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# Change and the Adventist Church

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## Change and the Adventist Church

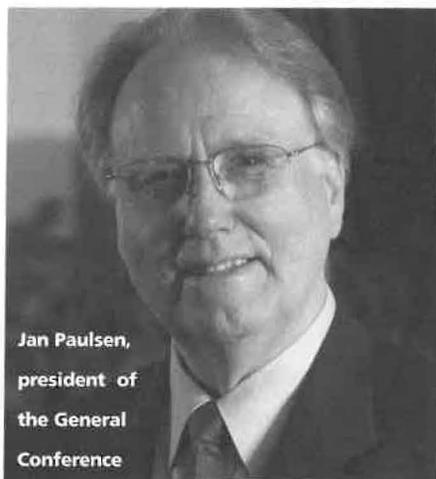
### Analyzing the Latest Actions at the General Conference

BY MICHAEL E. CAFFERKY

What does it take to bring change to the structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? A methodical, incremental process that would protect core values as it tiptoes through the political minefields. The Commission on Ministries, Services, and Structures, a hundred-member committee that studied the subject, brought a report to the 2007 Annual Council recommending a few procedural adjustments that were voted. The changes outlined in the approved measure suggest that organizational mission and unity seem to have Rook®—power over efficiency or financial savings.

The commission argued that:

- Structural diversity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church already exists,
- Geographical, political, and cultural diversity across the world is great,
- Local capacity and resources for church ministry vary widely from region to region,
- The varieties of technology for travel, telecommunications, and computing are not equally available worldwide,



Jan Paulsen,  
president of  
the General  
Conference

- A precedent exists for using additional structural designs that address the issues of vertical separation between power and authority,
- Changes have taken place in the church's external environment.<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, approval of the commission's recommendations means that the little-used union of churches provision existing in the General Conference Working Policy since the 1960s and designed for unusual operational conditions will now be available for use as an acceptable mainstream approach. This action legitimizes consolidations and mergers of traditional organizational units but does not mandate that such actions occur.

#### The Commission and Its Work

In his opening remarks to the commis-

sion at its first meeting in 2006, General Conference president Jan Paulsen, who chaired the commission, stated, "no organizational structure in government or industry can serve as a model for what we must have." He identified three main issues for the commission to keep in focus: (a) the global unity of the church, (b) the global mission of the church, and (c) the best use of resources.<sup>2</sup>

Presentations followed regarding the rationale for the commission; the history of Seventh-day Adventist Church organization and reorganization; biblical teaching on ecclesiology relevant to the issues of unity, identity and mission; and issues regarding functional departments of the church and some of the options available for reconfiguration of these departments.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, study groups were formed to focus on two topics: the concept of flexibility and the concept of union of churches, a little-used alternative available under General Conference policy where geopolitical constraints make it impossible to follow the typical church structure.<sup>4</sup>

When the commission met again, one group discussed ways in which currently authorized structural patterns might be modified rather than putting forward an entirely new organizational plan. Another study group,

chaired by Michael Ryan, presented a paper exploring the union of churches concept and its potential for wider application than when it was first developed under the leadership of Robert H. Pierson in the 1960s.

Ryan's group suggested use of the concept could help reduce the number of levels of organization from four to three and help redistribute financial resources to areas of the work that are currently languishing. It could also enable redistribution of personnel, which would provide additional pastors for local churches. Furthermore, the group suggested that the concept could facilitate access to a country's legal authorities and enable faster communication and more appropriate decision making.<sup>5</sup>

By 2007, the commission had agreed on a six-point recommendation for Annual Council, which it voted.

### **1. Structural Flexibility**

The opportunity is currently available for one or more conferences and/or unions to obtain division executive committee authorization and constituency consent to merge, which would remove one level of church hierarchy. The question is whether or not this will be attractive in the North American Division.

### **2. Alternate Structures**

With the flexibility principle as a foundation, the commission recommended that each geographic division territory be given full access to the range of designs when making structural changes to the mid-level administrative units that connect local congregations to their divisions. Essentially, these organizational units can have the same

relationship and status they now have. In contrast, with General Conference division approval and constituency consent, they can change to one of the following alternatives:

- a. **Complementary staffing model.** This model maintains organizationally separate conferences, missions, and unions, where the departmental staffing at the mission and/or conference level does not parallel that of the union.
- b. **Shared administration/services model.** Under this model, the local conference or mission will have reduced administrative personnel and will share administrative and support personnel with the union.
- c. **Constituency-based (union of churches) model.** Under this model, conferences and missions as separate organizational levels would disappear and be replaced by a union of churches. With this model, one administrative office would be established in a defined geographic territory currently considered a union, but a union of churches—essentially only a union—would replace the union and its conferences. Some unions that accomplish this change may choose to appoint directors over geographic areas.

The intent of the Annual Council action is prevention of multiple unions of churches operating within the same geographic territory. In North America, it will be interesting to see how the regional conferences take to this provision.

The shared administration/services model looks good on paper, but compared with the other models its

administrators will experience more time pressures because they will be working for two organizations simultaneously. They will be accountable to two sets of constituencies. Because of this, there may be migration either backward toward the traditional model or forward to the more streamlined union of churches model.

Under a consolidated union of churches model, geographic assignments of administrative and support personnel will widen, and administrative personnel may be reassigned pastoral roles. The number of churches with which union departments will interact will increase, thus requiring more efficient use of resources.

Potential divestitures of property, plant, and equipment assets that result from consolidation will raise the stakes and the emotional intensity of issues during the discussions.

### **3. Nonstructural Changes**

In its work, the commission attempted to distinguish between structural and nonstructural changes. Structural changes are those made to relationships between conferences, missions, and unions. Nonstructural changes include mergers of organizations, consolidation of functional services across organizations, and outsourcing. They can also include realignment of geographic territories within a division. Although some nonstructural changes will not require changes in the new overall design of the mid-level administrative structure, in fact, the kinds of changes given as examples represent potential structural and operational changes both within and across organizational units.

The commission recognized that some complicating factors still remain to be resolved as the new provisions

are put into practice. One example is the status of educational institutions located within a territory that might be restructured.

Organizations that wish to merge without going through the extensive procedures in the General Conference *Working Policy* may have a loophole to get around them by claiming that a desired change is nonstructural.

This recommendation has the potential to cause the most confusion. Division officers hold authority to advise and direct decision makers who grapple with nonstructural changes. In practice, this means that two levels of decision making will be necessary to accomplish a nonstructural change.

#### 4. Decision Making

Decisions to change structure in one territory will be made in ways that

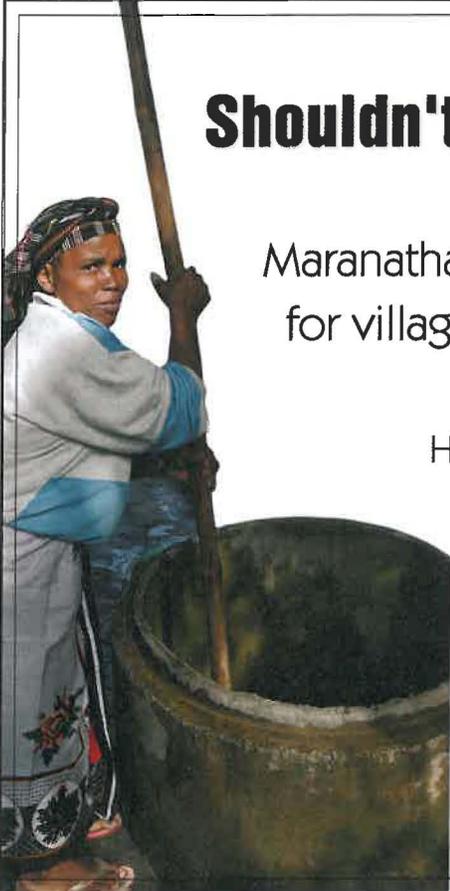
preserve governance practices, church authority, policies and procedures, unity, organizational identity, fairness, and accountability. Without this foundation, organizational changes that might be created for local interests would have the potential to destroy unity, authority, and the broader mission of the church. The issues of authority, fair representation, and unity are prominent in the report, although it also mentions efficiency and effectiveness many times as important considerations when deciding structural changes.

No structural changes can result in the formation of an independent organizational unit that is left unattached to church structure. Fair representation in the governance structure and equitable distribution of financial resources must be maintained.

Although existing organizational units can initiate a request for an organizational change, no approval for structural change can be self-determined. The unit desiring structural change must obtain the approval of the next larger (administratively higher) organizational unit.

#### 5. Implementation

Implementation of changes to structure will proceed with authorization from the division executive committee or the General Conference Executive Committee, depending on the level of organization that wants to reorganize. Before it gives its authorization, the executive committee will give local constituencies the opportunity to express their opinions. But the executive committee will expect more than mere opinions. It will want to see that



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the constituencies consent to a proposed change. Although consent is not defined, it is implied that constituencies will take formal action to provide or withhold support for a proposed change.

Most design changes, such as to the union of churches model, will come slowly to North America. Getting multiple conference constituencies and union leaders and division leaders to consent to a proposed change will require patience.

## 6. Representation

The question of representation has surfaced in many discussions of church structure during the last three decades.<sup>6</sup> The action at Annual Council is no different. The commission was sensitive to two paradoxical forces at work. On the one hand, it recognized the need to preserve fair representation on executive committees. Because of the diversity of the church, wide representation is required. On the other hand, the practical reality of managing the work of an executive committee requires that these decision-making groups be limited in size.

Paradoxes of this kind will never go away. The commission sees resolution in terms of attempting to achieve a balance. Balance will best be achieved, it suggests, when representation on executive committees is a function of size (for participating organizations) and employees of organizational units (conferences, unions, and missions), and selected on an at-large basis.

Another issue is preservation of two-way communication and accountability between officers of smaller organizational units (lower in hierarchy) and officers of their related

administrative units over larger territories (higher in hierarchy). In this regard, executive committee members who come from higher levels of authority (such as division administrators) will be limited to 10 percent of the voting members of the executive committee at the lower level (such as the union executive committee), allowing for 90 percent of voting members to come from the smaller geographic area.

In an attempt to close the gap between the executive committee and lay members, the commission recommended that church members and employees who are not executive committee members be given an opportunity to comment on executive committee issues "when and where appropriate." No specific process was spelled out in terms of informing and then accommodating the comments of church members and of church employees when accomplishing the work of the executive committee.

### Other Issues

Most organizations, whether for-profit or nonprofit, have a vertical (hierarchical) order of responsibility between those who perform the work and those who administer it. Although other factors are important, vertical specialization is valuable for coordination and for ensuring accountability.<sup>7</sup>

The reality is that, as a worldwide church, we have one overarching mission, but we also have multiple missions represented by the variety of church ministries, parachurch ministries, independent-but-affiliated ministries, support services, and departments and institutions affiliated with the church. In a complex, func-

tionally organized bureaucracy like the church, which has limited resources for coordination, vertical authority often becomes the default approach to integration, although top leaders might personally prefer some other arrangement. Church administrators may feel stuck with few other options.

In this context, there are two fears. On the one hand, church members and pastors may fear that centralization will lead to too much top-down control, and bottom-up trust would be undermined. On the other hand, church administrators may fear that decentralization will lead toward unity—destroying independence. Both fears are well founded.

High-level administrators have been entrusted by constituents with authority to exercise a great degree of control to move the church forward. Thus, in centralized organizations, leaders near the top of the hierarchy tend to make the important decisions. Those at the front lines tend to feel left out. Decentralized organizations attempt to put key decisions closer to those most familiar with the situations, where decisions are relevant, but within the boundaries of organizational identity. But increased autonomy that results from decentralization increases the risks that some control will be sacrificed. Regardless of the mid-level structural design chosen, this tension point will still be there.

So if consolidation leads to a union of churches in a particular territory, is it a move toward greater or less centralization? From the perspective of hierarchical layers, the organization would be flattened by one level, with local church members one level closer to organizational influence over valuable resources. Top-down vertical

coordination and control would be more efficient between organizational leadership and congregational pastors. But as the commission pointed out, communication is a two-way process.

From the perspective of the local congregation and pastor, bottom-up communication might be less efficient in the sense that union of churches leadership will have a much broader span of control for managing the competing interests of the diverse set of interest groups (congregations and institutions).

Congregations and institutions within the territory of the union of churches that need financial assistance may find a larger pool of financial resources available. That's the good news. The bad news would be that the larger pool of available resources also has a correspondingly larger, more diverse group of stakeholders lined up to capture its benefits.

However, there is a more important issue to consider.

### Vertical vs. Horizontal Changes

Based on the study papers the commission produced, discussions of vertical integration and the allowance for vertical consolidations into unions of churches have dominated its work. The action at Annual Council has the potential risk of fixing the discussion even more firmly on issues related to vertical coordination.

As a church, we must become mature enough to embrace continued discussions about vertical power and authority as we move on to include other discussions about the horizontal connections that are needed. Without horizontal integration efforts, we will make slow progress toward improved flexibility. The net result will be only

marginal progress toward mission accomplishment.

Thus, let us not forget the fundamental principle that still needs to be raised in discussions about church structure: it is always at the point of organizational separation that coordination issues arise. This applies as much to points of horizontal separation of function and task as it does to the vertical separation of power.

Over the last thirty-some years, the church has developed great diversity in the horizontal division of tasks. It now has multiple specialized ministries, parachurch ministries, support services, and specialized departmental functions. One of the unintended consequences has been development of separate mental orientations regarding goals, controls, rewards, formality, and mission.

These differences make it difficult for the organization to collaborate. Strategy-critical activities become fragmented. The processes of acquiring new members, edifying the church body, connecting with communities, and educating become fragmented. This is especially true when the organization has depended primarily upon vertical coordination and control mechanisms, as well as the policies that govern vertical power over resources.

Horizontal separations between the various functional tasks and specialized work units require both vertical and horizontal integration efforts. In a changing environment, reorganized vertical integration efforts alone, such

as the union of churches, will be insufficient to help the church deal with the challenges it faces as it adapts to its environment. Such efforts might even lull it to sleep if it thinks these alone will resolve the need of the church to be responsive to the external environment. But they ignore the crucial strategic importance of horizontal linkages.

We need the commission or another group to study ways to improve horizontal integration across functions,



departments, support services, specialized ministries, and organizations that share common goals. Discussions like this offer the potential for helping us learn how different perspectives can be unified, and how we can come to agreement on our priorities. ■

### Notes and References

1. "Principles, Possibilities, and Limits of Flexibility in the Design of Seventh-day Adventist Organizational Structure" (2006), 9–11. Accessible at <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/Flexibility-Paper-October-2006.pdf](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/Flexibility-Paper-October-2006.pdf)>.

2. Although Paulsen identifies differences between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, it is unfortunate that he chose to criticize both government and industry as sometimes driven by selfishness and greed.

3. L. C. Cooper, "Reasons for Considering  
*Continued on page 78...*

with awe. Almost anything written has high status. This has to do with the history of Madagascar. Although this is a complicated and ambiguous issue, perhaps this specifically Malagasy perception of the written word and of books makes a church that puts emphasis on reading and studying the Bible particularly attractive.

**Q: What kind of feedback have you received on your book?**

**A:** It has been very well received among social anthropologists (there have been several very favorable reviews in important academic journals). And—what for me is in a way even more important—among members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Europe and the United States.

I also brought copies back to Madagascar to the Seventh-day Adventist headquarters in the capital, to university departments, and to my friends in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. They were all very pleased, especially Ranala Isaac (who was the pastor in Maroantsetra when I lived there), who was enthusiastic about the book's emphasis on study and learning.

**Q: What new project are you working on now?**

**A:** I am still working in the same region in Madagascar, though on an entirely different research project. However, I continue to live with my Adventist friends when I am there. I presently study representations of nature and nature conservation in Madagascar as well as in Switzerland. ■

*The Road to Clarity* is available from Amazon.com

**Read** Adventist reviews of the *Road to Clarity*, by Stefan Höschele, in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44 (autumn 2006), and by Rich Hanon in *Spectrum* on page 75, above.

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## Noteworthy

*Continued from page 19...*

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4. The anonymous authors of the paper on flexibility assert that no previous review of denominational structure "addressed the topic of flexibility," leading to the impression that the study team was breaking new ground. "Principles, Possibilities, and Limits of Flexibility," 2.

5. M. Ryan, "Union of Churches: An Alternative Organizational Model for the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (2006), <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/Union-of-Churches-Fifth-Draft.pdf](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/Union-of-Churches-Fifth-Draft.pdf)>.

6. W. M. Hillock, "Need for Organizational Change in the Adventist Church," *Spectrum* 4 (summer 1972):24-32; R. F. Cottrell, "The Case for an Independent North American Division," *Spectrum* 13, no. 1 (1982):2-14; G. A. Fuller, "An Independent North American Division: Current Opinion at the General Conference," *Spectrum* 13, no. 1 (1982):15-21; M. Widmer, "Changing the Way We Govern Our Church," *Adventist Review*, Apr. 27, 1995, 16-21; Gary Land, "Where Did Adventist Organizational Structure Come From?" *Spectrum* 7, no. 1 (1975): 23-27; George Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil* (Washington D.C.: *Review and Herald*, 2001); M. Moore, "North American Structure and Evangelism," *Adventist Today* 12, no. 6 (2004):18-19; B. Haloviak, "Approaches to Church Reorganization," paper presented to the Commission on World Church Organization, Cohutta Springs, Georgia, March 1993.

7. H. Mintzberg, *The Structuring of Organizations: A Synthesis of Research* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 71; H. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 7-9.

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