

## San Antonio and the *Church Manual* | BY JOHN BRUNT

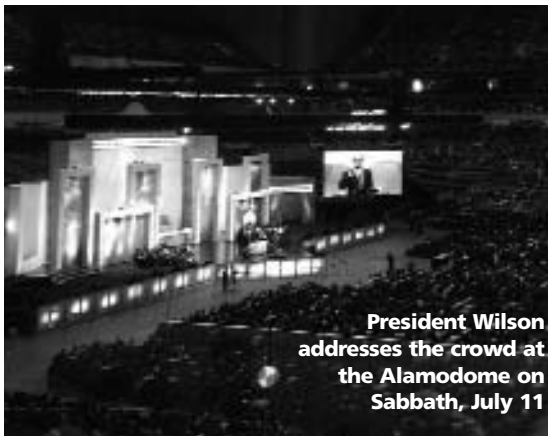
In the article I wrote before the General Conference Session on proposed changes to the *Church Manual*, I questioned whether they would be a matter for discussion or merely a rubber stamp, especially in light of the seemingly more significant items on women's ordination and Fundamental Beliefs. If anyone thought that *Church Manual* issues would be rubber-stamped, they were in for a huge surprise. About two and a half days were devoted to the *Church Manual*, and even then delegates never got to all of the proposed items.

### First *Church Manual* Session

The direction of the discussions was set right at the beginning when the fifth business meeting, on the morning of Sunday, July 5, took up the first *Church Manual* issues in a session chaired by Geoffrey Mbwana. *Church Manual* chair, Armando Miranda, and secretary, Harald Wollan, presented a total of five items during that first session. These all seemed like fairly simple items, but the delegates referred all but one of them back to the committee. In the first half-day they approved only one item!

The first item seemed simple enough. It stated that the *Church Manual* speaks primarily to the local church and the *Working Policy* to the wider organization. Delegates Jay Gallimore and Mario Veloso immediately objected that this introduced a dangerous dichotomy. Others joined in and the proposed change was referred back.

The second issue was a change in the appeal process when organizations within the church structure have a dispute. At present the appeal can continue right to the General Conference; the new proposal would limit the appeal process



to the highest organization not involved in the dispute, and that decision would be final. Again, there were immediate and serious objections. Most focused on the need to allow appeals to go all the way to the General Conference if they were not settled at a lower level, and felt that any limiting of the appeal process would be unfair. Again, the proposal was referred back.

The third proposal of the first morning called for using the term "pastor" throughout the *Church Manual*. The present wording is sometimes "pastor" and sometimes "minister." At this point it became evident that no discussion could ignore the women's ordination issue that was to come three days later. Opponents of women's ordination saw this as an entry to woman pastors and objected. Others admonished the chair not to allow commercials about opposition to women's ordination to creep into a discussion that had nothing to do with it. But opponents continued to worry that this change might open the door to women in the office of pastor (even though, as delegate Elizabeth Talbot pointed

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out, we opened that door long ago by agreeing to the commissioning of women pastors.) Finally Doug Batchelor moved that the item be referred back to the committee, and it was. Three up and three down!

The fourth proposal addressed who may speak in Adventist church services. The current *Church Manual* allows only credentialed individuals to speak. Yet many local elders speak who do not have credentials. Therefore new wording was proposed that stated: "No one should be allowed to speak to any congregation unless he/she has been invited by the church in harmony with guidelines given by the conference." After some brief and minor objections, this proposal passed. The first actual change to be made in the *Church Manual* after almost two hours of discussion!

Progress was short-lived, however. The next item was also referred back to the committee. It involved reasons for church discipline, expanding the reasons by adding the words:

*Violation of the commandment of the law of God, which reads, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14, Matt. 5:28), as it relates to the marriage institution and the Christian home, biblical standards of moral conduct, and any act of sexual intimacy outside of a marriage relationship and/or non-consensual acts of sexual conduct within a marriage whether those acts are legal or illegal. Such acts include but are not limited to child sexual abuse, including abuse of the vulnerable. Marriage is defined as a public, lawfully binding, monogamous, heterosexual relationship between one man and one woman.*

Jeroen Tuinstra, a conference president in the Inter-European Division, offered an amendment to omit the words "and any act of sexual intimacy outside of a marriage relationship". This amendment was quickly defeated, but another issue was raised by Dan Jackson. He suggested that the term "legally binding" might become problematic in the future, as laws redefine marriage. On that basis the motion was referred back to the committee.

This was the first of five sessions on the *Church Manual*. Within the scope of this article we cannot go into this much detail for each of the five sessions, but will try to summarize high points and major issues.

## **Second Church Manual Session**

The sixth business session, which began at 2:00 p.m. that same day, began with an easy one. The proposal changed only one word relating to church discipline. The word

"remove" had been used in a section referring to church discipline, but since censure is also an option in discipline, the work was changed to "discipline." Finally, an easy pass.

Two other issues dominated the remainder of this second session on the *Church Manual*: membership issues and who may conduct communion services.

The most significant proposed change in church membership had to do with those who choose to resign their membership. At present, if a member wishes to resign from church membership their request must be voted by a church business meeting and is recorded as being dropped for apostasy. The new proposal would allow the church board to receive the letter and simply record it, adding that efforts should be made to restore the individual.

This new proposal was voted after several minor changes were made by common consent, and after a good bit of discussion. Some were concerned that members would use this to avoid church discipline. Others wondered what this meant for those who resigned and later wanted to return. Would they come in by baptism or profession of faith? Some were concerned that if there was no discipline, and the person who resigned later wanted to join a different local church, the second church wouldn't know what the person had done. Even though the proposal passed, it was surprising to see how important it was for some delegates who spoke to assure that a pound of flesh be extracted from erring members before they could resign on their own.

Also with regard to membership, currently a business meeting can specify a period of time before a person can be reinstated after discipline, but the new proposal simply leaves the time open to a point where there is confession and evidence of change. This proposal also passed, but only after a long discussion.

The coming vote on women's ordination came back into the forefront when a seemingly simple proposal to allow ordained and commissioned pastors and local ordained elders, but not ordained deacons and deaconesses, to lead out in the communion. Those who opposed not only women's ordination, but also women as pastors, seized on this as an opportunity to try and roll back already-voted privileges allowed to commissioned pastors. An amendment was made to remove commissioned pastors from those who could lead out, but it was defeated, and the proposal was voted. It was obvious, however, that Wednesday was already in the room.

### Third *Church Manual* Session

Discussion on *Church Manual* proposals had to wait two more days to allow for the discussion of changes in the Fundamental Beliefs, but Tuesday afternoon the *Church Manual* took center stage again. This session was amazingly restrained compared to the first two sessions, which were noteworthy for their vigorous discussions. For the first time a number of proposals were voted without any discussion at all. Perhaps being sandwiched between Tuesday morning's discussion on Fundamental Beliefs and Wednesday's discussion of women's ordination made *Church Manual* proposals appear less vital.

Changes voted included sections on the function and training of deacons and deaconesses, giving receipts to members, nomenclature for the community services or Dorcas ministries, the procedure for objecting to local nominating committee reports, and the role of the finance committee. But proposals on youth ministries, unauthorized speakers in the church, and the communion service were referred back to the committee.

### Fourth *Church Manual* Session

Several of the items referred back to the committee at earlier sessions came back to the floor on Friday morning. The item from the first session, on the relationship between the *Church Manual* and *Working Policy*, came back with no change and was voted without discussion.

The second issue referred back in the first session—that of appeals when organizations have disputes—came back with a slight change. It specified that appeals could be made to one higher organization than the first proposal, but the organization could decide whether to hear the appeal or not. Several delegates objected that this limitation was unfair; there should be no denial of the right to appeal all the way to the General Conference. Delegate Roscoe Howard noted that in the U.S. appeal process, the Supreme Court is able to choose which appeals it hears.

A motion was made to refer this matter

back to the committee again. The motion was defeated, although the vote was so close that someone called for an actual count. The motion to refer lost 510–647. (Notice that by Friday morning fewer than half of the 2,566 delegates were present and voting.) After more discussion, the main motion to accept the proposed wording passed.

The next item was the proposal for using the term “pastor” consistently throughout the *Church Manual*. It had also been referred back on Sunday, but now passed. A few proposed changes in the role of the church board received several additional suggestions, but a motion to refer it back lost and the proposal was voted.

The last item taken up Friday morning related to campus ministries. Delegates voted some minor wording changes, such as changing the term “public colleges” to “colleges or universities not operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

As time for lunch passed, the chair gave delegates the choice—stay another half hour and finish, or come back in the afternoon for a fifth session on the *Church Manual*. Hungry delegates decided to go have lunch and come back.

### Fifth and Last *Church Manual* Session

This session was nothing less than bizarre. Somehow Alamodome staff got the idea that there was no afternoon session, and many delegates coming to the meeting were turned away. Given the long distance from the Dome to the hotels it was impossible to get the word out that the delegates were to return and meet. As a result very few delegates were on the floor. The chair ruled that, due to the lack of delegates, contentious proposals that had been referred back to the committee would not be addressed, and in these areas the *Church Manual* would remain in its present form for another five years.

The proposed changes on youth ministries that had been referred in the third session were voted, and some changes were made to the sections on church discipline and marriage. Under reasons for discipline the following statement was added:

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*Fornication, which includes among other issues, promiscuity, homosexual activity, incest, sodomy, and bestiality.*

In addition, the last reason for discipline saw a change in wording designed to rule out the use of marijuana in localities where it is legal. The underlined portions are new, and the sections with a line through them are deleted from the previous *Church Manual*.

*The use or manufacture of illicit drugs or the use, misuse, or sale of narcotics or drugs without appropriate medical cause and license. ~~misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs.~~*

The statement on marriage was changed as follows:

*Marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship between one male and one female. ~~Marriage is a lifelong commitment of husband and wife.~~ As such, marriage is a public, lawfully binding lifelong commitment of a man and a woman to each other and between the couple and God. . . .*

Statements on communion and unauthorized speakers in churches were not brought back to the floor, and in these areas the *Church Manual* will remain as is until 2020, when they are taken again in Indianapolis.

At the end of the session, delegate Larry Geraty rose to make a comment, stating that while he agreed with most of what had been voted, his heart was heavy as he sensed a lack of compassion for people “whom God has created, many of them the way they are.” He was cut off by the chair, who ruled that since there was no motion on the floor to address he was out of order.

### Concluding Reflections

The overall direction of the changes made is mixed. Many were fairly insignificant changes in wording and details. Some were clearly improvements, such as allowing members to resign membership without having to take the

request to the church business meeting. Many, however, seemed to reflect a desire to tighten and restrict membership.

When one considers the amount of time devoted to the discussion of the *Church Manual* in San Antonio, the apparent lack of genuine practical significance in many of the items that were changed, and lack of seriousness with which the *Church Manual* is taken, at least in my part of the world, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much time was wasted in this process. One might be tempted to see this as evidence that what began as a movement has become a bureaucracy. Bringing two-and-half-thousand people together from all over the world to haggle about issues of wording in a manual that have very little effect on the real world, hardly seems to make sense. It could lead to discouragement about the church.

Fortunately, arguments about the wording of the *Church Manual* do not represent what the church is all about. Even though there is no doubt that church structure and organization aid in the mission of the church and are important, the church is about vital, dynamic, flourishing communities at the local level where members experience God’s grace through fellowship, study and worship, and then give their energies to mission at home and around the world.

As part of one of those communities I conclude with a confession. Recently at a church board meeting someone asked what the *Church Manual* said about a certain issue. A search of the premises could not locate a *Church Manual*. ■

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for 19 years and was the Vice President of Academic Administration for 12 years. He and his wife, Lone, have two grown children and three grandsons.

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