

The Role of Union Conferences in Relation to Higher Authorities* | BY GEORGE R. KNIGHT

In March 2016, I presented two papers to a group of influential Adventist administrative and lay leaders. These papers, until now, have not been released. But, given the current discussion in Silver Spring, the time has come. The most pertinent of the papers is “The Role of Union Conferences in Relation to Higher Authorities.” Although written months before the recent paper by the General Conference, it addresses many of the same issues from a very different perspective. The other paper sets the stage for the one on Unions. Its title is “The Anti-Organizational People Organize in Spite of Themselves.”

The Role of Union Conferences in Relation to Higher Authorities¹

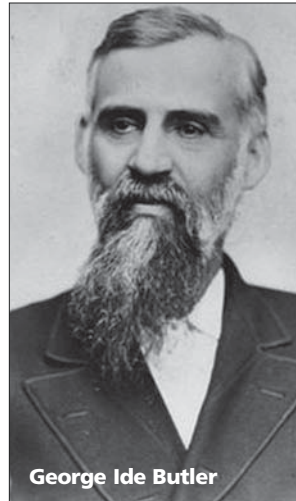
There are only two truly Catholic churches in the world today: the Roman Catholic and the Adventist catholic. Now that I have your attention, I trust that you realize that the primary meaning of the word “catholic” is “universal.”

Adventism is catholic in the sense that it has a worldwide commission to fulfill—the mission of the three angels of Revelation 14 to take the end-time message to every nation, tongue, and people.

Perhaps the major difference between the Roman brand of catholicism and the Adventist variety is the issue of authority. For Rome, it is a top-down proposition. For Adventism, it has traditionally been from the bottom up. I say traditionally because some Adventists seem to be in the valley of decision on this most important of all ecclesiastical issues. The real question facing the denomination is this: How catholic do we really want to be?

Expanded Mission Demands a Reorganization

In my first presentation, I highlighted how the anti-organizational people finally managed to organize in the face of the needs of mission. But in order to do that, they had to see that Babylon not only meant oppression but also



George Ide Butler

confusion. And, more importantly, they had to move from a literalistic hermeneutic, which held that the only things permissible were those specifically spelled out in scripture, to one in which everything was permissible that did not contradict the Bible and was in harmony with common sense. In the end, they organized churches, local conferences, and a general conference in

1861/1863, for the purpose of mission but with a cautious eye on higher ecclesiastical authorities removing their freedom in Christ. That potential problem would be highlighted in 1888 when a powerful General Conference president sought to block the preaching of righteousness by faith by Jones and Waggoner.

The 1860s organization worked well, and Adventism and its institutions by the end of the 1890s had spread around the world. In fact, the church of 1863, with its 3,500 members (all in North America), one institution, eight conferences, and about thirty ministers, could hardly be compared to the denomination of 1900, which was not only worldwide but had dozens of health care facilities, more than 200 schools, and other institutions.

But growth had brought its own pains and problems to the ever-expanding movement. By the 1890s, two major problems in the 1860s organization had surfaced: (1) too much control by the General Conference over the local conferences, and (2) too little control over the auxiliary organizations, such as those that supervised the medical and educational work of the denomination.

The first of those issues related most clearly to the geographical spread of the denomination. That problem was



Ole Andres Olsen

aggravated by the stand taken by the General Conference presidents. G. I. Butler, for example, in the late 1880s noted, in connection with the formation of the General Conference Association, that General Conference “supervision embraces all its interests in every part of the world. There is not an institution among us, not a periodical issued, not a conference or society, not a mission field connected with our work, that it has not a right to advise and counsel and investigate. *It is the highest authority of an earthly character among Seventh-day Adventists.*”²

O. A. Olsen took the same position in 1894 when he wrote that,

*it is the province of the General Conference carefully to watch over, and have a care for, the work in every part of the field. The General Conference, therefore, is not only acquainted with the needs and conditions of every Conference, but it understands these needs and conditions as they stand related to every other Conference and mission field. . . . It may also be thought that those in charge of local interests have a deeper interest in, and carry a greater responsibility for, the local work, than the General Conference can possibly do. Such can hardly be the case if the General Conference does its duty. The General Conference stands as it were in the place of the parent to the local conference.*³

That mentality, in essence, held that the General Conference needed to be consulted on all issues of importance. It may have sounded like a nice idea, but in practice it didn’t work. That problem is nicely illustrated by A. G. Daniells speaking to the issue from the perspective of 1913. Before the adoption of the union conferences, he noted, every decision that transcended the decision-making responsibility of a local con-

ference had to be referred to headquarters in Battle Creek. The problem was that at its best the mail took four weeks each direction from Australia and often arrived to find the members of the General Conference Executive Committee away from their offices. “I remember,” Daniels noted, “that we have waited three or four months before we could get any reply to our questions.” And even then it might be a five- or six-line inquiry saying that the General Conference officers really didn’t understand the issue and needed further information. And so it went until “after six or nine months, perhaps, we would get the matter settled.”⁴

Ellen White took the lead in combatting the centralization of authority in the General Conference. In 1883, for example, she wrote that the leading administrators had made a mistake in “each one” thinking “that he was the very one who must bear all the responsibilities” and give others “no chance” to develop their God-given skills.⁵ During the 1880s and 1890s, she repeatedly advocated localized decision making on the grounds that the leaders in Battle Creek could not possibly understand the situation as well as people on site. As she put it in 1896, “the men at Battle Creek are no more inspired to give unerring advice than are the men in other places, to whom the Lord has entrusted the work in their locality.”⁶ A year earlier she had written that the “work of God” had been “retarded by criminal unbelief in [God’s] power to use the common people to carry forward His work successfully.”⁷



Arthur Grosvenor Daniells

By the end of the nineties, Ellen White would be thundering against the “kingly power” which the leaders in Battle Creek had taken to themselves. In one fascinating testimony in 1895, she wrote that “the high-handed power that has been developed, as

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though position has made men gods, makes me afraid, and ought to cause fear. It is a curse wherever and by whomsoever it is exercised. This lording it over God's heritage will create such a disgust of man's jurisdiction that a state of insubordination will result." She went on to state that the "only safe course is to remove" such leaders since "all ye are brethren," lest "great harm be done."⁸

Erich Baumgartner, in his study of the issues surrounding reorganization, summed up the problem by noting that "the most urgent of the many problems were connected to an ever-widening discrepancy between worldwide church growth during the 1880s and 1890s and the narrow, inflexible, central organizational base of the Seventh-day Adventist church located in Battle Creek."⁹ That inflexible, centralized authority prevented adaptation to local needs. As Ellen White put it, "the place, the circumstances, the interest, the moral sentiment of the people, will have to decide in many cases the course of action to be pursued" and that "those who are right on the ground are to decide what shall be done."¹⁰

The denomination struggled throughout the 1890s to find a solution to the problem. The first attempt began in November 1888, with the creation of four districts in North America. By 1893, there would be six in North America and one each in Australasia and Europe. But the district system essentially operated as divisions of the General Conference with each district leader being a member of the General Conference Committee. Beyond that, the districts had no constituency or legislative authority.¹¹ In short, they were not effective.

A more helpful solution was the development of a union conference by W. C. White in Aus-

tralia in 1894. That act was resisted by O. A. Olsen, the General Conference president, who told the General Conference Executive Committee that "he thought nothing should be planned so as to interfere with the general supervision and work legitimately belonging to the General Conference, as that is the highest organized authority under God on the earth."¹²

But White, the leader for the Australasian district, and his colleague, Arthur G. Daniells, were in a tight spot and needed to do something. That led to the appointment of a committee that developed the first union conference constitution, which was approved on January 19, 1894, appointing White and Daniells president and secretary, respectively.

That move was not accomplished with the help of the General Conference but in spite of its counsel. Years later Daniells reported that not everyone was happy with the union conference idea. "Some of our brethren thought then that the work was going to be wrecked, that we were going to tear the organization all to pieces, and get up secession out there in the South Sea islands." But in actuality, he observed, the result was quite the opposite. The new organizational approach greatly facilitated the mission of the church in the South Pacific, while the new Australasian Union Conference remained a loyal and integral part of the General Conference system.¹³

That move was revolutionary. Barry Oliver, in his massive study of the 1901/1903 reorganization, notes that "the Australasian experi-



ment represented the first time that a level of organization other than a local conference or the General Conference had a constituency—that is, it had executive powers which were granted by the levels of organization 'below' it, and not by the

General Conference."¹⁴

The second issue troubling the church during the 1890s was the legally independent auxiliary organizations that had developed in Battle Creek, including the Publishing Association, the General Tract and Missionary Society, the Educational Society, the General Sabbath School Association, the Health and Temperance Association, the General Conference Association, the Religious Liberty Association, and the Foreign Mission Board. Legally, each was independent and there was no effective way to coordinate their work.

That was bad enough, but A. T. Robinson, president of the newly formed South African Conference, discovered in 1892 that he did not even have enough personnel to staff all of the organizations. Out of necessity, Robinson decided that he would not create independent organizations but would develop departments under the leadership of the conference. Both Olsen and W. C. White felt concern over the suggestion, Olsen fearing that the plan contained "elements of danger in too much centralization." The General Conference leadership eventually told Robinson not to develop departments. But it was too late. Because of the large amount of time it took to communicate, Robinson had already instituted the program and found that it worked.¹⁵

In 1898, Robinson moved to Australia where he became president of the Victoria Conference. There he presented the idea to Daniells and W. C. White, who rejected it. But Robinson's local conference leaders had already accepted the idea on principle and voted it into being. Before the turn of the century, both Daniells and White had adopted the departmental concept and helped it find a place throughout the various conferences in the Australasia Union.¹⁶

With that move the stage had been set for the reorganization of the denomination at the 1901 General Conference session. But let it be remembered that both of the major innovations were developed in response to regional mission needs and both were developed in

opposition to General Conference pronouncements and procedures. But they worked. The major lesson is that without the freedom to experiment, Adventism would not have its present system of organization.

The Reorganization of 1901

The tone for the 1901 General Conference session was set for it on April 1, the day before the conference officially began. On that date Daniells chaired a meeting of denominational leaders in the Battle Creek College library. The major presenter was Ellen White who in no uncertain terms called for "new blood" and an "entire new organization" that broadened the governing base of the organization. Opposing the centralization of power in a few individuals, she left no doubt that "kingly, ruling power" and "any administrator who had a 'little throne' would have to go." She called for a "renovation without any delay. To have this Conference pass on and close up as the conferences have done, with the same manipulating, with the very same tone and the same order—God forbid! God forbid, brethren."¹⁷

She repeated the same sentiments on the first day of the session, noting that "God has not put any kingly power in our ranks to control this or that branch of the work. *The work has been greatly restricted by the efforts to control it in every line. . . .* If the work had not been so restricted by an impediment here, and an impediment there, and on the other side an impediment, it would have gone forward in its majesty."¹⁸

The key word in seeking to understand the 1901 session is "decentralization." Some of the most important changes at the conference were the authorization to create union conferences and union missions in all parts of the world, the discontinuation of the auxiliary organizations as independent associations and their integration into the conference administrative structure, and the transfer of ownership and management of institutions that had been under General Conference jurisdiction to the respective unions and their local conferences.

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The unions, Daniells noted, were created with “large committees, and full authority and power to deal with all matters within their boundaries.”¹⁹ And Ellen White pointed out that “it has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences.”²⁰

On the basis of those and other statements, the late Gerry Chudleigh has argued that the unions “were created to act as firewalls between the GC and the conferences, making ‘dictation’ impossible.” He buttressed his firewall image with two major points. First, “Each union had its own constitution and bylaws and was to be governed by its own constituency.” And second, “the officers of each union were to be elected by their own union constituency, and, therefore, could not be controlled, replaced or disciplined by the G C.”²¹

“To put as bluntly as possible,” Chudleigh wrote,

*after 1901, the General Conference could vote whatever it wanted unions and conferences to do, or not do, but the unions and conferences were autonomous and could do what they believed would best advance the work of God in their fields. The GC executive committee, or the General Conference in business session, could vote to fire a union president or conference president, or vote to merge a union or conference with another one, but their vote would change nothing: the union or conference would still exist and the member delegates could elect whomever they wanted as president.*²²

A case in point in contemporary Adventism is the Southeastern California Conference, which has an ordained female president, in spite of the wishes of the General Conference. Some in the General Conference, in the words of Ellen White, have tried to “dictate” that she be removed. But there is nothing that they have been able to do about the situation. The firewall is in place.

Ellen White was thrilled with the results of the 1901 session, with its creation of union conferences. To her, unions were “in the order of God.” Near the close of the 1901 session she

noted that “I was never more astonished in my life than at the turn things have taken in this meeting. This is not our work. God has brought it about.”²³ And some months later she wrote that “during the General Conference the Lord wrought mightily for His people. Every time I think of that meeting, a sweet solemnity comes over me, and sends a glow of gratitude to my soul. We have seen the stately stepping of the Lord our Redeemer.”²⁴

She was especially gratified that freedom of action had been opened up and that the General Conference would not be in a position to “exercise dictation over all the separate conferences.” Along that line, she noted near the close of the 1901 session that “I earnestly hope that those laboring in the fields to which you are going will not think that you and they cannot labor together, unless your minds run in the same channels as theirs, unless you view things exactly as they view them.”²⁵ Early on, Daniells held the same position. While he saw *the General Conference as fostering the work in all parts of the world, “it cannot be the brains, and conscience, and mouthpiece for our brethren in these different countries.”*²⁶

Looking back from the perspective of 1903, in his opening address to the session Daniells was gratified that major decision-making authority had been distributed to those “who are on the ground” and understood the needs of the various fields. “Many can testify that the blessing of God has attended the efforts that have been made to distribute responsibilities, and thus transfer the care, perplexity, and management that once centered in Battle Creek to all parts of the world, where they belong.”²⁷

At the close of the 1901 session all looked good. Autonomous unions had transferred authority from the General Conference to local leaders and the creation of departments had transferred authority over the auxiliary organizations to church leaders at all levels. It appeared that the denomination had captured the elusive goal of unity in diversity so that it might most effectively minister to the needs of varying cultures around the world.

The 1903 General Conference and the Threat to Unity in Diversity

By early 1903, Ellen White's euphoria at the close of the 1901 session had disappeared. In January, she wrote that "the result of the last General Conference has been the greatest, the most terrible sorrow of my life. No change was made. *The spirit that should have been brought into the whole work as the result of that meeting, was not brought in.*" Many "carried into their work the wrong principles that had been prevailing in the work at Battle Creek."²⁸

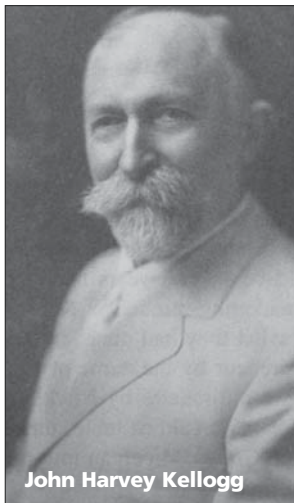
When she said that "no change was made" she was speaking on the spiritual rather than the organizational level. The major problem was that the old denominational demon of "kingly power" had reasserted its ugly head.

At this point we need to go back and take a closer look at the denomination's auxiliary organizations. In the monopolistic spirit of the times, each was seeking to control all the institutions around the world from the institutions in Battle Creek. Thus, the Review and Herald was seeking to control all other publishing houses; W. W. Prescott was not only head of the Adventist Educational Association but president of three colleges simultaneously; and John Harvey Kellogg was seeking worldwide control through the Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association and the massive Battle Creek Sanitarium. As a result, "kingly power" was not merely a problem of the General Conference president but also of the leaders of the various independent organizations.



William Warren Prescott

The reorganization in 1901 had largely taken care of the problem through its development of the departmental system and its transfer of the ownership of institutional properties to the various levels of the church.



John Harvey Kellogg

But there was one glaring exception to that success. Namely, Kellogg and his medical empire, which had more employees than all other sectors of the church combined and had been granted roughly one fourth of the positions on the General Conference Executive Committee in 1901. It didn't take long for the assertive Kellogg to run into a struggle with the equally adamant Daniells, the new president of the General Conference. The struggle itself was nothing new. The doctor had always jealously guarded his sector of the Adventist pie. He had no use for any church leaders who attempted to block the development of his program. As early as 1895, we find him referring to conference presidents as "little popes." But by 1903, as C. H. Parsons put it, Kellogg filled "the position of pope completely" in the medical program.²⁹

That was bad enough. But, unfortunately, Daniells, in his drive to bring Kellogg and his associates into line, had, by 1903, resurrected tendencies to "kingly power" in the presidential office. That development was natural enough. After all, power generally has to be met by power. But Ellen White was distraught at the development. On April 3, in the testimony in which she noted that unions had been organized so that the General Conference could not "exercise dictation over all the separate conferences," she again raised the topic of "kingly authority" and noted that "the General Conference has fallen into strange ways, and we have reason to marvel that judgment has not fallen" on it.³⁰

Nine days later, she wrote to Daniells himself, telling him that he needed to "be careful how we press our opinions upon those whom God has instructed. . . . Brother Daniells, God would not have you suppose that you can exercise a kingly power over your brethren."³¹ That was not the

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Alonzo Trévier Jones

last rebuke she would have to send him. The years to come would see similar counsel to him and others in leadership.³²

One of the casualties of the struggle between Kellogg and Daniells in 1902 and 1903 was the careful balance of unity in diversity that had been achieved in 1901.

Ellen White, back in 1894, had set forth “unity in diversity” as “God’s plan,” with unity being achieved by each aspect of the work being connected to Christ the vine.³³ In 1901 and early 1902, Daniells had championed that ideal, noting in 1902 to the European Union Conference that just “because a thing is done in a certain way in one place is not reason why it should be done in the same way in another place, or even in the same place at the same time.”³⁴

But that ideal began to give way by late 1902 as the Kellogg forces sought to unseat Daniells and replace him with A. T. Jones, who was by that time in the doctor’s camp.³⁵ In that struggle the Kellogg/Jones forces were pushing for diversity. That dynamic impelled Daniells to emphasize unity as he moved toward a more authoritative stance. Thus, the delicate balance between unity in diversity lost out soon after the 1901 session. And, as Oliver points out, *unity at the expense of diversity has been the focus of the General Conference ever since the 1902 crisis.*³⁶

Yet, Oliver notes in his very sophisticated discussion of the topic, in the long run “unity is dependent on the recognition of diversity,” and that we should see the denomination’s diversity as a tool to help the church reach an extremely diverse world. From Oliver’s perspective, Adventism in the twenty-first century is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse groups in the world. Diversity is a fact that cannot be suppressed.

If diversity is neglected, the church will be unable to perform its task. . . . The church which subordinates the need to recognize diversity to a demand for unity is denying the very means by which it is best equipped to accomplish the task. . . . The issue for the Seventh-day Adventist Church is whether or not unity is to be regarded as that organizing principle whose importance eclipses that of all other principles. . . . A commitment to a doctrine of unity which imposes alien forms on any group, when adequate Christian forms could be derived from within the culture of the group itself, does not enhance unity.

Oliver prods us a bit when he suggests that what Adventists need to ask themselves is whether their goal is unity or mission.³⁷

Before moving away from the topic of unity in diversity, it should be noted that unity and uniformity are not the same thing. Some have argued that Adventism must be united in mission, its core message, and in servanthood, but not in everything. In fact, these persons suggest that many issues need to be decided by locality and even by individuals. A movement can be united without being uniform. Unfortunately, in the drive for unity, the General Conference has too often failed to note that distinction. One-size-fits-all is too often the goal. In the process, it has spawned disunity among various cultural groups.

One of the purposes of the 1901 reorganization was to foster localized decision making that could contribute to the ideal of unity in diversity through what Chudleigh called the union conference “firewall.” Chudleigh, in his thought-provoking *Who Runs the Church?*, illustrates how the General Conference has progressively sought to weaken the firewall of autonomous unions through official actions that have sought to make unions obligated to follow all policies and programs and initiatives “adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in its quinquennial sessions” and by taking initiatives and making pronouncements in areas that church members and even leaders have come to believe are within its rightful jurisdiction

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even if they are not. Since such actions are largely accepted without question, Chudleigh concludes that “the more well-accepted a GC initiative is, the more it contributes to members believing the Seventh-day Adventist Church is hierarchical.”³⁸

The General Conference as the Highest Authority on Earth

Tensions between the authority of the General Conference and that of the local conferences have existed from early in the history of organized Adventism. In August 1873, in the context of a lack of respect for General Conference officers, James White noted that “our General Conference is the highest earthly authority with our people, and is designed to take charge of the entire work in this and all other countries.”³⁹ Then in 1877, the General Conference in session voted that “the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference *when acting within its proper jurisdiction*; and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, *unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience*.”⁴⁰

That vote seems clear enough and both of the Whites accepted it. Please note, however, that it did highlight limitations related to the “proper jurisdiction” of the General Conference and “the rights of individual conscience.” We will return to both of those items below.

So, the matter of the authority of the General Conference was settled. Or was it? Ellen White would make some interesting statements on the topic in the 1890s. In 1891, for example, she wrote that “I was obliged to take the position that there was not the voice of God in the General Conference management and decisions. . . . Many of the positions taken, going forth as the voice of the General Conference, have been the voice of one, two, or three men who were misleading the Conference.”⁴¹ Again, in 1896, she noted that the General Conference “is no longer the voice of God.”⁴² And in 1901, she wrote that

“the people have lost confidence in those who have management of the work. Yet we hear that the voice of the [General] Conference is the voice of God. Every time I have heard this, I have thought it was almost blasphemy. The voice of the conference ought to be the voice of God, but it is not.”⁴³

An analysis of those negative statements indicates that they refer to occasions when the General Conference did not act as a representative body, when its decision-making authority was centralized in a person or a few people, or when the General Conference had not been following sound principles.⁴⁴ That conclusion lines up with Ellen White’s statements across time. In fact, she specifically spoke to the point in a manuscript read before the delegation of the 1909 General Conference session in which she responded to the schismatic activities of A. T. Jones and others. “At times,” she told the delegates,

*when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.*⁴⁵

So the matter is settled. Or is it? Has the General Conference in session evolved beyond the stage of fallibility as God’s voice? Does an official vote of a worldwide conclave have something akin to Papal infallibility? Some wonder.

Chief among the wonderers in 2016 are the church’s young adults in the developed nations, many of them well-educated professionals. In all honesty and sincerity, they are not only asking questions, but many are deeply disturbed.

How, some of them want to know, does the voice of God operate when it is widely reported

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that delegates in some unions, in at least two divisions, on two continents, were told in no uncertain terms how to vote on such issues as women's ordination, knowing that they could face a grilling if the secret vote went wrong?

They wonder how Ellen White would see such maneuvering in relation to the voice of God.

And these young adults wonder about the booing and heckling of Jan Paulsen, when he raised issues related to ordination, with no immediate, significant public rebuke by the denomination's highest authorities. One can only wonder how Ellen White would factor the voice of God into such dynamics, or whether she would have seen shades of Minneapolis.

Thoughtful young adults also wonder how serious the General Conference President himself is in interpreting all of the voted-in-session actions as being the voice of God. A widely publicized case in point took place on Sabbath, November 11, 2011, in Melbourne, Australia. The Victoria Conference had planned a city-wide regional meeting, which would feature the General Conference President. Part of the day's activities included the ordination of two men and the commissioning of one woman in a united service. Both the ordaining and the commissioning were in line with General Conference policy, but the General Conference President insisted at the last minute that the integrated service be divided into two separate services—one for ordination and the other for commissioning—so that he could participate only in the service for the two males without having to be associated with the commissioning.

Now young-adult thinking at its best would have to grant the president the right of conscience to not participate in the commissioning

of a female if he did not believe in it. In fact, that appears to be in line with the ruling of the 1877 General Conference session that respected "the rights of individual conscience" even in the face of a "highest authority under God" vote by the General Conference in session.⁴⁶ That is clear enough. But to thinking people, it has raised related questions. For example, if the General Conference president can choose not to line up with a session-voted policy, might they do the same thing on the basis of conscience? More seriously, why couldn't an entire union constituency act on the same conscience-based rationale? Many have viewed the actions of the denomination's president as having set a precedent in taking a step that put him out of harmony with the policy of the world church.

Other questions have surfaced in the minds of the denomination's young adults. One has to do with the "rumor" that some of the top denominational leadership would like to reverse the General Conference actions that have allowed for the ordination of local female elders and the commissioning of female pastors. What does that tell us about the "voice of God" votes? That some are wrong? And if some are mistakes, how do we know which ones?

And, finally, some have wondered if Adventism might have a problem in that it has developed a polity for the world church based on democratic procedures, in a population in which most of the voters come from countries that lack a truly functional democratic heritage and where top-down commands even affect secret voting. And, given the small proportion of votes in North America, Europe, and Australia, they wonder if the special needs of those fields ever will be able to be met unless they are voted on by the majority of the church, which may not understand the situations or even care about them.

It appears that in 2016, the dynamics of 1901 have been turned on their head. Then the problem was North America not being sensitive to the needs of the mission fields. Now it is the former mission fields not being sensitive to the

needs of North America. And with that issue we have returned to the role of unions and why they were created in the first place: because people on location understand their needs better than people at a distance.

A Contemporary Illustration of the Tension between Unions and Higher Authorities

It should not come as a surprise to anyone that the most serious issue related to the tension between union conferences and the General Conference in 2016 is the question of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. I do not want to spend much time on this issue, but in the context of a union conference that voted to ordain women in 2012 it would not be totally responsible for me to neglect the topic.

But before moving into the issue itself, it should be noted that the recently voted Adventist position on ordination is a problem for many evangelicals and others. For example, one Wheaton College biblical scholar recently told one of my friends that he could not understand how a denomination that had a female prophet as its most influential clergy person could take such a stand. The vote in such people's minds is either a sign of hypocrisy or a breakdown of logic or both.

Here we need to look at some basic facts. After all, female ordination:

- is not a biblical issue (years of study on the topic has not created consensus and neither will repeated votes);
- is not a Spirit of Prophecy issue; and
- is not a General Conference policy issue.

That last point has been widely misunderstood. At no time has the Seventh-day Adventist Church specified a gender qualification for ordination.⁴⁷ The General Conference Secretariat has recently argued otherwise on the basis of male gender language used in the Working Policy's discussion of qualifications for ordination.⁴⁸ But, as Gary Patterson has pointed out, "the working policy was filled with male gender language until

the 1980s when it was decided to change its wording to gender neutral. An editorial group was assigned the task, and made the changes. The fact that they changed all the rest of the document, but not the wording in the ordination section does not constitute a policy, unless it is listed in the criteria for ordination, which it notably is not."

The editorial decision, Patterson points out, was based on precedent or tradition since all ordained ministers up to that time had been male.⁴⁹ And while tradition in itself may be good enough for the Roman branch of catholicism, it has never held authoritative weight in Adventism. If the Secretariat's argument is viewed as conclusive, then we have editors developing binding policy for the world church rather than a vote at a General Conference session. That, needless to say, has serious implications.

At this point we need to return to the General Conference action of 1877 that stipulated that a vote of a General Conference session is the highest authority on earth "when acting within its proper jurisdiction."⁵⁰ Since the selection of whom to ordain was, in the 1860s, made a prerogative of the conferences and, in the early 1900s, was transferred to the unions, it does not fall into the jurisdiction of the General Conference except in the areas that the worldwide church in session has voted as policy. Thus, rulings by the General Conference on the gender issue are outside its jurisdiction until such an action is taken. From that perspective, the unions in the North American Division made a major mistake when they asked the General Conference for permission to ordain women. Rather, the unions should have followed the logic of James White who repeatedly noted that all things are lawful that do not contradict scripture and are in harmony with common sense.⁵¹

Before moving away from the topic of policy we need to listen to another point made by Gary Patterson. "There is," he wrote, "a perception existing that the General Conference cannot violate policy, that whatever it does constitutes policy, but this is not so. The General Conference

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authority
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Conference
and that
of the local
conferences
have existed
from early in
the history
of organized
Adventism.**

can violate policy just as well as any other level of the church, if and when it acts contrary to the provisions of policy. Unless and until the General Conference changes its policy by vote, any action contrary to that policy is a violation. Thus, the unions are not out of policy on this matter of gender inclusiveness in the ordination of ministers. The General Conference itself is out of policy by intruding where it does not have authority."⁵²

At the 1990 General Conference session, the denomination officially voted not to ordain women to the gospel ministry because of "the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church."⁵³ That was twenty-six years ago, and the passage of time has demonstrated that unity can be fractured from more than one direction. It is no longer a question of dividing the church and hindering mission. *The church is already divided.* And whether those inside of the moat recognize it or not, significant numbers of young adults are leaving the church over the issue even as many more, while still attending, have tuned out the authority of the church.

The denomination needs to see that this problem will not simply disappear. Somewhat like the issue of slavery in the United States from the 1820s to the 1860s, the ordination of women will stay on the agenda no matter how much money is spent in studying the topic and no matter how many votes are taken. Without adequate scriptural grounding, legislation at the worldwide level of the General Conference will not and cannot bring resolution.

And once again, we are back to the reason that unions were created in 1901. Namely, that the people on the ground are best able to decide how to facilitate mission in their areas. And here I might suggest that the real issue in 2016 is not the ordination of women but the role of union conferences. The ordination problem is only a surface issue. But it is one that cannot be avoided. And here I need to backtrack from a position I suggested to the annual leadership seminar of the North Ameri-

can Division in December 2012. At that time, I noted that the problem could be solved by just doing away with the word "ordination" (which in the sense we use is not biblical) and just commission all pastors regardless of gender. But I have come to see that as a copout and an avoidance of the real issue of the relation between unions and the General Conference.

That thought brings me to my final point.

***There Is an Authority Higher than that of the General Conference**

Here we need to remember the title of this paper: "The Role of Union Conferences in Relation to Higher Authorities"—plural. While the General Conference in session may be the highest authority on earth, there is yet a higher authority in *heaven*. Ellen White made that point when she wrote in 1901 that "men are not capable of ruling the church. God is our Ruler."⁵⁴

With that in mind, we need to briefly mention several points:

It is God through the Holy Spirit that calls pastors and equips them with spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:11). The church does not call a pastor.

Ordination, as we know it, is not a biblical concept but one developed in the history of the early church and, notes Ellen White, was eventually "greatly abused" and "unwarrantable importance was attached to the act."⁵⁵

The laying on of hands, however, is a biblical concept and served in the Bible, we read in Acts of the Apostles, as a "public recognition" that God had already called the recipients. By that ceremony, no power or qualification was added to the ordinands.⁵⁶ Over time, the early church began to call the ceremony of laying on of hands an ordination service. But "the English word 'ordination,' to which we have become accustomed, derives not from any Greek word used in the New Testament, but from the Latin *ordinare*."⁵⁷

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes God's call of both males and females to the pastoral ministry by the laying on of hands. That is biblical, *but* it calls one ordination and the

other commissioning. That is not biblical. Rather, it is merely a word game that apparently has medieval concepts of ordination at its root, since there is certainly no grounding for it in either the Bible or Ellen White's writings.

And here we are back to the question I raised at the outset. Are we happy being catholic in the traditional Adventist sense, or do we prefer the Roman type? When any organization, including Adventism, begins to impose nonbiblical ideas contrary to such biblical ones as pastoral calling and the laying on of hands in recognition of God's call, it may be coming perilously close to replicating some of the most serious mistakes of Roman Catholicism.

Here Matthew 18:18 is informative. From the perspective of Rome, the idea is that whatever the church votes on earth is ratified in heaven. But the Greek in the verse actually says that "whatever you bind on the earth will have been bound in heaven" (cf. NASB). The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary has it correct when it notes that "even here Heaven's ratification of the decision on earth will take place only if the decision is made in harmony with the principles of heaven."⁵⁸ It is God who calls. All the church can do is recognize that call through the biblical act of laying on of hands.

After 115 years, Adventism is still faced with the twin Romish temptations of kingly power and top-down authority. But, unlike the church before the 1901 reorganization, the denomination now has the machinery in place to effectively reject the challenge. Yet it remains for some future historian to report on whether twenty-first century Adventism decided to use or neglect that machinery. ■

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**It appears
that in
2016 the
dynamics of
1901 have
been turned
on their
head.**

**Does an
official vote of
a worldwide
conclave have
something
akin to Papal
infallibility?**

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