



Delegates at the GC Annual Council 2017 (Photo: Mylon Medley, ANN).

Annual Council 2017: *The Unity Vote* | BY BONNIE DWYER

At 7:15 p.m. on Monday, October 9, the results of the vote by the General Conference Executive Committee were announced: 184 in favor of returning the document before them to the Unity Oversight Committee, with 114 opposed. The tension in the air over the proposal for “Procedures for Reconciliation and Adherence in Church Governance” disappeared as the delegates sang “We Have This Hope.”

But it had been a very long day, beginning with worship at 8:00 a.m., followed by a full morning agenda in which the state of the world church’s finances were reviewed, the 2018 World Allocations and Appropriations Budget presented, and the auditors’ analysis of 2016 shared. Paul H. Douglas, director of the General Conference Auditing Service (GCAS), made a key point for the day as he presented his service’s annual report. In their examination of financial documents and practices of divisions, unions, conferences, educational institutions, healthcare institutions, publishing houses, ADRA, and trust services, they found 81 percent of the entities had non-standard reports. In other words, there were instances of non-compliance with denominational policy. And the ten-year trend shows increasing non-compliance. In 2007, 62 percent of the entities showed non-compliance with the percentage dipping down into the fiftieth percentiles in 2008, 2009, and 2010 but then moving steadily upward for the next

five years, with 2016 being the year with the highest rate at 81 percent. It was a fact that was picked up and fed back into the six-hour afternoon conversation about unions that the GC wanted to discipline over “non-compliance” regarding the ordination of women. Was non-compliance really the issue?

Committee members were encouraged to return quickly from lunch to be sure to get a seat for the afternoon session. Promptly at 1:29 p.m., President Wilson began by leading the audience in singing of the early Adventist hymn “What Never Part Again.” Procedural instructions followed—please refrain from clapping or applause, “We want a quiet spirit,” voting will be by secret ballot (three color-coded ballots were given to each committee member), and a suggested time limit for comments of two minutes. An amendment was immediately proposed for three-minute speeches, but it went down to defeat. Then the chair proposed that a vote be taken at 5:50 p.m. That was shot down. The committee wanted to determine when it was ready to vote and not have a specific deadline placed on the proceedings.

Next, Thomas Lemon, the chair of the Unity Oversight Committee, presented his report of the committee’s actions in response to the vote in 2016. He said that he had had meetings in the North American Division, the Trans-European Division, and the Inter-European Division. While the South Pacific Division had requested a

meeting with Lemon, scheduling conflicts had prevented that from taking place. He said that he will meet with them in the future.

"As I listened (at these meetings)," he reported, "there was not one person who gave any hint of being in rebellion. Rebellion is an attitude before it is an action. I didn't hear that anywhere. Concern but not rebellion. I want to allay that fear. We are children of God and we are in this together." Later he added, "As I've listened to the stories, I heard an understanding of mission and a commitment to mission that would warm your heart. Commitment to mission is very, very strong."

With these meetings, he said he felt that they had met the requirements of the action voted in 2016. Although at the beginning of his report, he had admitted that "If you want to ask if we dotted every 'i' and crossed every 't,' you might say we didn't do everything." That the 2016 voted action set up at least three additional steps was not acknowledged.

At the conclusion of his report, he said it is time for Phase Two and to discuss what that is going to look like. He said he "was given" a document on September 14 that he took to the Unity Committee on September 18, where it was discussed for five hours, but the committee wanted more time, so the conversation continued the next day. Then it was discussed in the General Conference and Division Officers Committee (GCDO) for multiple days, changing along the way. In the end, he said the document was the best that could be put together by seventy people.

The fourteen-page document was finally distributed to the audience, and Associate Secretary Hensley Mooroven read it aloud in a measured and resonant voice. What the document proposed was that General Conference Executive Committee members be required to sign a personal declaration of loyalty and compliance with General Conference policy. "Those who do not sign the document for whatever reason, will forfeit their privileges of voice, vote and subcommittee participation." The General Conference Unity Oversight Committee would be given the responsibility of responding to instances where the actions or statements of an Executive Committee member is inconsistent with the statement after signing it, initiating a pastoral process following the counsel of Matthew 18. The statement that Committee Members would be required to sign would have four items:

1. I agree to respect church structure and abide by the GC Working Policy which has been voted by worldwide representation.

2. Within my sphere of influence I will work with appropriate Church leadership to correct any non-compliance situations within my jurisdiction.

3. If my organization or entity has voted or has been engaged in actions, and/or unilateral activities or has released statements or pronouncements which are not in harmony with General Conference Session actions, General Conference Executive Committee actions, or General Conference Working Policy for global implementation through divisions, unions, conferences, and missions, which if not implemented, would adversely impact Church unity, for whatever stated reasons, I will use my influence as a member of the General Conference Executive Committee to reverse and reject those actions recognizing that normal and accepted administrative Church procedures are to be followed regarding any adjustments to policy of voted actions.

4. I understand that my membership on the General Conference Executive Committee is a sacred, spiritual trust and that I am bound to adhere to the General Conference Session actions, General Conference Executive Committee actions, and General Conference Working Policy.

Another section of the document addresses General Conference delegates not in compliance and requires unions to submit names of delegates who have signed a Statement of Commitment regarding General Conference Session actions. If an individual is determined not to be in compliance, the General Conference senior executive administration will report this to the GC Secretariat so that the union can choose a replacement.

The document took forty-five minutes to read. Elder Wilson asked his two fellow officers and the General Conference Chief Counsel to share their thoughts on the document. At 3:50 p.m. the floor was opened for discussion.

Christine Burt, a lay representative from the Trans-European Division, was the first to the microphone. She began by saying that she wanted, with love, to make a suggestion. "We've been here for seven days. To have this document thrust on us now is not the right approach. We could have used the LEAD conference time. We could have had time for sharing. We don't have the opportunity to understand. In the future, we need to find other ways to approach this."

Mark Johnson, of the North American Division, said, "We are being asked to approve a document that nullifies over a hundred years of church history, that creates a super group of persons to be able to serve on the GC Executive Committee. How does the Unity Committee decide whether or not we are fit to serve?"

Ron Smith, president of Southern Union, rose to speak against the document because it created new machinery that would impede mission in his territory. He urged the GC to pull the document off the table.

Brent Burdick (ESD) said he could not support the document, and he had a suggestion for what could be done. "We need a timeout on the topic of women's ordination, including non-compliance. Take 2018 for a time out. No discussion, a Sabbath break on this discussion. Then in 2019, we could raise the issue again. If we take a time out, what is the worst thing that can happen?"

Lowell Cooper spoke against the motion for five reasons:

1. The document misinterprets or misapplies the GC Constitution and Bylaws (There is more than one example of this).

2. The proposal dramatically alters the ethos of the Church. Leadership accountability is inverted—instead of primary accountability to a constituency the proposal inserts accountability to a supervisory level of leadership.

3. The disciplinary measures in the document are focused on an individual who is considered to be out of compliance with policy. There is no recognition of constituency decisions that may conflict with policy. The document assumes that policy infractions will occur by an individual—and that such an individual can correct the matter. This is an insufficient comprehension of the issue.

4. The document envisions penalty as the only remedial measure for policy non-compliance. Perhaps this is an indication of an administration's mindset primarily focused on authority and enforcement. The processes outlined in the document do not even hint at any room for innovation, creativity, experimentation, policy waivers, or policy development as a way of dealing with emerging realities or developments that render existing policy inadequate or irrelevant.

5. The proposal stifles the expression of dissent. Disagreement with policy constitutes sufficient ground for being branded as non-compliant.

"These five issues, in my opinion, rise to a level of significance far beyond mere technicality. They constitute a serious threat to the principles that undergird church structure, operation and the 'body of Christ' imagery that we prize so highly," said Cooper.

Randy Roberts (NAD) asked for clarification on how the document reached the floor of Annual Council. "My understanding—which may be flawed—is that it was dealt with in the General Conference Division Officers meeting . . . and that when a vote was taken on whether or not to pass the document on to this body for consideration, it passed by a count of 36–35. Considering the weight of the issue before us today, that most narrow of margins is quite troublesome. When a body is that evenly divided, it seems the better part of wisdom to prayerfully reconsider how to approach it.

"But there is actually something that concerns me even more, and that is my understanding that a previous vote on the matter actually lost by a count of 29–26, following which several who were not in attendance, some of whom had not been able to read the document, were asked to vote. It was that vote, then, that passed by a count of 36–35.

"Would you kindly comment on two questions I have. One, is it normal GCDO policy and/or procedure to allow members who are not present to vote, especially if they have not been able to read the document on which they are voting? And two, as a leader, can you comment on the wisdom of pursuing the drastic measures we are considering today based on a one-vote margin within the key leadership team?"

President Wilson replied, "We have a very collegial process here at the GC. We try to achieve consensus, if possible. Votes are taken when consensus cannot be reached. The GCDO had quite extensive discussions on the document and were not able to come to consensus before the Adventist History tour. There were three members who are part of the IAD who could not be with us because of the natural disasters in their area. Canvassing of those members is what I told everyone early on. No one objected. We had various discussions. The discussions were very positive on getting to an appropriate goal. We canvassed those there and those who were not there. A very few who said they did not want to vote because they had not seen the document. The results are what you indicated. The vote that you mentioned. The fact you mentioned was

only known to a very few people. There have been leaks. People have misused information that has caused this to be very flammable. Private information has been taken and misused again. One final thing, the chair did not vote."

John Thomas opened his remarks by saying that he was one of the absentee individuals. But his great concern was for three large demographic groups: youth, women, and members who he felt would be questioning what the church is trying to do. "What are we going to do as a world church to explain to these three groups?"

Thomas Muller of the Danish Union commented on the "very good dialogue" that his division (TED) had with the chair of the Unity Oversight Committee and the hope that it could continue. He objected to a vote on this document before finishing with the document voted last year. "This process from last year has not been followed," he said. "The GC has not followed its own process. We want to pray and find solutions together. The process has not been followed, so it is far too soon to be taking this action. We can't vote on this document today."

Elder Wilson responded that it was the Divisions' responsibility to take the initiative on what was previously voted.

Mandia Matshiyae (SID) noted that the day before a request for the document had been made and turned down. "Today, we have expressed that we have not had time to respond to this document. Why couldn't it have been given to us. I speak against the document. Page 10, lines 37–40 I have a problem with."

Justine Ramas (SSD) was the first person to speak in support of the document. She asked how many as parents have had children disregard the rules? "I don't want my children to be selectively obedient. This church is my home. Wouldn't it be lovely to live in a home where there is structure, order, and unity?"

When Jan Paulsen, former president of the General Conference, was recognized by the chair, a total hush fell over the audience. "Since I made my comment at San Antonio, I have not made a public comment on the issue of Women's Ordination. I have prayed every day. With this document, we are making the Spirit's task more difficult. The quotes are not necessarily in harmony with what is in the document." Then he spoke about the loyalty oath being required. "My loyalty is written in my heart," he said. "I find the spirit of unity missing in this document." It needs to go back, he said. "I definitely do not see the hand of God in it."

Elder Wilson then asked Mark Finley to pray.

Suranjeen Pallipamula (SUD) said that there is discussion in his Northern Indian Union about non-compliance, but what irks him, as a lay member, is the loyalty signing. "Where I come from honor is important. In a meeting if I tell you I don't trust you to sit together in this meeting, that would be a problem." Specifically he questioned the use of the word "advocacy" on page 9, line 5, saying it has a much different meaning. "It is very much what I need to do and continue to do." He proposed an amendment to the use of that word which was voted.

Dave Weigley (NAD) affirmed the GC for not moving ahead with the nuclear action that had been proposed last year. But he suggested that taking away voice and vote from committee members violates the constitution. He asked to have the matter stricken from the agenda for violating the bylaws by taking away voice and vote. "If I am in error, correct me."

Elder Wilson said that the constitution is silent on privileges. He said the document was being presented under article 13, letter b on page 6. There is no Supreme Court to appeal to. It is up to this body to determine how its members would wish to proceed.

Weigley responded, "I still move to have the document sent to the Constitution and Bylaws Committee. If I have membership, I have voice and vote—without condition."

Dan Jackson requested to hear from legal counsel.

Todd McFarland came to the microphone and said, "The constitution is silent on this. There is agreement in the OGC that the ultimate decider is going to be this body. There is, however, a differing view on rights of individuals. When you start affecting individual rights, it requires a two-thirds vote. We are in unprecedented territory."

The motion to refer the document back to the Constitution and Bylaws Committee was then discussed, and during the discussion, an amendment was made to refer it back instead to the original committee from which it came—the Unity Oversight Committee. And that turned the discussion into a debate over which committee would be the best to refer the document to and a series of votes. The final vote was done by secret ballot, and the motion to refer the document back to the committee that originated it won, bringing to an end a very long day. ■

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