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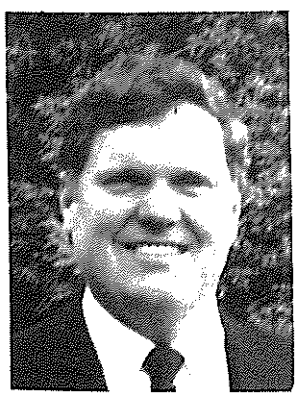
Ellen White and Organisational structure in the Church

by Barry D. Oliver

Ellen White was committed to the need for sound principles of organisation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to facilitate its mission. She well knew that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had arisen and grown on the strength of a sense of divine providence which laid down that the three angels' messages and a worldwide missionary enterprise be the foci of attention for the fledgling organisation. Organisational structures were needed which would further, rather than inhibit, that vital sense of destiny and mission.

However, despite her profound sense of the need for thorough church organisation, at no time did Ellen White prescribe any specific form of organisation which was to be definitive everywhere for all time. She simply did not tell the church precisely how it was to organise itself. That task she left to the corporate wisdom of the Church. Recent research has demonstrated that, neither in the years leading up to organisation in the early 1860s nor in the years prior to reorganisation in the early 1900s, did Ellen White prescribe specific structures.

As well, she was open to flexibility and adaptation of those organisational forms in response to changing conditions. For example, soon after the General Conference session of 1901, Ellen White wrote to A.G. Daniells, the newly elected president of the General Conference,



After completing a theology degree at Avondale College, Dr Barry Oliver went on to postgraduate studies through Andrews University. He has served as pastor/evangelist and mission president, and presently lectures at Avondale College in ministry and mission.

> Ought we consider changing church structures approved long ago under prophetic guidance?

regarding the work among the 'coloured people' in the South. She admonished Daniells to be flexible in his administration because of the unique needs of the South. The church was not to become 'narrow' and confined by 'regular lines'. Different methods of organisation and approach were necessary in culturally diverse situations. For administration to be tied to an inflexible predetermined policy which could not adapt to diverse cultural and sociological needs was, for Ellen White, an abuse of administrative prerogative.

In no uncertain terms, Ellen White instructed the church when changes were needed. On the day before the official opening of the 1901 General Conference session, she declared, "God wants a change...right here...right now".[1] The following day, when reiterating the concerns which she had already communicated, she added, 'according to the light that has been given me — **and just how it is to be accomplished I cannot say** — greater strength must be brought into the managing force of the Conference'.[2] She called for change and flexibility. That call was not accompanied by a statement that it was her prerogative or intention to prescribe unchangeable structural forms. In fact, for her to do so would be a fundamental contradiction of her desire to permit continuous reassessment of those structures in order that mission be enhanced.

It is therefore inappropriate for us to use statements from Ellen White as if to imply that current organisational structures in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are inflexible. In this brief article it is not possible to look at every statement she made with reference to organisation. However, we shall briefly look at one of her most comprehensive statements on the matter of organisa-

tion—a statement the context of which readily demonstrates that Ellen White was committed to the need for sound organisational principles in the church, one of which was the need for flexibility and the possibility of change, but that she did not dictate form.

'At no time did Ellen White prescribe any form of organisation which was to be definitive everywhere for all time'

In late 1892, Ellen White wrote from Australia to the General Conference in session. Her letter was read to the delegates by O.A. Olsen, president of the General Conference. It runs as follows:

> We had a hard struggle in establishing organisation. Notwithstanding that the Lord gave testimony after testimony upon this point, the opposition was strong, and it had to be met again and again. But we knew that the Lord God of Israel was leading us, and guiding by His providence. We engaged in the work of organisation and marked prosperity attended the advance movement... The system of organisation has proved a grand success... As we have advanced our system of organisation has proved effectual.
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> In some parts of the work, it is true, the machinery has been made too complicated; especially has this been the case in the tract and missionary work; the multiplication of rules and regulations made is needlessly burdensome. An effort should be made to simplify the work, so as to avoid all needless labour and perplexity.
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> The business of our Conference sessions has sometimes been burdened down with propositions and resolutions that were not at all essential, and that would never have been presented if the sons and daughters of God had been walking carefully and prayerfully before Him. The fewer rules and regulations that we can have, the better will be the effect in the end. When they are made, let them be carefully considered and, if wise, let it be seen that they mean something, and are not to become a dead letter. Do not, however, encumber any branch of the work with unnecessary, burdensome restrictions and the inventions of men. In this period of the world's history with the vast work that is before us, we need to observe the greatest simplicity, and the work will be stronger for its simplicity.
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> Let none entertain the thought, however, that we can dispense with organisation. It has cost us much study, and many prayers for wisdom that we know God has answered, to erect this structure. It has been built up by His direction, through much sacrifice and conflict. Let none of our brethren be so deceived as to attempt to tear it down, for you will thus bring in a condition of things that you do not dream of. **In the name of the Lord, I declare to you that it is to stand strengthened, established, and settled.** At God's command, "Go forward", we advanced when the difficulties to be surmounted made the advance seem impossible. We know how much it has cost to work out God's plans in the past, which have made us as a people what we are. Then let everyone be exceedingly careful not to unsettle minds in regard to those things that God has ordained for our prosperity and success in advancing his cause.[3]

This statement is obviously one of very strong support for the need for organisation and the 'system of organisation' operative in the church at the time of her writing. But please note the time of writing. Ellen White wrote these words only nine years before the major reorganisation of 1901—1903 when union conferences were introduced and the auxiliary organisations were brought under the umbrella of the Executive Committee of the General Committee of the General Conference as departments. Obviously, she did not intend that strong approval of the principles of organisation, should preclude later changes when contingencies in the context of the world mission of the church made change desirable.

We ought not to use this statement, or others like it, in support of rigid organisational structures in the church, for two reasons: First, this statement was written before the very structures which some attempt to set in concrete were themselves in place; second, in Ellen White's own mind her words did not preclude change in those structures. She could not have been saying that changes in the number of levels of organisation, changes in the relationships between the organisation and institutions and departments, and changes in the composition of key committees could not occur, because all of these did occur just a few years later, not only with her approval, but at her instigation. Having written these words in 1892 she remained an active proponent of change right through until the General Conference in 1901, and even after that session.[4]

Ellen White, a founder and loyal supporter of the Seventh-day Adventist Church recognised the need for sound organisation and described broad principles upon which an effective organisation could be built. Her primary goal, however, was the furthering of the mission of the church. When structures ceased to facilitate and, instead, inhibited that objective, they were seen by her to be in need of change. At no time, however, did she attempt to dictate a specific form for those changes. Nor did she appear to have demanded or supported the absolute necessity of uniformity in structure. She was committed to unity in diversity. If ever the church comes to the place where maintenance of specific structural forms becomes more important than facilitation of its

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mission, then we are on dangerous ground, indeed. Perhaps, we who have attempted to interpret her intentions with regard to organisation have been so careful to strain out the gnat that we have altogether missed the camel. ○

References

1. MS 43a, 1901.
2. *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, 25 (Emphasis supplied).
3. *Ibid*, 1893, 20—25 (Emphasis supplied)
4. A similar perspective must be brought to bear on a statement that she made in 1899. At that time she said that the features of the work were to remain settled (Ellen G. White, "The Work For this Time", MS 3, 1899). With reorganisation only two years away she could not have been referring to specific forms of organisation. She was, at that time, painfully aware of the inadequacy of the structures which were in existence at the General Conference. She was concerned with principle rather than form. In fact, careful consideration of the context of her statement makes it apparent that organisation was not her primary focus in this case at all. She was more concerned with the foundational doctrines of the church. Contention that she was discussing organisational structures can only be inferred from the text and not affirmed with certainty.

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The union president as Power broker

by Warren B. Grubb

> Regularly holding positions on nominating committees which appoint officers at all conference levels, union presidents exercise considerable power

The topic I have been invited to address may at first glance appear to be negative. There is little doubt that the union president has a lot of influence in church affairs. In the church system, as well as in outside organisations and governments, influential people are regarded as powerful people, and power, because it is often abused, is frequently viewed with suspicion.

For the average church local member, the role of the union president is most obvious at a conference session. Here he presides over the session and chairs the selection and nominating committees. His role on the nominating committees can be, and has been, viewed as influencing the committee in the recommendations it makes. How much a chairman 'guides' or influences a committee depends on the nature of the chairman and how compliant are the members of the committee. There is a perception that a good union president will be able to ensure the effectiveness of his union by guiding in the selection of local conference officers. Such perceptions are not unique to our church. It is generally perceived that successful leaders gather around them high quality personnel, while unsuccessful leaders are self-interested, remote from their constituency and the needs of their organisation, are autocratic and attract around them sycophants. Although the same may be said of church leaders, we need to remember that Christian commitment does add an extra dimension.

Today we have a constituency which is much more aware of issues and which is unwilling to be manipulat-

Professor Warren Grubb studied at the University of Western Australia (B.Sc.Hons; Ph.D.) and went on to lecture there in the Department of Microbiology. He is presently a Professor in Microbiology at Curtin University of Technology and acting head of the School of Medical Technology. He is committed to his church, presently serving as senior elder of the Mount Lawley Church in Western Australia and as a member of the Trans-Australia Union Conference Executive Committee.