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# **The church:** What is it? How does it work?

While president of the South Pacific Division, I was visiting a church on a Sabbath morning. I thoroughly enjoyed my time of worship, study, and fellowship. We had an excellent Sabbath School lesson. The music was special, and the involvement of people from the various age groups and ethnic backgrounds within the congregation was a foretaste of heaven. I was greatly blessed, and encouraged, by my brief time there.

But something occurred after the Sabbath morning services that has caused me unease since. The pastor and I were chatting over lunch. I commented on how much I had been blessed by my visit. I had been warmly welcomed at the door; several people, young and old, had chatted with me about a range of topics. One person even lent me their Sabbath School lesson when they discovered that, due to my travels, I had not been able to get one for myself as yet (it was the beginning of a new quarter). I noted that the church was comfortably full.

"But not as full as usual," the pastor replied.

"Is that so," I responded. "Was something else happening?"

The pastor then hesitated. His head went down just a little as he said, "No, nothing else. It's just that we have some members who stayed away today because the division president was the preacher, and on principle, they do not want to listen to anyone who is an administrator in the church."

## Reality check

Even as I pen these words, I am deeply saddened. I did not enquire and do not know who these church members were. I do not know whether they know me personally or not, and thus I am not aware of anything of a personal nature that would have caused such a reaction. I did get the impression, however, that they may well have had a problem with an administrative decision that had been made somewhere in the organizational structure of the church, and that the problem had loomed so large in their minds that their absence was a response to whatever decision it was.

We all experience occasions when we find ourselves in disagreement with decisions that have been made. This happens in the context of our employment, family, and church—whenever there is an established relationship between two or more people. We do not live in a perfect world. We are not perfect, and because we make up the church, it is not perfect either. But we do serve a perfectly gracious God who can transform our imperfect decisions into instruments of the outworking of His will and of His purpose as we together commit ourselves and our decision-making processes to Him. Maturity and Christian grace demand that we live together as the sons and daughters of God. I am not advocating an abrogation of accountability, lack of integrity, or an attitude of slackness. I am simply saying that though we will not always agree with every decision, we can live together in harmony nonetheless.

Over the years I have discovered, both in my own reactions and in those of others, that one reason why we may not agree with a particular decision is that we do not understand the context in which it had to be made. We do not necessarily have all the information available to those who had to make the decision. We all see reality through our own perspective; our own perspective is, therefore, reality for us. The complete picture may be very different.

## The purpose of the church

This is certainly the case with the church and the decisions that are made in the day-to-day operations of the church. We find it really a challenging task to grasp the reality of our church currently and understand its complexity. Yes, salvation by faith in Jesus Christ is simple, a personal transaction between the believer and Christ. But as soon as that vertical transaction is experienced by more than one person and a horizontal connection forms, you have the beginnings of a reality that Christ called the "church." By virtue of

His saving actions, He Himself founded it. There is no such thing as one who believes in Christ who is not compelled to enter into a relationship with other believers. Such, in its most elementary form, we call "the church."

Of course, the church is far more than this, and I think that one of the things we need to do, as Seventh-day Adventists, seems to be to have a good hard look at the purpose and nature of the church. I fear that we are in danger of losing our identity as a prophetic movement; that is, if we do not reexamine what makes us who we are and reacquaint ourselves with the values, principles, and doctrines that have been hard won by those who preceded us.

The church is, after all, a theological entity, called into existence and defined by theological categories that render it distinct from other entities. But, at the same time, the church has become a sociological entity and social in the sense that it is made up of people—people in relationship. These relationships in the church are experienced in a whole range of circumstances. The more people and circumstances involved, the greater the need for the relationships to be regulated or ordered—thus, the need for church organization, church organization that enables the church to fulfill its mission, despite a whole range of local and global circumstances.

## Explaining the system

To assist us in understanding how the church operates and, thus, makes decisions, the South Pacific Division in 2009 published in its division magazine a series of articles describing various aspects of the operation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific Division. Each article was written by a person who had particular expertise and acquaintance with the specific topic.

The articles described aspects of the church that are not necessarily recognized or understood by most church members. The articles discussed, for example, the fact that the church not only provides an opportunity to worship each Sabbath but also has an extensive network of preschools, primary and secondary schools, aged care facilities, hospitals, colleges, and universities; the Adventist Media Network; and the Sanitarium Health Food Company. We discussed the role of the incorporated entities, which hold the real and intellectual property of the church and protect the use of its name and its many trademarks—all of which is necessary for the operation of the church. Articles described the necessity, function, and operation of constituency meetings, selection and nominating committees, as well as the role of the auditors, accounting systems, and supporting institutions.

The church and its operations do not happen by chance but by a great deal of hard work and the dedication and commitment of church members who support it with both their financial resources and their countless hours of volunteering. Further, the church must operate in an increasingly complex legal, legislative, and compliance environment. In recent years, in every country of the South Pacific, for example, the church has been compelled to deploy financial and human resources in meeting the demands of society and government in order to ensure compliance with requirements that did not exist just a few years ago. I am thinking, for example, of occupational health and safety, risk management, privacy, and child protection, as well as the requirement for highly developed information technology resources, just to name a few things that we as a church, by law, must follow.

## Mission

In the midst of this increasing complexity, the church is called to maintain its commitment to its mission. In this, we have no alternative. We are not called into existence merely to maintain ourselves. We are called to fulfill the commission of Jesus, Himself, when He said: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded." And then He added: "And behold, I am with you always—to the very end of the world" (Matt. 28:19, 20).*

Our privilege is to take Jesus at His word and in everything we do accept His promise of presence and power. With the increasing complexity of the world, our responsibility includes being the people of God and ensuring that the church is where God wants it to be—even if, at times, as I have painfully learned, there will be members who will not necessarily like some of the decisions made in our attempt to do the work we believe God has called us to do.

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* Author's translation.

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