

# Regional Conferences and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

BY ISAAC R. PALMER, SR.

In June of 2015, in a speech that celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the Lake Region Conference, Don Livesay, president of the Lake Union Conference, made a heartfelt apology for the racism within the Seventh-day Adventist Church that had led to the formation of regional conferences in 1945–46. Elder Livesay’s sentiment that an apology was needed suggests that the formation of these conferences was somehow inappropriate or harmful to Black members and churches.

The apology for *racism* is welcomed, but no apology is needed for the creation of the regional conferences. The statistical evidence shows that the creation of regional conferences was a godsend to thousands of Blacks within the urban communities of America. Table 1 shows the spectacular success of the regional conferences.

Not included in the apology was any regret for the continued wrong impression that separate conferences were the request of Blacks in the 1940s. To this day it is widely believed that Blacks demanded regional conferences so that they could hold leadership positions. However, the truth is that White leadership of the

General Conference, the division, and the unions initiated the offer of regional conferences to Blacks. They offered Blacks their own conferences because they knew their own members and because of racial tensions within their constituencies they could not deliver on any commitment to integration that the Blacks were asking for. Their recommendation was precipitated when Lucille Byard, a 66-year-old Black Seventh-day Adventist woman, died a month after being refused admittance on the basis of her race into Washington Sanitarium (now Adventist HealthCare White Oak Medical Center in Silver Spring, MD).

Before and after the creation of regional conferences, Black members were specifically and unfortunately unwelcome in White churches. As late as the 1960s, many White churches were choosing to turn off the lights and shut down their sanctuaries rather than to accept Black worshippers. By accommodating the prevailing racial attitudes of the rest of America in the 1940s, White Adventism missed a great opportunity to show themselves to be a “peculiar people.”

America, a nation built on the backs of an enslaved

70 Years of Membership Growth				
Entities	1948 Members	2018 Members	Times Growth	Percent Growth
Regional Conferences	20,561	321,359	16	1563%
NAD sans Regionals	214,908	928,334	4	432%
Regional Percent to NAD	10%	35%		
<i>Regional Conferences outgrew the rest of the NAD 16 times to 4: 1,563% to 432%</i>				

Table 1 Regional and North American Division growth

people, with its DNA steeped in racism, was the birthplace and host of Seventh-day Adventism. The Church was infected by nature and nurture with an implicit bias and natural proclivity toward race-based discrimination. The Adventist Church is not to blame for racism, except in its failure, in a land consumed in racial bias, to distinguish itself as a “peculiar people.” The Church cannot deny the cultural cues of its host nation. The earnings differential between Blacks and Whites has forever been an intended byproduct of America’s systemic racism: racism that has outlived Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King’s Dream, the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, and Lyndon Johnson’s Civil Rights Act of 1964. And the three angels’ messages have not been a cure for the Church’s inherited racial attitudes and behaviors.

How the regional conferences were financially launched is the problem being addressed in this paper—the disparate earnings of Blacks and Whites and the resultant tithe in North America’s Church.

### Low Giving Begins with Low Earnings

In the 1940s, per the US Bureau of Labor, the median Black household income was approximately 50% of the earnings of White households. The main difficulty in the formation of the regional conferences was in how they were brought into the unions and the sisterhood of conferences under the same policies that governed the state conferences. This, despite the huge difference in member earnings and the resultant tithe from that income. And the 50% earnings difference, which was based on America’s racial biases, manifested itself in Black conferences and churches as 50% tithe and 50% local offerings.<sup>1</sup>

The same set of numbers can be viewed from two perspectives. If person A has \$40 and person B has \$80, person A has 50% as much money as person B. From an alternative perspective, you can say, person B has 100% more money than person A (person B’s extra \$40 ÷ person A’s \$40 = 100%).

For seventy-plus years, the regional conferences’ tithe per capita (tithe per member) has hovered around 60% of the tithe per capita of the state conferences. Using the 60% to 100% ratios and applying the formula above, this means that the state conferences

had 66.6% more tithe than the regional conferences. The formula reads: the state conferences’ extra 40% ÷ the regional conferences 60% = 66.6% more tithe. That’s 66.6% more tithe with which to operate their conferences. And those extra dollars are why a group of cohort state conferences with the same membership as the regional conferences, has 76% more churches, 42% more pastors, and 213% more schools than the regional conference with the same number of members. More on the cohort conferences coming up.

### Tithe Per Capita Shows the Real Disparity

The tithe differential is best expressed in the tithe-per-capita numbers for the different groups of conferences. The tithe per capita is a group’s tithe divided by its membership. Table 2 shows a partial listing of the tithe per capita of the conferences in the North American Division. Ranked from highest to lowest, the highest per capita is Michigan Conference at \$1,354. Illinois is ranked thirty-sixth with a per capita of \$863. The first regional conference is Allegheny East at thirty-seventh, with a per capita of \$862, and Northeastern is at forty-fourth. Most telling

## 2019 NAD Conferences Ranked by Tithe Per Capita

Rank of	Per	% NAD
58 NAD Conferences	Capita	Average
1 Michigan.....	\$1,354.....	129%
36 Illinois.....	\$863.....	83%
37 Allegheny East.....	\$862.....	82%
44 Northeastern.....	\$806.....	77%
52 South Central.....	\$581.....	56%
53 Central States.....	\$555.....	53%
54 South Atlantic.....	\$506.....	48%
55 Southeastern.....	\$482.....	46%
56 Southwest Region.....	\$464.....	44%
57 Allegheny West.....	\$427.....	41%
58 Lake Region.....	\$349.....	33%
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NAD Average.....	\$1,046.....	108%
Regional Average.....	\$591.....	61%

**Table 2** Rank of 58 NAD conferences. Regional conferences are at the bottom.

## Regional and State Conferences Paired by Membership Size

These conferences are paired on combined membership of each group. In 1948 the 7 regional conferences had 20,561 members. The 15 paired State Conferences had 89,871 members.

Regional Conferences	2018 Members	Paired State	2018 Members
1 Allegheny East	41,163	1 GA Cum.	40,613
2 Allegheny West	16,773	2 Chesapeake	15,758
3 Central States	8,593	3 Indiana	8,720
4 Lake Region	31,427	4 Rocky Mountain	18,227
5 Northeastern	58,322	Kentucky-Tennessee	15,305
6 South Atlantic	49,287	5 Texas	58,980
8 Southeastern	53,078	6 Southern New England	18,950
7 South Central	36,575	Greater New York	30,622
9 Southwest	26,719	7 Minnesota	10,101
		Ohio	11,856
		Illinois	13,767
		8 Gulf States	12,780
		New Jersey	16,774
		Carolina	23,235
		9 Michigan	26,738
Members	321,359	Members	322,426
Tithe	\$192,950,000	Tithe	\$337,298,000

**Table 3** The conferences were equal in members but widely separated in tithe in 2018.

is that the other seven regional conferences bring up the last seven rankings (52–58) with per capita of 56% to 33% of the NAD average. Note that only when Allegheny East and Northeastern are added to the other regional conferences do they together reach the 60% ratio. Allegheny East is an outlier because twelve of the fifteen highest income counties in America are in their territory.

The importance of per capita as a financial analysis tool is that it levels the dollars and allows comparisons of other statistics. Tithe per capita (tithe per member) says that if South Central Conference hired a pastor in 2019, at a total salary cost of \$100,000, with a per capita of \$581, the conference would have had to use tithe of 172 members ( $\$100,000 \div \$581$ ). But Michigan Conference would only have to expend the tithe per capita of seventy-three members to hire the same pastor ( $\$100,000 \div \$1,354$ ).

In each of the six unions with regional conferences, the regional conferences have the smallest per capita. Note the ranking within each union in Table 3.

### Is Tithe Low or Membership Too High?

An exhaustive study of the division’s members added, and members removed from their rolls over the

last twenty years, shows that the regional conferences added 287,644 members, and they “subtracted” 183,855 members, which was 64% of the total members added. This percentage is comparable with the paired cohort state conferences over the same twenty years. These findings refute the accusation by some that the regional conferences’ memberships are intentionally left overstated, because the churches and conferences are not as disciplined in dropping non-attending members from the rolls. The accusation of inflated membership is used with malicious intent to explain the low per-capita numbers in the regional conferences, allowing them to ignore the earnings differential.

### Cohort Conferences Paired by Membership for Comparison.

For comparison purposes, the now-nine regional conferences (two of the original seven divided in subsequent years) were paired with fifteen cohort state conferences in 2018; both groups collectively had nearly identical membership totals of approximately 322,000 (Table 4). The tithe from the 321,000 regional members was \$192 million. The tithe from the 322,000 cohort state members was \$337 million. The same-size paired

## 2018 Institutional Comparisons

	Paired State Conferences	Regional Conferences	Difference	Regional % to State
Members.....	322,424.....	321,359.....	1,065.....	<b>100%</b>
Tithe.....	\$337,000,000.....	\$192,000,000.....	\$145,000,000.....	<b>57%</b>
Tithe Per Capita.....	\$1,046.....	\$600.....	\$446.....	<b>57%</b>
Churches.....	1,767.....	1,048.....	719.....	<b>59%</b>
Pastors.....	1,062.....	683.....	379.....	<b>64%</b>
Schools.....	243.....	88.....	155.....	<b>36%</b>
Teachers.....	877.....	333.....	544.....	<b>38%</b>
Students.....	10,550.....	3,450.....	7,100.....	<b>33%</b>
Boarding.....	16.....	1.....	15.....	<b>6%</b>
All Employees.....	2,918.....	1,280.....	1,638.....	<b>44%</b>

**Table 4** Numbers for regional and paired state conferences and percent regional to state conferences

state conferences had \$145 million more to service their members than the regional conferences. And the tithe per capita for the regional conferences was 57% (\$600 ÷ \$1,046) of the per capita of the paired state conferences.

By contrast, the fifteen cohort state conferences paired with the same-size membership have 247 schools: thirty-one with grades through twelfth, which includes sixteen boarding academies. The regional conferences have seventy-nine schools, only seven through grade twelve, and one boarding academy. In fact, four of the nine regional conferences don't have a single school that goes to the twelfth grade. So important is the Adventist school system to the conferences and the churches that the General Conference Education Department states, "Christian Education is the most-effective Evangelism for second generation Adventist youth." This is truly a crisis for the nine regional conferences.

The lack of church schools and boarding academies in the regional conferences is not a lack of commitment to Christian education—it is a shortage that begins with the Black family's weekly paycheck, and then tithe and offerings. Over the last seventy-plus years, the 66.6% additional earnings in the White family's paycheck contributed a lot of tithe and local offerings; that bought a lot of schools and paid a lot of tuition. The state conferences and churches have cashed in on the monetized dividends of White privilege.<sup>2</sup>

### Tithe Percentages Policy

The Church's tithe percentage policy requires each NAD conference to remit a percentage of their tithe to support the unions, division, and General Conference. This amount is approximately 25%.<sup>3</sup> The lack of responsiveness to the earnings/tithe disparity and the consequential "haves versus have nots" in resources have been most harmful to the Black work since the 1940s. In 2019, for the paired conferences, after remitting the tithe percentages of 25% the state conferences were left with \$255 million; this is \$63 million more than the nine regional conferences' gross tithe *before* paying tithe percentages on \$193 million. The failure by the Church to factor this disparity into operating policies over the last seventy years has brought no statement of remorse, no offer of apology, nor thought of now considering these daunting factors and seeking to address them in a meaningful and impactful way. In 2019, on \$193 million in tithe, \$48 million was sent from the regional conferences in compliance with the tithe percentages policy (Table 5).

### Is the Tithe Percentages Policy Egalitarian?

This *equal* application of policies and assessed tithe percentages was not done out of malice. In fact, it was likely initiated and continued to this day without thinking through the reality of race-based earnings in America. And because it did not impact the White congregations, it simply was not on the minds of the union, division, and GC leadership. Why would it be? It is easy to

## 2019 Tithe Percentages Remitted to Unions, Division and GC

Paired Conferences	2019 Tithe	Less 25% Tithe Percentages	After Tithe Percentages
Paired State.....	\$341,326,000.....	\$85,331,500.....	\$255,994,500
Regionals.....	\$193,166,000.....	\$48,291,500.....	\$144,874,500
Difference.....	\$148,160,000.....	\$37,040,000.....	\$111,120,000

**Table 5** Tithe less tithe percentages. Paired states have more after tithe percentages than regional conferences began with.

believe that fairness is being practiced when all parties are assessed equally: *equality gives the illusion of equity and fairness*. But when the regional conferences are already shorted to 60% in tithe, anything taken from them effectively deepens their deficit in purchasing power and is therefore non-egalitarian.

Church leadership will claim that it is egalitarian because each conference is required to remit an equal percentage of their tithe income. But when one group is already standing in a 60% earnings/tithe hole, determined by America’s social economic system of racism, it is not egalitarian to now ask everyone to dig down another 25%. This merely extends and perpetuates America’s most enduring manifestation of systemic racism—opportunity and earnings disparity between Blacks and Whites—which was the intended result of public policy. Some national laws, policies, and practices may have been reworked, but the results continue with full intentionality.

Using a foot-race metaphor: if America’s racist behavior in the workplace puts you ten yards behind in the starting blocks, the race does not become egalitarian just because you both had to run the same 100 yards. If your starting position is unequal, the whole of the

disparate starting position and the race must be seen together as unfair. Subsequent equality cannot overtake situations that begin with racist imposed inequality.

The egalitarian action would be to 1) insist that every runner be allowed to begin from the same starting blocks, or 2) shorten the race to ninety yards for the person starting the race ten yards behind. The Church did not grant the ten-yards privilege to the White runner, nor did it impose the deficit starting position on the Black runner, but neither did it confront the disparity by changing the distance of the race for the disadvantaged runner. Since the Church has absolutely no capacity to change the starting positions, its only egalitarian action is to shorten the race for the disadvantaged runner.

### Billions With a “B”

Per the chart in Table 6, it took forty-one years (1948–1989) for the fifteen paired state conferences to receipt a billion dollars *more* than the regional conferences. But it only took fifteen years (1990–2004) to receipt an additional billion dollars tithe over the regionals. The last *extra* billion dollars in tithe over regional conferences was achieved in just ten years (2010–2019).

It can be projected that from this point forward, the

## Years for Paired Conferences to Reciept a Billion Dollars More than Regionals

Years	Number of Years	Tithe (Paired State)	Tithe (Regional)	Paired State Over Regional
1948 - 1989.....	First 42.....	\$1,773,740,697.....	\$749,890,053.....	\$1,023,850,644
1990 - 2004.....	Next 15.....	\$2,578,344,415.....	\$1,500,340,888.....	\$1,078,003,527
2005 - 2014.....	Next 10.....	\$2,698,058,355.....	\$1,622,939,287.....	\$1,075,119,068
2015 - 2020.....	Last 6.....	\$1,656,697,299.....	\$938,146,518.....	\$718,550,781
1948 - 2020.....	72.....	\$8,706,840,766.....	\$4,811,316,746.....	\$3,895,524,020

**Table 6** Years it took for the paired state conferences to exceed the regional conferences’ tithe by a billion dollars

. . . denominational policies cannot force tithe parity, but the policies can be made to do no further harm.

fifteen state conferences currently paired in 2018, based on having the same number of members, will receipt an extra billion dollars in tithe over the regional conferences every five to seven years. This is not just a billion dollars—it is a billion dollars *more* than all the regional conferences together. And this is not the entire NAD receipting an extra billion dollars. It is just the fifteen cohort state conferences paired with the same number of members as the regionals. That buys a lot of pastors, churches, teachers, schools, and evangelism.

Over the full seventy-plus years between 1948 and 2020, the fifteen paired state conferences (322,000 members) receipted \$8.7 billion tithe, compared to the regional conferences’ (321,000 members) \$4.8 billion. That’s \$4 billion over the regional conferences with equal memberships to the paired state conferences.

The apology for the racial attitudes within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the 1940s has been sincerely given and genuinely accepted (at least within the Lake Union territory). But *no* apology has been offered for forcing the regional conferences to operate on the limited resources available to the conferences whose Black members earn only 60% on the dollar of that earned by Whites in America.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America needs policies that will allow “have-not” conferences to maximize their own resources for parity in their capacity to support and afford Christian education, as well as to level the cost of hiring pastors

and conducting aggressive evangelism efforts in our urban communities. *Given the family earnings reality in America, denominational policies cannot force tithe parity, but the policies can be made to do no further harm.* The Church must recognize that in America, being Black or White matters.

### The Adventist Funding Triad

Adventism is funded by its members’ earnings. Starting with the family paychecks, the dollars are filtered through a triad that consists of tithe from the conference, offerings from the local church, and another portion of the family budget that pays tuition and other special projects (Figure 1). In the regional conferences and churches, all three components come from the same 60% deficient family paychecks. So, when comparing the resources that built up the regional conferences and those that built up the state conferences—their churches, schools, pastors, and teachers—the entire triad must be looked at over the last seventy-plus years. Table 7 shows what the regional and paired state conferences triads totaled in just 2019. Considering the full triad, the paired state conferences had a \$268 million advantage in 2020 alone (Table 8). Using the above formula, an amount close to that is repeated year after year for a total of billions of dollars since the 1940s. Those dollar differentials serve the same size memberships. In looking at the funding triad in Christian education, the low earnings of Black families are a triple jeopardy. It is that family’s 60% paycheck

Regional and Paired State Conferences in 1948 and 2019							
Year	1948			2019			
	Entities	Members	Tithe	Per Capita	Members	Tithe	Per Capita
Regional Conferences	20,561	\$1,097,938	\$53.40	327,000	\$193,166,000	\$590.72	
Paired State Conferences	68,711	\$6,296,623	\$91.64	326,000	\$342,640,038	\$1,051.04	
Regional % of Paired State	29.9%	17.4%	58.3%	100.3%	56.4%	56.2%	

Table 7 Members, tithe, and per capita: 1948 and 2018

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## The Adventist Funding Triad

The 60% Black Family Paycheck Funds it all at 60%



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1. **60% Tithe:** 10% to conference for pastors, teachers, evangelism and share up to Unions, NAD, and GC
2. **60% Donations:** 5% to local church for operating cost
3. **60% Family Budget:** 2% church school tuition and special church and conference projects

**Figure 1** All funds come from the paychecks of members as tithe, donations, and family budgets that support projects and tuition.

that funds all three of the entities that finance Christian education—the conference, the local church, and of course the family budget. From the 60% paycheck, the conference gets 60% tithe, the local church offering plate gets 60% donations, and the family pays tuition from their 60% family budget.

If the Church wants to realize any semblance of parity of opportunity and resources between the conferences, it is now time to consider the necessity of resetting or eliminating the tithe percentages being remitted from the regional conferences to the unions, the division, and the General Conference. This is not a call for a welfare system that would transfer resources from the state conferences to the regional conferences. But just as the unions and the division have recently reviewed and adjusted the percentages *they share*

with the General Conference—adjusting downward from 8% to 6%—adjustment should be made to accommodate the earnings/tithe realities of Black America.

Not included in the triad are funds resulting from the enormous wealth gap between Blacks and Whites in America—Black wealth is 7% of White wealth—Whites’ \$130,800 to Blacks’ \$9,595. Wealth is the net of all personal property, real estate, cars, and stocks and bonds, less any debt leveraged against those holdings. The wealth dollars come into play through Planned Giving and Trust Services. Planned Giving and Trust Services activities are lucrative in many state conferences and totally anemic in the regional conferences. Both the earnings disparity and the wealth gap are the result of *White privilege* and *Black deprivation*

### 2020 Adventist Funding Triad — Conferences Paired by Membership

2020 Triad Sources	Percent of Family Paycheck	Paired State Conferences	Regional Conferences	Difference (Amount State over Regional)
Tithe	10%	\$349,244,804	\$191,015,422	\$158,229,382
Local Offerings	5%	\$174,622,402	\$95,507,711	\$79,114,691
Family Budger	2%	\$69,848,961	\$38,203,084	\$31,645,876
Triad Total	17%	\$593,716,167	\$324,726,217	\$268,989,949

**Table 8** All figures are dependent on the family’s earnings.



This debate over parity in accessing mission-critical resources is not just about dollars and cents. It is about doing what makes sense when we embrace as truth that Black *Eternal* Lives Matter.

in America. In earnings and wealth, America's racism is monetized and generously flows into the treasury of the state conferences and churches.

This debate over parity in accessing mission-critical resources is not just about dollars and cents. It is about doing what makes sense when we embrace as truth that Black *Eternal* Lives Matter.

### The Unrequested but Well-Used Privilege

Though not of its own making and completely unsolicited, White Adventism has benefited from the privilege gifted it by America's structural racism: a bankable privilege that converts to more tithes, offerings, and family budgets—the full Adventist funding triad. That privilege has been used over the last seventy years to amass a disparate accumulation of more churches and pastors, along with more schools and teachers. Unlike the law's doctrine of “fruit from a poisonous tree,” the privileged get to keep, with full impunity, this legally begotten fruit from a racist tree.

But does an apology justify keeping the dollars layered onto America's racialized, systemic earning disparity inflicted on Black Adventists and regional conferences?

At the time of his apology, Elder Livesay had more to apologize for than just the events of the 1940s. By 2015, he and the Church had nearly seventy years of experiences with the disparate finances between the regional and state conferences. The Church merely layered on its own financial policies that further defined economic stratification between the Black and White conferences. At the national and church level, *White privilege* and *Black deprivation* have been on full display for seventy years.

In the final analysis, if one wanted to be especially cynical, the 2015 apology could be seen as hypocritical

and duplicitous. The tithes percentages policy continues to deepen the financial hole that deprives the regional conferences of the opportunity to stand operationally on level ground with the state conferences in meeting the needs of their members and churches. A more generous position is to wait to see how the Church continues its current post-apology enlightenment.

### Endnotes

1. Between their origins in 1948 and 2019, the regional conferences as a group have consistently shown a tithes per capita of between 55% and 63% of the state conferences' tithes per capita every year. Some individual regional conferences' numbers are higher and some lower. For purposes of uniformity, a per capita differential of 60% is used throughout this document—which fairly represents their collective average over the last seventy years. This 60% average is almost identical to the earnings differential between the median Black and White household income over the same time period.
2. The timing and urgency of this discussion about parity is especially relevant in 2022. State conferences are flexing their financial advantage and are aggressively reaching out to Black Adventists to leave their regional pews and join the churches they are intentionally setting up with Black pastors: churches in cities the state conferences abandoned years ago. The lure is no non-constituency fees charged for access to their schools, dollars to purchase church facilities, and higher pay for pastors.
3. While additional percentages are remitted for higher education and worker retirement. Throughout, this paper references just the approximate percentages that go to the higher Church structure.



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