Time for a Change?

by Barry Oliver

On the day before the official opening of the 1901 General Conference session Ellen White made it abundantly clear that it was time for the Church to change its outmoded organisational structures. Speaking to the assembled leaders of the General Conference she declared, "God wants a change... right here...right now."[1] With Arthur G. Daniells, who was to be elected as General Conference President at that session, and her son Willie C. White, she had just returned from a period of "missionary service" in the antipodes—Australia and New Zealand. There they had been largely responsible for pioneering a daring experiment in organisational reform. To better serve the mission of the church, the Australasian Union Conference had been formed. That experiment was so successful that the union conference model born in the South Pacific was adopted at the General Conference session of 1901, and together with other innovations which were introduced at that General Conference session, has been the model in place ever since. Unions continue to be the "building blocks' of the General Conference.

Of course, while fully supportive of the need for change, and ultimately of the structural model that was adopted, Ellen White did not see it as her duty to prescribe the specifics of the model. On the opening day of the session she reiterated the concerns which she had communicated in no uncertain terms on the previous day and 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] Her insight into the need for change did not dictate a specific structural form which would never need refinement and adjustment In fact, to do so would have been a fundamental contradiction of her desire to permit continuous reassessment of those structures in order that mission be enhanced.[3]

One hundred years have passed and we no longer have the benefit of her presence and active counsel. However, in the mind of many strongly supportive lay and pastoral leaders, including an increasing number of leaders in the Divisions and General Conference, there is a growing conviction that if she were still with us in person, her counsel may well be very similar to that which she gave in the Battle Creek College library in 1901.

A Time for Change?

One does not have to delve far into denominational history of the twentieth century to realise that there has been a reluctance to change our organisational structures. While there may have been continuous adjustments and much fine-tuning, the macro structures are fundamentally those that were put in place in the early years of the twentieth century. Some reasons why there has been reluctance to change include:

1. The perception and reality that the organisational structures have served the church well as it has expanded around the world.

2. The conviction of many that the form of organisation that we have is divinely inspired and that we do not have a mandate to tamper with it.

3. A fear of the unknown. The security of the status quo given the success the church has experienced is a powerful argument against change.

4. Failure to recognise diversity.

On the other hand there have been those who seem to give the impression that organisational change will be a cure-all. That is a delusion. The greatest change needed in this church is the change that takes place in every one of us every day as we submit ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ and are revived and renewed by his saving blood and mighty power and filled with the Holy Spirit. That is the change that can happen and should happen every day for all of us. And if it happens for all of us, it happens for the Church. We are the Church.



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Despite the obvious danger of erring either on the side of ultra conservatism or on the side of ill-considered reactionism, there is a growing consensus within the church that it is time for change. Church leadership in the Division, the Unions and the Conferences are committed to working through a process which will be constructive for the Church, which will facilitate well-considered dialogue and input from the Church at large and which will bring about needed changes in the way we express ourselves organisationally as the Church.

Initiatives of the South Pacific Division

In order to bring greater efficiency into the work of our Church in the South Pacific, the Division has taken a number of initiatives. It is anticipated that these proposals will be brought to the Division Executive Committee for consideration during 1999 and, if approved, implemented no later than the Division session next year

1. Centralised accounting.

A representative group is working to bring a proposal to the mid-year executive committee meetings which it anticipates will bring many efficiencies and cost savings into the accounting work of church entities in Australia and New Zealand. Wherever practical, accounting functions will be centralised. Entities will retain decision-making prerogative. It is unequivocal that there will be no diminution of the rights of conferences, schools and institutions. In addition, this proposal will include additional support for local church treasurers and address changing giving patterns and methods in the church and society as we enter the twenty-first century. This is an exciting initiative and one that should be doable whether or not any organisational restructure is deemed desirable. It will result in considerable cost-saving for the Church.

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2. Realignment of Union Territories

An Organisational Restructing Working Party has been meeting during 1998 and in the early months of 1999 with a view to preparing a recommendation that Union boundaries in the South Pacific Division be realigned and that the number of Unions be reduced. The final stages of the work of this committee have involved considerable work in comparative cost projections to ascertain if the recommendations that are being considered by the group do result in significant savings for the Church. Of course, it should be born in mind that cost savings are not the only factor that should be considered. If Union boundaries are to be realigned or the number of Unions reduced, the Church must be confident that optimum service is being provided to the various constituencies that are cared for by each Union. Within a very short time the details of the proposal will be available to the Church for analysis and comment.

3. The Shape and Role of Departments

Another task assigned to the Organisational Restructuring Working Party has been that of carefully examining the role of the Departments of the Church such as Personal Ministries, Sabbath School, Youth, Family Ministries, Health, Stewardship, Childrens' Ministries, Womens' Ministries, Ministerial, Communication, Religious Liberty, etc. The question that is being asked is, if the church needs these departments, how can they best be positioned in order to serve the mission of the church and deliver the best service to local churches. The committee has been encouraged to "think outside the square." Just because things have been done in a certain way, that in itself is no guarantee that they should continue to be done in that way. In fact, that may well be the

very reason why innovation should be considered. The time has long gone when we can afford to preserve the status quo simply because it is the status quo. Of course, having said that, there may be some very good reasons why the present order of things should continue. Whichever is the case, the committee will bring its recommendations to the executive committee of the Division and wide input will be sought from the Church at large in order to do what is best.

4. Education Review Process

While the above-mentioned review process has been proceeding, an education review process has also been in progress. Again, it is anticipated that this review will be completed very shortly so that a report and recommendations can be presented to the Executive Committee at its mid-year meetings. This review process has many objectives. Probably one of the most important objectives of this group has been to find ways to maximise appropriate funding from government and other sources. Another objective has been to provide some guidance as to how local churches may be relieved of some of the heavy financial burden that they have been carrying in order to support their schools. Seventh-day Adventists have a remarkable track record of sacrificial support for their school system.

Conclusion

In order to continue to be all that God has called us to be and in order to fulfil the mission that He has given to us, we need to be prepared to make necessary and appropriate changes. As to the shape of those changes we will not all see eye-to eye. Nor will we necessarily agree on the speed with which those changes take place. By its very nature the church is a conservative organisation when it comes to change—and so it should be.

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But be assured that the administrative team of the South Pacific Division is committed to listening to the Church and to facilitating dialogue which will be constructive and strengthen the ability of the Church to be a vibrant, healthy and growing community in the twenty-first century. And just maybe, the innovations pioneered in the South Pacific will again be a model for the world church—one hundred years closer to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

End Notes

[1] "Talk of Mrs E. G. White, before Representative Brethren, In the College Library, April 1, 1901, 2:30 P.M.," MS 43a, 1901. This manuscript together with MS 43, an edited edition of Ellen White's speech is available in the Ellen G. White Research Centre Branch Office at Avondale College. The author commends to the careful student a thorough reading of these manuscripts.

[2] *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, 25 (emphasis supplied). Bulletins which report on General Conference sessions are available at the Ellen G. White Research Centre at Avondale College.

[3] Please refer to an earlier article by the auther, "Ellen White and Church Organisational Structure," in *Adventist Professional,* 1/3(1989), 17-18. Those interested may also refer to a thorough study of reorganisation in Barry D. Oliver, (1989) *SDA Organisational Structure: Past Present and Future*, Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.✿

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH