

## Secrecy: The Adventist Experience | BY BONNIE DWYER

Secrecy is based on mistrust between those governing and those governed; and at the same time, it exacerbates that mistrust.

– JOSEPH STIGLITZ

What is true about secrecy within governments also seems true for church organizations. Writing “On Liberty, the Right to Know and Public Discourse: The Role of Transparency in Public Life,” Economist Joseph Stiglitz’ comment above on secrecy found its way into Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s book, *Secrecy: The American Experience*, in 1998, in which Moynihan concluded that secrecy has a negative impact on democratic norms, and that it is for losers.

Stiglitz’ quote also captures the current state of mistrust in the Adventist Experience. During the Wilson administration at the General Conference, secrecy has undermined the functioning of departments and agencies, and created tension between the various levels of church structure. Most conspicuously, it has interfered with the work of the General Conference Executive Committee. For the last three years, new proposals for how to discipline or control unions seen as being “non-compliant,” particularly on the issue of women’s ordination, have dominated the Annual Council meeting of the Executive Committee. The first formal proposal was for

the General Conference to take over such unions. Although it had been discussed within the halls of the General Conference, this “nuclear option” was sprung on the General Conference Executive Committee at the 2016 Annual Council, and it backfired badly.

However, a year later, during a dramatic Annual Council discussion of yet another proposal, Pastor Randy Roberts questioned General Conference President Ted Wilson about how the recommendation had come to the committee, noting that the vote of the General Conference and Division Officers (GCDO) had included (forbidden) proxy votes. “You weren’t supposed to know that,” Wilson said, as he began his explanation about a vote of the committee taken while GCDO was traveling and when some members had left to handle crises in their home territories. Wilson’s com-

ment surprised the audience and contributed to the failure of the Annual Council motion to require loyalty oaths from union conference presidents and other members of the General Conference Executive Committee. Wilson was stunned

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by the leaks from the GCDO and complained vigorously about them, but others in his administration promised openness and transparency going forward.

However, none of these experiences changed Wilson's mind about the need for discipline of the unions. In 2018, he pressured the Executive Committee to approve a system of five compliance committees at Annual Council, and planned to have them commence work immediately. While he got the vote that he wanted, he did not get the cooperation that he needed from within. The General Conference and division employees pushed back against the immediate activation of the committees. Later, in early 2019, when the GCDO members gathered, there were more questions about the advisability of the compliance committees. At the 2019 spring meeting of the Executive Committees, they were never mentioned, and now a year has essentially gone by without a single one of the committees functioning. However, a letter from the GC

Secretariat has been sent to the divisions asking about matters of non-compliance in their territories. When the letter arrived at the North American Division (NAD), it was met with a stern response calling the letter inappropriate and requesting that it be withdrawn. Other divisions have taken a more nuanced approach, hoping that a softer response would be more diplomatic.

Whether secrecy will again play a role at this year's meetings of the General Conference and Division Officers and the General Conference Executive Committee in October, of course, remains to be seen. Will there be a report on the Compliance Committees? Will there be another five- or six-hour long Annual Council debate like in the past three years? Will the leadership be transparent about what has taken place during the GCDO meetings leading up to Annual Council, letting people know when and how members of that committee differed on issues?

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The work of first the GCDO and then the GC Executive Committee will be what sets the stage for the 2020 General Conference Session in Indianapolis. They will craft the agenda, decide what needs to be added or subtracted from the Church's various policy manuals. One could wish that a motion would be proposed requiring that minutes of the Executive Committee meeting be made public immediately at the conclusion of a meeting—not months or years later. Likewise, requiring that minutes of the General Conference and Division Officers meetings to be public records

would be a positive move for openness within the Church. The GCDO with its sixty-plus members is the size of the General Conference Committee in the early days of the denomination. Surely, church members have a right to know about the discussions and actions of this committee, which plays such a crucial role in the management of the church.

Secrecy divides a body between those who know and those who are not deemed trustworthy to know. It is different from the privacy that is needed in handling of personnel issues and certain legal matters, for instance. Secrecy is a political tool that would seem to be unnecessary in our church organization, which eschews politics very specifically in the *Church Manual*.

As the Church makes plans for its future by bringing proposals for consideration to the 2020 General Conference Session, “sunshine” actions eliminating secrecy from official committees would go a long way to uniting the members who feel estranged by the secrecy that now pervades the organizational culture. Moynihan is right. Secrecy is for losers.



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