

# Supporting the World Church *or* Subverting the Local Conference?

BY ALEXANDER AAMODT

In the Spring of 2017, mysterious flyers began arriving at churches within the Upper Columbia Conference (UCC) of Seventh-day Adventists. They advertised meetings to be held at two UCC churches a few weeks later, put on by a new organization called World Church Affirmation Sabbath (WCAS). A letter accompanying the flyers asked churches to include them in the next weekend's bulletin.

A pastor from one church that received the flyers, said, "I remember there not being enough for our bulletin," and since he had never heard of this World Church Affirmation Sabbath, the flyers were thrown out and soon forgotten.

Other confused pastors tried to find more information about these meetings by calling the Upper Columbia Conference headquarters in Spokane, Washington. But the church leaders there had not heard of World Church Affirmation Sabbath either, so they began their own research into the organization.

The UCC's search for answers would span the next year and a half, culminating in a December 2018 public statement that took many throughout the region—and beyond—by surprise. After a preamble, the statement listed a number of concerns and grievances against the upstart organization:

Therefore, let it be known that the WCAS is:

- Not authorized nor recognized as a group of the Upper Columbia Conference.
- At variance with the transparency of truth that is the foundation of the Adventist church, operating using an anonymous post office box as their address.
- Inappropriately collecting data from individual churches to further their political agenda.
- Not aligned with the Spirit of Prophecy.
- Out of harmony with the SDA Church Manual (p. 114) regarding the selection and duty of delegates.
- Recognized as causing false alarm and division among God's people.
- Distributing unauthorized materials that divide God's people, spread disharmony and bring reproach upon God's church.

The statement went on to announce the organization was prohibited from using any conference-owned properties to host its events in perpetuity.

Shortly thereafter, thousands of miles away in the Texico Conference, church leaders released a similar statement, banning World Church Affirmation Sabbath meetings in their area as well.

How could an organization rise from obscurity and in less than two years earn condemnation from Adventist leadership in disparate regions of the United States, while many had never even heard of it? Many church members asked a similar question to that of the UCC pastors: What exactly *is* World Church Affirmation Sabbath? Perhaps a simple question, but answering it soon leads to competing narratives. In one, WCAS (the organization's common abbreviation) is nothing more than a group of dedicated lay church members who hold conservative values and want to uplift each other by sharing and meeting together. But in the other, WCAS functions as a political action group, organizing Adventists who agree with their ideology—centered around, but not limited to, opposing women's ordination—in order to influence church leadership and further their agenda.

This is the story of World Church Affirmation Sabbath, reconstructed through hours of interviews, examination of written and digital materials, and the search of public records. It begins as a local story, but soon leads to a secret online network, spread across the United States and perhaps extending to leadership in the highest levels of the Adventist church. From the local churches to obscure corners of the internet, the story of WCAS raises difficult questions about the role of church leaders in policing conduct and protecting the rights of its members, and whether there should be different standards for behavior in digital spaces than in the physical world.

Depending on which WCAS narrative one believes, the same piece of information may be innocuous, or a smoking gun proving darker intent; but through it all, one certainty does remain: as in many of the disagreements that embroil the Adventist church today, there often has been little in the way of middle ground.

### **Affirming Women Pastors**

There is a long history of conflict over women's ordination and the role of female pastors in the North Pacific

Union Conference (NPUC). In 2011, the union began to examine what role women should have in leadership, and whether NPUC might pursue a vote on ordaining pastors without regard to gender. Discussions about such a plan were met with a swift and concerted backlash, and the

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vote was delayed, then ultimately abandoned in the wake of the 2015 vote by the General Conference in session that prohibited individual divisions of the church from deciding to ordain women on their own.

Within the NPUC, the Upper Columbia Conference is neither the largest by membership nor by area, but it sits in what could be considered the heart of the region. As it includes Eastern Washington, a sliver of Oregon, and the Panhandle of Idaho, the UCC touches every single other conference in its union, save the Alaska Conference. Like many areas in the United States, its

110 churches span the range from tiny rural congregations, to a large church at Walla Walla University.

UCC leadership had watched the developments on women's ordination carefully—the delay and then cancellation of a regional ordination vote, the decision from the General Conference session—and in the spring of 2016 made their own move about how to treat policies regarding women pastors going forward. Even as the NPUC had announced it was canceling its own ordination vote, the union called for members to be committed “in line with the current NAD strategic plan, to grow the number of women in professional ministry and to value, affirm and foster their leadership gifts.”<sup>1</sup>

On March 29, 2016, the Upper Columbia Conference Executive Committee decided its method of affirming women pastors should be similar to that of several other conferences, and they voted a policy to give commissioned and ordained pastors most of the same responsibilities. Even though female pastors would not be ordained, they would be able to perform baptisms and weddings, and participate in founding churches.

To many of the executive committee members—and to many constituents throughout the conference—the new standards were in line with General Conference policy because female pastors were still commissioned, not ordained. Some disagreed.

A contingent of church members who were staunchly anti-women's ordination had seen the worldwide church vote in 2015 as a referendum against the legitimacy of women pastors. In their eyes, the new policy was a way of subverting the General Conference decision and a contradiction to the biblical headship model that they believed should apply to church leadership.

On April 10, 2016, UCC leaders held a scheduled meeting with the Lay Advisory Committee—a group containing representatives from every conference church. After UCC president, Paul Hoover, explained the executive committee decision, some of the lay advisers became upset at what they saw as the conference going against the guidelines of the world church. During lunch that day, some of them began to talk amongst themselves about what could be done.

A small detail in the constitution of the Upper Columbia Conference presented an opening. Conferences have provisions in their governing documents that allow churches to call for special constituency sessions and ad-

dress any topic of concern. In the UCC, only 15 percent of churches had to call for such a session and the conference would be required to comply.

The lay-advisory meeting concluded that Sunday, but the upset constituents continued the conversations they had begun during lunch. Belinda Lowry, the representative from the Chewelah Adventist Church in Washington State, would later write about what happened next.

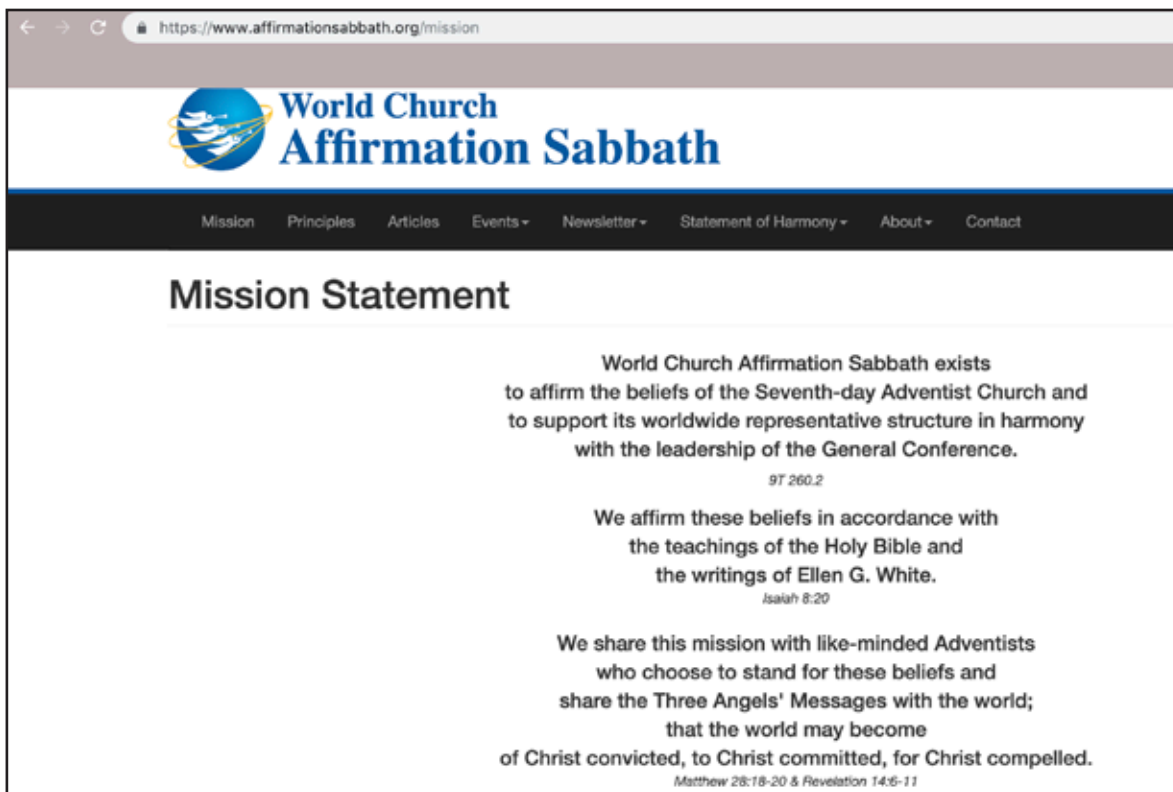
A few of us from two different churches began contacting other churches in the Upper Columbia Conference and found that many had the same concerns as we did. Therefore, an example petition was drafted and sent to the board of the concerned churches. The petition requested that the new Commissioned Minister Policy be rescinded or that a special session be held to address the issue at hand.

It's uncertain how many people were involved in the conversations, or exactly how the different churches were then contacted over the coming weeks and months. Lowry did not respond to a request for an interview.

On June 9, Larry Kirkpatrick, pastor of the Chewelah church, mailed a letter to Paul Hoover—also sending a copy to every member of the UCC Executive Committee—stating that the board of his church voted for the special session “to enable the constituency to overrule” the new policy. UCC constituents would “take any action deemed needful to provide administrative leadership consistent with the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” the Chewelah board stated.

In an email to their own church board, another UCC pastor would later characterize the letter from Chewelah as a “not-so-subtle threat” against conference leadership.

More letters arrived at the conference headquarters; seventeen were needed to trigger the meeting, and one by one they trickled in. Many constituents and church employees throughout the UCC looked on in dismay as anti-women-pastor constituents banded together in opposition to the commissioned-minister policy. Still, supporters of women pastors were not overly worried, even though they saw the situation as serious. “I think it rather unlikely that there would be a reversal of this policy,” one pastor wrote. “However, if such a reversal were voted, it



Mission statement of WCAS, as it appears on its website.

would be quite a blow to women in ministry, to a young generation of ministers in the conference, to us all.”

Different sources disagree about the exact number of letters submitted to the conference—from as few as seven to as many as eleven. Assuming the latter, analysis based on current church statistics reveals the total membership of churches that called for the special session was about 6.5 percent of total conference membership. The relatively small number of people calling to rescind the policy (combined they were fewer than the membership of the single largest UCC church on its own) gave female pastors and their supporters confidence. Even if a special constituency session were convened, there would be more representation from the larger churches. None of the churches that called for the special session had a female pastor or assistant pastor.

So, it was a shock to many when on July 22, 2016, Paul Hoover released a document titled “A Statement on Mission.” After seeing the “significant concern” among some conference members, the executive committee had decided to rescind its policy, hoping to “strengthen unity of purpose within our common mission.” Even though it was unlikely that the constituents would rescind the policy in a constituency session, it would be a large expense and distraction, and UCC administration had decided to backtrack.

By organizing themselves and understanding church government, a small group of lay church members had forced policy change for all 27,000 conference members. In the wake of their success, conversations between anti-women-pastor individuals would continue throughout the rest of 2016. Emboldened by their success, some of them would soon form a new organization, choosing a name descriptive of the public face of their mission. The groundwork had been laid for World Church Affirmation Sabbath.

### Listening to Each Other

Mid-morning on a Sunday in late January 2017, cars began arriving at the Ritzville Seventh-day Adventist Church. They came from all directions: from the north, in the far reaches of Washington State edging toward Canada; from the east and the population center of Spokane; from the south, where the drive had crossed the border from Oregon. If the Upper Columbia Conference is the center of the NPUC, then Ritzville could truly be at the heart of it all, geographically at least. It is a fair distance from everywhere.

Around 15–20 people came in total. In the months since the lay-advisory meeting the previous year, people had kept in contact with one another, still concerned

that Upper Columbia Conference, as symptomatic of the whole North American Adventist Church, was not supporting the General Conference.

Janet Neumann, a member of the Stateline Adventist Church, made the trip to Ritzville. “Somebody called me

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one day and said, ‘Would you want to come and join this group?’” Neumann explained to me during an interview. “A bunch of us are talking, as laity, as to what we might like to accomplish.”

Someone also called Ron and Carol Elder and asked them a similar question. The Elders were members of the Ritzville church, and they agreed to help host the in-person gathering. “There really wasn’t an agenda,” Carol Elder told me of that first meeting. “That’s all it was: to listen to each other and to know what to do, to leave from there and to pray about things.”

That day at the Ritzville meeting, Belinda Lowry stepped forward as a leading voice throughout the conversations. She was an eloquent speaker who was

able to express the thoughts of everyone, the attendees thought.

It may have been at the Ritzville meeting, or perhaps the idea had already begun to be discussed, but at some point everyone agreed to coalesce this group of like-minded people into a more formal organization, and to use it to organize public meetings throughout the Upper Columbia Conference. WCAS members interviewed for this story either said they didn’t know who could be considered the founder of the group, or refused to identify that person or persons. Lowry did not respond to a request for an interview, but in an article published to affirmationsabbath.org in 2018, she described herself as a “founding member of WCAS<sup>2</sup>.”

At the end of that January day, everyone parted ways and headed back to their homes. Some would meet one more time in person, but the planning would not have to wait for everyone to again travel hundreds of miles, as they continued to hold weekly conference calls. It’s unclear the exact moment when the name World Church Affirmation Sabbath was chosen, but it must have been by the end of the first meeting or not long after, for on January 27, 2017, public records show that the website domain affirmationsabbath.org was created. It was registered using a proxy service—a common practice that allows website creators to remain anonymous. A date was also chosen for the first public meetings—May 20. Throughout the rest of the winter and into spring, planning took place for the first event—and beyond.

The structure of WCAS was loose and informal in those early days. “Everybody worked together equally. There was no boss, so to speak,” Carol Elder said about her time with the organization. More structure became necessary as planning intensified, and eventually those working close together would come to be known as the WCAS Planning Committee.

Before the first meetings, the planning committee worked to solidify the finances. Eiji Minami, a member of the Chewelah Church, took the role of treasurer. To help WCAS to collect donations, preparation began on paperwork to file with the State of Washington to register WCAS as a non-profit corporation—a status that wouldn’t bring tax exemption but would allow for the unlimited collection of funds.

According to several of the people involved, Belinda Lowry stepped aside from WCAS during late winter or early spring for personal reasons. Ron Elder then took the title as chair of the planning committee. “Ron was put in there temporarily,” Carol Elder explained, “But it just ended up staying that way.” Carol Elder also became the group’s secretary after the man who initially filled the role had to leave as well. She took down notes during the conference calls every Sunday afternoon when the members would talk, connecting either from a computer through

Executive Committee. “My recollection is that almost every church in the conference was initially covered,” he told me during an interview, speaking about the inserts. Even though the meetings were confined to only two locations, the announcements could “plant a seed of anticipation” for those who saw them, Knight explained, and “grow the desire on the part of concerned lay people for such meetings in their own areas.”

On April 15, such an invitation was also posted on the newly live affirmationsabbath.org. “Living at time’s end, we

## WCAS PRINCIPLES OF ACTION

- 1. Participants support the decisions of the world church expressed through the General Conference.**
- 2. Participants seek unity on the basis of inspired truth rather than cultural compromise.**
- 3. Participants uphold God’s purpose for church organization and for pressing together rather than separation.**
- 4. Participants learn Protestant biblical interpretation—the historical-grammatical method.**
- 5. Participants are active and responsible members in their local congregation.**
- 6. Participants learn how to work effectively in board and constituency meetings.**
- 7. Participants commit themselves to pray for faithful workers, and for Heaven to provide godly, decisive leaders for the harvest.**
- 8. Participants embrace the conviction that God is in control, and choose not to be intimidated by factions opposing truth in the Church.**
- 9. Emphasizing connection to Jesus our Lord, participants learn how to resist pluralism, congregationalism, and other present errors.**
- 10. World Church Affirmation Sabbath emphasizes the Seventh-day Adventist representative form of church governance. We are the Church.**

the GoToMeeting web conferencing service, or calling in via phone.

As the winter turned into spring, the planning committee prepared bulletin inserts to send to churches throughout the Upper Columbia Conference. There would be two meetings: one in the north of the conference at the Chewelah church, and one in the south at the Stateline church.

Kent Knight, a retired pastor, was part of the planning committee. He was also in the position to have an intimate understanding of the Upper Columbia Conference’s structure, as he held a position on the UCC

are to uphold the government of God in a judgment-ripened world. Humans have gone feral. But Jesus’ gospel brings us back!” it read. The planning committee also decided on a theme: “Forward with Yesterday in View. 1 Cor 10:11.”

A list of speakers was given for both locations, and another description of what attendees could expect. “Inviting Upper Columbia Conference laypeople to unite together for fellowship, encouragement, and equipping.”

The WCAS Planning Committee had also been hard at work creating a list of “10 Principles of Action” to guide the organization. Different members contributed, and there was give and take on what exactly the principles should say.



Some had differences in opinion about how things should be worded.

“Ron and I could agree, [and] we were part of those that were wanting to change some of the wording,” Carol Elder said. “Not really what each of those points of action say, but to reword it. But you know, you go with the majority vote.”

The planning committee ratified the ten principles. Some would prove controversial as time went on—number six in particular: “[WCAS] Participants learn to work effectively in board and constituency meetings.”

By the end of April, the advertisements for the meetings had been sent to many churches, and pastors were calling the conference office asking about World Church Affirmation Sabbath and whether they should advertise for it.

On May 1, conference president Paul Hoover directed Mark Weir, the ministerial director for the conference, to try and find out more information.

Over the next several days, Weir talked to the head pastors of both churches hosting the meetings. Mike Lambert, pastor of the Stateline church in Milton Free-water, Oregon, had few details to offer about the upcoming meeting in his church, except that some members had asked to use the sanctuary on a Sabbath afternoon. Lambert assured Weir anything controversial wouldn’t be tolerated, but he knew very little about what the church members were planning to do.

Larry Kirkpatrick, pastor of the Chewelah church, explained that WCAS was a lay-led organization, and that Weir needed to talk to the church members if he wanted to know more. Weir asked for help getting in touch with anyone who could provide more information.

On May 3, one such member returned Weir’s call. In addition to being treasurer of WCAS, Eiji Minami was the principal representative from the Chewelah church. Weir asked to know more about WCAS but Minami was reluctant to give more information over the phone, according to documents obtained in the course of this reporting that describe the exchange. Minami said he could ask the rest of the group and then respond via email, but on the phone would only say that WCAS was formed to support the world church.

Perplexed, Weir asked who made decisions for the group or who was its leader. Minami explained that no single person was in charge but refused to say who else was involved and the call ended.

Weir explained to Paul Hoover that he had talked to someone involved with WCAS but learned very little about the details of what the organization was, or even who was behind it. As the end of the week approached, Upper Columbia Conference leaders felt they didn’t have a good answer about what guidance to give pastors who wondered whether to include the flyers in the weekend’s bulletins.

Why Minami wouldn’t give Mark Weir information over the phone is unclear. As the treasurer for WCAS, he would have known many details about the group, and what WCAS was trying to accomplish with its meetings. He also could have provided Weir with names and contact information for Ron and Carol Elder. Ron Elder was considered the chair of the planning committee within WCAS, but without any public leadership list, the conference had no way to know or get in contact. Minami declined to give an interview for this story, though he did later describe talking to Weir in a post on the blog [fulcrum7.com](http://fulcrum7.com).

Other external evidence also points to Eiji Minami having the ability to provide more information about WCAS than he would admit to Mark Weir. Public records show that the day after he spoke to Weir on the phone, Minami filed articles of incorporation with the State of Washington to establish World Church Affirmation Sabbath as an official non-profit corporation. The filing gave Minami’s personal address and phone number as contact information, and listed Ron and Carol Elder as “Director #1” and “Director #2,” respectively.

All this, however, was unknown to the Upper Columbia Conference, so Paul Hoover directed Mark Weir to send an email to all the pastors, asking them to hold off on distributing the flyers until the conference could learn more about WCAS. Early in the evening on May 4, Weir sent an email to all the UCC pastors.

“We are not in the habit of promoting events that are not sponsored by the church,” Weir wrote in explaining why the conference didn’t want the flyers to be handed out. “Second, I have been unable to find anyone who was willing to answer several specific questions about the event, and I have talked to several people...there will be a more thorough examination of this in the near future.”

Rather than contacting the conference office to provide more information about the organization so their flyers could be distributed, the WCAS planning committee looked for other ways to promote the meetings. On May

14, Eiji Minami published the finalized ten principles in a post on [advindicate.com](http://advindicate.com)<sup>3</sup>, concluding with a call for church members to mobilize:

God has given His people beautiful truths. And God has given His laity in every conference the voices to speak of His truth. As we pray together and ask for His leading, we will better understand how and who Jesus is leading. The laity can no longer be silent.

## The First Meetings

The topics were the same at both churches on May 20. In Chewelah, Eiji Minami introduced the meeting, which began in early afternoon after the normal church service had ended.

“It is the goal of World Church Affirmation Sabbath to promote fellowship among family members and to exhort one another with biblical truth,” Minami said toward the end of his opening remarks, “To get each member involved in decision making process, and finally to bring back unity to our church.”

Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick also gave a welcome and a prayer. “I believe that we presently stand in a crisis larger than any in Adventist history...But you’ve not been idle, so here’s WCAS,” Kirkpatrick said to the gathered listeners, both in the full church sanctuary and in the overflow room where more watched on a video feed. “Everything I see about this looks promising. And so, something conceived months ago is born today. And I’m looking out here at the baby. And it’s a beautiful baby.”

Two hundred miles to the south at the Stalene church, Pastor Mike Lambert gave an introduction. “It’s our privilege to host the first World Church Affirmation Sabbath...It’s certainly my honor to welcome our leaders of the WCAS team.”

What followed at both locations were presentations by lay members on familiar Adventist topics, such as the cleansing of the sanctuary and regard for the Spirit of Prophecy. Others ventured into more turbulent waters. Dan Eckenrot, introduced at the Chewelah meeting as a retired pastor, presented on “Dangers at the Door.”

“My objective today is to demonstrate that the subject of women’s ordination is inseparably bound together with the doctrine of the nature of God, the story of creation,

and the Great Controversy,” Eckenrot said. Over his twenty minutes, he argued a biblical case for headship theology and denounced feminism as coming from the devil: “Secular feminism is [the devil’s] willing agent,” he declared.

Some presentations seemed more driven by practical matters of influencing change within the structure of Seventh-day Adventist church government rather than theology. “We must be true watchman on the walls of Zion, taking an active part in our churches,” said Randy Bierwagen in the sixth talk of the afternoon at Chewelah,

Standing against any deviation from right principles and choosing only those to church offices who have proven themselves faithful to the Bible, and to the Spirit of Prophecy, and to right principles. This is especially true in choosing delegates to our conferences and other divisions of the church.

After all the presentations at both churches came to a close, attendees were encouraged to join together in a meal. Janet Neumann, the WCAS facilitator at the Stalene Church and member of the planning committee, explained that the meal had a purpose. It would be a “time so we can talk and get to know one another,” she said. “We’ve got some tables down there that are designated district tables. Do you know what district you’re from in this conference? Well, I’ll give you a way to figure it out. We’ve got a map that shows you.”

The districts Neumann spoke of (described as regions in UCC documents) are utilized by the conference to choose lay-representatives from all the geographic sections of the conference for various committees, but have little utility beyond that.

At the Chewelah church on May 20, tables at dinner were labeled with signs stating different regions. Everyone was encouraged to not just sit with friends from their own churches, but to meet others from their own region. Later in 2017, there would be a new name used for these meals following WCAS meetings: “Intentional Fellowship.”

“We felt like it was a success,” Janet Neumann said in an interview about the first meetings. During the program, WCAS gave out surveys for people to give feedback, and collected an offering to help fund future activities. On the survey, people could give their email address and sign up for a newsletter. “There were a lot of favorable comments on



the written [form] as well as people coming up afterwards,” she added.

Just a few days later, WCAS received outside validation of their efforts. In the June 2017<sup>4</sup> issue of the *General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter*—a new publication distributed every month beginning in 2017 to provide “informative, inspirational and educational articles especially for General Conference Executive Committee members”—a paragraph highlighted WCAS. “Organized by

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lay members, the special sabbath uplifted Christ and supported the world-wide Seventh-day Adventist church,” the blurb read. It also listed the WCAS website and claimed that the first Affirmation Sabbath was attended by “more than 600 constituents from 55 churches in the UCC.”

Upper Columbia Conference leaders would later find it curious that the General Conference came to feature WCAS in its official publication. The mention of WCAS was brief, but there is no record of that specific number of attendees or represented churches being shared publicly in the days following the WCAS meetings, either on the WCAS website or on other Adventist websites or blogs. The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists did not respond to

a request for comment about how their newsletter came to mention the specific information about WCAS. If not an official endorsement, to the members of the WCAS planning committee it seemed to be an implication of approval from the General Conference. “We were pleased that they were reporting on what we were doing,” Janet Neumann told me.

On June 1, WCAS sent out the first edition of their own newsletter. The first two articles of the newsletter showed the WCAS leaders’ optimism at what had transpired, titled “Affirmation Sabbath Tantalizes with Hope” and “General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter.”

### **Plans for Expansion**

Representatives from the conference attended the first meeting at the Chewelah church. Although a wide variety of topics were presented, they noticed that a tone of dissatisfaction about women’s ordination and the role of women pastors undergirded the event.

The temporary directive telling pastors not to distribute WCAS advertisements remained in effect after the first meetings, though it seemed WCAS hadn’t had much trouble getting the word out anyway. The icy silence in response to conference administrators’ questions, and talk about needing church leaders who were faithful to the Bible, made them feel that WCAS believed the conference was not supporting the world church—a characterization they strongly disagreed with. And still, UCC leaders felt they knew very little about WCAS and wished to talk more with someone who was in charge, for surely someone was calling the shots. At the WCAS meetings, there had been no explanation of leadership structure or any history beyond that it was just an organization of lay people. By early summer, the website still gave only two sentences about who was behind WCAS, though it did add another letter to the acronym.

The World Church Affirmation Sabbath Committee of Laypeople of the Upper Columbia Conference (WCASC for short) is composed of laypersons who are members in regular standing in Upper Columbia Conference churches and who support the Seventh-day Adventist world church. In Upper Columbia Conference, Affirmation Sabbath meetings are voted by church boards and held by local churches in liason [sic] with WCASC.

WCAS continued to hold its regular planning committee meetings throughout the summer, working on the details for the next events. This time, there would be five locations: three in the Upper Columbia Conference and two in the Oregon Conference. WCAS was expanding.

After nearly four months, one of the Upper Columbia Conference's requests was finally granted, when on August 30, WCAS published a list of its leadership team on affirmationsabbath.org. Ron Elder was listed as chair of the planning committee, along with a chair from each of the five conference regions. For the first time, UCC leaders knew who they could approach to learn more.

### The Second Meetings

The second set of WCAS public meetings took place over two weekends in September 2017 and followed much the same format as the first—this time with the theme “Forward in Unity and Faith. Ephesians 4:3.” Again, many of the presentations covered doctrinal and biblical topics that would be expected in a conservative Adventist setting, but an underlying sentiment that women's ordination drove the meetings also remained apparent. At the UCC meeting in Northern Washington State, this time held in the Newport church, WCAS moderator Will Fults asked one of the presenters during a panel discussion to explain the purpose of the meeting to the audience. “We are affirming the vote that the General Conference took when they were in session,” the presenter said, in reference to the 2015 vote prohibiting the global divisions of the church from deciding whether or not to ordain women. Fults nodded in agreement.

Intentional Fellowship again followed the presentations. At the start of the Newport meeting, Will Fults had held up one of the programs, which had a map of the Upper Columbia Conference showing the five different regions. On the back was also a list of all the conference churches organized by region. “This region map is to get to know other people in your region, alright?” Fults said, “And also to know which region you are a part of.”

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By the fall of 2017, the Upper Columbia Conference and World Church Affirmation Sabbath were no closer to

coming to an understanding. The members of WCAS felt that they were being censored by the conference; conference leaders saw political posturing in the rhetoric from the meetings and the 10 Principles, and a distinct ele-

**“We need to have a voice, as conservative Seventh-day Adventists,” Neumann said in describing why WCAS needed to exist. “You hear so many voices that are not in support of the world church right now.”**

ment of secrecy in how the group wouldn't speak openly with the conference. A reluctance to disclose names also extended to the WCAS newsletter, which was emailed out every two weeks. The articles never carried authors' names. There was also no editorial team or masthead—the only contact information included was a post office box in Spokane, WA and a Gmail address.

UCC president, Paul Hoover, did have a short list of names after they were published online, and he requested a meeting with WCAS leaders to try and resolve differences, and a date was set. Yet when the day of the meeting came, bad weather caused WCAS members traveling to the conference office to postpone.

During November and December, UCC leaders also tried to dialogue with their pastors in the last of the “pastoral clusters” of 2017—the regular meetings when conference

leaders meet with all the pastors by region. Doug Johnson, then the UCC vice president for administration, shared his concerns about WCAS—that the organization appeared to be using its meetings to organize people together by the different political regions of the conference, and that WCAS was suggesting to church members that the UCC was not in harmony with the General Conference.

Johnson shared how the conference was concerned that WCAS was out of accordance with the official *Church Manual* that directs how all local churches should conduct business. “It is not permissible for church or conference delegations to organize or attempt to direct their votes as a unit,” the *Manual* states. To the Upper Columbia Conference, all the talk about working effectively in committee meetings and organizing people by the regions suggested political maneuvering. The aversion to sharing leadership structure and relying almost exclusively on anonymous content in the newsletter also meant a lack of accountability for what happened under the WCAS name.

A UCC document describing those cluster meetings, said it “got a bit heated” because there were many pastors who thought “that there [were] other pastors who could answer questions, yet refuse to do so.” (Doug Johnson retired in early 2019 and declined to be interviewed for this story.)

After Johnson’s speech at the pastoral cluster meetings, conference leaders noted a distinct shift in how WCAS presented itself. Starting in December, articles in the newsletter abruptly began to carry author names. In January 2018, the newsletter carried an article titled simply “Politics?” that argued WCAS was in accordance with the *Church Manual* as in fact “all of our decision-making processes in the church are political in nature.” It appeared that someone had told WCAS that they needed to tread more carefully.

In the coming WCAS public meetings, there would be more distance kept from controversial topics. There would also be less talk about women’s ordination and female pastors.

### **The Long-Awaited Meeting**

Finally, on a sunny and brisk Valentine’s Day in 2018, UCC and WCAS leadership met. Perhaps, after nearly a year of conflict with the conference, the second year of WCAS could start on different terms.

For the most part, those who came matched the list that had been published on affirmationsabbath.org, including Ron Elder, Carol Elder, and Janet Neumann; however, to the surprise of the conference officers, there were also people who had not been listed. Approximately eight representatives from WCAS attended.

“I think everybody came wondering how is this going to turn out, because of the tension there had been,” Carol Elder said. Both sides had time to speak, with Ron Elder sharing that his vision of WCAS was not political—rather just a way to show support for the world church and its leadership that he felt had been much maligned. Paul Hoover also shared how the conference was concerned about the potential for politicking and the lack of clarity to questions about leadership, intent, and history of the organization.

The meetings stretched on for several hours, until people had to leave for the drive home. Recollections of how the meeting went vary among those who were there. To Carol Elder, the tension at the beginning of the meeting soon dissolved and she was encouraged that the conference officers seemed to express a desire similar to her own to uplift church members. When Paul Hoover spoke, she “totally agreed with what he said” about the mission of the conference. “In the end, we were shaking each other’s hands and they were welcoming us back to come visit and talk with them,” Carol Elder told me. “And we invited them to the next meetings.”

Conference leaders left feeling the meeting was constructive but still only a starting point, according to a source familiar with the meeting. Although there was common ground between the two sides, the conference leaders still felt like they didn’t receive much clarification about the details of WCAS.

The meeting may not have mended the rift, but to many who attended it seemed a step towards a better relationship. Yet it would be the only such dialogue in 2018, and soon the disagreements would spiral to new lows.

Not long after the Valentine’s meeting, Carol and Ron Elder left WCAS leadership. Carol Elder would tell me that due to caring for an ill relative, they “had to back out.” Two weeks after the meeting, the Elders were removed from the list of leadership on affirmationsabbath.org—and at the same time, region tags were dropped from the rest. Janet Neumann, who in the first year of WCAS was listed as a regional chair, soon assumed Ron Elder’s position as chair of the planning committee.

Neumann had come away with a somewhat different perception of the meeting with the conference than others interviewed for this story. “It started out as a half-hour to 40-minute description of what they thought of us before even asking us what we were doing or what our intent was,” Neumann told me. “Their concepts were so skewed from what the truth was.”

Then, in the spring of 2018, Paul Hoover retired as president of the Upper Columbia Conference. He had abruptly announced at the end of 2017 that he would not finish the rest of his term. Perhaps the gap in leadership was a factor, as some in WCAS describe, or perhaps it was due to the changes in leadership of WCAS itself—but whatever the cause, there were no further meetings between WCAS and the UCC through the rest of 2018.

In April, Minner Labrador, who had worked in the leadership of the Southwestern Union, was chosen to be the next UCC president.<sup>5</sup> He assumed the role in June.

For a time, it seemed that everything would continue as it had: WCAS continuing to hold events in UCC churches but still without being sanctioned by the conference.

Then, in the fall of 2018, the tenuous peace disintegrated once again.

### **Disagreements with the North American Division**

In the days following the 2018 North American Division (NAD) Year-End Meeting, WCAS began to circulate a “Statement of Harmony with the World Church of Seventh-day Adventists.” NAD President Dan Jackson had made an impassioned plea about the church’s “mandate” to help and encourage women pastors at the November meeting.<sup>6</sup> Doing so was not in violation with the General Conference policies, Jackson said, as the recent debates had only concerned the official designation of ordained pastors in regard to gender. This argument was similar to the one that leaders in the Upper Columbia Conference had made when they announced the ill-fated 2016 policy to expand the role of commissioned pastors. The 2015 GC vote on policy had no wording about women pastors more broadly.

“‘In Case of Emergency’—A Call to L.A.I.T.Y [sic],” the letter introducing the Statement of Harmony began.<sup>7</sup> It went on to call for individual churches to vote on the statement in their board sessions, then notify WCAS so that the organization could “share the names of supportive churches to encourage others throughout the Adventist world.”

On affirmationsabbath.org, a list appeared of all the churches that had signed. The text was also published in the WCAS newsletter and on fulcrum7.com.

In the Upper Columbia Conference, the statement was the final straw. Such an open registry could only create division between churches, conference leaders thought. If a church didn’t sign the statement, it could imply that they didn’t support the world church, but if a church did, it could be seen as a referendum against Dan Jackson’s statements. There was also an implicit accusation in saying the statement was necessary—that the leadership of the Upper Columbia Conference (and elsewhere, as the Statement of Harmony was meant to be used worldwide) didn’t support the world church. And so, on December 4, 2018, the UCC Executive Committee voted its own statement banning WCAS from using any churches or conference-owned buildings for its meetings.<sup>8</sup>

“We do not impugn the WCAS members’ motives or character or their desire to serve the mission of our church,” the executive committee wrote, “And yet, the fruits of their efforts, under the banner of the WCAS, have increasingly led to further dissension among our members and the spread of false information.” In the space of some 1,000 words, the UCC laid out many of the concerns that had been discussed in the meetings with its pastors, and with WCAS leaders in person.

The Upper Columbia Conference did not wish to facilitate the controversy any longer.

According to a source familiar with Upper Columbia Conference Executive Committee proceedings, speaking on condition of anonymity as they had not been authorized to address the matter publicly, the committee’s decision was near unanimous.

“It was on the agenda and it was presented by the administration,” the source said. After some “minor editorial work” a voice vote ratified the document. “I think that the central concern has been that [WCAS] is a political action committee,” the source explained to me. “Simply read what they’re producing. The kind of rhetoric they’re using is squarely in line with pushing a particular ideology into the nomination process and into the leader selection process.”

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Just before Christmas of 2018, I called Janet Neumann to ask for an interview and we arranged to meet at the Stateline Adventist Church, her home congregation. The morning we were set to meet, Neumann called to warn me that the boiler had gone out in the church. I should make sure to dress warmly, she said.

**The members of WCAS felt that they were being censored by the conference; conference leaders saw political posturing in the rhetoric from the meetings and the 10 Principles, and a distinct element of secrecy in how the group wouldn't speak openly with the conference.**

Neumann gave a warm greeting when I arrived, and we went and sat in the hushed and empty sanctuary. If Neumann carries herself with the effusive persona of a grandmother, it's because she is one—a fact she talks about it with pride. Although we had not talked about anyone else providing an interview, Neumann came accompanied by another member of WCAS leadership, Linda Brehm, who is listed on the website as the “Communications Director,” and whose husband Ed is described as head of “Internet Technology.”

It had been several weeks since the Upper Columbia Conference had released its statement chastising WCAS, and Neumann and Brehm were determined to portray the assertions of the statement as erroneous and defamatory. Neumann did most of the talking.

“We need to have a voice, as conservative Seventh-day Adventists,” Neumann said in describing why WCAS needed to exist. “You hear so many voices that are not in support of the world church right now.”

In the narrative Neumann laid out, there was no hidden agenda to what WCAS had done, although she did talk about how it all began after the conference released the policy enhancing the role of women pastors in UCC. Anything that looked political was just a misunderstanding, and the conference had always had an ax to grind. WCAS was never trying to organize people in the conference according to the regions used to help select leaders—the regions were just a convenient way to divide up such a large geographic area. “What does just showing the regions have to do with voting?” Neumann said. “It's never been our intent to change anybody's vote or direct anybody's vote.” The interview lasted two and a half hours, and we went our separate ways.

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On a day in late January, I pulled off Interstate 90 and drove toward the heart of Ritzville, Washington—just as the founders of WCAS had done two years before. It was a sunny winter day, the sky a shocking blue and the air deceptively cold. The fields surrounding town were brown and fallow, stretching unbroken to the horizon in most directions, some still showing remains of the summer's wheat stubble. Near the Interstate, fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and a Starbucks predominate, but give way to brick buildings and grain silos as one approaches the historic main street. Ritzville feels both isolated from and connected to the outside world.

I was looking for the Adventist church but drove past it on the first try, only realizing when the road started to leave town and re-enter fields on the other side. In Ritzville, boarded up buildings sit next to occupied houses. In the last census the population was 1,673, but it is likely less now as the town has been shrinking. Circling back, I



found the Adventist church—a tidy white building, across the street from a Methodist church and kitty-corner to the Empire Motel, where a sign advertised rooms from \$47 a night. On the front of the Adventist church, a sign proclaimed Sabbath School at 10, Sabbath worship at 11, and at the bottom added, “Pastor TBA”; the church had been without a pastor for some time.

## The Rest of the Story

Perhaps, if WCAS really is only that which exists in the public sphere—a time every three months when people can gather together and hear a conservative message from lay presenters—the narrative of WCAS that Janet Neumann and Linda Brehm gave me would be wholly true. Certainly, it is good for lay members to be involved in their churches, and certainly it could be valuable to give those members an opportunity to speak and share with others.

But the public face of WCAS is only part of the story, for there exists another side to the organization—a side that its members have fought to keep in the shadows. Once you venture into those shadows, it becomes difficult to maintain a narrative that WCAS is defined only by pure intentions, with no ulterior motives; the shadows are fraught with ethical implications, both for the leaders of WCAS and for pastors and administrators throughout church structure—from local all the way to General Conference.

The true story of WCAS can only be understood through the lens of the Internet; the story of WCAS cannot be separated from that of the “Nameless Network.”

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Every Sunday at 5:00 p.m., the call begins. Like meetings of the WCAS Planning Committee, it utilizes the ubiquitous web conferencing service GoToMeeting. A day or two before, an email will have been sent out to everyone on the list with the week’s presenter and links for pre-reading material—often articles from the fulcrum7.com blog.

Names begin to appear on the web interface as the clock rolls past 5:00 and people log on, yet for the most part they aren’t names one would expect. Instead of given names, most participants log in with a pseudonym of their

choosing. Everything that takes place will be under a cloak of anonymity.

According to individuals interviewed for this story who have participated, the meeting always begins with the organizer calling for someone to give an opening prayer, followed by a reading of the “Nameless Network Principles and Goals.” These principles are identical to the WCAS 10 Principles of Action, published on affirmationsabbath.org and shared at every WCAS public meeting since 2017. The only difference is that references to “WCAS” are replaced with “Nameless Network.”

There is a leader of the Nameless Network, but their identity also remains shrouded in secrecy. On November 1, 2017, the WCAS newsletter carried a manifesto titled “Introducing Nameless Network.” This first public mention of the network was credited to “Anna Zwingli”—presumably the pseudonym of the network’s operator (the historical Anna Reinhard Zwingli was wife of the Swiss church reformer). In the manifesto, Zwingli lays out in a militant call how the network can help Adventist church members take action against a church described as off the rails.

“Have we lost the Adventist Church?” Zwingli writes, “...as laypeople, our voice has often been silent. When there have been problems in the Church, we permitted the wrong changes to be made. We hung back complacent; we lacked courage; we grumbled to our friends. We did not take effective action.”

Zwingli calls for the readers of the WCAS newsletter to seek out “proactive solutions” because they have been given a “representative form of church governance.”

The language of the manifesto is strident, at times even militaristic.

“Nameless Network is an effort by the laypeople to mobilize faithful members of the Adventist Church to go forth ‘fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners’ (Song of Solomon 6:10).” Multiple times, Zwingli makes clear a desire to help people become involved in church leadership: “Total Member Involvement (TMI) not only means involvement in outreach but also in church governance.”

The manifesto declares that the individuals behind the network were “heaven led” as they adopted their mission statement and ten principles of action. Those wishing to join are directed to send an email to an



included anonymous address, after which Zwingli will respond about how to become a member.

Following publication in the WCAS newsletter, the manifesto was soon posted on the website for Secrets Unsealed, the California independent ministry headed by evangelist Stephen Bohr. Inquiries about the document to Secrets Unsealed were referred to Aileen Pyburn, director of marketing. Pyburn did not respond to multiple phone and email messages requesting comment on the document or how it came to be published by Secrets Unsealed. (During the course of reporting this story, the Nameless Network manifesto was moved from its initial location to a different section of the Secrets Unsealed website, where it is not visible from the homepage or indexed by search engines but is still accessible if a visitor knows the correct place to look.)

While Anna Zwingli is listed as author both in the newsletter and on Secrets Unsealed, the manifesto concludes with another simple signature: “We are the church. WCAS.”

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When I first interviewed Janet Neumann and Linda Brehm of the WCAS leadership team, I asked about the Nameless Network. I had read the manifesto on Secrets Unsealed and was curious about the strange need for pseudonyms.

“My understanding is it was a group of concerned laity with basically the same concerns WCAS has, that wanted an avenue for communication,” Neumann told me. “We’re basically on the same page, kind of sister organizations.” Yet when asked if there was someone I could speak to about the Nameless Network or how it operates, Neumann replied, “I don’t know who that would be.”

In an interview, Kent Knight, who had simultaneously been on the WCAS Planning Committee and UCC Executive Committee as a lay member, described how WCAS and the Nameless Network are intertwined (Knight remains on the UCC Executive Committee, but says that he resigned his position in WCAS leadership after the UCC issued its statement against the organization). The Nameless Network is really “an extension” of WCAS, Knight told me. WCAS in the Upper Columbia Conference was the “pioneering chapter” and then the Nameless Network was a “vehicle by which to bring people from a larger sphere, geographically,

nationally, even some international.” I also asked Knight if he knew who was behind the network. “There are several lay persons that are key to the logistics,” he said, but those individuals were “not open to an interview.”

In another interview several months later, I again asked Janet Neumann about the leadership of the Nameless Network and its connections to WCAS. In the intervening time since our first conversation, I had obtained the WCAS newsletter where the manifesto had first been published, something that Neumann and Linda Brehm had not mentioned.

“I *do* know who is in charge,” Neumann told me, “But that is to remain nameless.” She explained that in our first conversation she hadn’t meant that she didn’t know who operated the Nameless Network, but that she didn’t know of anyone who would be willing to speak about it.

Multiple inquiries were made to the Nameless Network email, asking to join the meetings in order to better understand their purpose. The same request was also relayed to WCAS leaders, who called the Nameless Network “uplifting” when asked what it was, and who claimed that there was nothing political in its purpose. The pseudonyms were necessary because people with conservative viewpoints are blacklisted in their local churches or even fired from denominational positions, I was told.

My emails to the Nameless Network were never answered; I received no reply of any kind to inquiries about reporting on the network itself. However, one individual familiar with WCAS proceedings later told me that my request had been discussed—both by the planning committee and on the Nameless Network—with my name coming up specifically. However, no communication ever made its way back to me.

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“If you and I wanted to have a conversation and wanted it to be private, wouldn’t we have the right to have private?” Neumann told me in our initial interview when I explained how such an anonymous network might be concerning to church members and leaders not a part of it. “We live in a free country, don’t we?”

I asked if just anyone would be allowed to join the Nameless Network if they wished to do so.

“Well do they agree with those ten principles?” Linda Brehm replied. “That’s the criteria.”

Contained in Brehm’s answer is a perhaps troubling question about what standards of conduct should be deemed acceptable today, in the age of the internet and unlimited global communication. If someone stood outside the door to a church or building where a WCAS meeting was taking place and only allowed those to enter who would swear an oath of loyalty to a certain set of principles, it surely would be concerning. If those who entered were then encouraged to wear a mask or disguise, and the meeting was led by someone whose face was hidden, it would, without a doubt, be considered strange and problematic.

Despite explanations from WCAS leaders to the contrary, the Nameless Network is not just a conversation between private individuals. It has been advertised publicly, both in the WCAS newsletter and on the website of a large independent ministry. Contact information for the newsletter was collected at the WCAS meetings held in conference churches. But when those meetings are taken online, the operators of the Nameless Network ask for different standards of discourse—as if, if it doesn’t take place in a physical space, the same rules don’t apply.

Looking at the Nameless Network’s ideological litmus test also makes its emphasis on educating members about church government more troubling. Throughout many hours I spent talking with WCAS leaders, the rhetoric about nominating committees and rules of order was explained to me as just an attempt to help educate lay members about how church governance worked—a public service of sorts. However, when that education is extended only to a certain group of people, it demands to be viewed differently. It then becomes a means for advancing specific ideologies.

It’s unclear which came first: WCAS or the Nameless Network. Anna Zwingli’s manifesto says that the Nameless Network meetings began “via the Internet in 2016.” It was also in 2016 that members of the Upper Columbia Conference started their meetings online to continue the discussions that followed the controversial commissioned-minister policy. As the operators of the Nameless Network have refused to identify themselves—or to share any details of the network whatsoever—it remains unclear if any practical distinction between WCAS and the Nameless Network is possible at all.

The Nameless Network also helps explain how WCAS has grown beyond its origins in the Upper Columbia Conference. Although WCAS leaders have done more traditional outreach to grow the organization, such as paying to have a booth at the Generation of Youth for Christ convention, the Nameless Network has provided a

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truly national reach. Church employees, of the UCC and perhaps elsewhere, have been presenters on the network. Mike Lambert, pastor of the Stateline Oregon church, has been featured multiple times.

Evidence also suggests individuals within General Conference leadership may be connected to the Nameless Network. It was mere days after the first WCAS public meetings in 2017 that the *General Conference Executive Newsletter* featured the paragraph about WCAS that included specific attendance numbers. According to current chair Janet Neumann, WCAS didn’t have explicit

communication with the General Conference, but she thought that it “may have been through Nameless Network” that the General Conference got the information.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists did not respond to a request for comment about how the WCAS information came to be featured in their *Executive Newsletter*. If the information was obtained via the Nameless Network, many church members might ask whether such an avenue of communication is appropriate for their leaders. At the very time that someone in the General Conference was receiving updates on the newly formed WCAS, church leaders in the Upper Columbia Conference were struggling to ascertain even the most basic details of the organization. The Nameless Network manifesto would be published later in 2017, but at the critical juncture before and after the first WCAS public meetings, UCC leadership didn’t know that the network even existed.

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Reporting this story has at times revealed evasive patterns similar to those which colored the original interactions between WCAS and UCC leaders. Soon after I began researching WCAS in December 2018, I started to look for a complete history of the WCAS newsletter dating back to just after the first public meetings. Anyone can sign up for the newsletter on [affirmationsabbath.org](http://affirmationsabbath.org), but to see all editions one must have been subscribed from the start. As some of the concerns local conference leaders and others have expressed about WCAS stemmed from articles published in the newsletter, a thorough examination would certainly be necessary to understanding both sides, I thought, and should be simple for WCAS leaders to provide.

But it was not so simple. I was directed to look at [affirmationsabbath.org](http://affirmationsabbath.org), and indeed, there is a “newsletter archive” page that lists some content from past issues. But it is far from comprehensive and shows no material before May 2018. I was given different rationale for why I couldn’t be provided past newsletters, from technical difficulties to that past content would soon be posted on the website.

As time went on, it became clear WCAS was not interested in sharing a newsletter archive or history.

Eventually I did obtain many of the past editions. Contained within was material that might concern some church members, and which has not been published on the website. In the newsletters, the organization is seen attempting to walk a thin line of influencing change by harnessing the Adventist church’s political systems, while remaining vague enough to argue that it’s not violating the clear prohibitions against organized political activity found in the official *Church Manual*.

In the November 16, 2017 issue, the lead article discussed how the conference presidents in the Pacific Union had refused to list their names in the worldwide *Adventist Yearbook* because the General Conference wouldn’t include Sandra Roberts, the elected president of the Southeastern California Conference. “Is it acceptable for leaders of non-compliant conferences and unions to promote wider non-compliance by interfering with the official publications of the church?” the article asked. It then moved to more practical implications of what should be done.

“The time has come to refuse to elect or to continue in office those who promote disregard for the world church by rejecting actions voted by the world church,” it read. “Because of actions like this by church leaders who refuse to support the decision of the world church, more of us are becoming awake and aware.” The article was signed simply “WCAS.”

An article titled “Form a WCAS!” in the March 23, 2018 edition also described the organization’s mission as tied to affecting church leadership.

Remember that one of the most crucial aspects of WCAS is to meet with your fellow constituent brothers and sisters from nearby Adventist churches in your region. As fellow believers come to know each other, they have a better sense personally about who are capable laypeople who are faithful followers of Jesus who fully support the world church, and who could serve with distinction on committees and in positions of leadership in your Conference.

An intentional effort to keep the totality of the newsletter in the right hands is also described in a disclaimer that was included in some form in most issues of the

newsletter (it has disappeared in the most recent issues beginning in April 2019).

We are glad to provide WCAS Newsletter freely to Adventist readers. We speak plainly in its pages and view it as best that non-Adventists not be engaged in these questions. We plead with readers not to post the newsletter onto the internet in any form. Readers are encouraged to email the Newsletter only to other interested Adventists. Readers are also granted permission to print-out hard copies of this Newsletter to give to interested church members who do not use email. Thank you for respecting our earnest wishes that you not post [sic] the Newsletter to the internet.

When asked about the purpose of the disclaimer, and how it might give the impression that WCAS was trying to restrict access to its newsletter, Neumann responded that it just bore out how the newsletter discusses “internal concerns” of the Adventist church and is not meant to be read by those outside the church body.

“We’re not trying to start any kind of discussion with non-Adventists,” she told me. “And when we say share it with like-minded people, that’s not to exclude anybody. It’s just share it with someone who would be interested.”

Regardless of intent, the end result of choosing not to have a newsletter archive and encouraging subscribers to limit its distribution is that someone wanting to examine the organization’s official publication and make their own determinations about its contents will have great difficulty doing so.

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Both conflicts and attempts at resolution between WCAS and local church conferences continued into 2019. On January 7, the Texico Conference issued its statement based on a vote the previous month by its executive committee. Texico disavowed WCAS with similar language to the Upper Columbia Conference, even quoting from the UCC document.

WCAS responded to the conference bans in its newsletter. In January, Janet Neumann wrote that “the accusations

against WCAS—of being divisive, political and twenty-some other statements—are yet to be understood.” In February, Randy Bierwagen, a WCAS regional facilitator from the Upper Columbia Conference, leveled his own accusations following the Texico statement, pointing out that both statements contained similar wording and had actually been voted by their respective committees on the same day in December.

According to Bierwagen, the statements showed “unequivocally the collusion between the Texico/Southwestern Union Conference and the Upper Columbia Conference.”

Representatives for the Texico Conference did not agree to be interviewed for this story, but Texico executive treasurer and secretary, Phil Robertson, did provide written responses to several questions regarding WCAS.

While no specific WCAS political activity has been noted within the Texico Conference, the WCAS website presents their 10 Principles of Action. Principle #6 proposes to train members for increased participation in local church boards and conference constituency meetings. We then noted in one of their newsletters that they have listed an upcoming local conference constituency meeting as an important event for action.

According to Robertson, the UCC’s knowledge of WCAS and its interactions with the group helped Texico decide their approach. “In researching the mission and the activities of the WCAS,” Robertson wrote, “inquiries were made of the leadership of the Upper Columbia Conference as to their experience with this group.” The Texico Conference didn’t have any of their own meetings with WCAS leaders before voting the statement, Robertson said.

Jay Wintermeyer, assistant to the president for communication in the Upper Columbia Conference, also described how the two conferences had communicated about WCAS.

“In late November Texico conference reached out to Pastor Labrador when they learned that WCAS was based in our conference,” Wintermeyer explained to me in an email.

They sought to confirm that WCAS was based in UCC and asked what the conference was doing. Pastor Labrador forwarded a rough draft of the statement UCC was working on. Apparently, Texico chose to adopt portions of our wording. There

was no dialogue or joint planning to release a statement. Pastor Labrador and UCC leadership were not even aware Texico voted a statement on WCAS until it was publicly released.

WCAS respected the UCC and Texico bans on using church properties for the first meetings of 2019, finding alternate venues in those areas.

In January 2019, I spoke with UCC president, Minner Labrador, about WCAS and the ban that had recently been put in place. “The challenge that we had with this

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tion of leaders are not  
being manipulated.**

group is purely an administrative challenge,” Labrador told me, in reference to the Statement of Harmony a few months prior and the confusion and concern it created in many parts of the conference. He emphasized that the UCC didn’t take actions against WCAS because they were supporting the world church, but rather due to the “false

alarms” that the group was spreading. He also hoped to have more dialogue with WCAS leaders and members.

“We’re thankful for these folks that love the church and are beginning to see that the conference is appointed by God as much as the world church,” he said. Labrador told me that he believed all members of the Upper Columbia Conference should be confident in the integrity of its elections and leadership selection processes.

At the end of March, WCAS leaders met again with Upper Columbia Conference leaders, including President Labrador. More people were involved compared to the meetings the year prior—other WCAS members outside the planning committee and several pastors from WCAS-supporting churches also attended. In the subsequent WCAS newsletter, Randy Bierwagen wrote that “the participants in this meeting felt that there was much healing that took place and a good spirit was felt,” and that they believed “positive changes will soon be seen in regard to the December 4 restrictions that were put in place against WCAS.”

In April, the results of the meeting were presented to the UCC Executive Committee, but the committee decided to leave the ban in place for the time being.

Despite the bans, WCAS has only continued to grow and expand. The second WCAS public meetings of 2019 were advertised to take place in fourteen locations in the United States and Canada, twelve advertised publicly and two meeting without public invitation.

Throughout its history, World Church Affirmation Sabbath has existed in the gray areas. Is it against church policy to talk about needing to elect different leaders and helping to give church members the tools to do so? The official church manual states that “everything of a political nature should be avoided” in the selection of leaders, but where does educating members how to use the existing political systems count in the equation? How about when that education is only provided to individuals who swear loyalty to a certain set of principles?

To some, affirming the world church has become a dog whistle for opposing women pastors. Leaders past and present in the Upper Columbia Conference emphasize they have always supported the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. The conference never tried to ordain women pastors in opposition to the 2015 General Conference vote; rather it only reinforced the role of women



pastors under the pre-existing commissioned credential. To some church members, though, even this warranted drastic actions. And while WCAS leaders are quick to point out that the organization is not only about women's ordination and opposing women pastors, its history, rhetoric, and statements show that these issues have always been central to its existence.

From its founding, WCAS has seemed to want the benefits of being a public organization without embracing the accompanying responsibilities. It wished to use church properties for events and have local conferences help with advertising yet refused to explain its leadership structure or be transparent about all its motives.

While there is no evidence of WCAS conducting overt political campaigns or conspiring to affect specific leadership votes, the Nameless Network has set up a system where such actions could be taken with impunity.

Transparency is the antithesis to impropriety, and the Nameless Network has been constructed to avoid transparency at all costs.

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I asked Janet Neumann about her overarching vision for WCAS as she approached the end of her first year as its chairwoman—why it is worth the struggle and work that has been poured in over the last several years.

“We want to see the Lord come,” she said.

We want to be ready for the Lord to come. And we believe that to [do] that we need to uphold the fundamental[s] and the structure of the Lord's church. I believe we're seeing prophecy fulfilled with these fissures and cracks that are occurring. But we're told to hold together. We're told to press together—that we're to be in unity. And the latter rain will not fall until there is unity.

The emotion was evident in Neumann's voice as she gave an impassioned plea.

“We are trying to stand up and say, ‘We need to support the world church,’ because the world church when it votes, according to Mrs. White, is God's authority on earth for today. And if we choose not to support that world

church, then we are going away from what the prophet has said and what scripture has said.”

There is no doubt that WCAS members and leaders are dedicated and care deeply about their church communities. Surely, they are people who give with generosity to their churches, both in time and resources. But, for as long as WCAS and the Nameless Network continue to work together with impunity, Adventist church members cannot have complete confidence that the political systems of the church and the selection of leaders are not being manipulated.

WCAS and the Nameless Network raise important issues. Should conduct be judged differently if it happens online versus in the physical world? Should church leaders and pastors be engaged in a venue where not every church member is welcome? Perhaps the discussion around these issues can one day foster more unity.

Or will wedges of division only be driven deeper?

The fall meetings of WCAS will be held September 21, 2019 at the following locations: Clinton, Arkansas; Magalia, Red Bluff, Granite Bay in Rocklin, Sacramento Central in California; Shellbrook SK, Canada; Washington, North Carolina; the laity of Stateline Church and the laity of Newport SDA Church in Washington.

### Endnotes

1. <https://gleanernow.com/news/2015/08/npuc-executive-committee-decides-against-special-constituency-session>.
2. <http://affirmationsabbath.org/blog/why-does-wcas-exist>.
3. <http://advindicate.com/articles/2017/5/14/members-to-affirm-world-church>.
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