



Bishops debating with the pope during the Conciliar Movement

## “Reformatio in Capite et in Membris” — 17 Questions That Need an Answer | BY EDWIN TORKELSEN

In 1378, the Great Papal Schism was a fact. The Western Roman Catholic Church was split. Two popes, later three, anathematized each other, all claiming to be the one and only true head of the church.

The scandal gave rise to the Conciliar Movement. Its aim was to restore unity. The watch cry was “*Reformatio in Capite et in Membris*” (reform in head and members). The need for reform was greatest at the top. It was the top that caused the schism. The popes perceived the Conciliar Movement as a challenge to “proper” church authority. For this reason, Pope Pius II in 1460 condemned Conciliarism in his bull “*Execrabilis*.”

The General Conference (GC) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has for years promoted Revival and Reformation. It is still unclear what specific reforms are wanted. Does the need for reform also include the “head” or only the members? I have not read or heard GC President Ted Wilson mention the need of any reform “*in capite*.”

After the GC session in San Antonio in 2015, the focus shifted to the need for unity, understood as *submission of personal conscience to church authority and church rules*.

On the surface, women’s ordination is the issue. After the GC decided to accuse the unions that allow ordination of women of being non-compliant rebels, the main issue is *authority*. GC leaders promote a hierarchical under-

standing of church organization where the “lower” levels are obliged to obey and submit to the “higher” levels. The wish to control from the top has become prominent in articles and speeches as well as actions.

The GC’s accusations against some unions reveal that it sees its role as an authoritarian father attempting to discipline his naughty kids. It claims to be the highest church authority, speaking on behalf of the Holy Spirit. Its task is to bring the unions in line with the Church Family’s house rules.

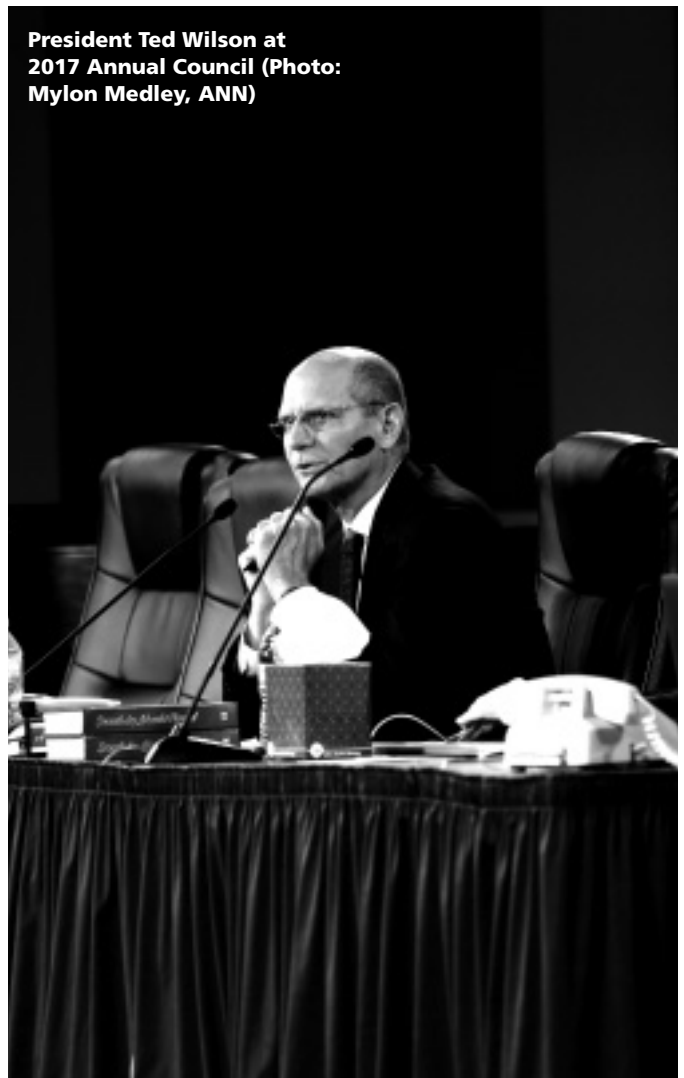
Women’s ordination is now reduced to a simple law-and-order question of policy compliance. The fact that women’s ordination is a complex, multifaceted issue is ignored. Presenting reductionist reasoning as a premise, the GC hopes nobody will discover that an invalid premise will never deliver a valid conclusion.

Some unions may succumb to pressure and accept this premise. They may view themselves as inferior to the Grand Inquisitors now traveling the world to conduct “conversations” with the naughty unions. Then collegiality will have lost to hierarchy.

We need to question these premises. Collegiality must be restored. The GC must be brought back to realize it is a service institution, not a control and command center. The unions need to proactively turn the tables, take the initiative, and *call the GC to account*. The GC must be *required* to answer questions about the inquisition process, the presuppositions, and assumptions that fuel it.

Ideally, we need an *independent* Unity Oversight Committee (UOC) that is free to critically evaluate the whole process, especially the role of the GC leadership. This is, of course, wishful thinking. The list of the present UOC members, almost all of them GC personnel, leaves no doubt that this committee will ask none of the important questions. They have only one task: bring the unions to submit to the will of God and the global church, defined by the GC as policy compliance.

If the present UOC members are in doubt about what happens if their conclusions do not satisfy the GC leaders, let them remember Thomas Lemon. After his honest remarks at the 2017 GC Annual Council, it did not take many hours before he no longer was chair of the UOC. A brief conversation with the GC President took care of that. That act alone speaks louder than a million words about the ability of the UOC to conduct independent oversight evaluations.



We need a UOC with *competent* members, independent of the GC leadership, including at least 50 percent women. They must address the underlying ideas and assumptions of the non-compliance allegations, starting at the top of the authority pyramid: the motives, authority, ideology, and agenda of the GC leadership.

Here are 17 points of concern:

1. Why was the question about allowing divisions to decide on women’s ordination brought to a vote in San Antonio, knowing that the Adventist Church is already polarized on this issue? A simple yes/no vote on a complex issue only serves to deepen the split. The tense situation was *willfully* aggravated. Is this wise leadership?
2. Is the San Antonio vote valid—not only technically but also ideologically and ethically? If this is a complex question of *conscience*, since when did the

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Adventist Church decide such questions by a simple majority vote?

3. If it is merely a *policy* issue, why not change policy to bring it into harmony with reality? Do policies serve mission, or is mission the slave of policies?

4. If it is a policy *compliance* issue, why does the GC refuse to comply with the GC *Working Policy* that leaves the handling of such issues to the divisions? What are the consequences for GC leaders who arbitrarily violate policies?

5. If ordaining women is an issue of theological *heresy*, what is the orthodox position? When did the Adventist Church decide that ordaining women is heretical?

6. What is the *material difference* between male ordained and female commissioned ministers?

7. If *Male Headship* ideology is the philosophical basis for prohibiting women's ordination, why has the GC not openly supported or repudiated it?

8. *Who* has decided that some unions are non-compliant and by what kind of *process*? Should the GC's *opinion* on votes and policies be accepted as the final verdict on the unions' assumed "guilt"? *When* did the GC acquire, as their prerogative, the *power of definition* and *the right to act as a tribunal*? The guilty verdict was handed down before the case was investigated. Is this *abuse* of authority and power?

9. The aim of the "Unity in Mission" document in 2016 and the "Loyalty" document in 2017 is to *execute punishment* based on an *arbitrary and unsubstantiated* guilty verdict by the GC. If non-compliance is not *proven through an independent process of investigation*, how can the validity of this allegation be acknowledged as a fact?

10. Both documents were presented to the GC Executive Committee (GCEC) at the last minute, the Chair explicitly

refusing requests from the members to study the documents before they were brought to the floor. In addition, one must look at the tactics used in 2017 to ensure that the "Loyalty" document was presented to the GCEC at all, despite being first voted down in the GC Division Officers' (GCDO) committee. There is also the fact that this document was not the product of the UOC but was handed to them by GC officers to be presented as if it was the product of the UOC. How could these, in my opinion, politically motivated, and possibly unethical, dishonest, and manipulative tactics pass without being strongly rebuked? Why were not the people responsible for these manipulations held accountable for their ethically questionable actions? These issues must be assessed from an ethical point of view. Should leaders be allowed to continue in their positions after they have repeatedly practiced unethical, deceptive, and manipulative tactics?

11. The core question of *unity* must be studied. Are true spiritual unity and organizational uniformity the same? When the GC President speaks about unity and church authority, he assumes that biblical unity in Christ and policy-enforced uniformity are the same. Nor does he distinguish between appropriate church authority, which is always limited, and inappropriate authority that does not recognize any limits. He assumes that in both areas the latter is the true definition of the former. Are these ideas in harmony with Adventist understandings of unity and authority?

12. The pivotal issue of using *threats* of punishment and *coercion* in ecclesiastical matters must take center stage as well as demands to *suppress personally held convictions and freedom of speech*. These methods are in conflict with the

Thomas Lemon, former chair of the Unity Oversight Committee, gives the UOC's report to the Executive Committee at the GC Annual Council, October 9, 2017 (Photo: Mylon Medley, ANN)



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New Testament, the Reformers, and the Adventist Church's historically strong defense of conscience as a sacred core Christian value. The Adventist Church has traditionally preached that use of threats and coercion in religious matters, even if disguised as a pious call for submission to law-and-order and obedience, is a core marker of apostasy. Is it OK when our own leaders do this?

13. There is a serious *conflict of interest* in the present UOC. Top GC officers, including the GC President, are listed as *ex officio* members. They have played a *vital role* in the process leading up to the San Antonio vote; they have been the main *accusers* of the unions for being non-compliant; and they have vociferously proclaimed their guilt. As members of the UOC, they are acting as *judges in their own case*. They seriously compromise the UOC's task of doing a fair oversight evaluation. This is a challenge to the credibility of the rest of the members, not only the UOC's but also their personal

*ethical reputation* is at stake.

14. The GC members *hide behind the San Antonio vote by GC in session*, promoting themselves as merely duty-bound executors of that vote. This picture is false. The GC started the process; it ordered the TOSC project (and ignored its results); its members decided to bring the issue to the GC in session; they formulated the text of the vote; they introduced the item at the session; they chose not to have somebody present the results of the TOSC studies; they did not invite female pastors from China or elsewhere to tell their stories; they have interpreted the vote to mean a general prohibition against women's ordination. Simply put, the GC members orchestrated the process in order to obtain a vote to their liking, they have interpreted the vote to their liking, and they have acted upon that interpretation to their own liking. Will the UOC look into and evaluate the realities and not only the formalities of the San Antonio vote and

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how the GC has used it to promote its own agenda?

15. Will the UOC address *the logical irony and implication of the San Antonio vote*? The fact that the question of whether or not Divisions should be allowed to decide on women's ordination in their territories was an *implicit and tacit acceptance* of the *principle* of women's ordination. If women's ordination was considered to be wrong, for whatever reason, there would be no point in asking this question. *The premise for the question is that women's ordination is OK in the Adventist Church.* In fact, the GC in session, by its vote in SA, has now *affirmed* that women's ordination is OK. It only remains for the GC leaders to discover and accept this fact—and to abandon their illogical crusade and leave the unions alone. Will that happen?

16. Our top GC leaders have chosen to be the *accusers of the brethren*. Their accusations are aimed at unions that do their best to preach the Gospel where they are. By doing this, the GC leaders point the finger of the accuser back at themselves. Why do they do this?

17. We need to ask this tough but important question: are top GC leaders guiding us into *institutional apostasy*? Warped ideas of authority lead to control and loss of freedom of conscience and expression. That is institutional apostasy. The line in the sand appears *when personal conscience is downplayed* and use of *threats and coercion try to enforce uniform compliance* with man-made rules presented *in a religious garb*.

When uniformity and coerced submission to rules become more important than respect for personal conscience and practical flexibility, I sense that *we are about to cross that line*. In his speech at the Lisbon Leadership Conference in February 2018, the GC President promot-

ed such ideas, even indicating that the Spirit agreed with him on this point. These ideas are now authoritatively spread to the global church as the President's speech is being published through all available official Adventist channels. Sadly, *these ideas contradict the fundamental principles of the Gospel* that call for the sacred freedom of conscience and a *voluntary* spiritual unity in Christ in *diversity*. Is this the way we want our leaders to lead our church?

These fundamental questions cannot safely be ignored. The GC may ignore them only to find themselves marginalized in a divided church of their own making. As long as the assumed premises remain questionable, the ensuing compliance process and the final conclusions of the UOC will be equally questionable. For these reasons, the GC's effort of going after the unions must be taken seriously but not in the sense that the GC takes it seriously. I am afraid that by now it is too late to save the present GC leadership's prestige, reputation, and legacy. By now it is the reputation of the corporate Seventh-day Adventist Church that is in danger. That danger does not come from the unions that want to ordain women; it comes from GC officers willing to use coercion and split the church to prevent it.

If the UOC will not raise these questions, the unions should do so. The GC leadership must be confronted and held accountable for all their assumptions and the processes they have started based on these assumptions. Ethics is more important than policies and personal prestige.

*"Reformatio in capite et in membris"?* Yes, we need that. Especially *"in capite."* ■

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