The Shape of Church Organisation Today

The 1901 and 1903 General Conference sessions saw the Church adopt a representative organisational form which was shaped as follows:

- 1. The basic unit is the **local church**. The local church comprises a group of believers who have been "organised" as a church and function in their community as the "body of Christ."
- 2. Local churches in a designated area belong to "the sisterhood of churches" in a **local conference**. For example, the North New South Wales Conference comprises Seventh-day Adventist Churches in a designated area of northern New South Wales, Australia. The conference is administered by a president, secretary, treasurer, and executive committee elected by representatives from the local churches at a conference session which may be held every three or five years.
- 3. Local conferences in a designated area belong to a **union conference**. Union conferences are also administered by a president, secretary, and treasurer. These officers are elected by representatives appointed for this function by the local conferences.
- 4. Union conferences around the world belong to the **General Conference** of Seventh-day Adventists with headquarters just outside Washington DC, United States. General Conference sessions are held every five years at which time General Conference administrators are elected and major doctrinal and business matters are discussed by representatives from around the world.

As mentioned above, subsequent to the 1903 General Conference session, the General Conference allocated many of its administrative tasks to General Conference Division Headquarters which were established at certain strategic locations around the world. This was done in order to facilitate the work of the Church and prevent decision-making processes from becoming too remote and cumbersome. Examples are the North American Division in Washington, the Trans-European Division in London, and the South Pacific Division in Sydney.

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been well administered over the years. Its organisational structures and institutions have served the Church adequately. It is in the best interests of the Church that a strong global organisational structure continues to facilitate the ministry and mission of the Church in the world as the Church takes seriously the commission of Christ which challenges it to take the gospel to the world. Continually we need to assess what structures best serve the Church and how these structures can continue to facilitate our mission.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church Today and Tomorrow

Barry D. Oliver

The Church Today

From its humble beginnings one hundred and fifty years ago, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has become the most widespread Protestant denomination in the world. Its commitment to a global mission has ensured its viability and continuing rapid growth. Today, almost 90% of the membership of the Church is found in what-were-once-considered

"mission lands." The strength of the Church is assured as the people of those lands become fully participating partners in its continuing missionary and organisational programs.

Indicative of the present status of the Church are these statistics for the world.[482]

Number of Churches	44,888
Membership	10,163,414
Total Active Employees	165,213
Primary Schools	4,450
Secondary and Tertiary Schools	1,140
School Enrolment	996,249
Hospitals	162
Clinics	361
Special Care Centres	102
Publishing Houses	57
Languages Printed	272
Total Tithes and Offerings	US$1,547,945,612

The Church Tomorrow

What does the future hold for the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Of course much depends on the Church itself and its ability to meet the contingencies that arise. Certainly the self identity of the Church is closely tied to its belief in the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the complete rule of God. However, while the Church keenly anticipates that event, it must continue to grapple with the reality of living in the present world and work to establish here the very kingdom that it is anticipating in consummation.

Here is a partial list of the issues that the Church should continue to work through at the beginning of this millennium and into the future.

The Growth of the Church

How is the Church going to cope with its continuing growth? As the Church proceeds into the new millennium there does not appear to be any slackening of its global expansion. If the growth rate were to continue at 8% per annum (lower than at the present time) the Church would have 55,000,000 members by 2020. This rapid growth, unless matched by a proportionate increase in funds remitted in tithe and offerings would result in massive overtaxing of already thinly distributed resources—especially since, at the present time, the growth is occurring in the developing world and there does not appear to be any prospect of that trend changing.

Diversity in the Church

As the Church continues to grow it continues to diversify. There are some beautiful pictures of unity-in-diversity in the New Testament. The image of the body is used effectively in 1 Corinthians 12-14 to describe the unique nature and function of each person who comprises the Church. Each is necessary, gifted, unique and valuable.

Yet in an imperfect world, difference can be destructive. If difference is not respected and its potential richness cultivated it can act as a chasm that cannot be bridged. In their ignorance, those who fail to respect difference only see unity in terms of uniformity. Unity may be constructive. Uniformity is always ultimately destructive. It eventually leads to rebellion.

There are many forms of diversity that must be considered by the Church. Some of the most significant are 1. Cultural and social diversity. How can the Seventh-day Adventist

Christian message be translated into different socio-cultural contexts? 2. Doctrinal diversity. The Church in the South Pacific is experiencing considerable anxiety at the time this page is being written because it appears that there are some who have not yet learned to cope with different approaches and viewpoints. Models of the past seem to be more attractive than contemporary, relevant ways of expressing the message of the gospel. 3. Methodological diversity. Just because a method of approach has worked in the past is no guarantee that the same method will keep on working into the future. The Church must continually find the most appropriate methods for living as Christ in the world in order to provide love, hope and redemption.

The Organisation of the Church

The question is how can the Church marshal its resources—financial and personal—in order to best facilitate its mission. Its organisational structures which have served it quite well over the years must continually be evaluated in order to ensure that they continue to promote and not inhibit everything that the Church is about. This question may not seem particularly significant to Mr, Mrs, or Miss Average Church Member, but believe it or not, the way in which any organisation chooses to organise itself has significant implications for those who are at the "grass roots." Implications like how your tithes and offerings are spent; whether you will have a pastor or not; whether there will be youth camps or an Avondale College; and how successful the Church is in reaching those who need to hear the gospel.

Worship

The experimentation with new worship forms will continue. Some will want to remain very conservative. Others will feel the need to throw away all traditional approaches and "re-invent the wheel" when it comes to worship. Adventists will probably need to realise that it is possible to provide different worship forms in different congregations and that people can be given some degree of choice to choose which best satisfies their needs. While that will be relatively easy in an urban environment where there are many congregations from which to choose, it is going to prove exceedingly difficult in provincial and country centres.

The Relationship between Church and Society

How is the Church going to interact with its society? Adventists have traditionally maintained a separationist approach to society. This cannot be abandoned altogether because when there is no difference there is no Church. The Church and the gospel must always challenge the society and the people who comprise it. That is the power of the gospel.

But the Church has not given sufficient attention to another model of interaction with its society. This model is also taught in the New Testament, especially by Christ himself. By word and deed he emphasised that the Church was to be found *in* society, *with* the people, serving and loving and healing and saving. The Church will never be salt and light while it remains in a fortress of its own making, cut off from the very world it is to serve and reach. "For God so loved *the world*." Can the Church do any less? For the sake of Christ and the salvation of his people we are to incarnate ourselves in the world as authentic Christians, following his example in order to bring the world to him. And even if the world does not respond, he still calls us to love and care.

You and Your Church Tomorrow

There are many more issues that the Church is going to have to address in the early years of this new millennium. It will not be easy to do. There will be those who are not willing to "make the hard yards." They will prefer to sink into comfortable irrelevance and certain redundancy. They will be in the Church but have no idea how to experience the power and freedom of the gospel.

Discussion Questions
1. What do you think will be the big issues that Adventists will have to deal with in the future?
2. Some Adventists have retreated to what they call "historic Adventism." Is there that kind of uniformity in Adventism's past? Are there dangers in such a perspective?

There will be others who will put everything into the "too hard basket," opt out of the Church and take the easy road. I cannot stop you if that is your choice. But I just have one question. How ever in the world are you going to deal with the crises of life when they hit you between the eyes? What will you have to fall back on? Christianity does not give you immunity from crisis but it certainly equips you to deal with it and gives you a loving community to support you through it.

And then there will be those who continue to struggle with the issues. These are the people who are prepared to engage life to the full with its defeats and struggles. These are the people who internalise their faith and find it at work in every fibre of their being. They grapple with things like gender issues, ethical issues, the role and function of inspired writings, the impact of technology and science on the Christian, and a thousand other things that we may know nothing of as yet. Life as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian can be exciting stuff if you are willing to get your teeth into it and get out of the spectator mentality that we are being conditioned into by just about every mass medium that you care to name.

Hugh Mackay has written that the most pervasive characteristic of Australian society in the 90s is the rapid rate of change.[483] People everywhere are desperate to come to terms with a world that is like child's play-dough in their hands. They and it are being pushed around, shaped by forces that seem totally out of their control. They crave institutions which offer solidity and permanence. They want security and anchor points in their lives. Christians expect the Church to give them what they desperately need in a world like this—and the Church should provide some of that security.

But there is a problem here. The Church is subject to exactly the same forces that shape us all. We are the Church—the Church at the start of the third millennium. We have not been called to be God's voice in the 60s, 70s, 80s or even the 90s despite the fact that it appears that some of us wish we could wake up tomorrow and, to our delight, find that it is 1954 all over again! We cannot live in the past. God must speak in the present and he has chosen to reach the world through us—in the new millennium!

The only solution is for us to come to grips with the issues that confront us and find solutions which enable us to advance with integrity and solidarity. Solutions are not found be burying our heads in the sand or by retreating to antiquated theological and practical models which are no longer appropriate. The genius of Seventh-day Adventism has always been its commitment to "present truth." *That is, truth that works and is relevant in the present*. If ever there was a time when the Church needed to maintain its quest for present truth it is today. The alternative is redundancy, antiquated curiosity and death. That alternative is not an option given the commitment to mission that has always characterised this Church—us!