Pacific Union College, told fellow members of the General Conference Executive Committee a few weeks before the General Conference Session in 2005. “The higher you go in the Church, the less process is used in the selection of leaders.”

Certainly, the process for picking church leaders at the union and division levels is very different from the processes proscribed in the education or business communities. And the differences create misunderstandings at the election of all leaders.

Academic and lay business leaders find fault with the simple process that must be shoehorned into a constituency session that often leaves little or no time for consideration of performance reviews, interviews for multiple candidates, or discussion of what personal characteristics would best help the organization move in new directions. Some church officials, accustomed to the streamlined processes that they regularly manage by virtue of their positions, feel that they also have the right to overrule the more elaborate processes required within the academic community and thereby create tensions and resentment.

The board chair and vice chair threw the Andrews University board and the university community into a tailspin in March when they abruptly asked for the resignation of President Niels-Erik Andreasen in the middle of the board meeting on March 6. Although concerns had been expressed about academic and financial issues, there was no board-wide discussion of change in presidential leadership. Just that morning, the president had presented strategic plans for solving key financial issues. The General Conference treasurer had commented that the university's finances seemed to have improved. Some board members thought the turnaround they sought was under way.

But without formal board discussion, Board Chair

Gary Karst and Vice Chair Walter Wright went to President Andreasen during the noon hour and told him it was time for him to resign. They came back to the afternoon board meeting with his resignation letter in hand. When they asked for a board vote to accept the resignation, they got it.

The next day an e-mail message was circulated to the board asking for approval of an interim president—a retired former General Conference vice president. When lay board members realized that Andreasen had been asked to resign and that he had not volunteered to do so, they asked for the issue to be readdressed. In a conference call on March 9, Andreasen was asked to stay until the end of the school year, eliminating the immediate need for an interim president. Over the next couple weeks, intense discussions continued, and on March 30, Andreasen was reelected.

At the campus assembly session where his reelection was announced, Andreasen was given a standing ovation, and any hint of difficulty between him and board chair Gary Karst was erased by the embrace that they gave each other on stage.

But why had the whole scenario taken place? Did the board chair and vice chair feel that they had the power to ask for his resignation without consulting the board? On campus, there was initial speculation of scandal, given the abruptness of the action, but with Andreasen's reinstatement, the scandal rumors

Continued on page 79...

died. Lay board members spent the month muttering about governance issues.

The thirty-eight member Andrews University board is a mini-General Conference Executive Committee composed of all three General Conference officers (president, secretary, and treasurer), two general vice presidents, four division presidents, four union conference presidents, five local conference presidents, the secretary and educational director of the Lake Union, and a president of the Adventist Midwest Healthcare Corporation, plus six nonvoting church advisers (the rest of the Union Conference presidents and the ADRA president). There are only eleven lay members, less than one-third of the total board.

With the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary a part of the university and its designation as a General Conference institution, a significant proportion of the board seats go to people who represent church entities. Thus, the board can become the place for political battles that have more to do with the institutional church than with the core function of the university in providing education.

In his book, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, management expert Peter Drucker says, "Over the door to the nonprofit's boardroom there should be an inscription in big letters that says: Membership on this board is not power, it is responsibility. . . . [B]oard membership means responsibility not just to the organization but to the board itself, to the staff, and to the institution's mission" (158).

When church officials who sit on many boards view the colleges as serving only the corporate purposes in their corner of the Church, they betray the concept of trusteeship. Trustees exist to serve the educational institution. At General Conference institutions, in particular, the conflicts of interest between institutions can be particularly jarring.

Union conference presidents chair the boards of the colleges in their territories. When a General Conference institution, like Andrews University or Loma Linda University, is added to their list of responsibilities, which institution's needs come first, the college in their own territory or the General Conference institution? In unions with more than one college, which one takes priority? And do Adventist colleges exist solely to fill the

employment needs of the denomination? Or do colleges also help the Church serve society by providing educated Christians dedicated to service.

Managing the Non-Profit Organization reports a conversation between David Hubbard, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, and Peter Drucker about effective boards. In it, Hubbard says, "Peter, you've stressed so much that the process is essential to the quality of the product. And the process of trusteeship is one of the central processes in organizational life. The process of leadership with the board is as central to the successful outcome—hospital care or relief—as any other single task. . . . An organization hasn't come anywhere near its full potential unless it sees the building of a great and effective board as part of the ministry of that organization" (178, 179).

When board chairs act unilaterally to manipulate presidents—or to overstep the election processes—without consulting the boards they serve, they injure themselves, the candidates, the boards, the institutions, and the process that has been created to protect all of them from such disasters. Andrews is not the only institution to have experienced this problem, it is simply the latest.

At this time when the General Conference has established a commission to look at the structure of the Church, perhaps it should also address the checks and balances necessary at every level of the organization for the effective ministry of all.

Bonnie Dwyer
Editor

Continued from page 11...

find solutions that would preserve the ultimate authority of Scripture, but also draw into thoughtful dialogue those who interpret scientific evidence differently.

When the week came to an end, the consensus was that something special had happened and that the symposium could serve as a model for other gatherings within a broad and diverse church. When people meet and worship and eat and tour together, they discover connections and bonds between heart and soul that transcend theological or philosophical differences. Those core beliefs that hold Adventists together far outweigh stances that sometimes divide them.

Dan Smith is senior pastor of the La Sierra University Church of Seventh-day Adventists in Riverside, California.