THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH AS A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION

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The Scope of Seventh-day Adventism

Unlike most Protestant denominations, which focused their missions in certain countries and later spun off independent national churches there, Seventh-day Adventists felt impelled to take their particular message to the whole world and to build a unified global church. The resulting organization, which is now headquartered in a suburb of Washington, D.C., was described - recently by the then world president of the church, Neal Wilson, as "next to the Roman Catholic Church,...the most centralized of fall major Christian denominations in this country" [Proctor v. General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986, 34]. Adventism's international organization is complex, as the following selection of statistics suggests:

> As of December 31, 1990, baptized church membership stood at almost 6.7 million in 182 countries. There were 31,654 organized churches, 11,626 active ordained ministers, and a total of124,900 church employees. The church operated 76 colleges and universities, 919 secondary schools, and 4,267 primary schools, with a total enrollment of almost 737,000 students; 154 hospitals and sanitariums, 71 retirement homes and orphanages, 336dispensaries and clinics; 58 publishing houses publishing in 190languages; and 28 food factories. It also operated numerous programs, ranging from "Sabbath Schools" with divisions for all age groups, through communications and public affairs and religious liberty, to the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. Contributions to the church for the year 1989-90, in US dollars, totaled almost $1.012 billion [*Annual Statistical Report*, 1990].

However, the international growth of the Adventist organizational structure has resulted in the emergence of strains and problems common among global corporations – strains which the - Adventist church has become acutely aware of in the last ten years.

Historical Background and Initial Structural Form

Seventh-day Adventism traces its roots back to the Millerite Movement of the 1840s. William Miller, a Baptist lay preacher, taught throughout upstate New York and New England that the world would end with the second coming of Christ in 1844. The failure of his prophecy brought jeers from without and disillusionment to many within the circle of his followers. Some, however, encouraged by the visions of Ellen (Harmon) White, a young woman who was soon to attain the status of a prophet, reinterpreted Miller's prophecy and went on to found Seventh-day - Adventism. The distinctive message of the new religious movement was summarized in the name it adopted: Christians should prepare for the return (advent) of Christ, which was imminent – indeed, the pre-advent judgment had begun in heaven in 1844; and all should return to the

observance of Saturday as the biblical(seventh-day) Sabbath, which was to be a mark of the faithful awaiting Christ's return.

The early Adventists were slow to organize or even take an official name – in part because of their eschatological views but also because of their disillusionment with organized religion given their treatment by their former churches. Eventually, in the early 1860s, the desire to solve the legal problem of church property ownership and to regulate ministerial credentials and salaries led to the creation of a formal organization. This had three levels: congregations, groupings of congregations into local (often state) "conferences", and an umbrella "General Conference" – a system with much in common with that of Methodism [Mustard, 208]. Although Adventists claimed that their structure was modeled on that of the New Testament church, the title - "president" accorded to their chief executive officers at both administrative levels and their selection of a "representative" system of government reflected their American origins. Nevertheless, the top-down initiative in organizing and the decision that congregations would not select their own pastors indicated that leadership would not be based locally.

At the time of initial organization there were only 3,500Adventists, all in the U.S.A., and only one Adventist-associated institution, a publishing house. As the church expanded the structural form adopted soon proved inadequate. Institutions (schools, hospitals and publishing houses) and programs (the General Sabbath School Association, the General Tract and Missionary Society, the Foreign Mission Board, and the National Religious Liberty Association, for example) multiplied, but they were usually autonomous. Even though church leaders were included among their board members, such enterprises tended to become jealously guarded fiefdoms, so that their control and relationship to the denomination were unclear. As Adventism spread overseas the necessity of all conferences relating directly to the General Conference proved inefficient and overburdened its leaders. The results were conflict, poor articulation of funds, inefficiency and, eventually, slowed expansion. Ellen White railed against the centralization of "kingly power" in the hands of a few, and advocated reorganizing the system to encourage broad consultation in decision making [*General Conference Bulletin*, 25].

Reorganization

The reorganization of 1901 created the structure that continues to the present. It made the following changes:

- it added a new geographic layer, "union conferences," whose constituency consisted of local conferences, between the latter and the General Conference. This allowed responsibility for overseeing the details of work in all parts of the world to be placed on units located nearby. It also created an "organic connection" between the various administrative levels, for It placed the presidents of units at one level on the executive committee at the next level.
- it brought the various institutions and programs under the direct control of General Conference "departments", which were also represented at the lower structural levels,

and placed the ownership of the institutions under church entities, usually their local union.

- it created an articulated financial system, where a portion of the tithe of members was channeled to unions and the General Conference, where it could be redistributed to foster the church in poor areas and to fund expansion into new countries.
- it located power at the General Conference in a large committee, which was to elect a chairman who would be the chief executive officer. However, within two months the new chairman began signing his letters with the title "president", and the General Conference session of 1903 affirmed this title and returned the position to the former method of election [Oliver,1989, 189-201]. Nevertheless, final authority in all units at all levels of the church continued to be vested, between sessions of their constituencies, in each unit's executive committee – at least in theory [Role and Function Commission, 1984, 9].

In 1913 what was tantamount to yet another administrative layer, "divisions", was established between the unions and the General Conference. While these are now technically known as - "divisions of the General Conference", and their officers are elected at the General Conference session, the latter are in fact nominated by separate caucuses of their own delegates and the divisions, in practice, operate in most respects as a separate structural level. The one major exception to this was the North American Division, encompassing the USA and Canada, which was accorded a "special relationship" with the General Conference, which means that its administration was fused with that of the General Conference to such an extent that its personnel were treated as General Conference staff and it had almost no flexibility or separate identity [*Role and Function Commission,*1984, 7]. The main reason for this situation was the fact that the great majority of General Conference income came from within the North American Division. By creating new administrative layers, the reorganization decentralized administration. At the same time, by bringing the autonomous programs and institutions under the control of departments of the General Conference and by articulating a financial system which secured the finances of the General Conference and made other units dependent on its largess, it further centralized control.

In theory, the structure continued to follow a "representative model," where power lay with the members equally, following the Protestant doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers," who delegate executive authority to the structural layers above the congregations. The officers and executive committees of each layer are chosen by delegates representing the layer immediately below. Each layer has a great deal of autonomy, dealing locally with as much as possible, with the higher levels providing consultation and coordination. Nevertheless, since the General Conference represents the whole church, it is frequently affirmed that it is "the highest authority, under God, among Seventh-day Adventists" [*Church Manual*, revised edition 1990, p.39].

In practice, the structure has proved to be representative at best only at the lowest layer. Laity are in a majority at only the constituency meetings of the local conferences, and even here it is difficult for them to exercise power because of insufficient information concerning agenda items

and instructions not to caucus in advance of meetings, the limited time available to discuss issues at meetings, the practice of bringing only one name for each position to the floor from the nominating committee, and the dominance of the union conference president as chair of the nominating committee. At higher levels clergy and then administrators are numerically dominant among delegates to constituency meetings and especially among members of nominating committees. The result is that officeholders become, to a large extent, a self-perpetuating cadre. Since delegates at one level elect an organizing committee which in turn elects a nominating committee whose task it is to choose officers and an executive committee which will later, in turn, choose delegates to the next level, the laity in the pews are thus several layers and a total of 15 steps removed from the choice of top decision-makers [Colvin, 1984]. The laity chosen as delegates and members of executive committees at levels higher than the local conference tend to be tokens who can be relied on to be cooperative.

Officers at all levels are almost all males; North Americans predominate at the General Conference, and this has also been true at the lower administrative levels until recently. Local control of administrative units is further reduced when they are not financially "self-supporting" (which includes raising the portion of the formula that must be sent on to higher structural layers), for then their officers are chosen directly by the next level up the structural pyramid.

Even though authority at the General Conference is vested in a large committee and units at different structural levels can exercise considerable freedom, presidential power can be very great, in part because the constitution does not define executive authority, setting no perimeters or counterbalances—especially if the incumbent is eager to persuade and pressure. President Wilson told me that he frequently merely informed meetings of controversial matters, rather than bringing them to a vote, for this allowed him greater flexibility of action [phone conversation, 1981].

Coordination

There are currently 11 divisions, 93 unions, and 445 conferences[1] within the worldwide Adventist structure. How are these, together with the various departments and multitude of institutions, coordinated? To what extent are there systematic global operating systems in place? An examination of the meeting calendar is enlightening, for it is at the major meetings that the influence of the General Conference, and of its president in particular, is most clearly felt.

Constitutionally, supreme authority lies with General Conference sessions. These elect General Conference and division officers and department personnel, vote changes in the *Church Manual,* the constitution, and bylaws, make other major decisions, accept reports, and commit the church, for example, to numerical growth goals. Their frequency has been reduced, over time, from annual to biennial, to quadrennial and finally, in 1975, to quinquennial, as their cost increased and power was transferred to the major meetings of the General Conference executive

[1] Or "missions" or "sections", the names accorded to units that are not self-supporting.

committee (see below). Over 2,200 delegates attended the 1990 session. The formulae governing their selection makes it unlikely that they will try to rock the boat.[2] As a further precaution, the General Conference Vice Presidents, who chair the business sessions, are not shy about trying to manipulate the outcome of any hotly debated issues. In 1990, for example, they strictly limited delegate speeches to three minutes but then allowed the outgoing president and another key official to make long, swaying speeches after which they cut off debate. Sessions have become an elaborate and expensive exercise in hype and good will aimed at maintaining unity. While the decisions of the session are binding on the world church, it usually gives rubber stamp approval to the recommendations of the major meetings of the General Conference executive committee.

Between sessions the highest authority is vested in the General Conference Executive Committee. Its membership, which stands at 365, includes the General Conference officers, their associates, department heads and associates, division officers, union presidents, heads of institutions governed by the General Conference, and media program speakers, among others. Twice yearly, at "Annual Council" and "Spring Council," division officers and many of the union presidents come in from all over the world for major meetings at which the most important issues are decided and budgets allocated. Unlike the General Conference sessions, where delegates increasingly reflect the diversity of international Adventism, these councils are dominated numerically by Americans. This is because of a travel policy which favors committee members who are close at hand and a practice of inviting other local officials, such as conference presidents. Four out of five Annual Councils and all Spring Councils are held at the headquarters of the General Conference in Maryland.

Spirited debate is common at these meetings, but the General Conference president can exercise great moral and strategic influence: Wilson several times adjourned debates which seemed to be going against him and resumed them after he had had opportunity to twist arms and when few delegates were present. Once again, decisions – other than those which must constitutionally be reviewed by a General Conference Session – are binding on the world church, and are immediately faxed to the unions so that they may be acted on.

The Executive Committee, or those members of it who are available (a quorum is only 15), meets weekly between the council meetings. However, in recent years it has acted as a rubber stamp for the decisions of the much smaller "officers meeting", which is not provided for in the constitution. A total of 85 standing committees ensure that General Conference officers and elected staff spend a considerable proportion of their time in committee meetings.

Two of the General Conference officers participate in each of the annual division sessions, which allows them considerable input at that level. The officers and departmental officials also have

[2] There are two categories of delegates: quotas chosen by the unions are “regular delegates”; General Conference and division office holders, union presidents, representatives of institutions and other General Conference nominees are “at large delegates”, who may make up as much as 40% of the total.

input to the lower layers of administration by maintaining busy travel schedules. While in their office they also interface regularly with their opposite numbers at the divisions via phone and fax machine.

Another means of ensuring control is through audits of each level carried out by auditors attached to the next level.

All units within the world church are expected to follow the procedures which are detailed in the *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*. This 548-pagevolume contains the accumulated policies adopted by General Conference Sessions and Annual Councils and is "the authoritative voice of the Church in matters relating to the administration of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in all parts of the world... [It] shall be strictly adhered to by all organizations in every part of the world field" [p.24]. Among its contents are model constitutions which units at lower levels are expected to follow closely. Similarly, "all matters pertaining to the administration of local churches both within the church and in its relationship to the higher organization, the conference" are based on the principles set out in the *Church Manual*, which only the General Conference in session has power to alter [*Working Policy,* 40].

Between General Conference Sessions and the two major annual Executive Committee meetings the authority of the General Conference over the lower level units depends primarily on shared ideals and moral persuasion – there are few mechanisms for disciplining, for example, a wayward union. In 1972 Wilson explained to a public forum on church structure one option open to church leadership: "The constituency of every union conference always includes all of the General Conference Committee members who may be present at a union conference session. If some union conference were going completely off course, the full General Conference Committee could move in at the next session and could probably swing the constituency in any direction it wanted to take it" ["Organization...," 50].

General Conference leadership has increasingly come to see the structure of the church as paralleling a corporate model. Signs of this include trademarking the name of the denomination in 1981 and moving to a giant new headquarters building in a corporate park in 1989. But many of the features that have been adopted from the corporate world – the huge book of procedures, management by objectives, considerable emphasis on quantifiable goals (growth in membership and in income), and even the pyramidal structure itself – are already outdated among - corporations, where they were found to allow too little flexibility.[3]

Current Strains

The centralized global structure has resulted in advantages for the church, such as the maintenance of unity in doctrine and program, and the creation of a flexible financial system

[3] For example, the Adventist emphasis on numerical growth during the last decade, with goals set for every unit and often consequently for every pastor, has resulted in goal displacement, as nurture of existing members has been neglected, thus distorting the overall church program.

which has allowed the General Conference to orchestrate expansion by redistributing tithes from the wealthier parts of the world church to newer and poorer segments.

However, the structure has also caused problems. This was, in part, because it has proved so resistant to change. The current structure of the denomination was set by the 1901-reorganization, with the exception of provision for the addition of divisions in 1913. In 1901 total world membership was only78,000, there were only 58 institutions of all kinds, and a total of only 1,500 church employees. The scope of the church has been transformed since then – membership stands at 6.7 million, and is projected to rise to at least 12 million by the year 2000— but the structure set at that time remains as it was. This suggests that the 1901 reorganization was very successful; but there has been mounting evidence that the vast changes in scope in recent years are now causing the structure to be "severely strained"[*Commission on Governance,* 1991, 1].

The centralized hierarchical structure has proved dangerous under totalitarian governments that want to control religious groups, such as the Communist regimes of eastern Europe, where Adventism proved especially vulnerable to manipulation. This is because the structure made it easy for the state, on finding a pastor who would cooperate with it in exchange for personal power, to take control of the whole church apparatus.(Congregationally structured denominations, such as the Baptists and Brethren, did much better under these circumstances, for there the state had to penetrate each congregation.) An especially blatant example of state control occurred in Hungary, where ties of the Adventist Union to the state were so open, being exercised through leaders whose corruption and departure from the Adventist lifestyle were so offensive that the church twice suffered major splits in spite of the knowledge that "unrecognized" groups courted persecution. Although Division leaders were well aware that these Union leaders were "not good Adventists" and that the state had a great measure of control over the church through them, and although they felt that those leading the second, more major, schism of 1975 were themselves "good Adventists" and justified in their charges, they nevertheless chose to support the official church rather than the schismatic church. They feared that government reprisals would exclude them from oversight of, or even contact with, the church in Hungary and that they could set a precedent that could undermine the hierarchical structure of the world church in many places. That is, the goals, strategies and impact of the interventions by the Division and also, ultimately, the General Conference, suggest that they gave highest priority to protecting the interests of the organization and its structure – even though that structure had rendered the Hungarian church so vulnerable. Similar splits occurred in the Soviet Union and Poland, while like attempts to manipulate the church occurred throughout Eastern Europe.

The centralized structure also hindered adaptation to local conditions. Adventism in the Third World was long a colonial church, led by foreigners who created islands of western culture around their institutions and mission stations and who related best to the American-dominated hierarchy. Local leadership developed very slowly. However, the rise of nationalism and the

withdrawal of the colonial powers, together with the rapid growth of the church in many parts of the developing world, forced changes on the church, so that nationals were appointed to union and ultimately to divisional leadership.[4] The push for greater international representation at the General Conference became strong in 1985, when Africans demanded the appointment of - "African cardinals", and moved from the floor that an African be added to the list of General Conference Vice Presidents. Their move was derailed then, but their goal was attained in 1990. At that session the two Latin divisions played a major role in removing the incumbent world president and in choosing in his stead an American who had spent most of his career in Central America. It is widely predicted that the next president will be from outside North America. Meanwhile, the gradual erosion of North American control of the General Conference has already raised the issue there of whether power should stem from financial support (where North America is still clearly dominant) or numbers (where it has been eclipsed).

The growth of the church outside of North America, to the point where only 11.4% of members are now found in its original geographic base, and the emergence of national leadership has made the General Conference leaders acutely aware of the diversity of church membership. Fear that diversity could become the basis of cleavages has led the General Conference increasingly to emphasize the importance of maintaining unity, which it tends to interpret as uniformity, and to try to strengthen the mechanisms of central control. However, the emphasis on uniformity fits poorly with the cultural diversity of the denomination. This issue was highlighted when many in the much more liberal, denomination-like, North American church, responding to the impact of the women's movement there, sought to change practice by permitting the ordination of women. This initiative was voted down first at the 1989 Annual Council and then ultimately at the 1990 General Conference Session by a Third World coalition, who were motivated not only by the conservative views of the place of women prevalent in their cultures but also by the absence of a specific biblical "thus saith the Lord" which these mostly first-generation, and therefore sectarian Adventists, felt was necessary to justify any change. The forces opposing the ordination of women were ultimately successful because they gained the support of the General Conference leadership in the name of retaining unity. Neither the church leaders nor the Third World delegates were willing to allow the North American church to have a different practice from the rest of the world church. Similarly, there is distress in Africa and New Guinea caused by imposing an American-honed policy banning polygamy on polygamous families wishing to join the church.

Adventist laity in the early generations tended to be poorly educated and subservient to the clergy. However, in recent decades the church's emphasis on education has produced a much better educated, and more independent, laity, especially in the First World. These have been rendered increasingly alienated or restive by a structural system which leaves them without a

[4] The first African division president was appointed in 1980, and the other African division achieved this status in 1985. The only division without national leadership today is the Far Eastern Division, where the process has been slowed by rivalry between the church in the various component countries.

voice in major church decisions. The General Conference leadership was dismayed when the constituencies of two of the North American unions forced the adoption of much more democratic constitutions which ignored the models in the *Working Policy* as well as their warnings.[5] The North Pacific Union constituency, for example, voted to reduce the General Conference representation among delegates at a constituency meeting to a maximum of 5%, removed the provision that the president of the North American Division would chair the nominating committee, significantly increased lay representation among constituency delegates and on the union executive committee, and reversed the direction of the flow of authority by ensuring that executive committee membership would clearly represent the local conferences. However, the greatest impact was felt when church leaders realized that significant numbers of American laity were also voting with their pocketbooks, showing that they were increasingly unwilling to bankroll the world church.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the unions in North America were also flexing their muscles, with the result that the General Conference leadership discovered that their will did not always prevail. For example, when the General Conference wanted to discipline the president of an American union following the disclosure of a financial scandal in 1981, the union committee refused to follow through. Unions have become noticeably more independent over the past decade.

The General Conference eventually responded to these challenges and to the widespread unofficial discussion of the need for restructuring by establishing a Commission on the Role and Function of Denominational Organizations. Although its report (1984) declared that unity was "basic to the nature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," and it endorsed the existing structure of the church, including the "special relationship" which kept the North American Division firmly subservient to the General Conference, its recommendation that several of the departments be combined into one and departmental staff reduced marked the beginning of a period of rapid reorganization that continues today.

A period of deepening financial stringency, which first began to be felt towards the end of the 1980s and was brought about by rapid growth among the poor in almost every part of the world church, a growing tendency of American members to divert their tithes and offerings from the common pot to specific projects of their own choosing, and the American recession, resulted in demands that the General Conference also join in the widespread economizing, with unions and conferences pressing fora greater share of the tithe dollar. Subsequently, Duane McBride, a sociologist at an Adventist university, was commissioned to survey personnel in units at lower levels and institutions in order to rate the services received from the General Conference so that those considered least useful might be cut [McBride,1990]. McBride's study found that "in many

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ways the General Conference operates like a command economy in that products and services are created on the basis of what [it considers] would be good for the church rather than on an assessment of what the church wants;" that the "structure and function of the General - Conference appears to be very amorphous – authority and responsibility are not clear," yet the emphasis is on maintaining the structure rather than on mission; that relationships are especially unclear between the North American Division and the General Conference, so that "tremendous confusion and bitterness" results. The consequence of the study was increased pressure for change, which resulted in painful cuts in the General Conference staff in the second-half of 1990, especially among departments, and the elevation of the North American Division to full division status. Deeper, unanticipated cuts in General Conference staff continued to be made in 1991 when revenues declined further, in accordance with a formula tying General Conference expenditure to tithe income from North America which was forced on the General Conference by the presidents of the American unions.

Meanwhile, yet another report – of the General Conference Commission on Governance – prepared the way for further restructuring. The General Conference President had charged the commission with the task of streamlining decision-making within the Adventist system, which had long been recognized as slow and tedious. The Annual Council of October 1991 accepted the commission's recommendations, which were described as "the most sweeping overhaul of the General Conference structure since 1901" [Johnsson, 1991, 9]. The large General Conference Executive Committee will meet four times a year instead of weekly, with most of its administrative functions passing to the new Administrative Committee, thus formalizing the committee of General Conference officers; the number of General Conference standing committees will be reduced from 85 to 21 and their average size also diminished; and each General Conference Department will be placed under the administrative authority of a general vice-president.

Thus, while the General Conference is finally, in the words of McBride, developing a consultative role and "providing an overall integration rather than daily world management" [p.12],the most recent changes will have the effect of further centralizing control within the General Conference. Departmental staff will become functionaries without the opportunity to raise broader questions about policy.

Conclusion

Kadushin (1991) argues that constant reorganization by global corporations is an indicator of internal structural fluidity and ambiguity, which are much greater because of their global scope. The Adventist church shares this experience.

Kadushin also finds that global corporations are marked by the erosion of homogeneity, because of a greater mix among managers, which makes relations more difficult and behavior less - predictable, and by status anxiety, which is related to the absence of an orderly career and

predictable roles and relationships within the organization. This is true of the Adventist church today.

In spite of their long reluctance to promote Third World nationals to administrative posts, Adventist leaders at all levels are coming increasingly to reflect the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of the membership. Moreover, women are now beginning to breach the formerly male bastions, for a sop to those disappointed over the decision to keep them ineligible for ordination is their affirmative promotion to the limited number of administrative posts that are not restricted to ordained persons.

The McBride study found that a large proportion of the General Conference staff felt "very threatened" by the attempt to have recipients evaluate services – "there was a tremendous - feeling of insecurity"; "many individuals indicated that they felt that God had called them to their roles and services and that those they served were simply not the appropriate evaluators" [1990, 2,5,3]. Furthermore, the new aggressiveness of the North American union presidents has been related to their realization that their positions no longer make them major candidates for the General Conference presidency, so that they may as well abandon their traditional subservience to the top leadership and make the most of the positions they now hold [interview].

The experience to date of this global church does not much help answer Kadushin's "unanswered question" concerning the optimum position for a global organization along the dimension of - centralization/decentralization, taking into account the resulting adaptation to local conditions, efficiency of decision-making, economies of scale, maintenance of unity, etc. While the Adventist experience suggests that a high degree of centralized control has advantages such as flexibility and unity of program, it also shows that it causes grave inefficiencies and increasing tensions, even with a shared ideology and sense of purpose, because of inability to adapt to diverse local cultures and needs, and is vulnerable to penetration by external authorities. It is not yet possible to gauge the extent to which the Adventist fear that a higher degree of decentralization would result in disunity would have been justified by experience. However, it would seem that in the near future the rapidly changing balance within the Adventist structure could provide some relevant data.

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