Political reality and the Holy Spirit:

when change confronts the Church

Robert K. McIver

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is changing. As it grows and as the world around it changes, it too must change. One interesting change taking place in several places around the world is that some conferences, unions, and divisions are in the process of incorporating a series of limited liability companies that will carry out much of the Church's administrative function.

With change comes opportunity and danger. Change also makes us think about what is important about our Church. Are there things we should not change? Are there things we should change?

In this article, I plan to approach these questions by looking at two aspects of Church: first, political realities, and then the leading of the Holy Spirit. Toward the end we will come back to the issue of limited liability companies.



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Business and politics in the Church?

In recent years I have come to a surprising conclusion: our Church governs itself more like a political party than like a business. To point out this reality is not to say that the Church must be sheltered from the kinds of realities that dominate the decision making processes of business: It must raise funds to conduct its activities and act with financial probity in the best allocation of these funds to achieve its goals. Yet there are many decisions that would have had a different outcome in a business world.

Take one, albeit rather sensitive, example: small churches.

Despite howls of protest, banks spent much of the 1990 decade shutting down many branches in small towns all across Australia. There were good business reasons for this—both population and business activity have been moving, especially from the country to the larger cities. Technology has changed in such a way that many banking services can be delivered without keeping open expensive and unprofitable branches. That these closures had a devastating effect on towns might be unfortunate, but if you were a business or a bank, these considerations would not be enough to overcome business considerations. And so the branches closed.

The same trends that have caused the banks to close these branches have also had a serious impact on the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has a strong presence in regional Australia. Yet only a handful of churches have been closed down because of them. Certainly, the population trends and their fallout are felt in many of the local churches. While there are some exceptions, many country churches are growing smaller,[1] and like the population of the towns that they are found in, their membership is aging.

This impacts local churches at many levels. The church knows it is shrinking, and this affects the morale not only of the members but also of the pastors who find themselves looking after such congregations. With shrinking membership, and with the remaining members earning less as more of them retire, the tithe and offering base is eroding. Many of these churches cannot afford a fraction of a pastor, and the scattered nature of the Australian population places a physical limit on how many of these churches can be maintained by one pastor.

If the Church were a business, these inefficient and economically nonviable small local churches would all be quickly closed, especially those located in cities. The pastors and other human resources associated with running these churches could then be diverted to the areas of population growth where local churches are flourishing, and where there is an economic base on which to further expand the Church.

Yet hardly one local church has been

closed. Nor am I advocating it! The Church has a mission to the whole world and needs to keep a presence in as many places as possible, although there is a need to think seriously about how the future pastoral needs of these churches will be met.

There will be need for more volunteers and for more support of local church leadership that must continue without the presence of even a part-time pastor. Economic realities will see to that. Yet it will not be an easy process, and over time, some small churches will not survive.

Political reality and church organization

Why has such an economically obvious thing as closing nonviable small churches not happened? Because the Adventist Church makes its decisions on grounds other than pure economics. The Church is actually a politically driven organization.

Is this a good or a bad thing? There is something a bit distasteful about politics. It is hard to feel comfortable dealing with the kinds of compromises that are politically necessary if one is fully devoted to following the truth whatever the cost.

Yet our modern distaste is nothing compared with the outright suspicion of any church organization felt by the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And rightly so, in their case, because most of them had been disfellowshipped from existing churches for following their own conscience. Yet practical considerations led the Church to organize formally and legally. Ministers were not getting paid and had to take on other full time work. The church lost buildings constructed at considerable sacrifice, but which had been built on land owned by individuals who became disgruntled.

The pioneer church had to organize, but they did so reluctantly and with great suspicion of all church organization, especially centralized organization. An example of this suspicion is revealed in the crucial decision as to who is or is not a Seventh-day Adventist. This authority was given to the local church, and there it has remained.

All the structures of the church have been carefully designed so that there are balances between the competing interests of the different parts of the Church, and so that no one individual has too much power. This means that while the local church has a leader, usually a pastor, it is the business session of the local church that has the authority to add and drop names from the church roll and to act in major financial and other matters.

Local churches are grouped together in a sisterhood of churches called a conference. They send representatives to a conference session, where they elect conference officers and departmental directors, and an executive committee. Usually, these elections take place every three or four years, but under special circumstances, the local churches can call a special session and vote in a new set of leaders.

Power is shared in a very interesting way in the conference itself. There are three officers: president, secretary, and treasurer, although sometimes for economic reasons, one person takes on the combined secretary-treasurer role. Each of these officers ultimately answers to the executive committee, not to the president. While the president probably has the most actual power because he chairs the executive committee, he cannot do anything if the financial officer will not release the funds, nor can this happen unless it is within the budget set by the executive committee.

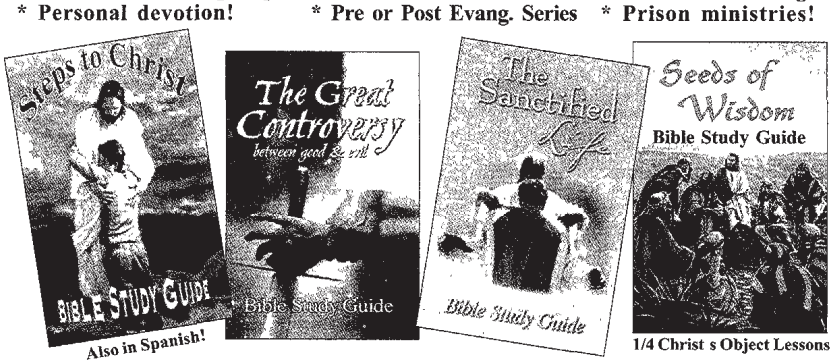
At the same time, the power of the executive committee is more limited than is usual in other management structures because the executive committee does not hire the president, although under certain circumstances, they can remove a president from office and call a special conference session to elect a new one, or re-elect the one recently deposed.

There is a balance of power between the conference and the local churches. Tithe is centralized at the conference level, which enables the Church to act strategically, which is a good thing. It is the conference, not the local church, that employs the pastors and other church leaders, and decides where they may best be used.

Of course, in the conference session, the various groupings of local

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churches and other institutions of the church ensure that they are represented in some way on the executive committee. The conference has other powers, although the most important power, the power to admit or eject a local church from the sisterhood of churches, remains vested in the conference session.

Representation on the "upper" levels

A sisterhood of conferences makes up a union, and for historical reasons, unions have been for some time the important administrative building blocks of the Church. Together they make up the General Conference.

At each level—conference, union, division, and General Conference, the Church runs sessions made up of representatives from lower levels and various of the relevant church institutions. These sessions elect presidents, secretaries, treasurers, and executive committees, who must work together to run that level of the church.

Each level is somewhat independent of the level above it—for example, the division or union cannot replace any local conference president without calling a special session of the conference. Nor can the constitution of a conference, for example, be changed without the vote of the conference in session. The conference and union executive committees can make their independent recommendations to their sessions, but only the conference session has the right to change its constitution, and that requires a two-thirds majority vote.

The only real power that exists is to exclude a conference, union, or division from the sisterhood of conferences, unions, or divisions.[2] I am unaware that this has happened in practice, though some conferences have come close, and there have been a couple of notable examples of conferences that have been lost to the church.

In summary so far, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is designed so that a significant number of people need to agree on something before anything is done. It is, in other words, a political organization. And by and large, I am happy with this.

Saying it is a political organization means that large numbers of people have input into important decisions, which is a good thing. It can be very frustrating at times, but on the whole, we would need to be very worried if we lost this kind of balance of power in the way we do business.

EVEN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH . . . NEEDED SOME LARGER DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES THAT EXTENDED BEYOND THE LOCAL CHURCH.

But where is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit has not been mentioned in all that has been written thus far. This is in dramatic contrast with the description of the work of the early Church found in the book of Acts. The actions of the apostles were decided not by a committee but because they, and the early believers around them, received power from the Holy Spirit and became witnesses to the whole world (Acts 1:8).

Peter spoke to the rulers, elders, and teachers of the law because he was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:8). Leaders were chosen because they were known to be full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3-5). The Spirit led Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:29). During a time of "peace," the Church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit and grew in numbers (Acts 9:31).

The Spirit led Peter to Cornelius the centurion and his family (Acts 10:19), and, perhaps most importantly, the Spirit asked that Barnabas and Saul (Paul) be set aside for the work to which the Spirit called them (Acts 13:2). Paul's missionary journeys were directed quite specifically by the Spirit on important occasions (e.g., Acts 16:6-10). And this is but a selection of the occasions that the Spirit is said to be active in the early Church in Acts.[3]

Yet that is not quite the whole story. Disputes can arise even between Spirit-led believers, and even between Spirit-led leaders. Paul and Barnabas had a falling out over whether John-Mark should accompany them on a trip. The dispute was fierce enough that the two thereafter went their separate ways (Acts 15:36-40).

This dispute, between individuals, was apparently quickly settled, but there is one major dispute that involved the whole Church. The issue was whether a Christian convert should be circumcised. This was an important matter, because at stake was whether or not Christianity would always remain a subgroup of Judaism.

"No small dissension and debate" arose between Paul and Barnabas and those who advocated circumcision for converts, so much so, it was decided that the dispute needed to go to Jerusalem and be heard by the "apostles and elders" (Acts 15:1-3). After much discussion, a decision was made on how to deal with the matter "with the consent of the whole church" (Acts 15:22).

Thus is revealed another aspect of the way the early Church organized itself—there was strong local leadership, but larger matters were brought before the whole body of the Church. Furthermore, we have, appearing beside the apostles, those unique companions of Jesus: a group of elders.

Paul (and Barnabas) appointed elders in the new local churches they established (Acts 14:23), and alongside the elders, deacons were likewise appointed (Acts 6:1-7). The appointment of such individuals became

commonplace in the various Christian communities. Paul even goes so far as to give instructions about the type of persons that might be considered for the tasks (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).[4]

Most likely, the early Church took over the way a synagogue was organized—with most decisions being made by a board of elders. Indeed, James 2:2 even calls a gathering of Christians a synagogue. Thus, in the New Testament, we have a system of local congregations, loosely organized and run internally, but with the occasional need to send delegates to a general meeting to discuss matters that could not be resolved at the local level.

It was along these lines that the early Adventists organized themselves. The local churches were very strong and had a fair amount of independence so that the Spirit might freely lead in their activities. Yet there were some functions best located at a "higher" level.

Even the New Testament Church, as strongly led by the Holy Spirit as it was, needed some larger decision-making processes that extended beyond the local church. Such decisions were made with wide consultation and under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

It is clear and deeply significant that in the earlier discussion room needs to be made about the realities of Church politics and organization, for the activity of the Holy Spirit. Ideally, each individual who is part of the consultative process will be led by the Spirit, which will guide the resultant outcomes.

What is driving the Australian Church to incorporate?

What does this have to do with the opening statement of this article that tells of a desire, in some locations, for the Church to "incorporate a series of limited liability companies?"

A number of factors have led parts of the Adventist Church to the place where it is inevitable that they will set up a number of companies to carry out significant elements of its operations. Two stand out as very important.

One is the kind of litigation that has been plaguing the American Catholic Church over sexual-abuse cases, many of which date back a number of years. This and other liability matters create the possibility that, without incorporating the various Church entities, an adverse court decision could cost the Church a significant amount of its assets, and that this would affect more than just the local school or local church in which it took place.

The second most important reason for the felt need to incorporate is government requirements. One of the state governments in Australia, for example, has insisted on incorporation of the Adventist school system in that state as a requirement for receiving any state funds. Similar pressures exist in the area of nursing homes for the aged.

There are other reasons motivating this sort of incorporation, not the least of which is the fact that because of our unincorporated state, there are an increasing number of cases before the courts claiming damages from accidents and the like that name each member of a conference executive committee in the court action.

Thus it is that much of the time and energy of the leadership of the Australian Adventist Church is being devoted to the matter of turning many of its various components into companies limited by guarantee. There are undoubted benefits to this process, but also this danger: that in doing so the Church will adopt a business model of governance.

It is possible to structure these corporations in a way that closely mirrors the excellent model that we have developed for Church organization, and it is important that all involved in the process remain vigilant in ensuring that this is the case.

Many of the same matters that are forcing the Australian Church to incorporate are also true in other countries of the world Church. Each country has slightly different laws, traditions of governance, and even local church traditions.

In every case it will be important to keep what is good about the current structure of Church governance: that power resides at the lowest level of Church organization, and that any major decisions are made only after wide consultation.

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church will change. This is inevitable. But in doing so, it must take care to maintain those elements of its current structure and practice that serve it best: (1) We need to ensure that important decisions are made only after widespread consultation; and (2) we need to allow much freedom of action so that the Holy Spirit can still act to guide in both the lives of the individual members and also in the movement as a whole.

Both of these considerations mean that close attention needs to be given to what powers are given to higher administrative structures. They need enough power to allow the Church to coordinate its activities in pursuing its worldwide mission. But this power needs to be limited so that important decisions are only taken after widespread consultation, and so that enough freedom of action is left at each level of the Church's activities thus allowing the leading of the Holy Spirit. ■

1 One of the most successful pastors in my present conference spoke to me of his time in a church in a medium-sized center of population. He needed to baptize 10 to 15 new members a year just to keep the church numbers steady at about 120 attending each week. Some died, some moved away, and some stopped coming. Ten to fifteen new members out of a shrinking town population that has had a long-term Adventist presence are not easy to find, and it is the rare pastor that is able to do this.

2 The Australian Church has a holding company in which all the properties of the church are placed. This means that when a church or conference or union is placed outside the sisterhood of churches, they lose title to all their properties, which remain with the parent Church. If such arrangements had been in place, the Church would not have lost Battle Creek Sanitarium and perhaps the Kellogg's factory during the Kellogg Crisis of 1903–1907.

3 The word "Spirit" is found in 61 separate verses in Acts.

4 The term overseer/bishop (*episkopos*) used in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 appears to be synonymous with the term elder (*presbuteros*) used in Titus 1:5-9.