



Troubled Waters in South Africa

By Eric Webster

In the fall 2005 issue of *Spectrum*, I presented a brief report of the session of the Southern Africa Union Conference held in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on Sunday November 20, 2005. At that time, action was taken on the basis of GC Policy B 65 05 to amalgamate two conferences in the south into one conference, and two in the north into one conference.

The session adopted this action by a vote of 163 to 28. This despite the fact that in the north the Transvaal Conference (traditionally white, but also serving the coloured and Indian churches and having several hundred black members) had already turned down a merger proposal 56 percent to 44 percent.

In the south, the Cape Conference (traditionally white but having many coloured and black members) had agreed to a merger 56 percent to 46 percent. However, the Cape Conference had to agree to the merger by at least 66 percent for the action to be constitutional.

Perhaps in desperation, with pressure from the world Church and from large segments of the Church in South Africa, the union grasped at Policy B 65 05 as a possible solution to the logjam. Here is the text of that policy:

B 65 05 Territorial Adjustments or Resizing of Territories.

1. If it is proposed to make territorial adjustments between local fields or between unions, or to resize the territorial units, the proposal shall be considered by the executive committee of the next higher administrative organization, at a time when a full representation of the territories and organizations involved is present.

2. If the proposal is approved by the executive committee of the next higher level of church organization, the proposal shall then be routed to the executive committee of the division, in the case of local fields, and of the General Conference, in the case of union territories, where, in each case, the final decision shall be made.

3. If the territory of a conference or union conference is involved, the administration of the next higher organization shall use its discretion to examine constitutions and legal requirements to determine whether a constituency meeting should be called and, if so, at what point (s) in the procedure.

At the union session, dates were set for a combined session in the south on Sunday, March 19, and for one in the north on Sunday, March 26.

The two sessions were dramatically different. In the south, the two conferences merged successfully into one new conference after a lengthy day of deliberation. In the north, the

session ended abruptly almost before it began.

The session in the south was held outside Port Elizabeth, in a large new complex called Vulindlela. Some 720 delegates registered on Sunday morning. Of these, 483 represented the 277 churches in the Southern Hope Conference (serving the blacks and the coloureds); 228 delegates represented the 46 churches and 11 companies in the Cape Conference (traditionally white but with coloured and black members, too); and 9 delegates from a portion of the Trans-Orange Conference represented 6 churches.

After the devotions, the session proceeded to form the organizing committee, which numbered about 250. Because of its size and language diversity, the committee was cumbersome, but the spirit was good.

The nominating committee did not get going well until the afternoon, and toward the end of the day it brought in its first report. The three officers it reported represented the three major segments of the church: L. M. Mbaza, a black man, as the new conference president; S. Zinn, a coloured man, as the secretary; and Cliff Glass, a white man, as the treasurer.

A spirit of patience and goodwill could be felt among the delegates as they waited for reports from the nominating committee. During the wait, many departments of the Church gave

interesting short reports. Many delegates stayed on until the end. The meeting finally closed on a good note at 11:45 p.m.

It remains to be seen whether this new conference will succeed. Much depends on the leadership of the new officers and the executive committee. The conference president stated his intention to cater to every segment of the conference constituency. This is a good omen.

It must be remembered that delegates who attended this session were willing to give the new conference an opportunity to succeed. Many were happy to forge a new dispensation. Members of the former Cape Conference dissatisfied with the venture were unwilling to be delegates. In fact, two churches did not send delegates. Furthermore, there are pockets of resistance scattered throughout the former Cape Conference. Many are still perplexed that the constitution of the former Cape Conference calls for a vote of dissolution and the allocation of its assets.

The session in the north, held in the Saint Georges Hotel near Pretoria on Sunday, March 26, had a more dramatic and unexpected outcome. The Transvaal Conference (representing white, coloured, and Indian churches) registered 279 delegates, and the Trans-Orange Conference (representing black churches) registered 304 delegates. Although the black conference has a membership of more than twenty-two thousand compared to eleven thousand in the Transvaal Conference, it was agreed that these two conferences would each limit themselves to 335 delegates.

As the session got underway, union president Francois Louw asked the two conference secretaries to proceed with seating the delegates. As this

began, one of the delegates from the black conference stepped to the microphone. He was a lawyer and wished to address the question of the proposed constitution. He evidently had concerns about it. The union president turned down his request for the floor, stating that the delegates needed to be seated first. The black delegate insisted that there was a problem with the constitution and wished to speak. Again, he was refused.

A second black delegate, another lawyer, took to the floor and expressed his desire to speak to the same concern. He, too, was turned down. A third delegate from the black conference arose and moved to the microphone. When he, too, was refused permission to speak, he and his two predecessors turned around and started walking to the exit door. About eighty delegates from the black conference followed. This was a dramatic moment; one sensed that the session was disintegrating before it had even begun.

Some of these delegates thronged the exit and some were in the foyer, and the atmosphere was noisy and tense. The remaining delegates from both conferences sat in stunned silence. After some minutes, the departing delegates regrouped and started to sing as they crowded around the exit. Sitting close to the back, I got up and walked to the exit. I stood next to one of the black delegates and put my arm around his shoulder as the group started to sing a Christian freedom song: "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less."

At the same time, these delegates started to surge forward down the side of the hall and onto the stage singing and carrying banners, one of which read, "No to MPG—Yes to Cultural Conference." The union president called for order and announced a break

in proceedings for thirty minutes.

At the conclusion of that thirty-minute period, the division president, Paul Ratsara, and the general conference vice president, Gary Karst, made statements. The gist of their reaction was that a way forward would be found, but that it was best to halt proceedings for the day. Karst wished that all the delegates had been able to witness how groups from the two conferences had wrestled and prayed over the proposed constitution and had often been willing to make concessions.

The session declared at an end, some delegates began to leave, whereas others stayed to enjoy the meal prepared for them and to visit with each other.

What happened? What lay behind the unhappiness of this large group of black delegates from the Trans-Orange Conference?

Prior to this session, a committee comprised of representatives from the Transvaal Conference and the Trans-Orange Conference had met to work out a proposed constitution for the combined conference. Upon the suggestion of the division, certain provisions were placed in this constitution that would have ensured care of minority groups (white, coloured, and Indian).

During the few weeks before the March 26 session, there was insufficient opportunity to familiarize everyone with this proposed constitution. Several lay members of the Trans-Orange Conference became concerned about a provision in the constitution that some saw as entrenching separation, or apartheid, and they approached the Trans-

Orange Conference leadership to express concern. The parties agreed to hold a special meeting of delegates on the Saturday night prior to the session. But a few days before, the Trans-Orange Conference called it off on the advice of the union.

Nevertheless, lay leaders felt that the meeting should go on and they proceeded. At this meeting, participants expressed concern regarding the questionable provision. Conference leaders visited with the lay group during the meeting, and the exchange was not cordial. Some lay leaders then attempted to approach the union and division leaders—even as late as Sunday morning prior to the session—to discuss the constitution, apparently without success.

The item in the constitution that disturbed some members in the Trans-Orange Conference was provision for existence of a “Ministry to Minority Population Groups Committee” (MPG). This committee of fifteen to nineteen members would ensure special attention to the pastoral and evangelistic needs of minority groups and would recommend plans to provide for special events, such as camp meetings, among them.

On Sunday morning, delegates staged their walk-out when they were not given an opportunity to address the issue of the constitution. The posters (“No to MPG—Yes to Cultural Convention”) were apparently not part of the strategy; no doubt unidentified persons composed them hastily.

What are some of the issues that arise from this situation?

1. Church Authority

This writer believes that the real authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church lies in the local church. Authority is then delegated to the conference president and an executive

committee. The president is to act as a dedicated servant in the interests of the churches, and not as a dictator.

This authority of the local church is delegated up the ladder to the conference, union, division, and ultimately the General Conference. The only reason why the General Conference in session is the highest authority in our Church is because it is a representative meeting of all local churches around the world.

2. We Must Listen to Each Other

E-mail messages going the rounds after the debacle of March 26 are titled “If They had Only Listened.” The feeling is expressed that if leadership of the Trans-Orange Conference, the union, and the division had listened to the concerns of lay people, some compromise or understanding might have been reached that would have enabled the March 26 session to proceed.

3. The New Combined Cape Conference in the South

Having attended the session that brought this conference into existence and experienced the blessing of the Lord, I hope that this conference will proceed. Opportunities exist for the leadership to make it work and to cater to every group within the conference. I believe that declaring this session illegal and disbanding what has been done would have unfortunate results. We pray that its legitimacy will prove valid and that it will continue. After all, it was brought about by the will of the union session, which represents all of the churches in the union.

4. Conferences in the North

After the failure of the March 26 meeting, the Trans-Orange Conference and the Transvaal Conference remain in existence. The prospect of

joining these two conference has suffered a blow. The higher echelons of the Church should guard against temptation to force the two conferences to unite. Some in the Trans-Orange Conference do not want the MPG clause to remain in the constitution. Many churches in the Transvaal Conference were evidently prepared to hand in letters of protest at the commencement of the session.

It would seem foolish for a bride and groom to proceed with a wedding if it is discovered that the bride doesn't want to get married. Likewise, it would seem just as unwise to force these two conferences to the marriage altar if one party is not ready for the wedding. We would only be preparing for a divorce.

Perhaps one way out of this predicament would be for the Transvaal Conference to reconstruct itself as a new conference for minorities with the blessing of the Trans-Orange Conference. This would be similar to the idea of the regional conferences that exist in North America. I am sure that North America's regional conferences are not organized on the basis of racial prejudice, but along the lines of worship style, culture, and church growth. The situation is similar in the Transvaal Conference.

In addition, the special need exists to spread the Advent message among the Afrikaans-speaking population of South Africa. In a minority conference, greater attention can be given to this need.

The Trans-Orange Conference should also ascertain the wishes of its churches that were slated to be given to the Cape Conference and the KwaZule Freestate Conference. The desires of the churches and pastors concerned should be solicited.

At times, some of us are tied

more to a concept of unity than to unity itself. The concept is that one controlling committee means unity and two committees mean disunity. As long as we can write in a report that we have one committee we think we have achieved unity. It matters little if we lose a few hundred members in the process. This kind of unity is, indeed, strange.

If the union, division, and General Conference force a structural union between the Transvaal Conference and the Trans-Orange Conference when one party is unprepared, the Church will commit an ecclesiastical blunder of the highest order in South Africa. If this happens, church leaders in the United States must likewise immediately call for the disbanding of all regional conferences in North America and their amalgamation into traditional conferences.

5. A Spirit of Respect and Loyalty

Attempting to halt a merger in the south, some laymen have engaged in an e-mail campaign. I believe these e-mail tirades have often led to a spirit of antagonism toward church leaders. This spirit of disrespect can easily infect many church members.

We should pray for a calmness of spirit and for much more prayer and love.

6. Legal Action

One group in the South African church has called upon a legal firm to engage the South African Union in this matter. This group seeks to declare the union action of November 20 unconstitutional and has apparently appointed a firm of attorneys to handle the matter.

Another group of eleven laymen has appointed itself to promote this action against the union and to raise money to cover legal costs. Many in

the Church are appalled, but those pursuing it hold the opinion that this is their only recourse.

Conclusion

The Church in South Africa is passing through troubled waters. The winds are severe and the prospects at times bleak. What we need at the moment are cool heads and warm hearts. The good news is that the Pilot aboard the ship is experienced, has weathered the storms of Calvary, and is well able to bring the ship safely into the eternal harbor.

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BRI Spring Break in Mexico

By Dan Smith

A landmark model for collegial dialogue, titled Symposium III on the Bible and Adventist Scholarship, occurred March 19–26, 2006. It was my honor to be invited to provide the worships for this gathering, which took place south of Cancun on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico under the sponsorship of the Foundation for Adventist Education and the General Conference Department of Education.

In this symposium, fifteen Seventh-day Adventist scholars and their spouses presented scholarly papers that explored the role of Scripture in guiding and judging each of their respective disciplines.

The donors behind the foundation asked Humberto Rasi, who retired in 2002 from his position as director of the General Conference Education Department but is still

extremely active, to host the symposium. Presenters were chosen from across the theological, geographical, and academic spectrums.

The genius of the concept was that the fifteen couples were invited to a resort on the coast south of Cancun. Rasi created an environment of collegial respect, and with a blend of passion, enthusiasm, and warmth, he encouraged, cajoled, and challenged the presenters and respondents.

Each day began with worship, which focused on the theme of God's character and applied it to each of the core beliefs of Adventism. Then, each morning two papers were presented, followed by general discussion, along with suggestions for improving the papers for their final form online and in print.

Afternoons were free, followed by a third paper in the evening. On three of the afternoons, the group took excursions to Mayan ruins, a fantastic Mexican cultural show, and, on Sabbath, a nature preserve.

The magic of the week came between presentations. Most of the couples ate at the same buffet restaurants, so discussions continued throughout meals. Sharing across disciplines and theological comfort zones was a powerful experience. Misperceptions were often set aside, and some participants had to release people from theological boxes in which they had been placed.

There was time for nuance and context, which helped address the stark polarities in which people are often perceived. Participants reached across the creation–evolution short-age vs. long-age divide trying to understand, clarify, and search for ways to

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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.

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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.

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