

The Norwegian Union Conference Asks the General Conference to Stop Investing in Weapons Industries

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Victor Marley, the President of the Norwegian Union Conference, asks the General Conference to stop all investments in weapons industry companies. Earlier this week it was revealed on social media that the General Conference holds stocks in companies associated with the weapons industry through investment funds that the General Conference manages on behalf of a number of entities within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

“It is totally unacceptable that the General Conference invests in companies that directly or indirectly are associated with the weapons industry,” Marley states. He points to the very rigid investment policy of the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that prohibits investments in the weapons industry.

“We ask for full transparency and expect the General Conference to pull out of all investments that are not in harmony with the faith, teachings, and values of the Adventist Church. We ask that this case is taken seriously and will be placed on the agenda when the Executive Committee of the General Conference meets in April.”

For a number of years several of the funds managed by the General Conference have invested in companies in the defense technology industry. This has been one item in a large management portfolio that invests in many types of industry.

Union Leadership Unaware of This Practice

Information about investments in defense technology companies has surprised many leaders of unions outside the United States. The accounts of the General Conference are on the agenda of the Spring meetings (April) each year of the Executive Committee. The leaders of unions outside the United States do not attend this meeting. They participate only in the so called Annual Council meetings in October. However, the accounting and investment information is made available for members who wish to see these documents in the Annual Council meetings.

At the General Conference session in San Antonio in 2015, Tom Angelsen, the President of the North-Norway Conference, presented a question about the ethical guidelines for the church's investments in the stock market. He specifically asked if the Adventist Church pulled investments out of companies with business activities that were not in harmony with our ethical guidelines.

Robert Lemon, the Treasurer of the General Conference at the time, assured that there was a high focus on ethics, and that every year all companies that the Church invested in were subject to close scrutiny to see if there were any changes that demanded that the Church should pull out their investments. European delegates to the General Conference session could hardly imagine that this annual review would give the green light to investments in companies in the weapons industry. As for the ethical guidelines, Lemon referred to the General Conference Working Policy.

The General Conference policy that regulates the management of funds mentions ethical considerations in only general terms. Section S 85 10 reads: “**Philosophy**—Committees and individuals authorized to invest funds for the denomination must always be mindful of their stewardship responsibility. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they should strive with prudence and wisdom to reflect the Master both in style and substance. At the practical level, this means direct investments will not be made in certain industries which are not in keeping with Seventh-day Adventist values. It also means that principles of integrity and fairness will govern all transactions with counter parties.”

The General Conference manages their own funds, but also funds on behalf of conferences, unions, divisions and church institutions. These are mainly entities in the United States. About 60% are retirement funds. The Adventist Church is not the owner of these deposits. They belong to the individuals who are the beneficiaries of these deposits. The remaining 40% of the funds managed by the General Conference, are mainly assets like management capital, building funds, and other funds, from conferences, unions, divisions, and institutions. It is the constituency sessions and executive committees of these entities that have the authority to decide if the money should be invested in mutual funds, and if so in which funds. The General Conference manages 19 funds with different levels of risk.

The Response of the General Conference

The General Conference office responsible for investments has responded to the inquiries regarding investments in the weapons industry. “As a general rule, the General Conference follows the prudent approach of maintaining a highly diversified investment portfolios using different investment strategies based on the most competent advice we are able to secure.” No investments are made in companies engaged in business related to tobacco, alcohol, gambling, pornography, the meat industry and caffeinated beverages, because such companies are not in harmony with the values of the Adventist Church, says Timothy Aka, the person in charge of managing the General Conference funds.

Aka, an associate treasurer of the General Conference and the manager of the General Conference investment portfolios, informs us that his office works with weeding out other companies from the portfolios. They target companies in the defense industry, companies with activities harmful to the environment, and companies that exploit their employees and have poor management.

Aka emphasizes that they strive to be good examples for both members and institutions when investing means that the Lord has entrusted to us.

Aka also reminds us that the investment strategies followed by the General Conference are not new, and not at all secret.

The General Conference has followed this investment strategy for several decades, and a list of companies invested in has been made available to the members of the Executive Committee every year.

Trans-European Division Wants a More Strict Policy

The Trans-European Division supports the efforts to strengthen the ethical guidelines for investments, and will contact the General Conference about this issue. The Division leadership are very clear that they want a more strict ethical framework for General Conference investments.

The Norwegian Union Conference has tried to collect as much information about this case as possible, but admit that there may be aspects of the General Conference investment practices that are still unknown.

The Norwegian Union has only small sums of money invested in stocks.

In an email to the General Conference Treasurer, Victor Marley reminds him that European Adventists have always taken a pacifist stance, and for many adopting a pacifist ethic has involved great personal cost. What has now been revealed about the General Conference investments in the weapons industry, is by many European Adventists felt like betrayal and a slap in the face given our ethical integrity.

Disappointment in Norway

Victor Marley, the Union President, understands well the disappointment that many Adventists in Norway feel now. He writes to them:

“To our members in Norway I will say that I have many times been disappointed by the 'Church.' Today I am also disappointed. But the reality is that the General Conference is not the church. It is you and I, and the people around us where we are, that are the church. God has saved us and invited us to join him in his mission to the world. We can make a contribution so that the local churches can reflect God's message given to us through Hosea: 'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6,6 NIV). On days like these, I choose to focus on God's call to me, and that I can make God known where I am. We who live in Norway may be a prophetic voice not only in the world 'out there,' but also within our own organization.”