



The Importance of the Backstory

Following the Unity Documents through Annual Council and Year End Meetings

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After the vote in San Antonio, at the 2015 General Conference Session, on whether or not to allow divisions to ordain women, there was a dramatic moment the next day when a woman delegate asked the General Conference President to clarify what had taken place. She had friends, she said, women in pastoral positions, who were being told that they could no longer hold their jobs. President Wilson reassured her that nothing had changed. Women would still hold the same positions that they did previously. And women have been serving in significant-growing numbers of pastoral positions ever since approval for women pastoral associates to perform baptisms and marriages was voted at the 1990 General Conference Session. While women had received approval to assume pastoral responsibilities, they had been denied the ordination title.

Then, at the 2015 Annual Council, there was an action voted which reiterated what Elder Wilson had said in San Antonio. In the document “An Appeal and Appreciation to All Church Entities and Members from the General Conference and Division Officers Regarding the 2015 General Conference Session Vote on Ordination” the role of women in the church was reaffirmed. “The vote taken in San Antonio does not change the church’s understanding of the role of women in the life, mission and practice of the

church as supported by the *Church Manual* and outlined in General Conference and division working policies,” it read.

The following paragraphs in the document addressed “Moving Ahead Together in Mission.” There, in hindsight, is an indication that the changes envisioned by the Office of the President were with church entities, rather than dealing with individual women pastors. “We appeal to all entities to respect the decision by the world body in session since any unilateral and independent action contrary to the voted action paves the way for fracture and fragmentation. We urge all entities to work closely with world division administrations to ensure that all actions harmonize with voted policy to foster worldwide unity and our heavenly-entrusted mission.” What specifically that meant, however, was not discussed until this year when the General Conference President’s office began to draft documents and seek agreement from the various representatives of the General Conference and its divisions to discipline the unions that had voted to ordain women.

Summer 2016 – According to an *Adventist Review* story (posted October 11), Mike Ryan, assistant to the General Conference president, met with the Division Presidents in the summer and shared an early draft of the ideas that would later be spelled out in the “Unity in Mission: Procedures in Church Reconciliation” document.

August/September 2016 – The Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research did the research and drafting of the fifty-page paper titled “A Study of Church Governance and Unity” as well as the seventeen-page “Summary

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Document: A Study of Church Governance and Unity.”

Sunday, September 25 – An *Adventist Review* story announced “Church Governance and Unity to be Discussed at Annual Council.” General Conference Secretariat asked church leaders to consider two documents on the issue. The story said the two documents were posted on the Archives website, also on September 25. The story quoted GT Ng; “During Annual Council this year we plan to discuss how best to address divergence from the current policy.” Ng sent out the documents to delegates via email.

Tuesday, September 27 – In a meeting with the Division Presidents, General Conference President, Ted Wilson, handed out the document that Ryan had been writing. This draft “action” document was seven pages long and titled “Unity in Mission: Procedures in Church Reconciliation.” It outlined a way for the General Conference leadership to take over the unions that voted to ordain women. The Division Presidents approved the document to be taken to the next committee level—to the GCDO, a seventy-plus-member group of all the General Conference and Division Officers.

Thursday, September 29 – “General Conference Leadership Considers Takeover of Unions that Ordain Women” was the headline on *Spectrum’s* website, with a short report of the meeting earlier in the week (Tuesday) when Division presidents voted to recommend disciplining unions. It also noted that the GCDO vote was to take place the 29th.

Friday, September 30 – When the *Spectrum* story was updated, it was to note that the GCDO asked for a rewrite of the proposal to disci-

pline unions.

While, at the General Conference, work was focused on the procedures document from the President’s office, Adventists elsewhere were examining the lengthier documents on the Archives website and asking questions.

Faculty at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary at Andrews University voted a statement saying, “We have serious concerns about the recent document ‘A Study of Church Governance and Unity’ released by the General Conference and its portrayal of the nature and authority of the church. Further discussion by the church at large on this important ecclesiological issue is needed before such a document is adopted.” (*Spectrum*).

Sunday, October 2 – The GC Secretariat Department staff, who prepare and compile all the documents for Annual Council, discussed with each other the document that was being revised. When they realized that they were unanimous in their non-support of the nuclear option being recommended, they asked for a meeting with their boss, G.T. Ng, who listened, agreed, and recommended the next step—sharing their concerns with General Conference President, Ted Wilson.

Monday, October 3 – Work began on revising the “Unity in Mission” document (according to October 11 *Adventist Review* story on the vote).

Tuesday, October 4 – The Adventist Church in Norway formally responded to the General Conference Unity Document with a document on their website. In their statement, the Norwegian Union Conference leaders said the GC document had a number of weaknesses

and would likely contribute to a splitting of the church. “An attempt to coerce unions to comply with the General Conference Working Policy is likely to set in motion a series of uncontrollable and unpredictable events.” Further, the leaders said, considering only policy compliance is “a dangerous oversimplification based on pragmatic rather than moral and spiritual considerations. Those unions which have ordained female pastors or stopped ordaining altogether do so because they are convinced that the Bible tells them to treat men and women equally. Their decisions are not grounded in policy but in spiritual and moral obligation.”

The Loma Linda University School of Religion Faculty voted and announced their support for the Seminary Response to the Unity Document (*Spectrum*).

Wednesday, October 5 – “GC Proposes Year of Grace for Unions” (*Spectrum*). In their reworking of the procedural document at the General Conference, a more pastoral approach was being suggested. The GCDO was scheduled to meet the following day to consider a “pastoral action” that would propose giving the unions a year of grace and appeal to them to repent of their actions. If approved, the procedural document would go to Annual Council for consideration on Tuesday, October 11.

Wednesday, October 5 – The LEAD Conference opening marked the start of the Annual Council Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee. This is the group that holds the power to initiate action between General Conference Sessions. It is a group of over 300 people,

including all division officers, union conference presidents, lay and pastoral representatives from all divisions, and many of the General Conference staff. Adventist education was the focus of the LEAD conference this year, and it was declared worthy of becoming Fundamental Belief No. 29 (*Adventist Review*).

Thursday, October 6 – The *Adventist Review* provided clarification to their earlier story on the documents about “A Study of Governance and Unity”: “The first paragraph of this story has been updated to clarify that the two documents were not discussed by church leadership at the Annual Council but were meant to act as resource materials for an agenda topic to be considered by church leadership. The original paragraph said, ‘General Conference Secretariat has released two documents about church governance and unity that are to be considered by church leadership at the Annual Council business meeting in October.’ It now reads: ‘General Conference Secretariat has released two documents about church governance and unity that are resource materials for an agenda topic to be considered by church leadership at the Annual Council business meeting in October.’” This clarification helps explain why the study documents were never discussed during the coming days. Only the “procedures” came to the Annual Council for consideration.

Friday, October 7 – “GC Outlines Proposed Plan of Action for Unions that Ordain Women” (*Spectrum*). The GC released the revised document on “Unity in Mission: Procedures in Church Reconciliation,” approved by the seventy-eight-member GCDO, on the evening of October 6. The revised

document was now three pages, rather than the seven of the original action. It no longer included the “nuclear” action of taking over the unions. Instead it now recommended a two-step process of reconciliation. It called for “personal visits, open consultations, meetings, and forums for dialogue.” Pastoral letters, listening, and praying were key components. Then, its second recommendation was “To request the General Conference Administrative Committee to recommend to the 2017 Annual Council, procedural steps to be followed in the event that a resolution of conflict is not achieved under procedures identified in recommendation 1. above.” It closed with the surprising statement, considering what the first two pages had listed, “Upon the approval of this document, even though the full process has not yet been fully identified and approved, entities are authorized to implement the process where there are matters of non-adherence regarding biblical principles as expressed in the Fundamental Beliefs, voted actions, or working policies of the Church and provide a report through the division, or in the case of a General Conference institution through the General Conference Administrative Committee, at the next Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee.”

Another document that gained significant attention that day was one written by Adventist historian George Knight on “The Role of Union Conferences in Relation to Higher Authorities.” It appeared on the *Spectrum* web site, and is included in this issue on page 32.

Monday, October 10 – Walla Walla University School of Theology joined the other academic institutions in issuing a Statement on Church

Governance and Unity (*Spectrum*).

Tuesday, October 11 – “Annual Council Approves Measure to Encourage Adherence to Church Policies: The vote took place after fifty delegates share their viewpoints.” (*Adventist Review*). The body voted the revised three-page document, “Unity in Mission: Procedures in Church Reconciliation,” by a vote of 169–122. The document “details steps on how to deal with SDA entities not adhering to voted actions of the Adventist world church.”

Delegates received copies of the revised document as they filed into their seats. At the bottom it carried a 10/9/16 revision date even though the GCDO vote was on October 6. “The document calls for the GC Administrative Committee to draft a proposal on the next course of action and submit it to the 2017 Annual Council for approval.” Other details noted in the story include the count on delegates: 315 delegates to Annual Council, but a total of 291 delegates participated in the vote.

Mike Ryan, who the *Review* article said was involved in the development of the document, suggested at the beginning of the discussion that the “Unity in Mission document was not about women’s ordination. Instead, he said, it was about making sure that all church entities followed world church policy. This, in turn, would keep the church united and help it fulfill its mission of spreading the gospel to the world.”

Jiří Moskala, dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary at Andrews University, called for a theological study of how policy relates to the church’s core doctrinal beliefs during the discussion.

Wednesday, October 12 –

Response Statements were posted (*Spectrum*) from NAD, TED, and the Pacific Union.

Dan Jackson sent an open letter to female pastors in NAD, saying that the GC “Unity in Mission” document “did not affect your status as a pastor.” Jackson reiterated that “the North American Division remains committed to empower[ing] and establish[ing] our women in pastoral ministry. We will not give up on this ideal and goal.”

Friday, October 14 – “Washington Adventist University Religion Department Responds to the Governance and Unity Document” (*Spectrum* story, October 25).

Wednesday, October 19 – Dan Jackson responded to the “Unity in Mission” vote in a video message released by NAD.

Thursday, October 27 – The Year End Meeting of NAD Executive Committee opened. In his president’s report, “Collaboration 2.0,” Dan Jackson focused on the mission of the division saying, “all are needed; all are wanted.” He made a point to congratulate Andrews University’s president Andrea Luxton, inaugurated on October 25. He noted NAD’s plan to bring many more women pastors into employment, calling it “well within” GC and NAD policies.

Friday, October 28 – The NAD Executive Committee spent over three hours discussing the GC “Unity in Mission” document. Jackson stated that the NAD will comply with GC directives and noted that despite what some GC leaders have said to the contrary, the issue in the document is clearly women’s ordination. Jackson noted that the GC will determine punishment for policy noncompliance by the 2017

Annual Council. He suggests that if another iteration of the document is drafted, distinction should be made between theology/ Scripture and policy. Jackson says he will not defend the document, but will appeal to the two unions that ordain women as he has been directed. Apologizing to union leaders, he stated that he would ask unions to revoke ordination of forty-four women and predicted “they will refuse.” He said he would vote against the “Unity in Mission” document “300 more times” if he could. The Adventist Church “is in a crisis” and because of the issue, the church “is hemorrhaging young people,” he said. NAD Secretary, G. Alexander Bryant, made the point that policy is “not on the same level as doctrine.” The majority of delegates spoke against the “Unity in Mission” document and in favor of ordaining women. Two delegates, both from Canada, voiced dissent. La Sierra University Student Association President, Nicqelle Godfrey, noting that La Sierra has a female provost, senior church pastor, and conference president, said, “You’re not going to convince my community that women should not be ordained.”

Friday, October 28 – La Sierra University President, Randal Wisbey, ended the NAD discussion of the “Unity in Mission” document with a motion requesting that the General Conference recognize the Southeastern California Conference President, Dr. Sandra Roberts:

The attendees of the NAD Year-end Meeting respectfully request that the General Conference provide Elder Sandra Roberts, president of Southeastern California Conference, the same respect, rights and privileges of office as any other con-

ference president in the North American Division who has been duly elected by an official and legal constituency meeting of that conference. This will include inclusion in the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook as president of SECC and being provided with regular and official credentials at General Conference meetings, such as Annual Council, etc., the same as any other NAD conference president.

The motion passed 141 yes, 32 no, 5 in abstention. With the vote, business ended for the day.

Sunday, October 30 – After the NAD’s Undertreasurer’s financial report, Douglas Pereira, a pastor in the Manitoba-Saskatchewan Conference, who emigrated from Brazil, introduced a motion to lower the tithe sent by the NAD to the GC. He proposed that by 2020, the NAD reduce remittances to the GC to 2 percent of tithe income, as is the case for other divisions. He stated that the current remittance rate of 5.8 percent hampers the mission of the NAD in places like his district in Canada and asked delegates to “send a clear signal” to the GC. NAD President Jackson responded sympathetically to the motion, and citing “culture wars,” noted that other division presidents inappropriately fundraising for their projects within NAD “must stop.” Jackson then discouraged delegates from voting the motion, saying the removal of approximately \$45–\$50M from the GC budget would “severely damage” the mission of the world church. Alex Bryant pointed out that an incremental reduction of the rate is already underway, but stated that it is not enough—it must be re-negotiated. Pereira’s motion was tabled, pending

a report of the NAD Governance Committee.

Monday, October 31 – With less than ten minutes before lunch break, NAD YEM reconsidered Pereira’s motion. Several delegates spoke in favor of the spirit of the motion (parity with other divisions regarding tithe remittances to GC), but against the motion’s specific goal of 2 percent by 2020. The motion was voted down, 64 yes, 121 no.

Monday, October 31 – With fifty minutes remaining during the scheduled business session, discussion of the “Unity in Mission” document resumed. While other business sessions had been broadcast via live internet streaming, this session was not. A delegate expressed fear for the church, worrying that this issue will fracture the denomination. Randy Roberts, senior pastor of the Loma Linda University Church, introduced a motion expressing “grave concern” with the “Unity in Mission” document and registering “our vigorous disagreement with the intent of the document.” Roberts’ motion authorized “NADCOM to appoint a subcommittee to craft a thoughtful path forward,” and reiterated “our unwavering support and steadfast intent to realize the full equality of women in ministry, in fulfillment of biblical principles, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

AU Seminary Dean, Jiří Moskala, stated that the “Unity in Mission” document references “biblical principles” four times. He suggested that NAD dialogue with other divisions to

point out that ordaining women violates no biblical principles, as the GC Theology of Ordination Study Committee found.

The motion was voted by a wide margin: 163 yes, 35 no, 1 in abstention.

October 31, 2016 – TEAM (Time for Equality in Ministry) hosted the premiere of “Called,” a documentary featuring four women who minister. Many NAD leaders attended the screening, and the documentary was released online.

November 1, 2016 – In the NAD Ministerial Department report, another video was presented depicting women pastors who serve around the world. The video introduced the hashtag #WhatAPastorLooksLike. Secretary Alex Bryant stated that there are some 4,500 licensed pastors in NAD. He said that when the “Women in Ministry” building block was introduced a few years ago, there were 107 women pastors (2 percent). Within seven years, he continued, 50 percent

of the pastoral workforce will be eligible to retire. He described this as an opportunity to add more women pastors. He called for doing all that can be done to assist women currently studying at the Adventist Theological Seminary. Another member of the NAD Ministerial Department, Brenda Billings, said there are currently 148 women pastors (thirty-eight hired in last two years; the goal was twenty). Billings thanked conference leaders who helped make it possible. The report was received by a vote of 165 yes, 4 no, and 4 in abstention.

Jackson brought the meeting to a close, noting that it was the last NAD YEM in the General Conference building. By next year, the NAD will have completed renovation of new headquarters. He said, “we owe a debt of gratitude to the GC for hosting us all these years.” A motion to that effect was made and the vote carried. ■

