

AUSTRALIAN CHURCH EXPLORES

New Governance Models for the 2020s

BY GILBERT M. VALENTINE

From its very beginnings, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific has been innovative and unconventional in seeking an effective organizational form through which to effectively progress its mission. Growing a church from nothing, in a sparsely settled land ruled by the “tyranny of distance,” presented unique challenges. Later, the wide South Pacific, with its scattered islands, would pose similar problems and constraints. The first conference in Australia, organized in 1888, covered the vast entire continent and began with just four churches stretched across huge distances in three different states. The first conference in neighboring New Zealand (1,200 miles from Australia) was established a year later and, while separated by a four-day ocean crossing, it did not face the same

domestic distance challenges. Nevertheless, the numbers were just as small. The New Zealand Conference began life with three churches and 155 members. Within a decade, church leaders down-under broke with North American Adventist tradition and moved beyond being just “district” number 7 of the General Conference to become a new “union” conference, embracing both the Australian and New Zealand local conferences. The new entity had its own constituency, elected its own officers, and made its own decisions about what was best for mission in the South Pacific (with advice, of course, from Battle Creek if it came in time).

Within a decade, church leaders down-under broke with North American Adventist tradition and moved beyond being just “district” number 7 of the General Conference to become a new “union” conference, embracing both the Australian and New Zealand local conferences.

In 1897, in another iconoclastic move that broke with tradition, delegates in the Central Australian Conference

Recent survey data indicates that managing the school and aged care homes by themselves can take up more than a third of a local conference president's time. Overseeing church life and the work of ministers in such circumstances can readily become a lower priority.

disbanded its para-church auxiliary organizations like the Sabbath School Association and the Religious Liberty Association and incorporated them as departments within the conference structure. This initiative would not have been adopted if church officials had had their way. Both A. G. Daniells and W. C. White saw the move as promoting only “anarchy” and “confusion.” Lay activists, however, saw merit in the idea, insisted the plan be adopted, and had the votes.¹ The idea worked efficiently, and it was soon being implemented elsewhere, with Daniells's enthusiastic endorsement.

Shaping organization to most effectively achieve mission in its local context continued to be the goal. Even though the General Conference established the wider Australasian Church as a “division” in 1922, for the next quarter century the Church in the South Pacific functioned as only one expansive union—the “*Australasian Union*”—which continued to exist with its own constituency and elected its own president and officer team. The GC Session nominated a vice-president of the GC for the division, but he was in fact the same person as the local union president and needed to be voted into office back home at the local union session. The GC Session nominating committee, on a legal basis, only dealt with naming the union president as GC vice president. Only in 1948, after the war, when three other union entities were created in the South Pacific, did the General Conference formally extend itself organizationally into the territory as a regional office of the General Conference. This establishment of “a closer tie-up” and a “stronger link” with the General Conference involved long consultations over several years. Eventually the conversations brought about a situation where the full Australasian leadership team was formally appointed at

a GC Session.² And even then, for a while, in order to meet local legal requirements, the entity down-under was labeled as an “inter-union conference” not a “division.” Flexibility and the need to meet the requirements of local law and local mission were the driving principles. Of course, none of this meant that the church in the South Pacific was less “loyal,” or lacking in “love for our brethren.” Nor was it less committed to mission or headed in a different direction from headquarters in Washington. Rather, it simply meant that the church had adopted an organizational structure to meet local mission needs and local legislative and cultural requirements.

Over the years since World War II, the configuration of both unions and local conferences within the division territory has changed from time to time in response to membership growth and the complexities of national developments in the island fields of the South Pacific. Mission unions and the two homeland unions have all reconfigured their territories at various times. The increasing complexity of legislative requirements in both Australia and New Zealand in the late 1990s required further changes in the legal configuration of constituent and legal bodies, and evolving mission imperatives at that time led to redrawing union territorial boundaries.

Since 2000, the Adventist Church within the Australian continent has again, as at the beginning, operated under one conference—but now as one Australian Union Conference (AUC). (New Zealand, together with some nearby independent island nations, form a separate New Zealand Pacific Union Conference and there are two large union missions. One embraces Papua New Guinea and another, the Trans Pacific Union, embraces the more scattered islands of the broad Pacific.)

TABLE 1 Australian Union Church Membership⁵

Year	2001	2005	2010	2015	2019
End of Year Membership	50,696	52,254	56,110	59,112	62,838
Number of Congregations	481	489	518	527	546

Currently, the AUC, with its 62,838 members meeting in 546 congregations (churches and companies), is organized as nine regionally based local conferences.³ It oversees a complex network of twenty-nine local conference incorporated and unincorporated legal bodies within these nine organizations. Five entities underpin seventeen retirement villages and aged care facilities, while another nine entities provide the legal structures for forty-seven school campuses. Other legal entities represent the aspects of the worshipping church itself.⁴ Recent survey data indicates that managing the school and aged care homes by themselves can take up more than a third of a local conference president’s time. Overseeing church life and the work of ministers in such circumstances can readily become a lower priority.

Once more, in 2021, the church on the Australian continent is exploring ways of re-organizing in order to meet the challenges of mission more effectively. Once again, lay activists have been involved. This time the initiative for change has been prompted by stagnating membership growth, new technologies that have conquered the “tyranny of distance,” and new demands from congregations for greater resources to be made available at the front line for local mission. Since

2014, Australian union leaders have been engaged in a thoughtful, creative, and focused consultation with church members across the continent to find an effective way forward. It has not been an easy journey.

Low Growth or No Growth—A Problem

Church growth in the AUC, according to the Church’s internal reporting systems, has been slow but steady during the almost two decades since its establishment. Up to the end of 2019, the Church added 12,142 members and 65 new churches or companies. (See Table 1.)

Nevertheless, public evangelism now generates fewer baptisms than it did in earlier times and the rate of departure of youth from the church is increasing. When compared with quinquennial, government-census data that reports the number in the population self-identifying as Adventists, church growth appears to have stalled. Between 2011 and 2016, census data indicated that the number of Adventists self-identifying as such had actually declined in raw numbers over the most recent five-year period.⁶(See Table 2.)

When compared with the rate of growth of the general population, church growth appeared even more problematic. Growth from this perspective could be interpreted as decline. Between 2006 and 2016 the general population grew at 17.9%, while church membership grew by 13.7%. Census data also indicated that during the fifty-year period since 1966, the proportion of the population in Australia identifying as Christian had dropped from 83% to 50% and the proportion identifying as having no religion at all had increased to 30%. Australian society was changing. It was becoming more secular.⁷ Furthermore, church leaders were also concerned when figures from the annual church-attendance survey revealed that church attendance among Adventists was declining. This survey indicated a drop in attendance in 2017, down to just 67%

TABLE 2

Census Date	People Identifying as SDA
2006	55,300
2011	63,000
2016	62,900



The AUC leadership team, as published in the *Adventist Record* in May of 2017: from left, Peter Cameron, Jorge Munoz, Michael Worker, and Ken Vogel.

of official church membership on the survey Sabbath.⁸ AUC President Jorge Munoz acknowledged the problem publicly in 2018 when he commented on a church website report, “We do not see the growth in our churches that we once enjoyed. This is an urgent issue that we need to address, without delay.”⁹

The Problem Addressed

The uncertain growth patterns, and a sense that more resources were being invested in maintaining church structure than in church frontline mission, worried activist laity on the union executive committee. They urged that more attention be given to resourcing local church needs. According to committee member Lindsay Borgas, such voices began calling for a formal study and review of the situation.¹⁰ Under President Chester Stanley, in 2014, the business department at Avondale College was requested to undertake a “desktop” analysis of conference governance structures and their associated costs. In their report, the business department suggested that if a restructuring of governance was envisaged, there would need to be “a long-term commitment” that would also need to give attention to important “organizational culture” issues. This would be necessary to “ensure the sustainability” of any changes that might be implemented.¹¹ Upon considering the Avondale document at its meeting on November 15, 2015, AUC leaders report that the committee resolved “to seek the services of a change management facilitator

to arrange focus groups to identify the main issues driving the need for change.” This they saw was a “logical” next step.¹² Some on the union committee apparently understood this development differently. They viewed the Avondale report as too limited in its scope, which was why it had not been acted on.¹³ It had not undertaken any stakeholder consultation, nor had it considered the complex Adventist school system and the extensive network of Adventist aged care facilities, both of which also came under conference administration. Because of these inadequacies, Borgas observes, it was felt to be inadequate and the AUC executive committee chose not to act on it. Nevertheless, the issue of a church structure review had been incorporated into the AUC’s strategic plan. In early 2016, under the new administration of President Jorge Munoz, lay activists on the executive committee continued to urge the issue and a decision was taken at the end of 2016 to undertake a more extensive review under the broad theme of “How Can we Do Church Better?”¹⁴ Even though the project was entitled “Church Structure Review,” it was apparently envisaged that the study would look at both quality of church life issues and at conference organizational matters. Views about which of these were more important would later give rise to serious misunderstanding.

Data Gathering

In early 2017, the union executive established a Structure Review Committee (SRC) and committed to a multi-stage process of assessment and change. The SRC comprised the union conference officers, the nine conference presidents, and an initial sprinkling of lay persons. Retired business professional Lindsay Borgas, an AUC executive committee member, was asked to chair the SRC, which was later expanded to include one lay person from each of the nine conferences, to make a group of almost twenty-five, five of whom were women. With initial planning completed, in May 2017 the AUC authorized a task force of three to undertake an unprecedented data collection exercise that would initiate the structural review and shape its agenda. AUC associate secretary, Elder Kenneth Vogel, represented the union officers on the leadership trio and had been tasked with overseeing the structure review project on behalf of the union officers. Borgas, as SRC chair, served on the group

along with Anthony Mitchell, a respected management consultant with ten years' previous experience as an Adventist minister, who had been engaged as "Change Management Facilitator." Mitchell had established a highly regarded consulting practice and had assisted many global clients through the processes of organizational change. Both Borgas and Mitchell volunteered their time. Although the AUC executive had also recommended the employment of a communication specialist to assist the team, this role was not implemented until much later.

Between June and November 2017, the three-person team conducted over seventy consultation workshops with a variety of church stakeholder focus groups in twenty-one different locations in Australia. Each workshop lasted two to three hours. They also opened a Facebook page to facilitate feedback and received more than 26,000 reactions during the five months. The leadership team made clear that their task was to listen. There was no pre-established "agenda" for any specific preferred change, explained Borgas. The process was designed to "engage" with stakeholders in an "open, transparent" way.¹⁵

Early in the process, workshop feedback and Facebook comments indicated that stakeholders felt as strongly, if not more so, about organizational culture issues, both in local churches and in church employment settings, as they did about efficiency issues in regard to the configuration of church governance. Borgas reports that the data-gathering team alerted the AUC executive to this unexpected development.¹⁶

The Report

In November 2017, the data-gathering trio presented a detailed, 137-page PowerPoint report to the AUC executive. A draft had earlier been circulated to the nine conference presidents for review and thus the executive committee felt able to vote unanimously to receive the report with its recommendations.¹⁷ As change facilitator, Anthony Mitchell explained to *Adventist Record* readers

that the final report "not only considered organizational structural issues but, importantly, highlighted practical day-to-day operational factors at schools, aged care facilities and local churches."¹⁸ Framed under six main findings, the report affirmed that "stakeholders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church across Australia have spoken and made it very clear that 'mission' must be the agenda that drives church structure." Stakeholders also gave "strong direction that, the local church must be the hub on which all operational and governance structures must focus." According to Mitchell, "The review revealed that the local church, the local conference and the Seventh-day Adventist Church nationally are in need of a significant overhaul." The report identified "duplication across the corporate Church system" resulting from "multiple layers of Church governance" and concluded that a "greater focus," on efficiency and effectiveness in "mission," was not only possible but imperative.¹⁹

Much of the emphasis in the Structure Review Report focused on problems with organizational culture referred to as "operational issues." These reflected employee and church member angst about a perceived lack of good HR practice and organizational politics, as well as a lack of attention to quality-of-life issues within congregations and organizations. Unhappiness about pastor-congregation relationships was apparently a significant issue. The final report noted that about 70% of churches could be considered "unhealthy" and there was a lack of really effective cooperation between schools, other entities, and congregations in the task of mission.²⁰ This unexpected data "turned the review on its head," observed Ken Vogel, the AUC member of the data-collecting trio.²¹

The first five findings in the report discussed the perceived need to seek greater spiritual depth in congregational life, to better integrate organizational entities in central mission, to focus the various entities more closely on the task of making disciples, and to concentrate their combined effort on the local church,

The uncertain growth patterns, and a sense that more resources were being invested in maintaining church structure than in church frontline mission, worried activist laity on the union executive committee.

The summary concluded by noting that the Structure Review Report had outlined “a landmark cultural and operational shift in the church,” that would require a commitment for the church to move forward “as one.”

with a focus on being “excellent at everything we do.” Only the sixth finding dealt specifically with governance matters, outlining the need for structural initiatives such as developing single organizational entities for education and aged care, experimenting with a “network model” for local churches to focus on mission in their regions, and then exploring local conference governance realignment.²² The emphasis on first developing networks of churches in “districts” would provide performance evaluation for ministers by trusted mentors close to hand and would help improve the effectiveness of ministers and thereby the quality of church life. On the matter of broad governance, stakeholders had “overwhelmingly asserted” that the church in Australia was “over governed and over managed,” and that “layers of governance” needed to be reduced.²³ As already noted, twenty-nine different legal entities underpin the work of the church across the nine conferences. In responding positively to the report, the AUC executive resolved to move promptly to the next phase of the process and framed five definite recommendations for further action. The executive noted that each of the governance reforms being proposed would require consultation with local conference executive committees and constituencies, for they were ultimately the entities that had legal jurisdiction and the power to act. The five recommendations were to:

1. Explore developing a single Adventist aged care system;
2. Explore developing a single Adventist school system;
3. Explore and develop an implementation plan, and conduct trials of the district/network model for churches;
4. Develop and implement, under the banner of “Mission Excellence,” an action plan for resolving the “operational issues”;

5. Explore ways to create greater efficiencies and/or reduce the management and governance of the corporate administrative structure.

A short, eleven-page summary of the final report was prepared by Mitchell and the five recommendations for action were attached at the end. The summary concluded by noting that the Structure Review Report had outlined “a landmark cultural and operational shift in the church,” that would require a commitment for the church to move forward “as one.” In December 2017, the AUC posted the summary on a new website dedicated to providing information about the Church Governance Review.²⁴

Implementation and Conflict

Following the adoption of the 2017 Structure Review Report, the AUC executive determined to share the full report with each of the nine local conference executive committees as early as possible and commissioned the union officers, together with the SRC leadership trio, to meet in person with each local conference between February and April in 2018. The report needed to be explained and discussed.²⁵ This task was completed with all local conference executives voting to accept the report recommendations.²⁶ The AUC was also requested to write up an action plan to address the “operational” problems. Disciple-making initiatives and concerns were acknowledged to fall in the province of local churches, which were the responsibility of local conferences. While these were being addressed, the AUC administration would progress the structural reforms that had been called for in the report.

During this second consultative stage, conflict developed among the key players when the AUC leadership felt the need to take control of the process rather than leave it in the hands of the facilitator and the

chair of the SRC. The AUC officers declined to publish the full 137-page report, feeling that its content was too negative and that elements in it were too strongly critical of ministers. Borgas and Mitchell felt that the AUC officer team was not giving enough attention to the dominant problem of “operational issues” but had begun to focus on the governance restructuring task instead, with an emphasis on reducing the number of conferences in the union in order to achieve financial savings. The lay activists perceived the union officers to have developed their own “agenda” for a particular model of change and to be promoting this. According to Borgas, some feared that the union officers had become enamored with the union of churches model of governance, which, while certainly reducing the overlay of administration, would nevertheless remove church administration even further from frontline church members and the role of their churches as “mission hubs.” Stakeholders, they asserted, had urged closer links not more distant connections. Considering that the project was beginning to “go off the rails,” the professional facilitator initiated discussions with the AUC administration to get it “back on track.” This led to difficulties in personal relationships.²⁷ As a result of these tensions, in November 2018, Borgas resigned from his chairmanship of the SRC following discussions with the AUC president. He felt that change-management principles were not being properly followed.²⁸ Subsequently, the contracted, professional change-facilitator was discontinued amid distrust and misunderstanding. The AUC executive appointed another lay chair of the SRC with whom they were more comfortable.

Frustrated by what he saw as lack of progress and a perception that the AUC was focusing on economics and issues not recommended in the initial report, Lindsay Borgas resigned his membership on the AUC executive in September 2019. He cited the failure of the AUC to implement any trials of church districts and a preoccupation with “investigating conference boundaries” before addressing the need to “restore the gap between Lay Members and Ministers,” as reasons for his disengagement.²⁹ Nine months later, in mid-2020, he went public with his discontent, sending a detailed letter of complaint to the right-wing, independent Fulcrum 7 website.³⁰ His burden was that the full report had not been published and that the AUC officers were pursuing

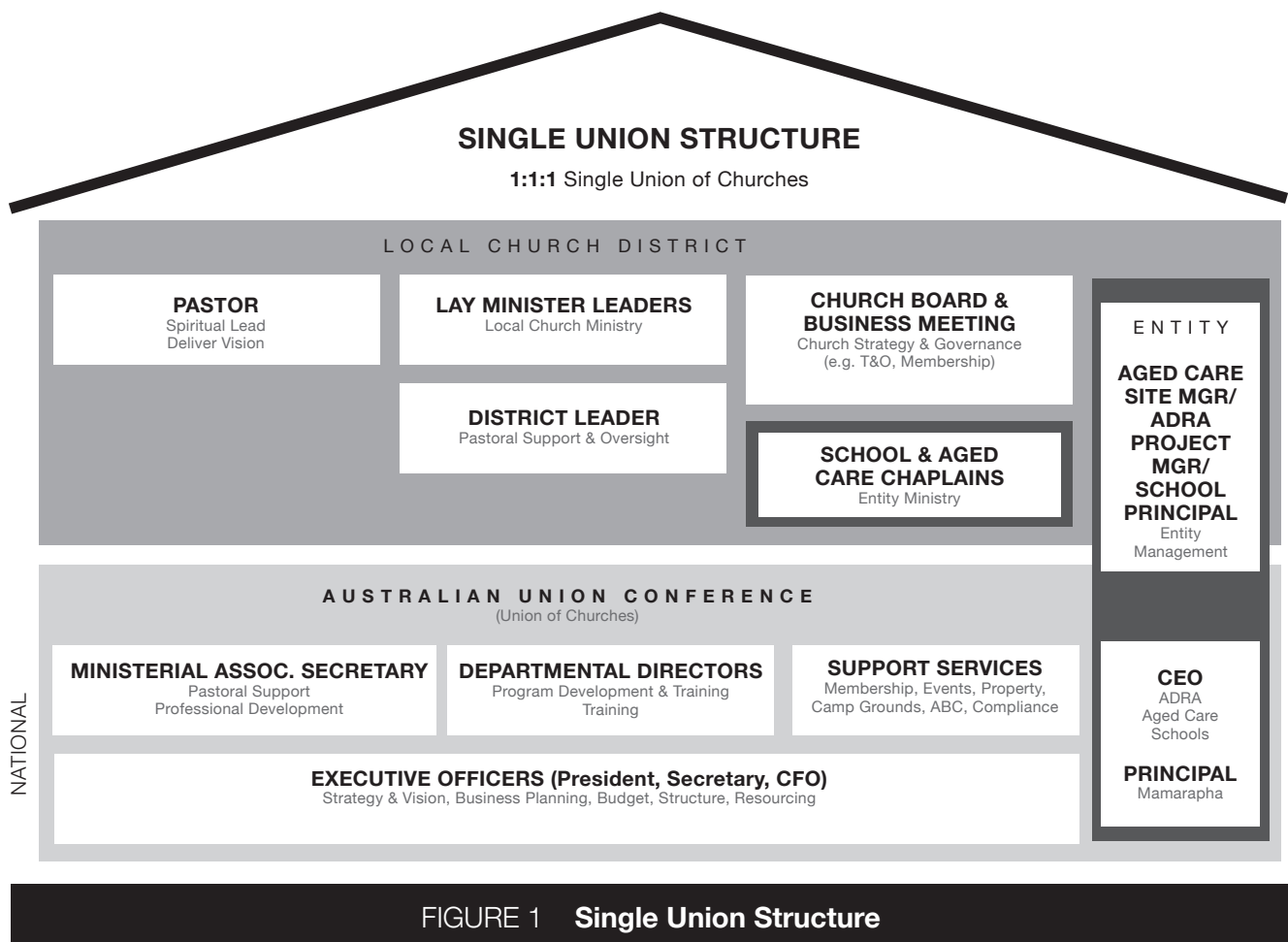
structural change and ignoring the more important issues of cultural change.

The AUC would explain that work was, however, proceeding in the background with town hall meetings and efforts to address the “operational” issues, while work groups were assigned to specific projects and the AUC administration focused on the conference restructuring issue. The arrival of COVID-19 in early 2020 forced the postponement of further town hall meetings that the AUC officers had planned around Australia and further consultations with the local conference executives.

Around the time of Borgas’s Fulcrum 7 letter, the AUC created another Facebook group in an endeavor to enhance communication. Feedback to surveys on this platform swung heavily in favor of the “no change” option for restructuring and a demand that the full report be published.³¹ In response, the church’s governance website published the full SRC PowerPoint report and a communication specialist was engaged to assist the overall project. Beginning in mid-2020, a regular stream of informative posts has been issued, keeping the church informed on progress of the review project, with clear diagrams of the change process involved, sequences in decision making, and who the responsible entities are who need to make the decisions.

Progress

Although there had been little fanfare, from late-2018 to early-2020, in-depth consultations were undertaken to address the five recommendations. The AUC executive approved the setting up of various working or “reference” groups and a new consultative forum to process feedback and advice on the entire project. One reference group, operating under the rubric of Quality Adventist Churches (QAC), was established to consider approaches to support and assist local churches. One reference group was assigned to work on the single-entity option for the schools, while another was assigned to develop designs for a new approach to governing the aged care facilities. Conference education directors and aged care CEO’s met on a regular basis. By late-2018, a feasibility study for the single aged care entity had been completed and further work was being undertaken to ascertain how the entity should be structured before proceeding to wider consultation. Issues involved consideration of the value of a single identity



balanced by the need for regional responsiveness. A centralized CEO working with a distributed leadership team seemed to have the most advantages. Consolidation in the industry in response to changing government regulations provided both an important context and a stimulus for change in the aged care area. Similar research and design work was being done with the school systems by the schools reference group.³²

To address the church organizational structure recommendation (#5 in the executive summary report) the AUC executive set up a sub-committee called the Church Structure Reference Group (CSRG) to guide the initiative. Following the early 2018 consultations with the local conference executive committees, the AUC executive agreed to engage another Melbourne-based consulting firm, Allegra Consulting, to assist CSRG with the development of different models for the configuration of conference organization and to assess the merits and demerits of each. The specialized governance framework

and design skills of Allegra consultants Tim Robinson and Cat Hefernan, though expensive, proved particularly helpful. The arrival of COVID-19, with its lockdowns and travel restrictions, complicated the consulting process even while the economic impact of the pandemic on conference finances gave added urgency to the overall task.

Beginning in late-2019, the CSRG gave careful study to a range of proposed models designed for a reconfigured conference structure. These involved possibilities for four or five new conferences to be created out of the present nine, which would be dissolved. The November 2019 AUC executive committee meeting considered these options and identified the three models for reconstructed conferences they deemed most suitable. Then, in early 2020, following further consultations with the conferences, they began sharing with all stakeholders across the union information about the three models that had emerged as being the most feasible. This very professional communication

exercise consisted of a series of postings accompanied by diagrammatic presentations.³³ The options being considered were:

1. The “1:9:9:5 structure,” which was the existing structure without change. It comprised one union, nine conferences, nine school systems and five aged care systems. Diagrams highlighted how the current organizational structure reflected the presence of the church across the six Australian states and how it related to the division and General Conference.
2. A “1:4:1:1 structure” comprised one union, made up of only four conferences. One school and one aged care system would be operated under the union, not the local conferences. This model envisaged that departmental ministry support functions would be offered only at conference level and that districts would be created where district leaders would be able to provide more localized support to churches and local pastors. A diagram was provided for the model.³⁴ A configuration of “1:4:4:4.” was offered as a variation of this slimmed down model but with one school system and one aged care system in each of the newly chartered conferences. The church districts idea would also be utilized.
3. A “1:1:1 structure” involved dissolving the existing nine conferences into one reconstituted entity as one “union of churches” with single legal entities for both education and aged care. It was noted that eleven such “union” entities already operated in the wider Adventist world, although most of them, if not all, were smaller in dimension. Under this model it is envisaged that there would be distributed leadership, with four vice-presidents located in four regional locations around the country to minimize the barrier of distance. Again, this model would also rely on the formation of localized district “networks” of adjacent

churches, each with a district supervisor. This model, it was claimed, would enable a major shifting of resources from administration to front-line churches, enabling them to function more effectively as “mission hubs.” An accompanying diagram illustrated the governance design.³⁵ (See Figure 1.)

Modelling for options 2 and 3 envisaged between twenty-six and thirty-five districts across Australia, with approximately fifteen pastors per district in urban areas and ten per district in rural areas, depending on geographical proximity.

Additional communication postings to stakeholders during September explained, with diagrams, how church districts would work, the relationships between churches and conferences that would be involved and, in the case of the 1:4:1:1 model, how the new conference boundaries might be drawn across the six states. Maps for seven possible territorial configurations were provided based both on natural geographic regions and on membership distribution.³⁶ In October the postings gave details on the governance structures and lay representation that would be involved in the proposed arrangements, again accompanied by careful diagrams. The postings also reported on the decision-making process that would be involved for implementing each of the models. Careful thought had been given to the different options and it was clear that AUC leadership placed high importance on keeping church members informed.³⁷

The key concern of Quality Adventist Churches that had figured so prominently as a priority in the 2017 report was addressed in two very detailed postings in late October 2020. These reported on extensive creative work that had been done by the AUC ministerial director, Brendon Pratt, in partnership with colleagues in the South Queensland Conference, with much new material being provided both for local churches and for pastoral ministry

Nine months later, in mid-2020, he went public with his discontent, sending a detailed letter of complaint to the right-wing, independent Fulcrum 7 website. His burden was that the full report had not been published and that the AUC officers were pursuing structural change and ignoring the more important issues of cultural change.

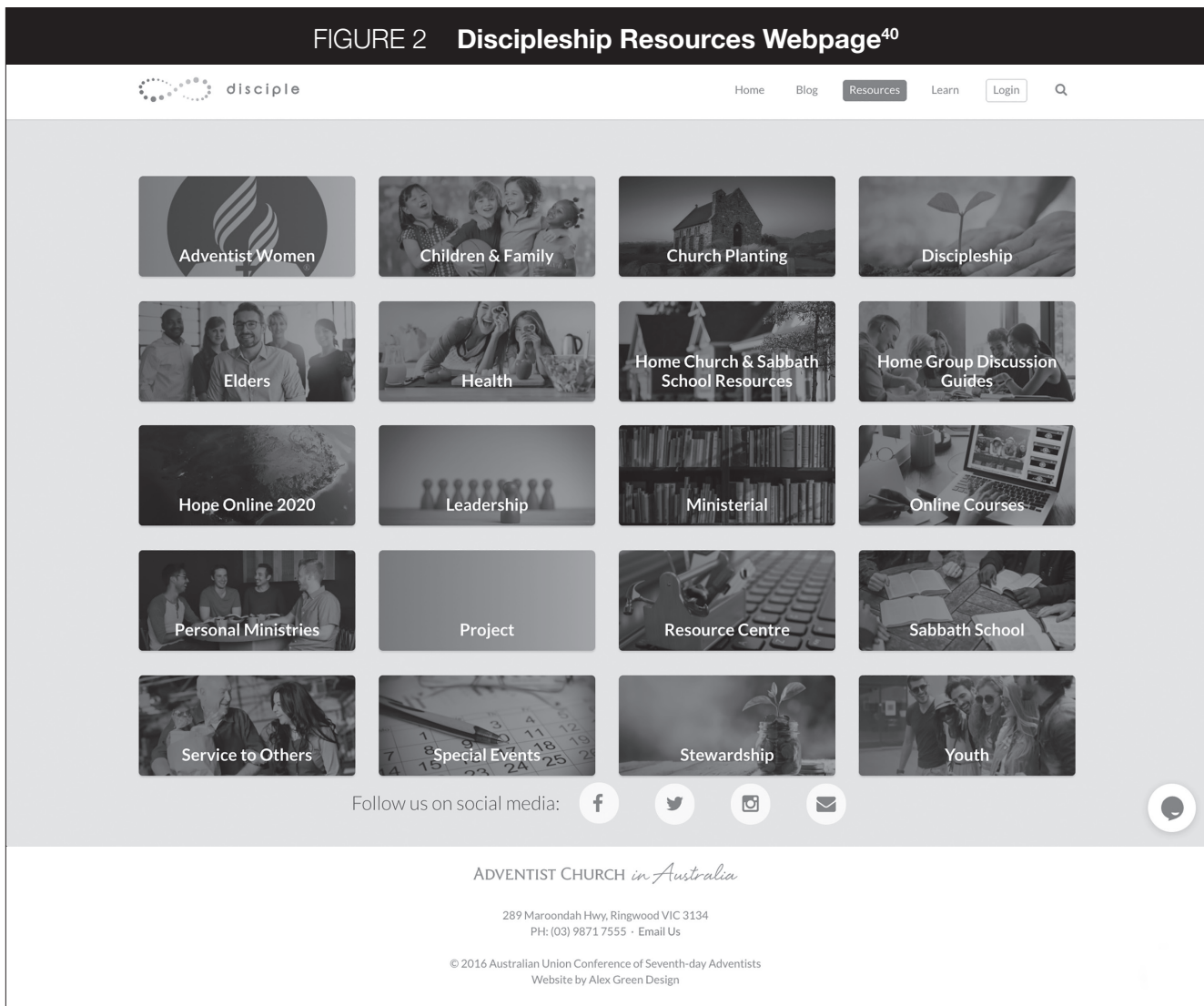
development.³⁸ A framework of support developed for local church improvement involved the sophisticated use of new information technology to provide a range of quality data on church life. Pratt and his team created a platform for generating healthy conversations and made resources available to improve strategies for discipleship. A new data dashboard was developed that enables church leaders to get “a clear snapshot of who their church is,” and this linked into a Ministry Development (MD) portal that included “a whole suite of helpful strategic and refocusing tools” to support pastors in their planning. The AUC also made further developments to their existing *disciple.org.au* resource website to make it easier for pastors and leaders to find relevant resources to help achieve their goals. (See Figure 2.) Church members have been assured that “whether there is a change to

the governance structures of the church or not, Quality Adventist Churches will be developed.”³⁹

Change—An Elusive Goal?

In October 2020, the ACU officers were able to report that many churches across Australia were already working through strategies and plans for a healthier and more effective ministry using the tools provided under the QAC rubric. Achieving change in church structure, however, was more uncertain and AUC administration acknowledged that it would prove more difficult. Consultation with conference executive committees and town hall meetings with stakeholders had been slowed by the travel restrictions imposed by state governments to contain the spread of COVID-19. Zoom meetings had helped to overcome the restrictions to some degree. As

FIGURE 2 Discipleship Resources Webpage⁴⁰



the AUC executive approached its November 2020 end-of-year-meeting it anticipated a comprehensive report on the design work and consultation feedback undertaken during the year on the restructuring proposals. In-depth discussion would be undertaken with CSRG in the hope of determining what would be the most feasible and appropriate of the three design options for restructured governance. Once these decisions were undertaken, further extensive consultation was planned with the nine conferences involved.

The enormity of the challenge facing the AUC was reflected in the last posting for 2020, following the end-of-year executive meetings. Several conferences protested about the process that the AUC was using, and some felt that AUC officials should not be involved in visiting local conferences without meeting with conference officials. A consensus on a way forward had not emerged, but AUC administration still held out hope. Authorization was given for pilot testing the church district models and undertaking case studies where such trials had been undertaken elsewhere.⁴¹ The AUC committee recognized that “a significant amount of time and effort had been spent on the Church Structure Review process so far and that the potential changes which could result from this process were too important to give up now.” The AUC officers reported that further consultation was going to be needed and that the committee had agreed the process should continue and “a full exploration of the structure options be undertaken.” Feedback would help further shape the models, while reliance on the help of Allegra Consulting was to be reduced. The resources were to be sought on a daily, “as needed,” basis rather than on the basis of a long-term contract.

Adventist historians observe that the track record of local conferences merging with each other or being discontinued is not good. Not mission but economics has been the driving force when mergers have been achieved. Adventist experience on this journey has never been easy and whatever has been achieved has not been without considerable pain. In the early 1930s, when the church in America experienced a drop of 25% in tithe income, the dire economic distress persuaded the Annual Council meeting in Omaha, Nebraska to recommend reducing the number of union conferences from twelve to nine, and fifty-eight local conferences to forty-seven, plus five

missions. The resultant closures and reconfigurations were not accomplished without heated charges of apostasy and shrill accusations that a desire for control was the driving motive. Slander and vilification were the weapons of resistance that made life very difficult for General Conference President C. H. Watson.⁴² In the late 1990s, Southeast Asian Union College in Singapore merged with Mission College, which had two campuses in the Thailand Mission. Economic exigency drove that successful merger, but it was not accomplished without much ill-feeling and charges of theft made against the union. Economic exigency has not yet been strong enough to achieve the merger of unsustainable colleges in the United States. Vested local interests have always posed strong barriers to such change. Political factors such as these had led to the shelving of the more recent restructuring plans in the North American Division and the AUC was aware of this.

Among the last postings for 2020, the AUC officers also acknowledged resistance and that ultimately, in the area of governance, the executive is only able to make recommendations.⁴³ Any decision to merge or to restructure needs to be an action taken by local conference constituencies. The AUC can study, consider options, advise, share information, and facilitate the process through communication but it will be up to local conferences whether to proceed with any recommendation for structural change. Whether such change will happen remains to be seen. Resistance already appears to be mounting. Misunderstandings and conflict are inevitable. Despite a leadership team’s endeavor to be transparent, innovative, and even realistic, priorities will yet differ. Will the commitment to achieving a sense of common purpose and a church-wide desire to “do church better” bring results that will please all? Will sufficient political will and commitment to change be generated? In what ways will Adventists in Australia move forward to meet the challenges of mission for a new generation and a radically different world? Watch this space.⁴⁴

Endnotes

1. The episode is discussed in detail in Gilbert M. Valentine, “A. G. Daniells, Administrator, and the Development of Conference Organization in Australia,” in *Adventist History in the South Pacific: 1885–1918*, ed. Arthur Ferch (Wahroonga, NSW: South Pacific Division, 1986), 86–88.
2. H. E. Piper, “Special Session, Australasian Union Conference,” *Australasian Record*, September 13, 1948: 2, 3.