

Is Ted Wilson
a Racist?

Policies in Conflict
with Policies

Can This Marriage
Be Saved?

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My Advice to the Next General Conference President

By Loren Seibold

Here's a question I've been pondering lately.

What should be our church's priorities as we look toward the future?

Please, lay down this magazine, find a Seventh-day Adventist, and ask her or him what's most important about the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Go ahead. I'll wait.

Are you back? Let me guess what you heard.

- If you asked one kind of Adventist, the answer was something about following Jesus or the Bible—whatever the answerer thinks that means. It leaves much room for interpretation, though the answerer undoubtedly has his or her own much more specific interpretation.

- Another Adventist you asked was more specific. He or she talked about being God's chosen people, the remnant that has the Spirit of Prophecy and keeps the commandments. These people think it's about what doctrines you believe and whose membership list you're on, and that you show up on Sabbath morning with a Sabbath School quarterly and a checkbook to prove it.

- You might have run into someone who put the promotional function first. "To win the world for Jesus" or "To tell everyone the Seventh-day Adventist message."

Operational Priorities

For most of my life, the church has acted as if the most important things we did were abstract and subjective (such as "following Jesus"), or intensely doctrinal and denominational (such as believing the Seventh-day Adventist message), or some variety of "sell it to the world."

Yet after all these years of working for the church, I confess that I have concerns about the priorities of organized religion. The moment a group of Christians has assets and commitments—property, employees, bank accounts, trademarks, fundamental beliefs—it begins to concentrate on keeping the institution thriving and surviving. It becomes less responsive to people than to its own success, which

generally means forcing upon people what it has on hand rather than offering them what they need.

We agree that we Seventh-day Adventists are supposed to be here. We agree there's something we should be doing. But what? Suppose, for example, we were to get a new General Conference (GC) president in 2020, and you were called in to advise him on what he should emphasize in his leadership. What would you say?

You could talk about all that the New Testament has to say about churchness. About all of the parts working harmoniously together. About loving one another as Jesus loved us. About being new creatures in Christ. All of those things are inspirational and important.

Personally, though, I'm a little weary of just quoting texts. I'd like to hear theology translated into operational priorities. Here's what I'd wish a new General Conference president would emphasize.

1. Not hurting people. It's not that Seventh-day Adventists are any worse than other people. There are many extraordinarily good, kind people among us.

But we promised to be better. And I'm not sure we are. I think back to all of the church fights I've seen. Bickering about things that ought to be unimportant but that rend relationships. I think of the people we've let walk out the door because they divorced and remarried, or had an addiction, or were gay, or just didn't fit in.

Probably the most frequent reason people left is because someone felt compelled to criticize the hell out of them. I remember many of those people. Often there was nothing I could offer after the harm that had been done.

What happened to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"? That simple principle, it seems to me, defines Christianity more than any systematic theology one can articulate.

I think about all of the good pastors and their families who were driven out because someone treated them like rubbish, and the congregation didn't come to their defense. When there's

I believe that if we had made this one thing our emphasis—to not hurt people—we would be today 10 times better a church than we are now.

congregational stress, or even if folks are a bit bored, changing pastors is the reset button. Another one bites the dust.

And yes, pastors do hurtful things, too. Hippocrates wrote, “The physician must ... have two special objects in view with regard to disease, namely, to do good or to do no harm.” What if *that* had been taught in seminary as primary, as even more important than correct doctrinal formulation?

Here I carry some guilt of my own. Sometimes I had the best of intentions but didn’t know how to manage a conflict. I’ve said things I wish I hadn’t—or neglected words of encouragement I could have said. I often pray this from the *Book of Common Prayer*: “We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.”

I believe that if we had made this one thing our emphasis—to not hurt people—we would be today 10 times better a church than we are now. I pray our next GC president would encourage us to “do no harm” in our congregations and communities.

But I also pray that our leaders in Silver Spring would understand how they could be less hurtful, less divisive, than they have been. We will look back at the 10 years of Ted Wilson’s reign as a time when the GC consolidated power and expended much energy trying to force reluctant compliance to questionable and controversial policies, while alienating tens of thousands of Seventh-day Adventists.

2. Being honest, moral, and ethical. Before I became a pastor, I was certain we were the best bunch of people in the world. After all, we’re God’s special church! We wouldn’t do anything immoral—right?

The Catholics abuse children. Not us. (Adventist Risk Management would inform you otherwise. Though Roman Catholicism is an extreme case—sometimes seeming to have designed its ministry to shelter pedophile clerics—it does happen among us, too.)

Some of those *other* pastors, the ones on TV, are enormously rich. But we Adventists are scrupulously careful and honest with money. (Sorry, that’s not completely true either. We have a problem with corruption worldwide,¹ and though the vast majority of leaders are honest with money, some spend it carelessly. Three Angels Broadcasting Network has a public record of misuse of money and immoral behavior, and our hospital system executives use the church’s nonprofit status to pay themselves more than for-profit hospital CEOs do.²)

Other churches’ pastors take advantage of women. Even the great Bill Hybels! We’d never do that. (Wanna bet?)

Again, ask Risk Management—or the folks at The Hope of Survivors ministry or even the ministerial directors in our conferences.)

We’re a democratic system, so we don’t scheme and act politically. (Let me just remind you of how the women’s ordination matter was handled, starting with the Theology of Ordination Study Committee and ending with the clumsily crafted motion at San Antonio in 2015. A participant in a GC nominating committee almost a decade ago told me that rich Adventists dropped hints to committee members that if they’d nominate a particular person as president, the GC would get a million dollars here, a half-million there. That’s not written down anywhere, but the person who told me has an unimpeachable reputation—and he was there.)

Right now all of Christianity is in trouble, and this tendency to overlook bad behavior, to subsume it under doctrinal or political expediency, is a suppurating wound. What if, rather than being a doctrine-policing organization, we Adventists made it our emphasis to teach and hold our employees accountable for following foundational moral and ethical principles?

3. Helping people have better, happier lives. This is something we aspire to do, though I don’t think we do it very consistently. I’ve never seen a congregation that doesn’t believe itself to be friendly, warm, and kind. Yet in practice, we emphasize our beliefs and our denominational identity, not stopping to ask whether those things are helping people.

What is the best *practical* tool the church has to improve people’s lives? I submit that it is community: people united around a shared admiration of Jesus and exercising godly kindness among people who care deeply for one another.

Community, we like to assume, is a result of doctrine and denominationalism. Four decades of pastoral experience convinces me that doctrinalism (the tendency to think of the church as a set of beliefs to be affirmed) and denominationalism (putting the organization’s survival over people) actually conspire *against* community. They spawn judgments and arguments, and they create useless busywork that burns people out. You can know all of the doctrines, be slavishly loyal to the church, do every task asked of you, and still be spiteful, judgmental, and narrow-minded—and many Christians are.

We must be intentional about forming happy Christian communities, or we’ll shed members faster than we can bring them in. I have come to believe that community is much more fragile than we have supposed. I’ve seen a congregation ruptured, a pastor driven off, by the actions of just a family or two.

You've no doubt seen members expelled for moral problems or doctrinal unorthodoxy; but have you ever seen someone disfellowshipped because by angry words or cruel actions he made the church a living hell? Have you ever seen a member disciplined because she drove off a pastor or church members with scheming, lies, and criticism? Neither have I. Congregations don't know what to do when the community-killing cancer is within its own body, and usually their first reaction is to replace the pastor.

We say that what we have to offer makes people's lives better. Indeed, I can easily list some of the unique blessings I've received from this denomination: Sabbath rest, Adventist education, preventative health practices, and faith as a family experience.

But not everything we've offered has been so good. For over a century we offered people the second coming of Christ, calling it a "blessed hope" while presenting it in utterly terrifying terms. We told people that ours was the "only true church" and threatened loss of their salvation if they left it. We made rules about eating and dressing and Sabbath behavior, and people wondered why, even after following them all, they were still unhappy. (Passages such as Romans 14:17 and Colossians 2:16 directly contradict how we regarded people who ate or worshipped differently from us.) We implied that God was harsh and judgmental, while seldom mentioning all of the pure, practical grace in the New Testament. We cherished ideas such as the investigative judgment and the close of probation because Ellen White supported them; but can anyone make the case that they are essential to salvation?

4. Disinterested helping. We Adventists have some excellent programs for our communities: health screening, community services, cooking schools, family seminars, stop-smoking clinics, religious liberty advocacy, schools, clinics, disaster relief, and others.

But what's always bothered me is when we treat these as promotional events. Wrote Duane McKey in the *Adventist Review*, "The concept of TMI [Total Member Involvement] is more than random acts of kindness. It is purpose-driven evangelism"³—which is to say that we don't help to see people helped, but to see them incorporated into our denomination.

I find the Salvation Army, with their brass ensembles and military dress, a little odd. But they are probably the only Christians who have put more energy into the activities praised in Matthew 25:31-46 than into doctrinal teaching. The liberal mainliners such as the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal church seem almost caricatures

of theological noncommitment. But they have stood prophetically for human rights and for acceptance of the marginalized rather than judgment of them, even at the cost of organizational growth.

Yes, you say, but we want *our* church to grow! I agree. Ellen White was never more practical than when she said, "The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian."⁴

Advising Our Next President

I needn't tell you that little of the above describes the leadership in Silver Spring for the last eight years. Our current General Conference president began his term lecturing us on the evils of meditation and reading non-Adventist writers. Since then he has spent most of his leadership capital keeping women out of ministry and trying to craft ways to punish those who disagree with him—the latest being official committees to identify and discipline those who don't "comply." He preaches unity but endlessly churns us into disunity. He appears not to understand the concept of "win-win," seemingly believing that it's fine for those who don't see the church as he does to be shaken out of it.

Nor have attempts to get his attention about corruption been heeded: his soft responses to leaders with fake graduate degrees are well-known. As for helping ministries, one of his first acts after being elected was to make leadership changes that permanently crippled ADRA's effectiveness and reputation.

I'm not expecting our leaders to be saints. I just would like to be able to say that when our church sets its goals, leaders talk about basic operational priorities. How I would love to see a General Conference president rise to his feet at his inaugural address and encourage us not just to believe Adventist doctrines, but to be guided by basic Christian moral principles! Not just to say that Jesus is coming again, but to try to be like Jesus now! Not merely to claim we're the True Church, but to lead our church in such a way that the claim is reflected in who we are! **AT**

¹ Loren Seibold, "Donor, Beware: A Crisis of Integrity in the Mission Field," *Adventist Today*, online edition (Aug. 11, 2018).

² T. Joe Willey, "Million-Dollar Salaries in Adventist Healthcare," *Adventist Today*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Spring 2013).

³ Duane McKey, "Essential Keys to Total Member Involvement," *Adventist Review* (Aug. 5, 2016).

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), p. 470.

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REFLECTIONS ON THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

By Denis Fortin

IT SHOULD NOT COME AS A SURPRISE TO ANYONE ANYMORE WHEN we say that our denomination is a hierarchical institution. In an earlier article,¹ I argued that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a hybrid form of episcopatism similar to that of the Methodist Church in the United States. This represents a weakening of our Protestant heritage, meaning that Seventh-day Adventism is in dire need of a major realignment of its ecclesiology and ecclesial practices.

Avery Dulles

I am relying as a guide for this analysis on Avery Dulles' book *Models of the Church*, a classic textbook in ecclesiology. First published in 1974, the book articulates models of the basic functions and roles of the church in the life of believers as well as its mission on Earth, each model highlighting aspects of the church that are essential to its comprehensive identity.

Dulles, a Roman Catholic Jesuit scholar, was one of the architects of a post-Vatican II reshaping of Catholic faith and practices, and *Models of the Church* offered paradigms of the church that Catholics could endorse in order to see in Protestant churches true brothers and sisters also belonging to the Body of Christ. Like no other Catholic theologian before him, Dulles was able to show how the church of Christ on Earth is bigger than any particular denomination, including his own.

Dulles' five models show the strengths and weaknesses of how the church is present in the world as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant. His later 1987 edition added a sixth mode: the church as the community of disciples. (Page numbers in parentheses refer to the 1987

edition.) The positive response the book received was also the result of Dulles' moderate and cordial tone in his appraisal of both Catholic and Protestant views of the church.

Forty-some years later, *Models of the Church* is still a starting point in any discussion of the church. While his model of the church as sacrament has become the dominant model in Catholic and many Protestant ecclesiologies, the paradigm of the church as the community of disciples of Jesus, along with the model of the church as servant (*diakonia*) of the people of God, is emphasized today by the World Council of Churches in creating relationships between member churches.

But it is the model of the church as an institution that should especially interest us Seventh-day Adventists. I believe we must pay close attention to Dulles' critiques of the institutional model of his own church, because I fear we may be making the same mistakes.

The Institutional Church

While for Dulles the church is a communion of people with one another, it is nonetheless also God's mysterious work of grace in Christ. Along with its structures, organization, and rituals, the church contains an element of mystery as God's "unsearchable riches" (Eph. 3:8, KJV) in Christ (17). It is God's instrument to bring people to salvation.

Yet the dominant model through the centuries has been the institutional model, with its political connotation of the church as the "perfect society." It is a society rooted in a long history with a constitution, a set of rules, a governing body, and a set of members who accept its constitution and rules as binding upon them (34). The church has its recognized ministers, accepted confessional formulas, and prescribed forms of worship and rituals. Since New Testament times, all of this has been fitting and proper (35).

But the church has always had to contend with *institutionalism*, which has treated the institutional element as primary and indispensable.

It is toward the end of the Middle Ages, and after the Catholic Counter-Reformation to Protestant criticisms, that the Roman Catholic Church became overwhelmingly preoccupied with its institutional elements. Yves Congar, another prominent Catholic theologian of the 20th century, stated that the Roman Catholic ecclesiology has been marked by a tendency to see the church "as machinery of hierarchical mediation" in which the needs of the hierarchy are primary (36).

The institutional model of the church, particularly when institutionalism becomes its primary self-understanding, defines

very clearly what is to be taught and who is to lead and have authority. It conceives authority in legal terms and sees obedience to rules as faithfulness and disobedience as subject to penalties. This ecclesiology easily becomes triumphalist and dramatizes the church as an army to fight against the powers of Satan and evil (39). For Dulles, it is obvious that many of these aspects of the church were not instituted by Christ (40) but were, in fact, adopted from the political world in which the church evolved.

Unity in this model is demonstrated by members who profess the same doctrines and who subject themselves to the rules of the church and its duly appointed leaders (40). Unity is therefore visible, and it is also clear that in this model the church grants

For this reason the institutional model fails to account for the spiritual vitality of other churches and the presence and actions of the Holy Spirit in other communities. Since it considers itself as the true church, self-centeredness isolates it from other communities, and it rejects the value of dialogue with others (44). Those outside the institutional church perceive it as self-serving and repressive (45).

Dulles goes on to discuss other models of the church, and he expresses the need to conceive the church as much more than primarily an institution. But his critique of the institutional model should make Seventh-day Adventist leaders pause and reflect. Much of the conflict we currently experience is, in my

While some members and leaders are in denial about political process outside of constituency meetings, those with an agenda are very much fanning the flames of partisanship, influence peddling, and prejudice.

salvation; outside of the church there can be no salvation (41). The church seeks to bring into its institution the people to be saved—something that is statistically verifiable (42).

One of the greatest strengths of this model is that the church communicates a clear sense of corporate identity and generates a high degree of institutional loyalty. It has clear goals for missionary actions and for determining success. So far, it is easy to see that the Seventh-day Adventist Church reflects this institutional model.

Major Liabilities

Yet the institutional model of the church, explains Dulles, “labors under several major liabilities” (43).

First, this model has very little support in Scripture. A few texts in the New Testament are interpreted as favoring the institutional model (e.g., Matt. 16:18-19), but the evidence points rather toward the church as an organic community of believers who serve one another and proclaim the gospel (Acts 2:42-47) (43).

Second, this model naturally leads to clericalism, which tends to reduce the laity to a secondary role and to exaggerate the role of authority and the need to maintain the “right” relationships with church leaders (43).

A third difficulty with this model is that it tends to institutionalize doctrinal teachings. Dulles shows that theology becomes a defensive exercise of the current doctrinal positions and, thus, diminishes critical and exploratory thinking. The theologian becomes a defender of the faith and, over time, creates a system of thought that is exclusive of anyone who does not belong to the institution (44).

opinion, the result of overemphasizing the institutional part of our ecclesiology to the detriment of others.

As our church ages, it appears to me that we are becoming more preoccupied with our institutional life. What may now set us on a path to schism isn’t dissimilar to what led Protestant Reformers to critique and eventually depart from Roman Catholic institutionalism.

A Needed Reflection

Now, more than ever, we need a serious reflection of Seventh-day Adventist institutionalism. I offer four sets of questions to guide such a reflection.

First, while our form and structure of governance has allowed us to develop a successful mission and sustained operations, it has also created a danger zone. We must admit that our tithe and offerings system, which is envied by many denominations, has given us a healthy financial stability. No doubt it has been a blessing of God.

But at the same time, it has created an ethos that has encouraged institutionalism. *We are a rich denomination, in more than one sense.* Rich in spiritual knowledge and truth, but also rich in real estate (houses of worship, corporate offices, schools and universities, hospitals, publishing houses, summer camps, etc.) and in investment and retirement funds. We can afford to do huge, costly events (such as General Conference Sessions or very large evangelistic events in expensive facilities) to boost our self-esteem under the cover of outreach. But are we misappropriating our funds and missing the real point of mission and evangelism? Should we build the institution—or the lives of people in our

communities? Would our church institution be the same, or even survive, without our spending vast amounts of money on these “outreach” events? Are we dependent on big events?²

Second, it is an intrinsic propensity of institutionalism to value hierarchical leadership authority. To become a leader in a large institution is automatically perceived as a promotion and a blessing of God. Institutionalism fosters a hierarchical culture, and leaders in such a culture get a sense of accomplishment when their programs are authorized, when their decisions are accepted, when their wisdom is valued. Dissent and contrary opinions may be perceived as disloyalty or even rebellion. The Protestant ethos of obedience to conscience and the priesthood of all believers is not as valued in centralized church organizations, because leaders are expected to make the vital decisions.

Have we created an organization where subservience to leaders is expected and demanded? Are we moving away from a Protestant church organization where the laity are valued and respected? Is headship theology unconsciously influencing this trend?

Third, the survival of institutionalism relies on compliance and obedience to its rules and regulations. The bigger the institution, the more demanding such compliance can become. When compliance does not readily happen, this in turn may cause some church leaders to feel a loss of control.

But churches are voluntary organizations. In all church organizations, the participation of church members is based on goodwill and a willingness to be part of the institution. Is institutionalism eroding goodwill and trust even among church leaders? Are goodwill and trust sacrificed when church governance seeks to require mindless compliance to all rules and regulations and when leaders are required to sign documents about their orthodoxy? To what extent do we still value freedom of thought? Who will ensure that leaders at the highest echelons are also orthodox in their beliefs and praxis?³

Fourth, all institutions that rely on an election process to select their leaders are subject to the rules of politics. Churches are not exempt from this. We have refused to acknowledge that political machinations are very much a part of our Adventist culture. While some members and leaders are in denial about political process outside of constituency meetings, those with an agenda are very much fanning the flames of partisanship, influence peddling, and prejudice. Will we continue to be blind to such a reality? Will we dare to change the selection process for our church leaders and require more openness, transparency, and community involvement? Could we, for example, put term limits on leadership positions?

The Laodicean Church

The message to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22) is often applied to the lack of spiritual discernment of church *members* at the time of the second coming of Christ. But are we overlooking the real intent of the message—that the warning is also to the church *institution* that claims to be Laodicea? In fact, maybe it is church institutionalism that makes its people Laodicean! Does the institutional church need to hear the warning?

“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see” (verses 15-18,ESV).

The end-time institutional church has deceived itself into thinking that it has intrinsic value and worth (but it is poor), that it has prestige and a good reputation (yet it is naked), and that it sees reality adequately and has much wisdom (even though it is blind). And the leaders of the institutional church are likely responsible for this Laodicean stance. If Jesus is on the outside knocking at the door of this church to invite himself for dinner (Rev. 3:20), is it because he is not inside? Jesus speaks tenderly to this church as much as to the others, and he invites repentance and a change of heart. It is not too late. **AT**

¹ Denis Fortin, “Church Governance in Times of Conflict,” *Adventist Today*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Winter 2018), pp. 4-7.

² An irony of these large events is the fact that a significant number of local non-Adventists must work on Saturday in order to manage the rented facilities so that we Adventists may gather for Sabbath worship.

³ Who watches the watchmen? Last Generation Theology and Headship Theology have been openly supported by some Adventist leaders. Why would some church leaders who refuse to comply with a church policy on ordination be removed from office, while some church leaders who espouse theological heresies that undermine several key Christian doctrines remain in office?

Is Ted Wilson A RACIST?

BY CHRISTOPHER C. THOMPSON

USUALLY THESE MEETINGS COME AND GO without anyone even noticing. But not this time.

It started with the announcement that for the 2018 General Conference Annual Council (GCAC18), male leaders were encouraged to grow extravagant beards to pay homage to the great graybeards of Adventist antiquity. And along with beards, they were to wear Early American garb, representative of the early Adventist pioneers.

Memes began to appear. Online viewers took screenshots, and some attendees even snapped a few photos, which were quickly turned into caricatures to poke fun at what many considered a tone-deaf cosplay. I was surprised to see how many people thought the entire idea to be silly or, at best, ill-advised.

It was around this time that I got a call from a friend. “Do you think Ted Wilson is a racist?” he asked.

A Contentious Context

GCAC18, I needn’t tell you, was a showdown. General Conference leaders descended on Battle Creek for a Mount Carmel-style standoff. The previous year’s meeting had been electric with the release of a so-called “unity document” and GCAC18 brought the follow-up, a “compliance document.” Much of this seemed intended as a threat against the North American Division.

To many of us in the NAD, it felt profoundly oppressive. I remember a conversation with a friend that was

supposed to be about church and the need to be spiritually fed. But my friend kept leading the conversation back to frustration with the General Conference. She helped me realize that this compliance document was a major trigger issue for many like her, who saw it as a manifestation of longstanding rot that was spoiling all of church life.

I suspect this is why many of us, especially in the African American community, took such notice of the 19th-century clothing. In one online discussion, a pastoral colleague asked why so many African Americans seemed to think that the attire of the GC leaders was reminiscent of slavery and colonialism, rather than simply the way our great church pioneers used to dress. The African Americans obliged with copious explanations, reasoning, and rationale. But at least part of it was the context: that we were dealing with a meeting where the issues were control and punishment, which was reflected in the way Elder Wilson and his crew were attired.

What Ted Wilson Says

I don’t know Elder Ted Wilson. I’ve never even met him. I’m not in a position to draw any conclusions about his thought-life. I do know people who know him, though, and I’ve worked with people who have worked with him directly. Frequently I have heard that he is very gracious, kind, and pastoral, and I have no reason not to believe that.

(Also, there are those who have said

that he is strikingly shrewd. I believe that as well.)

But precisely because I don’t know him, I have to respond to the things he says and does publicly. Those are the things that concern me.

In his Sabbath sermon at GCAC18, he said: “There may be those in your local church or elsewhere who introduce worldly music and unbiblical worship styles into our churches or spiritual meetings. However, there are many in the church who are resisting these attempts, as did our pioneers in times gone by.” A complete explanation of why this statement is problematic probably shouldn’t be attempted here. Yet it’s important to recognize that in a global organization, there should never be an expectation of monolithic uniformity. We don’t even talk the same—how could we possibly worship the same?

One of the more problematic statements in his sermon at GCAC18 was this one: “There may be those who overemphasize social issues while downplaying or neglecting biblical truth and its relevance for today’s society. Yes, there are appropriate social issues we need to address, but always within the context of God’s last-day warning.”

I am certain one of the things that made this statement so upsetting is that some church leaders, pastors, and laypeople have clamored for the world church administration (namely, Elder Wilson) to speak to the rash of violence against African Americans over the recent years.

He has appeared to ignore those entreaties, and in this moment he seemed to suggest that social justice was in some way anti-Adventist and in conflict with “biblical truth.” He later walked the statement back a bit, yet for many Adventists, the damage had already been done.

Multiple scholars have called statements like this dog whistles to the ultra-conservative base that contains his most ardent supporters.

Bigoted or Divisive?

I’m not prepared to conclude that Elder Wilson’s statements are bigoted. They do, however, come across as planned, intentional, and impeccably timed. They occur in settings where he will receive rousing support. And in many cases, they seem to ignore or even challenge important cultural differences.

As one who has been involved in communications and media ministry for quite some time, I’ve learned that messaging is important. We must be tremendously vigilant about ensuring that our message is clear and accessible, that the message is not obscured or misconstrued. Can you control how everyone receives your message? No. However, you can be *extra* careful to remove elements that may detract or distract from the message.

Take the dress-up thing, for example. Was there consideration about how this “re-enactment” would be perceived by the wider group—or at least certain sectors of it? I would like to think that there was a lively discussion around the table that day, where the communication and public relations team raised the concern that some may see slave owners rather than Adventist forebears in those costumes. I am hopeful that after a lively discussion, there was a consensus that enough people were aware of Adventist heritage that could counteract any misunderstanding about the *intent* of the costumes.

Nevertheless, some are still a little concerned about that very thing: *intent*.

Which brings me back to the original question. My friend asked if Ted Wilson is a racist—not because he heard him use racial slurs but, rather, because his words and actions come across as divisive. Does Elder Wilson intend divisiveness?

Preservationism or Progress?

This divisive element isn’t something that should be overlooked. There is a long history around this kind of religious orthodoxy. Some scholars argue that “Pharisee” is a Hebrew word that means to “separate” or “detach.” At a very basic level, this concept of separation effectively captures the ethos of the Pharisees. They were divisive—separatists. They believed that they could protect themselves by disconnecting from any and every thing they considered unclean.

Please understand that the Pharisees were not, in theory, bad men. We see them as antagonists to the ministry of Jesus, but that’s not a complete picture of what they were about. Conceptually, the Pharisees were heroes of the Jewish faith. They had organized with the express intent of preserving the sacred oracles that God had entrusted to his chosen people. They wanted to ensure that God’s people wouldn’t fall victim to idolatry and apostasy and, as a result, be forced to endure the pain of judgment and exile again. The Pharisees were die-hard preservationists, fundamentalist scholars with a penchant for fastidiousness and unwavering discipline. They were known as top-shelf biblical interpreters.

These, it could be argued, were good things. However, Jesus challenged the Pharisees that in their effort to be circumspect and perfect, they had developed a misdirected focus. “These things you should have done,” he chided, “without leaving the others undone” (Matt. 23:23). In an effort to be committed to God, they became exclusive and divisive.

When I hear Elder Wilson railing on contemporary worship styles in a suit from the 1800s, I don’t see an angry,

racist, white man. What I do see is someone who is so laser-focused on our religious heritage that he is incapable of appreciating other expressions of the same heritage. I see an honest man who is trying to preserve his culture, a man striving to protect his people from perceived threats.

What Adventists Need

Yet I, and many like me, do not see what he sees. I see a church on the brink of missing tremendous opportunities for ministry and mission because of restrictive views like his.

We are living in a deeply polarized time in history. Nuclear holocaust sounds more and more plausible with each airing of the evening news. Every day seems closer to Armageddon. Hate wins political campaigns. It’s easier to get a semi-automatic rifle than it is to get a driver’s license. Military units are dispatched to impose violent measures on innocent civilians. The world economy is on the brink of collapse. World powers are racing to secure the last bits of the Earth’s natural resources.

No, I don’t think Elder Wilson is a racist. But I think he could benefit from opening his mind to some new cultural languages. Even though he has worked extensively in foreign fields, he still seems tone-deaf to so many different ways of looking at the world. He doesn’t seem to be a keen enough listener to hear the unique inflections and intonations, the distinctions of tone, among us.

With all of this unrest and distress, we need a leader of the world church who is able to bring people together, not drive people apart. We need Elder Wilson to affirm every language and dialect, every culturally unique form of worship, and every community-specific pain in the global community.

I think I can safely add that he’s not the only one. The rest of us could also stand to learn a new cultural language or two. It would help us all to understand each other better. **AT**



DEFENDING THE CHURCH:

The Limits of Church Authority, Conscience, and Compliance

BY EDWIN TORKELSEN

SINCE 2015 THE LEADERSHIP OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE (GC) of Seventh-day Adventists has obsessively focused on women's ordination, which has now morphed into a contest over enforced church authority. Two mentalities have emerged: *hierarchy thinking*, which promotes technical legalities and coerced obedience, and *democratic thinking*, which focuses on dialogue and ethical principles.

The GC leadership has usurped the power of definition¹ regarding the assumed “guilt” of “rebellious” unions that ordain women. They have set aside policy that states that matters of ordination belong to the union conferences and that matters of discipline regarding church entities are the responsibility of the executive committees of the divisions within the world church.²

Response from members, leaders, local churches, and church entities (e.g., conferences, unions, and divisions³) has advised against a GC “compliance document” and disciplinary process⁴ they find divisive, unbiblical, and in conflict with core Adventist values.

A democratic ideal has been compromised by leaders who adopt a hierarchical, nondemocratic mindset.⁵ When authority is

obeyed *unconditionally*, democratic organizations are in danger of transforming themselves into majority dictatorships. This article focuses on the *conditions and limits* of church organization and authority.

Christ himself warned his church against a *hierarchy* mentality and *command* structures: “Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; ... But you are not to be like that’” (Luke 22:25-26, NIV). Status and power are still powerful attractions, however, as they were for the early disciples: “A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest” (verse 24, NIV).

Democracy, Hierarchy, and Discrimination

The Seventh-day Adventist Church claims to be a nondiscriminatory, representative democracy built on *equality* in status, with *equal* opportunities for all. GC Working Policy B 05 and BA 60 10, however, reveal a different story:

“3. Organizational status is *granted to a constituency* as a trust. Official recognition ... *is not self-generated*, automatic,

or perpetual. It is the *result* of a *formal decision* by an executive committee or a constituency session *at higher levels* of denominational organization” (B 05, emphasis added).⁶

“The world Church supports *nondiscrimination* in employment practices and policies and upholds the principle that *both men and women*, without regard to race and color, shall be given *full and equal opportunity* within the Church to develop the knowledge and skills needed for the building up of the Church. Positions of service and responsibility (*except those requiring ordination to the gospel ministry*) *on all levels* of church activity shall be open to *all* on the basis of the individual’s qualifications” (BA 60 10, emphasis added).

The language of B 05 reveals a top-down *hierarchy* mindset. The “except” parenthesis in BA 60 10 erases “*full and equal opportunity*” for “both men and women.” The intention is to keep women *out of* spiritual leadership. Its unintended consequence is that for these positions only *ordination status*, not qualifications, is required. The claim to be “democratic” comes with *exceptions*.

Democratic Centralism

The Adventist world church utilizes a layered committee system that weakens the *dēmos* (Greek for “common people”) element and transforms it into a committee hierarchy managed by an increasing ratio of *ex officio* members (in this case, employees). Lay (nonemployee) committee members above union-conference level are *appointed* by other committees.⁷

On Oct. 8, 2018, the GC Communication Department issued the document “Questions Regarding the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Its Leadership.” It states that in “the Adventist Church authority flows in both directions, from the bottom-up and the top-down, through representatives...” This is *democratic centralism*, hierarchy masquerading as democracy, which is well known in the Communist world.⁸

On Oct. 17, 2018, the same GC department issued the document “Harmony With the World Church.” It states that “It is the prayer of the GC leadership that the current [compliance] document will help *preserve the structure of the world church* to fulfill the mandate of Jesus.”

The referenced document is promoted as a recipe for unity; however, it is a potion of surveillance and coercive ideas foreign to the Adventist ethos that has caused *more* opposition, disunity, and confusion. A quasi-democratic structure has no inherent value to “preserve”; on the contrary, the core values and ethos of the Adventist church are what stand in dire need of protection today. Structures must be open to change in order to “fulfill the mandate of Jesus.”

The Role of Unions

In the 1903 GC Session, W. C. White said that we “should bear in mind that the remedy ... for our confusion *is to strengthen the union in every locality, strengthen it in my individual heart, strengthen it in my church, strengthen it in my conference, strengthen it in my Union Conference.* ... the General Conference, by this system of organization, is forced to become a *mission board*; and our General Conference *must leave institutional work alone*” (emphasis added).⁹

He quoted from a 1902 letter written by his mother, Ellen G. White: “The division of the General Conference into District Union Conferences *was God’s arrangement.* In the work of the Lord in these last days *there should be no Jerusalem centers, no kingly power.* And the work in the different countries *is not to be tied up by contracts to the work centering in Battle Creek, for this is not God’s plan.* Brethren are to *counsel* together; for we are *just as much under the control of God in one part of His vineyard as in another*” (emphasis added).¹⁰

GC leadership should not “preserve” a hierarchy structure with reduced *dēmos* participation, but instead change structures to increase *dēmos* participation. Seminary professor Denis Fortin’s recent online analysis for *Adventist Today*¹¹ and his proposals for a *decentralized* solution, as in 1901/1903, deserve attention. They lead toward a more democratic and mission-focused church.

Men hungry for control, status, and power created the *institutional* church. They did not trust the Spirit to guide the congregations (John 16:13). The dynamic Jesus *movement* became a calcified church *monument*.

Jesus challenged the fallacy that the institutional church is a bulwark against spiritual chaos. It is not, of course; it opened the door to church tyranny. The only glue that binds the believers together is their common love, flowing from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1Tim. 1:5, NIV). No organizational rules can replace that glue.

Bible Writers on Authority

The General Conference leaders feel that their authority is being challenged. They ought to ask, “Why?” Instead, they produce articles, speeches, documents, and videos defending *formal* authority vested in church sessions, procedures, committees, policies, and offices.¹²

Jesus said, “*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given *to me*” (Matt. 28:18, NIV, emphasis added). The Jewish high priest claimed authority vested in his *office*. Jesus held no office, but the people listened to him “because he taught as one *who had authority*” (Matt. 7:29, NIV, emphasis added). Institutional

authority and moral authority are not the same.

The chief priests and elders recognized only authority granted by humans. They challenged Jesus: “By *what* authority are you doing these things?” ... “And *who* gave you this authority?” (Matt. 21:23, NIV, emphasis added.) Jesus never answered their questions. His authority *did not* depend on approval by church leaders. The authority of church *leaders*, however, *is granted and limited* by the authority God granted to the priesthood of all believers.

Many leaders like to quote Romans 13:1, which says, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established” (NIV). The apostle Paul also pointed out the *purpose* of authority: to protect the good from the evil (Rom. 13:3ff, CEV). A distinction between office and incumbent is that the *authority of the incumbent is*

being *examples* to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3, NIV, emphasis added). God’s church has one “Father” (Matt. 23:9), but no human *Pater Patrum, Vicarius Christi, Pontifex Maximus*, or World President. A true shepherd *serves* the church, but not as a false *Servus Servorum Dei*.

The Connecting Link

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to guide us (John 14:26). Our *conscience* is the connecting link; however, human conscience is not infallible.

Before King Agrippa, Paul declared, “I *strive* always to keep my conscience *clear before God and man*” (Acts 24:16, NIV, emphasis added). And even though the Jerusalem Council had declared, “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols” (Acts 15:29, NIV), he also wrote, “Eat anything sold in the meat

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limited by the purpose of the office.

A story from Hebrew history provides important perspective. When the Israelites left Egypt, Moses was *leading* them. Recall that Moses had been educated in Egypt, where authority was hierarchical. Every small conflict was brought to him, until he grew exhausted. Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, observed his stress. He told Moses to his face: “*What you are doing is not good.... The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone*” (Exo. 18:17-18, NIV, emphasis added).

Jethro’s advice was simple: *Distribute authority* down to *small groups of 10 people each*. Let *them* solve their own problems. *Only* if a case could not be solved at that level was advice to be sought from others, eventually from Moses himself (verse 26).

The weary leader followed Jethro’s advice and placed *immense trust* into the hands of simple people who were just days into their liberation from centuries of slavery. By *distributing* authority, Moses *limited* his own. That is the spirit of 1901!

The early church likewise selected overseers to *assist* the believers. The counsel given them by the apostle Paul is *pastoral*, not structural. Similarly, the apostle Peter stressed: “Be *shepherds* of God’s flock ... *not lording it over* those entrusted to you, but

market without raising questions of conscience” (1 Cor. 10:25, NIV, emphasis added). Paul recognized that a church council’s authority is *limited by conscience*. Unity mandates that different consciences should be respected.

To Timothy, Paul wrote about “hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:2, NIV). He repeated to Titus that “both their minds and *consciences are corrupted*” (Titus 1:15, NIV, emphasis added). A bad conscience may be repaired if we “draw near to God with a *sincere heart* and with the full assurance that *faith* brings, having our hearts sprinkled *to cleanse us from a guilty conscience*” (Heb. 10:22, NIV, emphasis added).

To the Sanhedrin, Paul declared, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God *in all good conscience* to this day” (Acts 23:1, NIV, emphasis added). To Timothy, he wrote that “love ... comes from a pure heart and a *good conscience* and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5, NIV, emphasis added).

The Adventist Conscience

Denominational co-founder Ellen G. White also recognized that conscience has *conditions*. She wrote: “The idea is entertained by

many that a man may practice anything that he conscientiously believes to be right. But the question is, Has the man a *well-instructed* good conscience, or is it *biased and warped* by his own *pre-conceived opinions*? ... *Men may be conscientiously wrong as well as conscientiously right*" (emphasis added).¹³

In addition, she strongly affirmed an individual's conscience—despite its shortcomings—as *off limits* for others.

"God does not force anyone."¹⁴

"Force must never come in. All who thought that their *position* gave them power to command their fellow beings, *and control conscience, must be deprived of their position*; for this is not God's plan" (emphasis added).¹⁵

"*No one has a right to control another's mind* and judge for another, prescribing what is his duty. There are certain rights that belong to every individual in doing God's service. No man has any more liberty to take these rights from us than to take life itself" (emphasis added).¹⁶

Let "those who are in positions of authority ... *respect the individuality of mind and conscience*. These workers are in co-partnership with Jesus Christ, and you may interpose yourself so as to interfere with God's plans; for the human agent is under His special authority and dictation" (emphasis added).¹⁷

A person's conscience is a matter between that individual and the Spirit; "*one human being has no jurisdiction over the conscience of another human being*."¹⁸

The Duty of Moral Disobedience

Spiritual reform predicates that obedience to ecclesiastical authority is *conditional* and *limited*.

Jesus said: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But *do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach*" (Matt. 23:1-3, NIV, emphasis added).

He continued: "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath. You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?' (verses 16-17, NIV).

Clearly, we should obey *only* if the rules are *ethically valid*! Jesus disobeyed policies that church leaders invented to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath. When he and his disciples walked through a field and picked some heads of grain to eat, they were rebuked by the Pharisees (Luke 6:1-2). Several times Jesus healed on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21-27; Luke 6:6-10; 13:10-13; 14:1-4; John 5:1-9; 7:23; 9:13-16), and the leaders disapproved.

When Peter and John preached, they were spied upon, reported, and faced consequences. The Sanhedrin told them *to stop preaching*. These two disciples' response has been the freedom cry of every Christian down to the present: "*Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him?*" (Acts 4:19, NIV).

The next time John and Peter were called before the Sanhedrin, the high priest confronted them, saying, "We gave you *strict orders* not to teach in this name" (Acts 5:28, NIV, emphasis added). Peter's answer is immortal: "*We must obey God rather than human beings*." (verse 29, NIV, emphasis added).

The wise Pharisee named Gamaliel counseled: "I advise you: *Leave these men alone! Let them go!* For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; *you will only find yourselves fighting against God*" (verses 38-39, NIV, emphasis added). But the Sanhedrin did not listen. They wanted to impose *consequences for noncompliance*. Initially the church leaders were out for blood (verse 33), but out of fear, they settled for a less severe punishment and had the apostles flogged (verse 40).

Closer to our own day, the revolutionary principle that made the Reformation possible was that we all have a *sacred right and duty to protest, resist, and disobey church authority gone astray*. If Martin Luther had accepted *unconditional* obedience, he would have turned back into his monastery cell and remained there.

By their example Jesus, the apostles, and all reformers taught us *the duty of moral disobedience*. Ethics trumps every vote and policy!

Forced Compliance

The demand for *unconditional* compliance with "rules and resolutions" is an old pitfall. Ellen White wrote: "Those who are enjoined to represent the attributes of the Lord's character, step from the Bible platform, and *in their own human judgment devise rules and resolutions* to force the will of others. The devisings for *forcing men to follow the prescriptions of other men* are instituting an order of things that ... *blinds the eyes to mercy, justice, and the love of God*. Moral influence and personal responsibility are trodden underfoot" (emphasis added).¹⁹

She also warned: "*Laws and rules* are being made at the centers of the work that *will soon be broken into atoms*.... If the cords are drawn much tighter, if the rules are made much finer, if men continue *to bind* their fellow-laborers closer and closer to the *commandments of men*, many will be stirred by the *Spirit of God to break every shackle, and assert their liberty in Christ Jesus*" (emphasis added).²⁰

As White correctly observed: “The church may pass *resolution upon resolution* to put down all disagreement of opinions, but *we cannot force the mind and will*, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions *may conceal* the discord, but they *cannot quench* it and establish perfect agreement. *Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance*” (emphasis added).²¹

Regarding the General Conference in session, White wrote in 1909 that it is to “be respected” and “have authority.”²² To claim that this statement is *unconditional*, however, is as far from her thinking as we possibly can be and would certainly misapply her statements.

- Recent General Conference leaders have repeatedly *denigrated* the individual’s conscience.

- Threats to use force, coercion, and punishment are *not in harmony* with the Bible.

The use of quotations by Ellen White to support the claim for compliance overlooks one more important condition, which she herself stated: “I have been shown that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, *private* independence and *private* judgment must not be

The revolutionary principle that made the Reformation possible was that we all have a sacred right and duty to protest, resist, and disobey church authority gone astray.

In 1877 the GC in session voted this statement: “*Resolved*. That the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference *when acting within its proper jurisdiction*; and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, *unless* they can be shown to *conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience*” (emphasis added).²³

This statement posits three explicit condition for compliance: The voted action: (a) must be “within its [GC’s] proper jurisdiction;” (b) must not “conflict with the Word of God;” and (c) must not violate “the rights of individual conscience.”

The process used by General Conference leadership after the GC Session 2015 in San Antonio is not in harmony with the aforementioned conditions, for the following reasons:

- Per policy, the issue of women’s ordination is still within *the unions’* jurisdiction.
- A disciplinary process in matters of apostasy and noncompliance is within the jurisdiction of the *executive committees of the various divisions of the world church*.
- All officially commissioned study committees have concluded that ordaining women is *not forbidden* by the Bible (or Ellen G. White writings).
- The principles of the document voted during 2018 Annual Council are *opposed* to the Bible, the writings of Ellen White, and core Adventist values.

maintained, but be surrendered” (emphasis added).²⁴

The qualifying word “private” is crucial. The obligation to surrender is focused on *private* opinions. The GC process targets official Adventist units, conferences, unions, and divisions. At the 2015 GC Session, 42 percent of the *official delegates* disagreed with the 58 percent. In 2017 a majority of the GC Executive Committee members voted against the proposed “loyalty” document at their Autumn Council. In 2017 and 2018, the GC and Division Officers (GCDO) committee was divided as close to 50/50 as it possibly could be.

To brand about half of the world church’s official delegates in GC Session, as well as the GC Executive Committee and a number of its administrative units, and even the GC’s own GCDO committee as holding “private judgment” strains any credulity. This rhetoric promotes the GC administration’s own political agenda.

Organization Is Good—When It Is Good

Legal technicalities, clear purpose, efficient structure, and orderly process make an organization *look* good, but technicalities alone never make an organization *morally* good.²⁵

The moral transparency of Jesus Christ permeates the Gospels. “I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus testified. “... I said nothing in secret” (John 18:20, NIV). As he told the Twelve before sending them out to minister, “there is nothing concealed

that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known” (Matt. 10:26, NIV; cf. Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; 12:2).

The apostle Paul declared: “Rather, we have *renounced secret and shameful ways*; we do not use *deception*, nor do we *distort* the word of God” (2 Cor. 4:2, NIV, emphasis added).

Ellen White cautioned: “Organizations, institutions, unless kept by the power of God, will work under Satan’s dictation to bring men under the control of men.... *Whatever in our practice is not as open as day*, belongs to the methods of the prince of evil” (emphasis added).²⁶

If, like Paul, “we do not use *deception*,” then there is no valid ethical reason to classify anything in a normal decision-making process as “confidential.” A whistle blower, or one who “leaks” what White says should be “open as day,” is *not* unethical. That person or organization is merely pointing out what is unethical. It is, rather, the one who *manipulates* a process by delaying, withholding, or keeping information *secret* who is acting unethically.

The one exception is when a person’s *private* sins, shortcomings, and failures are involved; at such times, we should follow Peter’s advice: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8, NIV).

Jesus had one measuring rod to assess a church organization. “By their fruit you will recognize them. ... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Matt. 7:16-18, NIV; cf. 12:33). *The fruits of a vote or policy will reveal its ethical validity.*

Ethical quality is a *sine qua non*. We do not condone Jesuit ethics that allow the pious end to justify the evil means. All means must be ethical. The Inquisition was established to defend and preserve the *unity and faith* of the church. Its immoral methods to obtain *coerced compliance* had no value in God’s eyes.

Our Sacred Duty

Each of us must ask this question before we comply: *Is this process, vote, document, or policy ethical?* Don’t take for granted that it is! Check its ideas and principles! Learn from church history!

Church organization must always be simple, honest, transparent, open, welcoming, flexible, tolerant, adaptable, inclusive, and diverse, showing respect and allowing freedom with an abundance of fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23, NIV). Human hierarchical *control* through surveillance and *coerced compliance* is *not* on this list!

Ecclesiastical use of *secrecy, threats, force, coercion, and punishment* to obtain compliance is an alarm bell warning us that

the church has left its *biblical and ethical foundation*. Then it is *the sacred duty* of the faithful to speak up, rise up, protest, disobey, and refuse compliance. *In defense of the church.* **AT**

¹ In August 2015 the GC Secretariat issued a statement, *Unions and Ordination to the Gospel Ministry*, which told Adventists *how to understand* the ordination policy. This “explanation” subordinated the unions to the GC Secretariat’s *interpretation*.

² Mitchell Tyner, “Analysis: The Use of General Conference Working Policy in the Case of Unions That Ordain Women,” *Spectrum Magazine* (online), Oct. 10, 2016.

³ On Oct. 23, 2018, the Trans-European Division reaffirmed its position to affirm all in pastoral ministry, regardless of gender. On Nov. 6, 2018, the North American Division voted a statement against the compliance document and process. On Nov. 14, 2018, the South Pacific Division did the same.

⁴ “Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions,” voted by the GC Executive Committee at its 2018 Annual Council on Oct. 14, 2018.

⁵ Edwin Torkelsen, “Church Democracy and Orthodox Faith,” *Spectrum Magazine* (online), Aug. 28, 2018.

⁶ I argue that “organizational status” in a democratic church is constituted when the constituency of that church decides to organize itself; thus, its “status” is self-generated. Its “recognition” as a member of an association depends on being accepted by that association. Autonomous status and recognition by someone else are two different matters.

⁷ Torkelsen, “When a Small Thing Betrays Important Principles,” *Adventist Today* (online), Aug. 28, 2018.

⁸ Merriam-Webster defines democratic centralism as: “a principle of Communist party organization by which members take part in policy discussions and elections at all levels *but must follow decisions made at higher levels*.” The idea was introduced by Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in 1902 and defined by the Party Congress in 1917. Its two main points were: (a) subordination of the minority to the majority, and (b) all decisions of higher bodies shall be absolutely binding on lower bodies and on all Communist party members.

⁹ General Conference *Bulletin*, Apr. 10, 1903, p. 158.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Denis Fortin, “Church Governance in Times of Conflict,” *Adventist Today* (online), Aug. 27, 2018.

¹² Beginning in January 2017 and continuing after the 2018 Annual Council, several articles, statements, speeches, and videos appeared defending GC positions.

¹³ Ellen G. White, Letter 4, 1889, paragraph 78.

¹⁴ White, Manuscript 57, 1896.

¹⁵ White, “The Great Controversy,” *The Review and Herald*, Sept. 7, 1897.

¹⁶ White, Letter 92, 1895, quoted in *Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, p. 708.

¹⁷ White, Manuscript 43, 1895.

¹⁸ White, Letter 92, 1895.

¹⁹ White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 363.

²⁰ White, “The Great Need of the Holy Spirit,” *The Review and Herald*, July 23, 1895.

²¹ White, Manuscript 24, 1892.

²² White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 (1909), p. 260.

²³ *The Review and Herald*, Oct. 4, 1877.

²⁴ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 492.

²⁵ At its 2018 Annual Council, before discussion of the “compliance” document began, the GC Executive Committee devoted 1 hour and 45 minutes to explaining the *legal* and *technical* validity of the document. No time was allotted for a discussion of the document’s *moral* principles and implication.

²⁶ White, Letter 55, 1895, paragraph 23.

POLICIES IN CONFLICT WITH POLICIES: A Closer Look at the 2018 General Conference Executive Committee ACTION CONCERNING COMPLIANCE

By Lowell C. Cooper

AT ITS 2018 ANNUAL COUNCIL (AC), THE GENERAL CONFERENCE Executive Committee approved an action titled “Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions,” hereinafter referred to as the “AC Document.” The document, tagged as agenda item 113-18G, outlines a process for reporting and addressing perceived noncompliance with General Conference Session and Executive Committee decisions.

Matters of noncompliance are not new in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Constitutions, bylaws, and policies have long been in place to nurture and protect mutual accountability across the global spectrum of denominational organization. However, the 2012 decision of two unions to proceed with ministerial ordination for women contrary to a 1990 General Conference Session action¹ not approving such ordinations brought questions of organizational authority into clearer focus.

General Conference Sessions in 1995 and 2015 considered and rejected proposals to permit divisions of the General Conference (GC) to address the matter of ministerial ordination for women. These decisions left world church leadership with the task of illuminating the place and practice of ecclesiastical authority in denominational life. The document presented to the 2018 Annual Council grew over three years of polarizing debate about the need for such an instrument and about the appropriateness of its procedures in light of Seventh-day Adventist Church polity and ethos.

Warning Flags

This brief review identifies some provisions in the document as being in tension with, if not contrary to, existing and long-standing policies of the church. A worldwide organization such as the Adventist Church needs to have clearly understood and consistent procedures. Conflicting policies will consume valuable resources and sow discord within the structure. The following five areas merit careful attention and resolution:

1. The AC Document is intended to be policy but is not presented in the standard policy format. It contains no indication of where it belongs in policy and whether it is an addition to, amendment of, or substitution for existing policy provisions. Approval of the document necessarily places it within policy, but its relation to existing policy on authority and relationships among organizational entities is unclear.

2. The AC Document elevates actions of the General Conference Executive Committee, meeting in any of several configurations, to the equivalence of official policy. Although all meetings of the GC Executive Committee require notice to members, quorum requirements differ depending on the nature of the agenda.² A quorum of 15 is required for routine business; a quorum of 40 is required for items that are not routine, such as major financial decisions, the dismissal of elected and appointed employees, and the election of presidents of divisions and of general vice presidents. A majority of the full membership of the General Conference Executive Committee, including the president or a general vice president, is empowered to transact



denominational business of any nature at any time and place. However, policy formulation and approval has historically been considered at the Annual Council,³ when provision is made for all members of the Executive Committee to be present.

The AC Document fails to acknowledge the requirement for global decisions to require global input—which effectively comes only during an Annual Council. The document simply asserts that “Where regard for and practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee actions have not been followed, these principles shall apply.” This means that any decision of the GC Executive Committee, at any time, and with a quorum as low as 15 members, has authority and validity equal to policy.

3. Investigative provisions in the AC Document effectively duplicate and/or replace the constitutional role of GC divisions.⁴ General Conference *Working Policy* describes the role of divisions as follows: “To facilitate its worldwide activity, the General Conference has established regional offices, known as divisions of the General Conference, which have been assigned, by action of the General Conference Executive Committee at Annual Councils, general administrative and supervisory responsibilities for designated groups of unions and other church units within specific geographic areas. (See C 05, Division Territories. Each division executive committee acts for the General Conference Executive Committee in the territory of the respective division.)”⁵

Elsewhere General Conference *Working Policy* states: “The division committee is the authorized body which acts for the

General Conference Executive Committee in the respective divisions.”⁶ In a section on Administrative Relationships (General Conference *Working Policy* B 40), the role of a division executive committee is again affirmed: “The executive committee of each division shall function on behalf of the General Conference Executive Committee in the division, and its authority shall be recognized by union [conferences] and local organizations in matters of division administration and counsel.”⁷

The policies quoted above are not meant to imply that a GC division is free to determine its own course of action. Policies clearly outline the obligation of divisions to act in harmony with General Conference Session and Executive Committee decisions.⁸ The point to be emphasized is that the worldwide church already has a system of accountability within its overall structure. A parallel system of accountability is confusing at best and positively harmful at worst.

The AC Document permits a higher organization to pierce the network of supervisory functions entrusted to the various levels of denominational structure. “The Administrative Committee of any conference and/or union and/or division and/or the General Conference which identifies an entity they perceive to be non-compliant, shall report the matter in writing to the administrative level of the Church immediately above the perceived non-compliant entity, beginning with the administrative level of the Church closest to the matter. If any level of organization does not report an issue of non-compliance, it becomes the responsibility of the next higher organization.”⁹

The document states further: “If, in the opinion of the executive officers of the conference and/or union and/or division and/or General Conference, compliance has been requested but has not been made evident or has not been sustainably achieved, the General Conference Administrative Committee may request the appropriate General Conference Compliance Review Committee* to implement its terms of reference.”¹⁰ This means that a small group at the General Conference can insert itself directly into the oversight and operations of any unit of organization anywhere.

The Terms of Reference for the General Conference Compliance Review Committee(s) were not part of the AC

will hold that person accountable for his/her noncompliant behavior. The AC Document purports to remedy organizational noncompliance through a two-step punitive process: (1) placing the entity under a warning, and (2) placing the entity president under public reprimand.

This is a case of vicarious punishment and surely must weigh on the minds of those who pass judgment on the individual in question. Elected leaders serve their constituencies and do not have the authority to rule at will. How then will a leader be responsible both to a local constituency/executive committee and to a compliance review committee at the General Conference? Such a leader is being placed in an impossible situation.

The worldwide church already has a system of accountability within its overall structure. A parallel system of accountability is confusing at best and positively harmful at worst.

Document. The Terms of Reference for five compliance review committees were established by the General Conference Administrative Committee. They include the following provisions, which by reference in the AC Document virtually become part of this new policy on addressing noncompliance: “3. Examine non-compliant entities as identified and recommended by the Administrative Committee (ADCOM) of a conference and/or union and/or division and/or General Conference.” and “6. Exercise overview, and with divisions, work with germane-committee-specific noncompliance issues that primarily are the administrative duty of unions.”¹¹

4. Disciplinary measures described in the AC Document are meted out to the head (i.e., president) of an entity deemed to be in persistent noncompliance with General Conference Session or General Conference Executive Committee actions. The described process holds an individual accountable for organizational noncompliance. Is this a tacit acknowledgement that the Adventist church operates under a presidential rather than a committee system?

A principle of Seventh-day Adventist Church structure is that authority is entrusted to groups.¹² The AC Document addresses organizational rather than personal noncompliance. It is assumed that the body that elects/appoints an individual to leadership

If a constituency or executive committee decision is contrary to General Conference *Working Policy*, then a process for addressing the group that is responsible for the decision is needed. If discipline is necessary, it ought to be seen as discipline of the group or the entire entity concerned. The AC Document is wholly deficient in this regard and relies only on the General Conference Executive Committee’s authority in relation to individual members of the Executive Committee.

In fact, General Conference *Working Policy* already addresses situations in which the majority of members in a denominational entity are regarded, by the higher organization, to be in apostasy or when the organization refuses to operate in harmony with denominational policies and constitutional requirements and is in rebellion. Unsuccessful resolution of these deficiencies can lead to involuntary discontinuation of the entity as a member unit of denominational structure.¹³ Policy is silent regarding intermediate sanctions of organizational units. The only disciplinary measure for unacceptable and uncorrected behavior is removal from membership.

Dissolving an organization or removing it from membership in the church family of organizations is an extremely serious matter. The repercussions of such an action would reverberate throughout denominational structure for years to come. It is

perhaps due to the drastic nature of dissolution or removal from membership that the world church has studied the possibility of lesser disciplinary measures. The AC Document may reflect the need to find alternatives to dissolution and removal from membership. However, the application of discipline, through public reprimand and possible removal from Executive Committee membership, to one individual rather than an organization begs the question of fairness and morality.

5. The appeal process described in the AC Document is in direct conflict with existing policies concerning appeals in the settlement of organizational conflict. According to the document, an entity wishing to appeal the decision of a compliance review committee shall address the appeal to that same committee. If the entity is dissatisfied with the result of this initial appeal process, it can appeal in writing to the General Conference Administrative Committee.¹⁴ It seems a denial of reasonable and natural justice that a decision be appealed to the same body that issued it.

General Conference *Working Policy* already defines an appeal process under which an entity may appeal to the next higher organization not directly involved in the matter.¹⁵ The next higher body, for a division, would be the General Conference Executive Committee, not a compliance review committee or the Administrative Committee. The General Conference Executive Committee, at an Annual Council, constitutes the body of final authority between General Conference Sessions, and its decisions shall control on such controverted points. However, at the request of the division executive committee concerned, such a decision may be reviewed at a General Conference Session.¹⁶ The church has thus made arrangements that, to the extent possible, appeals will be heard by an entity that was not initially involved in the decision that is being contested.

Time Will Tell

In conclusion, the foregoing critique of the AC Document is not an attempt to undermine the need for the appropriate role of authority in the world church. Instead, the purpose is to affirm that the Adventist church already has in place adequate policies to deal with organizational conflict. If these policies were implemented in a spirit of Christian listening, understanding, openness for policy development, and concern for each other and the mission of the church, they would prove their wisdom and merit. The AC Document, on the other hand, introduces both direct and indirect conflict with existing policies and the distribution of responsibilities in church structure. As such, it will become a stumbling block to the orderly life and processes of the world church. **AT**

¹ Fifty-fifth General Conference Session, July 11, 1990—Excerpt from Session Bulletin #7, p. 15, dealing with the action and report of the Role of Women Commission: “VOTED, To accept the following report and recommendations of the Role of Women Commission as recommended by the 1989 Annual Council: ... 2. Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world church and in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church, we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry.” (The vote was 1,173 in favor, 377 opposed.)

² General Conference *Working Policy*, 2017-2018, pp. 24, 35: Bylaws of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Article XIII, Sec. 3 and 4.

³ General Conference *Working Policy*, 2017-2018, Introduction: “This book contains ... and the Working Policy as adopted by Annual Councils of the General Conference Executive Committee. It is therefore the authoritative voice of the Church in matters relating to the administration of the work of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in all parts of the world. It is to be adhered to by all denominational organizations. (See General Conference Working Policy B 10.) ... This edition supersedes all previous editions and shall be adhered to except as it may be amended by subsequent actions of a General Conference Session or an Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee.”

⁴ General Conference *Working Policy*, 2017-2018, p. 13: Constitution of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Article III—Divisions of the General Conference.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 69, B 10 20 General Conference, Sec. 2.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 73, B 15 10, clause 1.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 82, B 40 55.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 13: Constitution of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Article III—Divisions of the General Conference, and p. 36, Bylaws Article XIV, Sec. 3, and p. 73, B 15 10 Adherence to Policy Required.

⁹ [AC Document] “Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions,” p. 1, lines 18-23.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, lines 39-42. The asterisk references this note: *As per General Conference Administrative Committee actions July 17, 2018, and August 14, 2018.

¹¹ General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter, June-July 2018, p. 8, reporting on General Conference Administrative Committee actions of July 17, 2018.

¹² General Conference *Working Policy*, 2017-2018, B 05 Organizational and Operational Principles of Seventh-day Adventist Church Structure, Sec. 4: “Decision-making is based on group processes that allow for member participation....When the necessary quorum is present for a constituency/ executive committee meeting, the opinion of the majority participating in a vote is regarded as the decision of the entire group unless bylaws or rules of order require approval by more than a simple majority.”

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 110, B 95 Discontinuation of Organizations by Voluntary or Involuntary Dissolution.

¹⁴ [AC Document] “Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions,” p. 2, lines 8-15.

¹⁵ General Conference *Working Policy*, 2017-2018, p. 69, B 10 22.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

I AM A BLUE-BLOOD SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST WHO STRUGGLES right now with a severe case of disappointment with the church I have loved all of my life.

As for the blue blood, my maternal grandfather played a formative role in the establishment of Adventism in South Africa. He was an Adventist missionary, for sure. I have an almost-century-old photograph of my mother at age 8 or 9, with her mother—my grandmother—in front of a corrugated iron mission shack, which I’m sure my grandfather himself had raised on a lonely slope. It stood on the site of what was then becoming Bethel College. In the picture, mother and daughter are standing outside behind a table, washing clothes in a galvanized tub filled with fetched water. They are both grinning for the camera. Mom is pig-tailed and dressed in a homemade frock, and although you can’t see her feet in the photo, she’s undoubtedly barefoot. Later Mom married Dad, of course, and spent two days shy of 60 years (until Dad’s death) following him around the world.

My father’s ministry was mostly administrative, covering parts

I’m troubled by not only the incongruous existence of a compliance committee, but also the fact that it now seems desirable to so many of our leaders. To be more specific, it is disappointing that the committee’s stated purpose is not only to monitor compliance regarding women’s ordination, but also to investigate church entities in at least four other matters—with perhaps more to come. The committee’s directives give “church discipline” a dramatically advanced scope and authority, and this power is placed in the hands of comparatively few upper-echelon members. Frankly, it has been given the authority to find people and legitimate organizational entities within the world church (such as union conferences and educational institutions) guilty or not guilty on issues that are out of step with nondoctrinal church-policy matters, and it will inevitably play a key role in determining any related disciplinary action. Where such extreme disciplinary action might lead the church is unnerving to consider.

The scope and purpose of this compliance structure is, as far as

Quo Vadis Ecclesia?

A PERSONAL CONFESSION

BY WILL EVA

of three continents, and he retired as a general vice president of the General Conference. I proudly add that he spoke out in favor of the ordination of women. My own ministry was significantly inspired by his.

Following my much-appreciated tutelage in the Adventist educational system, from elementary school through to the doctoral level, I pastored for about half of my career and spent the other half in corporate ministerial work, retiring after a decade at the General Conference as the editor of *Ministry* magazine.

The Administrative Trend

In the light of all this personal history, it’s both baffling and illuminating to ask how I could end up at age 70-plus with so much disillusionment about my church. The immediate reason for this disenchantment is the formation of the aptly named “compliance” committees and the fact that this new construct follows a procession of similar, almost preparatory administrative moves (such as the Glacier View “hearings” and the ensuing fallout) that cover the last 40 years or so of Adventist history.

I can see, unprecedented in the history of our church. It is a step toward an Adventism that brings to mind some of the darkest moments of Christian history.

As I try to project the effects of this committee, I am struck by the unsustainability of such an enterprise in the North American church. It is disconcerting to speculate, realistically, what might happen to the Adventist church as the committee applies its work in the field. Its findings will very likely be a source of increasing disunion, debate, and painful estrangement. And again, any actual disciplinary action growing out of the committee’s “findings” will undoubtedly be all the more destructive to the “soul” of the church.

In 1949 Winston Churchill addressed the House of Commons about the financial markets of Britain and the world. His words could apply to the Seventh-day Adventist Church today: “If you make ten thousand regulations, you destroy all respect for the law.” Relatedly, Thomas Paine observed: “The greatest tyrannies are always perpetrated in the name of the noblest causes.”

Have there been serious disagreements among us? Yes, by all means! Have we repeatedly struggled to find agreement? Absolutely! Do substantive matters still tend to divide us? Of course! But we have never before resorted to a global, top-down administrative apparatus to enforce compliance at every organizational level of the church.

I must say it again: The unprecedented step of forming and commissioning the compliance committee system is part of a quasi-dictatorial trajectory that plays too close to the very thing that the Adventist prophetic voice has warned us of as we look toward the eschaton. It is conveying us toward the *normalization* of administrative actions that, at their heart, have a predominantly punitive and even political character. This structure engenders the values of naked governance (Matt. 20:25-26) and lacks the warm spirit of deep, body-of-Christ fellowship. It seems spawned by the “letter” rather than the “Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Theological Considerations

In 2 Corinthians 3, we find one of the most succinct summaries of the effect that Jesus, the gospel, and the new covenant are designed to have on the soul of a believer, the Christian community, and the world at large. Here Paul shows the crucial shift that happened with the arrival of the promised Messiah. The old—the Mosaic—was not displaced by the new, but it found fulfillment and completeness in the new.

The step from Moses to Christ, as Paul describes it in this chapter, is one that we Adventists must take if we are to be freed from the toxic realities that are presently seeking to shape us. This is not only a theological or doctrinal step, but one that changes our attitudes and values, especially in the way we treat one another (agape love). It also affects how we show each other interpersonal respect, particularly while we surrender space for Jesus Christ to operate uninterrupted in and among us. This necessary shift brings personal freedom within the fellowship (Gal. 5:1-15). It comes when Christ himself, through the Spirit, constrains us without misplaced—even well-meant—maxims from high priests, popes, or denominational presidents.

Paul elucidates the following core points in 2 Corinthians 3: Through Christ, we have actually been made “ministers of a new covenant” (verse 6, NIV). The reality of this is straightforward, unequivocal, and preeminent: a much more mature way of life and the introduction of new, transformative realities that enhance our relationships. Most important to our current Adventist conflicts is that this new covenant is “not of the letter *but of the Spirit*” (verse 6, NIV, emphasis added). Paul declares with overt emphasis that “the letter kills, but the Spirit

gives life” (verse 6, NIV). This is graphic and transformative in terms of who we become, the attitudes we have toward one another, how we perceive the innate nature of the church, and therefore how we administer it.

The “ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone [the Ten Commandments], came with glory, so that the Israelites [at Sinai] could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory” (verse 7, NIV).

But despite its glory, the Mosaic lettered testament was fading and making way for the greater and more complete splendor of the Spirit, who is surpassingly glorious (verses 8-10). And this greater glory of the ministry of the Spirit becomes the glory that endures, even while the lesser glory fades away (verses 8-11, 13).

The “veil” (verses 13-16) Moses had to wear, says Paul, has a stubborn way of remaining in place in the tradition-bound soul, especially “when the old covenant is read, . . . because only in Christ is it taken away” (verse 14, NIV). The unremoved veil is forever a threat to authentic Christian faith (verses 12-18), as well as to church administrative presuppositions and practices.

Paul ends this section of his writing by saying that when people turn to Christ, their “dullness” is removed—that is, “the veil is taken away” (verse 16, NIV). He concludes by saying, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” and “ever-increasing glory” (verses 17-18, NIV).

It seems to me that this veil, or dullness, is what the compliance process threatens to lay upon us, and that our most important task is to find freedom and ever-increasing glory in Christ. He must increase, while what preceded him must decrease (John 3:30).

A Spiritually Grounded Church

In the midst of the present cacophony, the Lord’s fabulous invitation from Matthew 28 comes to us here and now, as it did long ago. His bidding feeds my soul with divine wine and bread as I read it.

Here is the late Eugene H. Peterson’s paraphrase of that well-known call from Jesus’ heart to ours. It asks me to actually embrace Jesus and his attitudes of grace and love when it comes to my own follies *and* to the folly of those who have been called to lead the church.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matt. 11:28-30, MSG). **AT**

Basal Faith *for the* Despondent

By Elle Berry

OVER THE PAST MONTHS IN ADVENTIST-sphere, the 2018 compliance vote has made church life seem a little tumultuous. Perhaps for anyone paying attention, this wasn't a surprise. Like a pot that's been sitting on the burner for a long time, it didn't just *suddenly* start boiling; it's been heating up for a while.

But since the vote, it seems as if everyone has a feeling about, or a take on, this situation. Adventists have penned countless opinion pieces about the reasons for and against various perspectives and have written multiple open letters to the church. Members have posted, shared, and tweeted strings of social-media posts. Some are almost gleeful in approval, while others are angry, or outraged, or in a state of pure grief. Sadly, for some Adventists this vote signifies the final straw of betrayal from a church they no longer feel comfortable calling home.

But in the midst of all this, I admit with a bit of remorse that the state of mind I've most comprehensively identified with is *exhaustion*. I've felt weary and have struggled to bring any fresh insight to the situation.

The Cultural Spark

It's not that I don't have strong, passionate opinions about the subject. While the compliance vote has been reduced by some to simply an authority issue, as a longtime Jesus feminist, I'm not surprised that women could spark a cultural revolution in the church.

The gospel consistently calls women to the forefront of leadership in kingdom work, despite the fact that in the culture of the New Testament, this was in no way a logical choice. Whether it's the first recorded preacher (the Samaritan woman at the well), the first person to spread the news of the resurrection (Mary Magdalene), or the first European convert

to Christianity (Lydia of Thyatira), women are time and again described as Spirit-filled, gifted, and called into kingdom work, and this has been upsetting the status quo of the world ever since. It is no surprise to me that this would continue, even in the Adventist church. And in spite of my general despondency, I continue to believe that recognizing the call of God in women's lives is a crucial step in fulfilling the kingdom life we are called to, and I will therefore continue to advocate accordingly, compliant only to my conscience.

I'm certainly not an outlier in my belief, yet I have been at a loss to know how to go forward. I've considered the compliance process. I've prayed about it. At times I've worn myself out thinking about it. Part of me even considered the possibility of leaving this church and moving on. But now that various parts of the church are taking a definite stand on women's ordination, it seems as if there may still be room for someone with my convictions to share in this fellowship.

Consider the Basil

A few weeks back, when praying about this particular subject, I heard a still, small voice in my heart say, "Consider the basil." This was such a random reference that I understood immediately it truly must be God speaking to me, and it also made me laugh. But to understand where this is coming from, you'll need the backstory.

I'm not a gardener. My dad is, and so was my grandfather before him. But since both of them came to gardening somewhere after their half-century marks, it is my conviction that I should not rush the process. I, too, can be a gardener—someday.

This year, however, I wanted to brighten up the porch with some greenery, so I picked up a few potted plants from the

local market: four tomatoes, a mint, a few flowers, and a basil. I transplanted them all and set them across the front of the bungalow for most of June.

Some did better than others. The basil, I noticed, was thriving. It grew at a pace of what seemed like inches each day, and of all the plants on my porch, my basil pleased me the most. But it was not to last. One day a wind came, a gust from the south, purging the trees of loose leaves and branches. The next morning when I went to water my plants, I saw that the basil was gone. I searched for it, because it's not as if a plant can wander far on its own, and found that it had blown off the porch, falling about four feet and landing upside down in the thorns of a rose bush. The poor plant *looked* all right, so I put it back on the porch and watered it, humming a happy basil blessing song as I did. (I have been known to sing to my plants; feel free to judge.)

Soon it became clear that my basil plant was not fine. The leaves grew limp and got brown spots. Not being a plant doctor (or really even a plant person), I had no clue what to do. Like any good Millennial, I turned to Google and typed, “upside down basil sick after falling in rose bush...?”—which, strangely, yielded no answers. I continued to water it and sing to it. “Live, little basil!” I encouraged. But it didn't help. The basil grew dry and weary, and within a week every branch was brown and dry and crunchy, and I was almost certain my basil was dead.

The normal thing at this point would have been to throw out the basil plant. It didn't appear to be absorbing water, which seemed to be a sign of a dead plant. But I kept watering it. And although it didn't have a green leaf on it, I kept talking to it. Pointless as the ritual was, and comical as I found the situation, I kept watering—and singing to—the basil. Every single day.

After a month of this ridiculous ritual, I discovered something strange: a nub of green on the dry, cracked stem. My first thought was that it must be a bug crawling up in search of food, and I assumed it would soon be a disappointed bug. “No lunch for you,” I thought. But on closer examination, this green nub was actually the start of a leaf. And over the next few days, the trend continued. While the branch on the top half of the left side remained completely dry and barren, the branch shooting off toward the right side started to sprout leaves—lots of leaves.

No, it was not a normal basil plant. It was a half-dead skeleton, with death to the left but with a foot of lush, green foliage shooting off toward the top right. It was like a lopsided, half-thriving palm tree. But the point was that my basil was alive! Yes, it was shaped oddly, and altered completely by the fall, but it was thriving.

A Basal Faith

As encouraging as this was, further affirmation came a few weeks later as I was watching a documentary about redwood trees. It featured a man sporting the stereotypical Pacific Northwest plaid, discussing his mission to revive the last of the redwood forest.

He was walking through the forest, saying: “We kept running into these stumps, over and over and over again, and [thinking that] these trees are dead and gone; there's nothing you can do. It's a tragedy, ... but gosh, we just have to learn to live with it ... till we learned about these right here...” He paused, walking away from the giant stump of a redwood and gesturing to a closely neighboring tree, growing next to the stump.

He continued: “Basal sprouts. Okay, this tree is not dead. It's a long way from dead. In fact, it's almost impossible to kill a redwood. You can cut 'em down, burn

'em, ... and you can't kill it. ... Nobody recognized that the tree lives on, because when you threaten its life, from its roots it throws out things called basal sprouts. So the exact genetic fingerprint of this stump ... is in the basal sprouts.”

I hit pause, blinked, rubbed my ears, and thought, “Wait, what?!” I had at first heard “basil.” But I don't think it's a coincidence that *basil* sounds a lot like *basal*, so much so that it once again caught my attention. It seemed really clear to me that God was trying to communicate something. Out of the stumps of things that appear dead, new shoots come forth.

God's Spirit Can't Die

Both of these stories are the same story, and wrapped in them is a profound truth that we, the church, must not lose as we wander through this—and every—tumultuous season in our lives. God's Spirit cannot be killed. You can try to burn it, cut it down, or blow it off the porch into the rose bushes, yet *the Spirit lives*. Our job is to keep our eyes on Jesus; God's job is to live in us, that we may also join in this resurrection life we are called to and rooted into.

I don't know what will happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in this coming season. I have no way to predict how big or little this conflict will turn out to be. But I do believe God heard me. And his answer for weary hearts and despondent spirits is this: keep watering your faith. Keep singing songs of life over it. It may not be clear what is next, or if this thing is even alive at all, but be confident that when you are rooted into Jesus, you will yet live.

We the church may not see the path forward, but the Spirit is not dead. Keep a basal faith. Consider the basil. **AT**

Can This Marriage Be Saved?

BY LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER

ON SUNDAY NIGHT, OCT. 14, 2018, I READ THE NEWS THAT the General Conference had voted the infamous “compliance document,” empowering the world church to discipline union conferences not in compliance with the voted policies of the General Conference. At that point I didn’t even feel anger. That would come later. I felt stunned.

My shock wasn’t just because the vote had passed. What surprised me most was my emotional reaction to it. I thought I had worked through my pain about the policies of the top governing body of my church in the past three years or so, since the vote against women’s ordination in 2015. Why, I wondered,

So if you’re in a relationship with the church and the church hurts you, how many times should you be expected to forgive it?

does this still hurt me so much? Why do I feel the sharpness of it? How does it still cut so precisely, so deeply, right into the depths of me?

As usual, people took to social media to express their pain. I read variations of this comment throughout the next week: Don’t leave. The church needs you to fight for change from within.

After the fifteenth time I read this, I sat back and reflected on what it means to stay and fight for change from within. For me it means continuing to invest. Investing my time. Investing my money. Investing my emotional energy. The highest cost, for me, is my emotional capital. When the church makes these annual decisions that cut me like a knife to my gut—all of them having to do directly or indirectly with my place as a woman in the church—my emotional investment seems foolish at best, personally damaging at worst.

The longer I thought about it, the more it sounded to me like an abusive relationship.

An Abusive Church

Since my divorce almost a year ago, I have met many women who speak in hushed whispers to one another about the men who abused them. Despite not having endured such abuse myself, my

divorce brought me into that previously undiscovered sisterhood. I learned that abused women, especially within religious circles, hear several common themes. The woman should stay in her marriage. The abuse isn’t that bad. She must be exaggerating. She must have brought it upon herself. There are always two sides to every story, after all. She may be lying. I know that man, and he would never abuse his wife. It is her duty to stand by him. She is breaking her vows.

To all of the above, I respond: nothing the wife did (or could ever do) deserves abuse of any kind. Women rarely lie about domestic abuse, and in fact, most women stay much longer than is safe or healthy for them.

So if you’re in a relationship with the church and the church hurts you, how many times should you be expected to forgive it? Should I have left in 2015 when I first felt emotionally stabbed after the San Antonio vote saying that women shouldn’t be ordained? When leaders at the 2016 Annual Council declared they would give the NAD “a year of grace” to either get in line or else face punishment, should I have left then? Perhaps it was time to leave when a sloppy document was forcibly thrust on the General Conference Executive Committee in 2017 and only narrowly sent back for revisions? Or perhaps now, when I can expect to see punishment for my leaders who believe, as I do, that women and men are equal under God and entrusted with the same ministerial calling?

At what point does it stop being a fight to change from within and start being merely enduring abuse? Do I actually have the power to change anything in this relationship?

It Isn’t That Bad

One variation on the theme I mentioned is that “The General Conference isn’t the church!” I’m told: “Focus on your local congregation. That’s where the real church is.” And while I believe that is true, it doesn’t lessen the pain. The General Conference, for better or worse, represents my global church to me, to other members, and to the world. The actions of the General Conference in the past three years are a stain on the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They are not only personally painful, but also embarrassing. Even in my local church, I carry the weight of them.

Stop telling me that I shouldn't feel the pain I feel.

Another thing I've heard (a parallel to what abused women often hear) is that we've brought the current situation upon ourselves. Now I am no expert on colonialism, but I understand how the actions of the North American and European divisions in decades past might have bred resentment. Some say it is understandable, if not right, that Adventist leaders in other geographical regions of the world church are gleefully taking advantage of the chance to show the West who's boss now that membership in those other divisions makes up the majority.

Although I don't feel I can be held personally responsible for a historical grievance, I do see that my spiritual ancestors may have led us into this predicament. So while recent decisions were hurtful and sexist and painful, Adventists in the West may be reaping what was previously sown.

Still, this is global politics outside of my control. Adventist leaders were elected to their positions to represent and protect *all* of the church, including women like me in this region of the world. And what has happened is unequivocally wrong. So while I know that "we hate women!" isn't the reason for these actions, I'm still disappointed by the lack of courage and clarity from our General Conference leaders.

Stand by Him

Relatives on both sides of my family tree have been Adventists for five generations. I went to Adventist schools for my entire education. I've attended Adventist congregations regularly for my 36 years. My parents were both involved heavily in our congregations, and I was raised to be involved, too. My own children attend Adventist schools and church. I was baptized at age 11. If anyone has reason to feel a duty to the church, I do.

But if I have a duty to the church, the church has a duty to me, too. The church has a duty to affirm my equality with men. To cherish me as a child of God. To honor the years I have served it. And at a minimum, to refrain from emotionally eviscerating me once every autumn. Has it fulfilled that duty?

Remember this story, General Conference leaders? Who "was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Jesus asked some experts in the law (Luke 10:36, NIV). One replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (verse 37, NIV).

I think you owe us women some mercy.

Feeling Our Pain

I'm not saying that a small group of thoughtful, committed members can't make a difference. Perhaps we can. And despite my vocal disappointment, I'm still here. I haven't marched into the

pastor's office to demand my membership be removed. Nor have I encouraged others to leave.

What I *am* saying is that people are feeling real pain. And some of them are choosing to leave. It might be hard for you to watch them go. Perhaps you're afraid for their souls. Or maybe you're just afraid that if all of the disillusioned members leave, no one will be left to stand up to the Ted Wilsons of the church.

Either way, those Adventists don't need a guilt trip. They don't need anyone to minimize their pain. They don't need you to tell them to get over it. They don't even need you to tell them to fight back. They just need you to love them.

Offer them grace. Show them that you care about them. Don't make your relationship with the church institution so important that you can't be friends with someone who has questions or wants to leave.

At the very least, honor their pain. Who knows? Maybe if they find someone who doesn't try to minimize the hurt they feel, they won't be as eager to walk out the door. After all, churches are, at their best, a place where hurting people can be vulnerable with one another and receive support, comfort, and hope for their lives.

What Now?

For more than 60 years, *Ladies Home Journal* has been running a popular column titled "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" To borrow from this title, I ask: Can the relationship between disappointed women and the Seventh-day Adventist Church be saved?

That's an individual decision, of course. For those of you who feel the drive, the call, the fire to fight back, I am grateful for you. The church needs people like you.

But others of you feel beat down. You feel repeatedly harmed, even abused. I'm not trying to push you out. But I am here, right now, to give you permission to leave, if you need to. Perhaps you need a break to heal. Maybe you can come back when the church has gotten its act together and become affirming of women (assuming, optimistically, that ever happens).

I know there's the risk that you'll never come back and that you'll find new joy in a relationship with Jesus outside the walls of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We will miss you. But Psalm 16:11 says, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy" (ESV).

John 10:10 says, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (KJV). That doesn't sound like a God who wants you to live in depressed misery. It sounds like a God who wants you to have joy and freedom in your life. Even if that means away from the General Conference and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. **AT**

WHY DO PEOPLE GIVE UP THEIR MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH?
 Right now, some Seventh-day Adventists—probably some readers of *Adventist Today*—are considering it. Many thinking Adventists, especially in North America and Europe, find it increasingly difficult to interpret the actions of the General Conference in a positive way and to keep giving it the benefit of their loyalty. Will they walk away?

The conventional wisdom has been that folks leave because other members have hurt their feelings, or they have discovered doctrinal or moral differences with the church. While this happens, it is certainly not the entire story. A process of disillusionment occurs within questioning church members that

that his losing baseball team could win the World Series, if it were played tomorrow. In short, Charlie is the endearing loser we all love, because he cares so much and tries so hard and never succeeds in kicking a field goal.

Lucy van Pelt is the ball holder, who gets a peculiar satisfaction out of moving the pigskin at the very instant Charlie launches his foot to kick it. His momentum carries him upward to a horizontal position in the air, followed by a hard landing flat on his back. Lucy seems obsessively afraid of getting her football dirty. She is more interested in protecting it than in scoring field goals. She values the ball more than all else, even winning the game. And it belongs to her alone.

How Members Are Motivated **TO LEAVE THE CHURCH**

BY SMUTS VAN ROOYEN

we need to understand. And if we do so, it might help us to define a new relationship between church leadership and its protesting members. It may even give us reason for optimism.

Let me try to illustrate a process of disillusionment using two familiar characters from the *Peanuts* comic strip. Charlie Brown and Lucy are involved in an ongoing failure to score a field goal together. Let's meet them.

Charlie Brown and Lucy

Charlie Brown is the frustrated field goal kicker. He is an 8-year-old boy who wears a yellow shirt with a black zigzag on its lower front fringe, which may indicate a proclivity for vacillation. Because his head is rather big and round, a phrenologist might measure it to be the cranium of a budding progressive. A single curl looping tightly over his high brow marks his face with a quizzical, perplexed expression. At times he seems too young for his age. Charlie is not very good at sports, but he loves to play baseball and football. In spite of his stubborn determination, his team never seems to win. Nor does he ever succeed in putting the ball through the goalposts.

Charlie spends most of his life between the poles of negative pessimism and heroic optimism. When on the negative downswing, he is reluctant to enter the day because he fears he will spoil it. When on the heroic upswing, he is wholly confident

When the team plays baseball, her position is far right field. Even there, she deliberately drops the high fly balls hit her way. She blames toxic substances coming from her glove that make her crazy, or she claims that the moons of Saturn get in her eyes.

One of Lucy's pastimes is giving advice. On occasion she sets up a counseling booth similar to a child's lemonade stand, from which she pontificates wisdom. Sitting behind her little table, she humbly declares, "I can't help thinking this world would be a better place if everyone would listen to me." Some of her other assertions are: "You can't do it, but I can" and "The secret to love is the removal of the competition." She does not tolerate having her competence and authority questioned. She claims: "I've never made a MISTAKE in my life. I thought I did ONCE. But was WRONG."

Two questions arise from the dynamic between Charlie and Lucy: (1) Is Charlie likely to quit playing football with Lucy? and (2) What would prompt him to do so?

Weiner's Attributional Theory

We could get some help in understanding the process of disillusionment from the famed social psychologist Bernard Weiner. An American professor at the University of California in Los Angeles, Weiner has a theory about how ordinary people explain their failures and successes—in fact, their lives—to themselves, and how they react to their explanations.

Weiner's theory proposes that a person's causal explanations of a failure will determine the effort he or she is willing to invest in the future—whether to persist or to quit. For example, a student might ask: "Am I failing at math because I have no aptitude for it or because the teacher just does not know how to teach it? And is this situation likely to change?" The causal explanation of the failure he gives to himself will determine whether he quits the class, takes math from another teacher, or gives up on math forever.

The theory suggests three specific causal attributions people make, when faced with a failure, that affect their motivation:

Locus of cause: Is the cause of the failure inside or outside of me? Who caused this failure?

Controllability: To what extent, if any, did I have control of the situation? Was the control shared or one-sided?

Stability of cause: Can the situation change over time? Will there ever be a capacity to change?

Charlie Brown's Attribution

With Weiner's theory in mind, let's look at the causal attributions Charlie might make about his failure to kick the ball and determine how he becomes disillusioned.

Locus of cause attribution. Charlie says to himself: "Lucy is the cause of the team's failure, not me. I can kick well, but she doesn't hold the ball steady and upright. The fault is with her. My intention is to win the game for both of us, but she is afraid the ball will get dirty or damaged, so she moves it. She has a total misconception of what a ball is for and what a game is about. I am not to blame; she is, and I am tired of landing on my back."

While such an attribution may make Charlie feel free of guilt and blame, it nevertheless makes him angry and thus demotivates him. But he loves football and his team. Snoopy, Schroeder, Linus, and Woodstock are his friends. He knows Lucy has gamed him, but he still thinks he might convince her to actually hold the ball in place. So he will keep on trying, but even as he does, ambivalence begins to set in. Something seems to be wrong with Lucy.

Controllability attribution. Charlie begins to realize: "I am unable to share control with Lucy. She creates an illusion of sharing control with me during my run-up for the kick, but she has no intention of granting me even partial control. In her view the ball belongs to her and, therefore, she alone should control it. Shared control is foreign to her—and a sheer fantasy I keep falling for." A feeling of helplessness now begins to plague Charlie Brown. He is impotent despite all of his efforts and good intentions. His desire to win for the team amounts to

nothing. He is now on the brink of walking away from the game.

Stability attribution. Charlie reaches the point in his thinking where he says: "Lucy will never change, even over time. Change is impossible for her because of what she is. It's in her genetic structure to keep the ball to herself. Even time will not heal her." With this attribution Charlie might feel a certain pity for her, but a sense of hopelessness will overtake him. An assessment of her capacity to change has shown him the futility of continuing to play the game. Nothing will ever change, because it cannot change. Deep disillusionment now takes hold of Charlie Brown. He will in all likelihood finally leave the field of play. And sadly, Lucy would probably not care.

There is reason for optimism; therefore, I will continue to participate—not as a rebel, but as a remonstrator within a loyal opposition.

The Current Situation

Although I blame the General Conference's top leadership and not myself for the present crisis in the church (*locus of cause attribution*), and although I wholly reject the notion of forced compliance on policy issues (*controllability attribution*), I plan to remain an active Seventh-day Adventist. This is so because I do not make the fatal attribution that the church has lost the capacity to change over time (*stability attribution*). Intransigence has not yet come to a granite stability. Thank the Lord, our church, as I see it, is still capable of change and will weather this storm.

As evidence for the capacity to change, I note those who have joined the cause. Their ranks extend beyond the lone reformer type, who can be defined by the authorities as a heretic and then hanged in the public square. Rather powerful administrative entities now challenge the General Conference. The Dukes support the reformation, and Rome has cause for fear. We have become hard to bully.

I also find the vote count on recent explosive issues to be revealing. The vote has been close, perhaps too close for comfort to those in charge. It seems the opposition to the status quo is proportionately significant.

There is reason for optimism; therefore, I will continue to participate—not as a rebel, but as a remonstrator within a loyal opposition. I'm running up to kick a field goal and to loft that pigskin through the posts. **AT**



What Are We Waiting for Now?

By Carmen Seibold

LIKE A LOT OF MY GENERATION, IT DIDN'T occur to me when I was a child that women could be pastors. But when it was suggested to me, perhaps sometime when I was in college, I saw no reason why they shouldn't be. After all, a woman was our church's preeminent leader and the author of our unique inspired and authoritative writings. At the time, women were flooding all other professions and jobs. Why not ministry?

Back then, though, church leaders told us that we had to be patient. Just wait, they said. There isn't enough support for women's ordination yet. The entire world isn't ready, they said.

Through what has been my entire adult life, I have heard, "Just wait." Wait for us to figure out what Ellen White counseled. Wait for us to move on this together, so we

don't create conflict in the church. Wait for our best Bible scholars to render an opinion. Wait for stronger support from reluctant parts of the church membership. Wait for the mission fields to agree with us. Wait for the General Conference to decide.

Wait. Wait. Just wait. Be patient.

Ordination Lite

In spite of my denomination's slowness, I felt called to study for ministry. After a career as a registered nurse, I completed my M.Div. at Fuller Theological Seminary, took Clinical Pastoral Education classes, and for the last third of my working life I have been a hospice chaplain, ministering to the dying and their loved ones. Because my employer expected some kind of affirmation of my calling from my denomination, my conference first offered me something called commissioning, a sort of "ordination lite." My employer accepted it, though puzzled about what in the world a "commission" was.

The question of whether the Adventist Church can recognize and bless pastors who are women with the same signs and words it uses to bless pastors who are men has been kicked around since at least 1881. In this century some union conferences, motivated by a growing biblical understanding of the gospel, began to study the constitution, bylaws, and policies of the denomination.

They realized that they are in charge of whom they choose to ordain, and they moved beyond misusing ordination as a gender marker. Some union conference constituencies voted to ordain all of their pastors. A few others decided to forgo ordination for everyone. Nearly all of the union conferences across a vast portion of the North American Division (NAD), the South Pacific Division, and Europe—plus a few elsewhere—have hired female pastors and voiced their support for women in ministry, with most even saying that they support ordaining women when it is permitted.

I'm blessed to be in the Columbia Union Conference, where I've been fully affirmed in my ministry. Yet many of my sister pastors, even here in the NAD, are still waiting.

Moment of Clarity

Several months ago, the General Conference Executive Committee's Annual Council meeting in Battle Creek voted to implement a disciplinary system of "compliance committees," understood by most as a means to punish unions that have ordained women or otherwise consecrated their pastors equally.

While we don't yet know the actual power of these committees, this should be a moment of clarity for other leaders of the denomination. There is no longer any question of winning approval for ordaining women from the leaders of the General Conference or its executive committee. Many in the church don't want to make room for the biblically based conscience and missional needs of others—and this on a practice fully supported by our Fundamental Beliefs! (Perhaps part of the problem is the GC

We haven't moved forward despite having a track record of successful women pastors, the rules on our side, and support from constituencies.

president's sermons highlighting the errors and dangers of a "progressive" church, until many feel that women in church leadership is one of those evils.)

So here's my question to all of the remaining conferences, union conferences, and their leaders and executive committee members who have spoken in favor of women in ministry but have not yet acted: What are we waiting for now?

Across the Adventist church, women in ministry are showing us that the Holy Spirit has gifted and called them. The Holy Spirit is leading congregations and leaders to recognize them.

So I ask again: conference and union administrators, executive committee members in territories where you say you are waiting—now what are you waiting for?

Waiting is clearly not convincing the rest of the church; with the Battle Creek decision to impose negative consequences on those who want to ordain women, we're now farther from a resolution than ever. That decision means that compliance requires going backward. Many women want to do ministry and are doing it well. Young people in our churches are seeing their church as so out of touch as to be irrelevant, because we haven't moved forward despite having a track record of successful women pastors, the rules on our side, and support from constituencies.

I dare ask this question because it is glaringly necessary: What are we waiting for now?

We've Waited Long Enough

Why should we expect a change from the General Conference that it shows no sign of making—a change that we may not see in our lifetimes, if ever?

Why wait more decades to do what you are already empowered to do? How much waiting does it take to be seen as "cooperative"? What does it say about the value we place on women in the overall gospel message to continue to wait, and wait, and wait for a church that doesn't respect these values? Is it time to say, "We've waited long enough"?

I wish each person reading this would put this question to your conference leaders, union leaders, and their executive committee members. Our conference and union leaders are crafting strategies for the future. And I'd like them to know that we out here are wondering how much longer they're willing to wait.

For our part, we think we've waited long enough. **AT**

Our holy ambitions are not focused on compliance with an ecclesiastical vision fossilized in a policy manual.

We aspire to a brighter and nobler calling: loving God and loving our neighbors.



COMPLIANCE?

It Didn't Even Cross Our Minds

By John McLarty

I SPENT A COUPLE OF HOURS LAST NIGHT DOING church. The people I was sitting with organize worship, coordinate children's Sabbath School, manage the maintenance of our large, old building, take food to our senior members when they are sick, feed the homeless, and provide the money and volunteer hours required to operate our school. These are good people. They care for one another. They love their church. The congregation would collapse without them.

And they are noncompliant.

One is homeschooling to protect her children from the faith-eroding dogma of flood geology. They think of Sabbath as a divine gift that enriches our lives now rather than as an end-time test of obedience. None cares anything

about 1844. They believe clergy should be chosen on the basis of gifts and calling, not on the basis of maleness. They share the pew on Sabbath mornings with people whose formal religious identity is Catholic or atheist or devout, conservative Adventist. One woman grew up in the world of self-supporting Adventists who attempted to incarnate Ellen White's "blueprint" for life: communal living, disdain for formal education, and evidence-based medicine. She is at the top (literally) of her profession in Seattle because relatives rescued her and funded her education. Another in our circle helped to create *Spectrum* magazine. Another has devoted decades to the Association of Adventist Women and the

weariness struggle to get the Adventist church to properly respect women.

A Brighter and Nobler Calling

We are noncompliant, if “compliant” means studied submission to the dictates of General Conference committees or employees. Such compliance never crossed our minds. Our holy ambitions are not focused on compliance with an ecclesiastical vision fossilized in a policy manual. We aspire to a brighter and nobler calling: loving God and loving our neighbors.

If worship is a measure of our love for God, this congregation is pretty good at loving God. We devote a significant portion of our corporate attention, time, and money to our public worship services. We are publicly and privately devoted to the God who loves. We nourish and express that love in our worship services, and we dream of even better worship.

If service is a measure of love for neighbor, this congregation is really good at loving neighbors. One of our circle fired an employee for drug use and then paid for the ex-employee’s rehab program, paid for his kids to attend camp every summer, and now includes this former employee—turned successful contractor—and his kids in church social events. Another of our circle funds grad-school scholarships for women from Africa. One is revered by an entire clan in another country because of the love he showered on one of their own and the respect he has demonstrated for the entire community across the decades. Another of these so-called noncompliant tracked down the lost family of one of our seniors who had been dumped in an orphanage when she was 5 years old. The fruit of this work: in her old age, this “orphan” was joyously received by a family of brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews whose existence she had scarcely suspected.

All of Us Together

What can I say about the place of church in supporting the family love on display among us? We celebrate, appropriately, the precocious children in our midst: the kids playing violin, dazzling us with their stage presence when they read scripture or preach. These kids give us a collective sense of parental pride at our annual recognition of their academic and athletic and community service awards. Church is where these brilliant young people hear, unambiguously, the call to employ their greatness in service. Church is also where we love and honor the other children: the 40-year-old babies who have not yet learned to say a single word or have even managed potty training. They are our children, too. Where besides church can all of these children be treasured as the gifts—as the weighty responsibilities—they are? Church is where all mothering is honored: the mothering that sets the stage for future greatness as well as the mothering that never sees a graduation, never attends a recital, never is reversed in a sweet old age where the child becomes the caregiver. Church is not about 1844 or 6,000 years or perfect families where all of the children are above average. In the congregations I have been part of, church meant all of us together.

I make no pretense of knowing how to successfully run a denomination or a university or other large institution. But I do have decades of experience leading congregations—groups of people devoted to God and in love with people. (Note to the bureaucrats: tithe and church school support measurably increase in congregations where I pastor.) The heresy-hunting and policy obsession evident in the “compliance committees” are utterly alien to the life of church as I tasted it at last night’s board meeting at Green Lake Church and have experienced over the

decades in congregations from New York City to Seattle.

Because We Are Noncompliant

Green Lake Church is an Adventist church. It would not exist apart from the denomination. The majority of people in the pews and on the boards and committees of Green Lake Church have deep, multigenerational roots in Adventism. The new families that show up, swelling our children’s Sabbath School departments and disrupting our carefully planned worship services (smiley face), come because mom or dad or both grew up Seventh-day Adventist. These new people arrive at our church because we are Seventh-day Adventist. However, they stay because we are noncompliant. They stay because here they do not have to choose between being Adventist and honoring the ministry of women or the research of scientists or the humanity of their gay friends. They would not listen to apocalyptic speculations. We are Adventist by history, culture, and religious conviction. But none of us has bothered to read a church policy manual in a very long time. And we care nothing about being “compliant.” Instead we cultivate acquaintance with God and love for our neighbors. We give careful attention to the text of the gospel (e.g., especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke). We pursue truth and love.

Rather than looking over our shoulders to see if we are compliant with the dictates of church bureaucrats who have little experience in actual church life, we look forward along the path illuminated by Jesus: loving God and loving neighbors. We will do this in the context of Adventism as long as we are allowed. **AT**

HOW *NOT* TO IMPOSE ORTHODOXY AND COMPLIANCE: **LESSONS FROM** AN 1888 CASE STUDY¹

By Gilbert M. Valentine

Just over 155 years after achieving a unified organizational structure (1863), the Adventist church today grapples with the challenge of how to maintain unity and compliance with centrally approved convictions and policies. It is currently attempting to achieve unity by installing regulations to ensure orthodox teaching as well as systems of punitive compliance control that override local church leadership and local institutional boards.

Such approaches fly in the face of Ellen White's counsel that unity can never be achieved through enforced

policy compliance. In 1889, in the midst of a threatening church schism, she wrote that "the church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement."² Unity through legislation and policy enforcement was not the way forward for a church claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit.

The resolutions Ellen White had in mind were those specifically designed to muzzle and control Bible teachers to prevent them from teaching new scriptural interpretations. A contextual study of Ellen White's 1888 passionate objections to such methods highlights important principles for

the church today as it seeks to regulate religion teaching. The 1888 approach is a case study of a failed model of administration. It also casts light on the futility of recent attempts to prevent Adventist union conferences from publicly recognizing the work of the Spirit in the ministry of women. The refusal of current church leaders to take heed of such warnings is puzzling indeed.

Defending Bible Teachers

On Sunday, Oct. 21, 1888, in a challenging address to the contentious General Conference Session at Minneapolis, Ellen White described and defended the change-agency, "prophetic" role that is a vital part of the Adventist religion teacher's task. "The Lord has need of men who are

spiritually sharp and clear-sighted,” men upon whose minds “God’s Word flashes light, revealing to them . . . the safe path.”³ She was, at the time, speaking particularly of two young West Coast religion teachers named Alonzo T. Jones and Ellet J. Waggoner.⁴ With these two men in mind, she went on to make one of her most provocative public defenses of an educator’s change-agency, innovative, “prophetic” function.

White opposed attempts to use denominational legislation to restrain Bible teaching. In opposition to just such a proposed policy in 1888, she asserted: “Instructors in our schools should never be bound about by being told that they are to teach only what has been taught hitherto. Away with such restrictions.”⁵ Was this just prophetic hyperbole, not to be taken literally? Did Ellen White really mean “never be bound”? She continued, “That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God’s message for this time.”⁶

Later she would add, in a letter drafted for deposed General Conference (GC) President George Butler, who had encouraged such restrictive policy initiatives, “When the resolution was urged upon the conference that nothing should be taught in the college contrary to that which has been taught, I felt deeply, for I knew whoever framed that resolution was not aware of what he was doing.”⁷

Situating the Statements

At the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference Session, senior church leaders in a focused administrative

effort sought to preserve the doctrinal status quo and constrain Bible scholars. They proposed a policy that would require Adventist religion instructors and periodical editors to teach only already established positions; no new doctrinal insights were to be

Enacting restrictive legislation that would prohibit Adventist thought leaders from teaching anything that might be considered doctrinally new was absolutely not the way to proceed, Ellen White argued. It was not the way God worked.

introduced. Ellen White fought hard during the conference to protect the innovative role of the Bible teacher. Her declaration on Sunday morning, Oct. 21, addressed several policy initiatives

to legislate orthodoxy that had been attempted unsuccessfully during the previous week.

On the day that the conference ended, Sunday, Nov. 4, White wrote to her daughter-in-law reporting that the session had produced “the hardest and most incomprehensible tug of war we have ever had among our people.”⁸ She noted that it had been “a most laborious meeting for Willie,” her son, “and I have had to watch at every point lest there should be moves made, resolutions passed, that would prove detrimental to the future work.”⁹

Three months later, in January 1889, Ellen White would write a long letter of rebuke to Rufus A. Underwood, president of the Ohio Conference and an influential member of the General Conference Executive Committee. Underwood probably had chaired the committee that framed the restrictive policy resolution attempting to impose and maintain orthodoxy.¹⁰ White deplored the fact that he had persisted with the resolution even after she had spoken against it, pointing out its very real dangers. They had looked at each other across the room, she recalled, and she had observed his scowl. White reminded Underwood that she had told the conference delegates about “what had been shown me in the past in reference to resolutions which covered the same ground.”¹¹

She spoke negatively of the resolutions adopted two years earlier in 1886. Furthermore, she recalled that she had told the delegates that she was “a [legal] stockholder” in Battle Creek College and on those grounds, too, “I could not let the resolution pass.” It was simply not “right that every

that they “should never have seen the light of day”; however, legislating them out of discussion was not right either, even though there might be risk.¹³ Enacting restrictive legislation that would prohibit Adventist thought leaders from teaching anything that might be considered doctrinally new

made part of the public instruction” in colleges, Sabbath Schools, or in periodicals, unless “approved by the leading brethren of experience.”¹⁴ The “introduction of points of doctrine contrary to the established faith” needed to be avoided. Why? Because the faith of the body had already been settled. The declared purpose of the policy resolution was to achieve the very laudable goal of “unity,” for “unity in the work of God is of paramount importance.”¹⁵ But by 1888, the 1886 policy prohibition framework was deemed insufficient. It had not worked as intended as a mechanism of unity. Major disagreements over biblical interpretation continued to disturb the church and its leaders.

At the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference Session, senior church leaders in a focused administrative effort sought to preserve the doctrinal status quo and constrain Bible scholars.

avenue should be closed in our school so that the students could not have the benefit of this light” [from Bible teacher A. T. Jones], she asserted. “The resolution was not called for.”¹²

What is of particular interest about the Underwood letter is Ellen White’s juxtaposition of a discussion of the futility of legislating orthodoxy alongside a discussion about former GC President George Butler publishing and promoting erroneous speculative ideas on the nature of biblical inspiration. White was certain that Butler’s ideas were not right and

was absolutely not the way to proceed, Ellen White argued. It was not the way God worked.

An Earlier Prohibition

The intention of the proposed 1888 General Conference policy initiative for restricting Bible scholars was to control, if not silence, Jones and Waggoner. As we have already noted, it had antecedents. Two years earlier at the 1886 GC Session (held when Ellen White was absent in Europe), Butler as GC president had engineered the forming of a “Theological Committee” to propose the adoption of a resolution by that session that “doctrinal views not held by a fair majority of our people” were not to “be

Hermeneutical Disagreements

Serious conflict over biblical and prophetic interpretation formed the backstory to the 1888 episode. As is generally well-known, the primary issue in contention at the time was the interpretation of Galatians 3:24-25. Was the “law” (the “schoolmaster”) in these verses referring to the moral law or to the ceremonial law?

How to interpret and apply Revelation 13 was also an issue. Jones’ new take on this chapter, according to *Review editor Uriah Smith*, “undermined the positions held for thirty years.”¹⁶ Smith and Jones also disagreed over which European nation comprised the tenth toe of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in Daniel 2.¹⁷

For George Butler and Uriah Smith and their traditionalist supporters, however, the really serious issue was

the Galatians interpretation. It is crucial to understand why this was deemed so important.

To reinterpret this passage as applying to the moral law posed two serious problems for the church. First, it undermined a deeply entrenched Adventist apologetic for the Seventh-day Sabbath. In fact, the two senior leaders viewed the new interpretation as recklessly undermining pillars of the faith. Already the public argument that Galatians 3 referred to the moral law but not to the ceremonial law had precipitated the 1887 departure of the church's leading evangelist, Dudley M. Canright. He had abandoned the Sabbath and rejected Adventism because he claimed the Sabbath could not be defended if Galatians spoke of the Ten Commandments.

Arguing the view that the "moral law" was the referent in Galatians might sound spiritually insightful to the uninitiated, asserted Smith, the highly respected editor of the *Review* and established defender of the faith, but it threatened to "break down our old positions of faith."¹⁸ There was no question "more vital to the interests of Sabbath-keepers."¹⁹ Both Butler and Smith genuinely thought that by opposing Jones and Waggoner, they were upholding historic Adventism and protecting the foundations of the church's key Sabbath doctrine.

The second problem posed by the "moral law" interpretation, in the minds of both Smith and Butler, was that acceptance of it would undermine the authority of the Spirit of Prophecy and would cause widespread confusion. This

is because both senior GC leaders clearly recalled how 34 years earlier, in 1854, Ellen White had intervened in a dispute between Stephen Pierce and Joseph H. Waggoner (Ellet's father) over which law was referenced in Galatians. She had declared that the "moral law" interpretation, favored by Waggoner, was wrong. In fact, White's intervention at that time had persuaded George Butler to change his mind 180 degrees on the question.²⁰ Now, in 1888, he could not understand how Ellen White would entertain the opposite viewpoint.

For the two veteran church leaders, a reversal of the prophet's earlier counsel regarding the Galatians teaching was simply very dangerous. They considered it as much a problem as the undermining of the Sabbath truth, and both felt it their duty to defend the church against such subtle and insidious attacks from the upstart West Coast Bible teachers.

As if that wasn't bad enough, church politics soon greatly complicated things for everyone.

Indignant Protectors

Both Smith and Butler felt they had reason to be supercautious over the name of Alonzo T. Jones when, six months before the Minneapolis session, the Californian teacher was proposed as a candidate for the church's flagship ministerial training center at Battle Creek College. The energetic 38-year-old Jones had attracted attention as a

Bible and history teacher at Healdsburg College in California. He was popular with students, and his fresh insights had impressed both Ellen White and her son, W. C. White. He had also impressed W. W. Prescott, the General Conference educational secretary and president of Battle Creek College. In early April of 1888, Prescott and W. C. White persuaded the General Conference committee to recommend to the college board that Jones be appointed, apparently with the support of Ellen White.

At the board meeting, the Jones appointment "was the subject of lengthy discussion but no formal action was taken." The issue was shelved. Jones, it seemed, was just too risky an appointment. According to later information from Ellen White, rumors had come to the ears of the board chair, George Butler, reporting that because of Jones' unorthodox teaching at Healdsburg, parents in Northern and Central California had threatened to not send their children to the college, fearing they would be exposed to questionable new ideas that could weaken their faith. Butler had reportedly received a number of such letters.²¹

On Nov. 13, 1888, after the leading brethren returned to Battle Creek from Minneapolis, discussion over Jones

as Bible teacher was taken up again by the board, and once more the name was “discussed at considerable length.” The prospect of Jones also being a lead teacher at a churchwide Ministerial Institute scheduled for the winter of 1889-1890 gave the matter even more weight. Again, however, the trustees turned down the proposal and turned instead to the relatively unknown Frank D. Starr. Impasse.

The deadlock over who should be the new teacher eventually

as chair of the college board. Uriah Smith, who had resigned as General Conference secretary in solemn protest at the direction of matters in Minneapolis (after he had been elected), also continued serving on the college board. Among the 10 senior leaders who sat down together in joint session that day to seek to resolve the issue were some indignant men with severely bruised egos who considered themselves the last defenders of the orthodox faith.

might fill the position.

Three days later, board chairman Butler reported that following a long conference with Jones, the candidate “had assured them in a very positive manner that if he should be employed to assist” in the college, he “would not knowingly teach any opinions contrary to those which the Board desired to be taught recognizing fully the right of the Board to determine what views should be presented.”²³ What Ellen White had labored so hard to prevent at Minneapolis by her protests, Butler and Smith had now achieved: control over Jones’ teaching. By securing Jones’ acquiescence to silence on the new ideas, Butler felt he had protected the church and had prevented the spread of a cancer. As things turned out, Jones taught for only one quarter at the college, and the politics of the situation meant he could not be utilized at the Ministerial Institute.

Ellen White was more than a little unhappy that “arrangements were made to shut him [Jones] out of the school for fear something should come in that would be at variance with what has been taught at the school.”²⁴ In fact, she was highly indignant. This way of doing things was not “a conscientiousness inspired by the Spirit of God” but was “from another source.”²⁵

Really? That serious? Yes. So were attempts by the elders of the Battle Creek church to control the content of Ellen White’s own preaching and to prevent Jones from being invited to preach at the headquarters church.

Ellen White’s ire would again rise, and this time with Bible scholar Prescott in mind, she asserted, “The God of heaven sometimes commissions men to teach that which is regarded as contrary to the established doctrines.”

necessitated a highly unusual joint meeting of the General Conference Committee and the college board on Thursday morning, Nov. 22. The interpersonal board dynamics were now complicated by the unexpected election upheaval at the GC Session. Although George Butler was no longer president of the General Conference nor a member of the executive committee, he still served

The board was called to explain its failure to make an appointment. “The fact that Eld. Jones took so prominent a part in pressing vigorously at the recent General Conference points of doctrine concerning which there exists differences of opinion among the body of S. D. Adventists was stated to be the reason why the Board had hesitated about employing him.”²² After lengthy discussion it was determined that Butler, Smith, and Prescott should interview the nonconforming teacher about how he

Controlling the Pulpit

Upon her return to Battle Creek from Minneapolis, White was deeply disturbed over the conditions that local elders attempted to place on her own preaching.²⁶ She would certainly not be muzzled, and she did not want to see Jones be muzzled either. When Ellen White heard of such attempts, she became irate. “I bore a very plain testimony to these brethren,” she recalled.²⁷

Such restrictions and prejudice reminded her of the attitudes in her home church in Portland, Maine, when, as a 15-year-old in 1843, she had experienced the pain of her family being excluded from Methodism. Adventism, she feared, had come full circle—back to where her creed-encrusted Methodism had been when she left it.

“As reformers,” she wrote, “they [early Adventists] had come out of the denominational churches, but they now act a part similar to that which the churches acted. We hoped that there would not be the necessity for another coming out,” she lamented, using a well-understood and fateful Millerite expression. But she resolved to resist. “While we will endeavor to keep the ‘unity of the Spirit’ in the bonds of peace,” she recollected, “we will not with pen or voice cease to protest against bigotry.”²⁸ Legislating in the church to prevent and prohibit new perspectives and muzzling a Bible teacher was a muzzling of the Spirit, she felt. It was not the way forward.

As a kind of coda to this extended episode, it is worth noting that in

1896, eight years after Minneapolis, Uriah Smith and his circle of defenders of the orthodox view on Galatians 3:24 continued to resist the new insights. This led them to reject a manuscript submitted by W. W. Prescott titled “The Law in Christ,” because they saw it as expressing “fundamental errors.” Ellen White’s ire would again rise, and this time with Bible scholar Prescott in mind, she asserted, “The God of heaven sometimes commissions men to teach that which is regarded as contrary to the established doctrines.” And in a prophetic but subversive tone, she would add that “men in authority are not always to be obeyed.”²⁹

Legislating Orthodoxy Is Not the Way

The contextual background to Ellen White’s 1888 and continuing opposition to the use of legislative policy as a means of imposing conformity clearly indicates that in her view, the innovator role of the Bible teacher was an important dimension within a healthy church that is expanding its understanding of present truth. Denominational legislation or policy regulation and the muzzling of a scholar’s voice were not the way forward for a church led by the Spirit.

Smith and Butler perceived that the exegesis of Jones and Waggoner would undo teachings “vital” to the existence of our faith. The departure of Canright over the issue of Galatians had served as an

alarming recent warning. How could the church defend the Sabbath on the basis of Jones’ and Waggoner’s interpretation? These senior leaders felt they were carrying out a pastoral duty to the church and protecting its core teachings. But for Ellen White, protecting a church teaching by ecclesiastical legislation (or by encoding it in a creed-like statement) was to muzzle the Holy Spirit.

White did not advocate unfettered libertarianism. Furthermore, she was deeply committed to the unity of the church. But she also saw the need for the church community to live with the creative tension between preserving the faith of the fathers and having a faith that was relevant “present truth.” The prophetic role of the Bible teacher/scholar was essential to maintaining that balance.

This important Minneapolis episode clearly points out that administrative approaches to ensuring orthodoxy are inappropriate if they put authority for orthodoxy into the hands of small groups, or if they reflect a disposition to control the minds of others, or if they in effect legislate against new interpretations and new ideas.

Balancing openness to the freshness of the Spirit and keeping the faith relevant with the need for church unity and the ensuring of orthodoxy continues to be a demanding task for church leaders today. But if this episode teaches anything, it suggests that legislating orthodoxy is not the way forward for a community of the Spirit. **AT**

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POLICY VIOLATIONS AND COMPLIANCE COMMITTEES:
A DEADLY
MINEFIELD

By Alvin Masarira

VERY FEW ECCLESIASTICAL DECISIONS have been more controversial in the history of our denomination than the vote at the 2018 Annual Council meeting to accept item 113-18G: “Regard for and practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions.” As you undoubtedly know by now, it outlines a process to enforce compliance with organizational policies and votes, complete with disciplinary measures for those who don’t comply.

As I listened to the presentations made by the various General Conference (GC) Executive Committee members prior to the vote, I was most touched by the presentation of Dr. Peter Landless, the General Conference director for

Health Ministries. As a white native of South Africa, he reminded the Annual Council (and all watching or listening around the world) that the church has in the past made serious mistakes by voting unethical, immoral, and unprincipled policies, and that expecting people to abide by such policies in violation of their conscience is wrong.

Landless talked about the policies of racial segregation practiced by the Adventist Church in South Africa during the apartheid years. Black Adventist members, churches, pastors, and church workers were ill-treated by the church system, receiving inferior benefits and working conditions compared to their white counterparts. This was official church policy, and anyone who stood up against it was violating church policy and would have faced the “wrath of the compliance committees.”

The same issues mark the history of the United States, where racial segregation within the church was official church policy.

Selective Enforcement

Thus, my biggest problem with this policy enforcement strategy is the likelihood of selective enforcement.

The General Conference Auditing Service reported this year that noncompliance is up 2 percent over last year to 83 percent of all entities. The terms of reference for the newly created compliance committees were not discussed at Annual Council. When will these committees begin their work, and how fair will any appeals process be? Given the high rate of noncompliance across the world church, how will enforcement work in practice?

Most of us believe that the policy compliance process was put in place to penalize those regions of the world that ordain female pastors. Yet these

entities view women's ordination as an issue of social justice, gender equality, morality, and ethics. They are acting according to conscience. As with the racially discriminatory policies of the past (e.g., apartheid in South Africa or Jim Crow in the United States), no one should be expected to follow policy that they believe is immoral.

In an earlier piece on the *Adventist Today* website, I talked about the positions that leaders of the Adventist Church in Africa take on such matters.¹ To further highlight the minefield through which the compliance committees will have to walk, I share two examples from the Southern Africa Indian Ocean Division (SID):

- *Racially Based Entities*. At the 1991 Annual Council in Perth, Australia, the GC Executive Committee voted that racially based local conferences, union conferences, and other institutions in South Africa should be disbanded. The church in South Africa was given two years to do this. Yet 27 years later, it is not yet fully achieved. Even though the 1991 resolution was reaffirmed by the GC Executive Committee in 2002, the SID is still noncompliant on this matter.

- *The Degrees Scandal*. In 2016, the man who was then SID president was accused of acquiring his doctoral degree in theology at a South African university through unethical means. The matter was widely reported and is in the public domain. GC President Ted Wilson personally chaired a SID executive committee meeting where it was discussed and heard the

testimony of a person who said that he wrote some of the chapters that were then submitted to the university under the name of the man who was then the division president.

The then-president of the SID resigned on the basis of that testimony, but he was subsequently moved to another part of the division,

As with the racially discriminatory policies of the past (e.g., apartheid in South Africa or Jim Crow in the United States), no one should be expected to follow policy that they believe is immoral.

where he is currently serving as a district pastor. Church policy requires that both he and the man who claimed to be his ghostwriter appear before the division ethics committee for a hearing. The matter is relatively simple, in that either the person who claimed to have written a majority of the doctoral thesis was lying (and therefore should be fired) or else he was truthful, and in that

case the then-president of the SID should have been sanctioned and removed from pastoral ministry. One would expect the General Conference president who chaired the meeting to know the policy and ensure that it was complied with, but nothing of that sort happened, and both leaders are still serving.

Private Investigations

These examples show the huge task that GC compliance committees will face if they are to convince the world church that they are not just a “special policing agency” to deal with noncompliance only when it relates to the ordination of female pastors.

It also exposes another risk: that church members, pastors, or entities appear empowered now to conduct their own private investigations against each other, in order to find and report policy violations. Historically, the General Conference is meant to serve as a facilitation body for the union conferences, which were specifically created in 1901 to ensure that the GC does not become a super police for Adventist believers across the world. As many have pointed out, existing church policy contains enough provisions to ensure the church is united in its vision and mission without creating this unnecessary structure, which also violates the basic ethos of Adventism. **AT**

¹ Alvin Masarira, “The General Conference Compliance Committees and Africa,” *Adventist Today*, online edition (Sept. 18, 2018).



Conscience, Compliance, and Compassion

By Alden Thompson

The recent debate over compliance presents a complex challenge for Adventists. Here I will bracket the word “compliance” with two other terms that can help us explore the Lord’s will. I address each in turn: (1) conscience, (2) compliance, and (3) compassion.

1. Conscience. I would hope that Adventists would always make conscience their first priority. It may be skewed, but it is still the only safe arbiter of our actions. What is so unsettling, however, is the realization that our consciences differ, sometimes radically, especially when in response to authority. Although the line between them is often ragged, the human response to authority typically divides into two groups: those who are conscience-bound to obey authority and those who are conscience-bound to resist it.

Such diversity shouldn’t surprise us. As Ellen White put it: “Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same.”¹

As I see it, it is incredibly difficult for a free-thinking rebel to recognize that an authoritarian is conscience-bound to “obey,” since in his mind the authority is always “right” even when it is “wrong”! But it is equally difficult for the obedient authoritarian to understand why the rebel could be so bold as to reject authority. Is the matter genetically determined? I think so, and that will be a key factor when we talk about compassion.

An illustration: When the first edition of my book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* was published in 1991, a fascinating incident occurred during the Saturday-night book sale at the Idaho

Conference Camp Meeting that year. When my book came up, the publishing-house representative made this announcement: “Now here is a book that is not approved by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference!”

Perhaps he was thinking that such a line would sell more books, and it did indeed sell some, as noted below. The typical role of the press representative, however, has been to hawk the books with enthusiasm, saying: “Now here is a book you will want to buy for all your grandchildren!”—and variations on that theme. Why the Review and Herald rep would announce my book as not approved, I cannot imagine. There had indeed been lively discussion about the book, but at that time it was not the role of the BRI to either approve or disapprove of books published by either the Review or Pacific Press. Nevertheless, the reaction of those at the sale indicated that his flamboyant claim of nonapproval did sell some books, for at his announcement, a host of hands went down at the same time that a host of hands went up!

Differing perspectives can actually be a strength to the church. Amens with no discussion can be deadly. But we are also on shaky ground if we always call everything into question. Is one danger greater than the other? An Ellen White quotation from the turmoil of 1888 suggests so. “When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures,” she declared, “when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition and worship they know not what.”²

2. Compliance. If we could remember the conviction of our early Adventist forebears that

our statements of belief are descriptive rather than prescriptive, compliance would not be an issue.

For example, our very first statement of belief—the unofficial one of 1872—made that point with emphasis, noting that this “synopsis of our faith” was not for the church, but for others: “We wish to have it distinctly understood that we have no articles of

For whatever reason, those of an authoritarian bent have not been able to see or hear Ellen White’s powerful statements in opposition to any call for compliance. She herself had plenty of experience opposing authoritarian voices in the church while she was still alive.

faith, creed, or discipline, having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them. We often find it necessary to meet inquiries on this subject, and sometimes to correct false statements circulated against us, and to remove erroneous impressions which have obtained with those who have not had an opportunity to become acquainted with our faith and practice. Our only object is to meet this necessity.”

Reinforcing that 1872 position was the official vote of the 1883 General Conference to reject a church manual. That rejection was all the more remarkable because the General Conference, during the previous year, had appointed a committee to draw up a manual and serialize it in the *Review* for the entire church to read. A vote would then be taken the next year.

The committee did as instructed, but it recommended at the next General Conference that the manual not be adopted: “It is the unanimous judgment of the committee that it would not be advisable to have a Church Manual. ... It would seem to many like a step toward formation of a creed, or a discipline, other than the Bible, something we have always been opposed to as a denomination. If we had one, we fear many, especially those commencing to preach, would study it to obtain guidance in religious matters, rather than to seek for it in the Bible, and from the leadings of the Spirit of God, which would tend to their hindrance in genuine religious experience and in knowledge of the mind of the Spirit. ... The committee feels, in short, that our tendency should be in the direction of simplicity and close conformity to the Bible, rather than in elaborately defining every point in church management and church ordinances.”³

The delegates agreed, voting not to adopt a manual. The first official one wasn’t published until 1932.

3. Compassion. When Ellen White died in 1915, the church lost its most powerful change agent. And for whatever reason, those of an authoritarian bent have not been able to see or hear Ellen White’s powerful statements in opposition to any call for compliance. She herself had plenty of experience opposing authoritarian voices in the church while she was still alive.

One of the most vivid examples is provided by her relationship with G. I. Butler when he was General Conference president. An anecdote about Butler reveals his own assessment of that relationship.

At the Autumn Council of 1915, a proposal came from the General Conference that either we bring our missionaries home or else close the medical school at Loma Linda. The delegates were stunned. But Butler, then 81, stood and said: “You know who I am: George I. Butler. I used to be president of the General Conference, and I think I received more testimonies from the servant of the Lord than any of you, and most of them rebuked me. We were at times urged to do what seemed impossible, but when we

Authoritarians will always be among us, and given the distinct possibility that their attitude toward authority may be nonvolitional, and perhaps even genetically determined, we must treat them with respect.

went forward by faith, the way opened.”

A. V. Olson, the 31-year-old president of the Quebec Conference, was there and told what happened: “Waving a pamphlet with Ellen White’s counsel on Loma Linda, Butler continued: ‘Now Brother Daniells [then president of the General Conference] will soon call for a vote. When he does, there is one old hand that will not go up. This hand,’ he said as he stretched out his quivering arm, ‘has not learned how to vote to close what God says should be open.’” Butler “lowered his trembling hand and sat down.”⁴

Olson remembers: “I thrust my right hand into my pocket and said to myself: ‘I know another hand that will not go up!’”

The result? “Not one hand went up! The school was permitted to live. Not one missionary was called home in order to give the foreign missions offerings to the school.”

Authoritarians will always be among us, and given the distinct possibility that their attitude toward authority may be nonvolitional, and perhaps even genetically determined, we must treat them with respect.

But while treating them with respect and compassion, we must recognize that their calls to compliance are not necessarily consistent with the truth as it is in Jesus or with our early Adventist heritage. When it comes to issues of authority, Jesus is our standard. He did not coerce or call anyone to compliance. By God’s grace, we can follow his teaching and his example. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), p. 483.

² White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (1889), pp. 706-707.

³ *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, vol. 60, no. 46 (Nov. 20, 1883), p. 733.

⁴ A. V. Olson, *Thirteen Crisis Years* (1966, 1981), pp. 95-96.

Valentine *continued from page 39*

¹ Material in this paper extends research that was presented briefly in an earlier article: Gilbert Valentine, "A Slice of History: The Difficulties of Imposing Orthodoxy," *Ministry*, vol. 75, no. 2 (2003), pp. 5-8.

² E. G. White to Brother and Sister Buckner, Letter 29, Nov. 8, 1889.

³ Ellen G. White, Manuscript 8a, 1888, paragraph 6.

⁴ Jones was a teacher at the Adventist school in Healdsburg, California, and Waggoner taught there part-time over several years in addition to his editing and regional preaching.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ White, Manuscript 16, 1889, paragraph 8.

Several resolutions concerning controls on new ideas had apparently been attempted.

"Transcription of Minutes of GC Sessions from 1863 to 1888," Dec. 6, 1886, p. 334. See also "General Conference Proceedings," *The Review and Herald*, Nov. 23, 1886, p. 728; "General Conference Proceedings" *The Review and Herald*, Dec. 14, 1886, p. 779.

⁸ E. G. White to Mary White, Letter 82, 1888, paragraph 3. Ellen White did not attend the final day of the Minneapolis session (Nov. 4, 1888), and on that morning the session voted a modified resolution titled, "How New Theories Shall Be Presented." It read:

"#3. We Recommend, That persons holding views different from those commonly taught by us as a denomination, present them to the conference committee of their respective states; and if thought proper, the conference committee present them to the state institute; and if considered of sufficient importance by the state institute, it shall recommend them for consideration at the General Conference Institute, a report of all such cases to be sent at the close of the state institute to the General Conference Committee." From "Transcription of Minutes of GC Sessions from 1863 to 1888," Nov. 4, 1888, p. 388. What Ellen White thought of this particular resolution is not known. It would have had the same effect as the one she opposed.

⁹ White, Letter 82, 1888, paragraph 2.

¹⁰ In his non-extant letter to Ellen White in January 1889, Underwood had raised the matter of the proposal. His letter is cited in her response; see E. G. White to R. A. Underwood, Letter 22, 1889.

¹¹ White, Letter 22, 1889, paragraph 25.

¹² *ibid.*, paragraph 28.

¹³ White, Manuscript 16, 1889, paragraph 6.

¹⁴ "General Conference Proceedings," *The Review and Herald*, Nov. 23, 1886, p. 728 and *The Review and Herald*, Dec. 14, 1886, p. 779.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ U. Smith to A. T. Robinson, Sept. 21, 1892.

¹⁷ As George R. Knight has pointed out, these hermeneutical conflicts took place against the background of a dramatically heightened sense of imminence due to recent persecution of some Adventists in the Southern states who had been imprisoned over so-called Sunday Law violations. From A. T. Jones: *Point Man on Adventism's Charismatic Frontier* (2012), p. 77.

¹⁸ U. Smith to A. T. Robinson, Sept. 21, 1892.

¹⁹ Uriah Smith, *Synopsis of the Present Truth* (1884), p. 258.

²⁰ Ellen G. White to A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, Letter 37, Feb. 18, 1887; U. Smith to A. T. Robinson, Sept. 21, 1892; Uriah Smith, *Synopsis of the Present Truth* (1884), p. 258. Smith and Butler recalled that Ellen White had written her 1854 letter on the basis of a vision asserting that J. H. Waggoner had been wrong in his hermeneutics.

²¹ E. G. White to W. M. Healey, Letter 7, Dec. 9, 1888. Healey had also been the source of rumors circulating around Battle Creek that Ellen White and W. C. White had colluded with Jones and Waggoner in California to deliberately make a push against Butler and Smith. Learning of the conspiracy theory after the General Conference, White was irate and rebuked Healey for acting like a traitor.

²² Battle Creek College Board Minutes, Nov. 22, 1888, p. 290. Andrews University Archives.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁴ White, Manuscript 16, 1889, paragraph 8.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ White, "Experience Following the Minneapolis Conference," Manuscript 30, 1889. See also E. G. White to R. A. Underwood, Letter 22, 1889, for an additional account of the episode.

²⁷ E. G. White to R. A. Underwood, Jan. 20, 1889.

²⁸ White, Manuscript 30, 1889, paragraph 14.

²⁹ E. G. White to S. N. Haskell, Letter 38, May 30, 1896. The letter needs to be read in the context of Manuscript 148, Oct. 26, 1898, which on the basis of internal evidence should be dated two years earlier in 1896. See Gilbert M. Valentine, *W. W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation* (2005), pp. 115-116.

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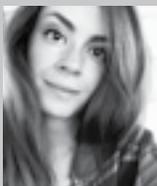
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EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the editorial board. One of the purposes of this magazine is to encourage dialogue between those of differing viewpoints within the Adventist Church. Thus, we will publish articles ranging throughout the conservative-liberal continuum.

Contributors



ELLE BERRY is a writer and nutritionist. She is passionate about creating wellness, maintaining a bottomless cup of tea, and exploring every beautiful vista in the Pacific Northwest. She blogs at ChasingWhippoorwills.com.



Prior to retirement, **LOWELL C. COOPER**, MDiv, MPH, served for 16 years as a general vice president at the General Conference of SDA. He currently serves as a member of the General Conference Executive Committee and lives in the state of Washington.



WILL EVA was born in Zimbabwe and spent his first 20 years in Southern Africa before moving, via England, to the United States.

He spent 40 years in Adventist ministry and retired a decade ago. Now he enjoys greater freedom and life with his wife, Claire, devoting as much time as possible to their daughter and son and their granddaughters.



DENIS FORTIN is professor of historical theology at Andrews University.



ALVIN MASARIRA is a structural engineering consultant based in Johannesburg, South Africa. He and his wife, Limakatso, who is a medical doctor, have three children.



JOHN MCLARTY is a past editor of *Adventist Today* and currently serves as pastor of the Green Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church in Seattle, Washington.



LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER is a mother and author from northern California who enjoys writing about feminism, politics, and faith. She is one of the editors of the *Adventist Today* newsletter, *AT Update*. When she isn't writing, she can be found working or playing with her children, Emery and Warren, and her cats.



CARMEN SEIBOLD is a chaplain in Columbus, Ohio.



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ALDEN THOMPSON is professor emeritus of biblical studies at Walla Walla University. A revised 25th-anniversary edition of his book *Inspiration* was released in 2016.



CHRISTOPHER C. THOMPSON works in Huntsville, Alabama, for the Breath of Life broadcast ministry. He and his wife, Tracy, have one son, Christopher II.



EDWIN TORKELSEN is a retired historian who worked for the National Archives in Norway. He also taught medieval history in the University of Oslo and was an associate professor of history in the University of Trondheim with a special interest in the development of the ecclesiastical, jurisdictional, theological, doctrinal, and political ideologies of the medieval church.



GILBERT M. VALENTINE chairs the Department of Administration and Leadership at La Sierra University and has written extensively on Adventist history. He is the author of *The Struggle for the Prophetic Heritage* (2006) on the history of the White Estate and *The Prophet and the Presidents* (2011).



SMUTS VAN ROOYEN is a retired pastor living in Central California. He holds an M.Div. and a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from Andrews University. His ministry has been divided between teaching undergraduate religion and pastoring. He has been married to Arlene for a long time.

Adventist Today



NEWS BRIEFS

GC Wishes Adventists a Compliant 2019

SILVER SPRING, Md. — In the new year, the General Conference released what it called a “grave greeting” wishing Adventists everywhere a Compliant 2019. The e-card greeting linked to “helpful guidance” from an ever-growing list of compliance committees that covered everything from veggie lasagna recipes to how many times musicians should practice Sabbath-morning special numbers before going live (seven, of course).

In addition, headquarters released a database of the entire Adventist membership that included a “compliance score” for every baptized Adventist. Particularly low scores were accompanied by explanatory notes, which were especially scathing in their critique of members who snore in church.

Dwight Nelson Declares That God Hates Carob

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich. — In a passionately delivered sermon this Sabbath, Pioneer Memorial church Senior Pastor Dwight Nelson claimed that the eighth thing God hates is carob.

After rattling off haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers, Nelson said that years of Bible study and personal experience had led him to the inescapable conclusion that carob comes next on the list.

“Look, I’m just calling a spade a spade here,” said Nelson, looking down at his sermon notes. “I know I’m walking on thin ice with some of you. But we as an Adventist global family cannot keep deceiving ourselves about that nasty, brown pseudo food that worms its way into our cookies and onto the shelves of our ABC stores.”

New Bracelets Prompt: “What Would Ellen Do?”

SILVER SPRING, Md. — The Ellen G. White Estate has released a line of “What Would Ellen Do?” (WWED) bracelets aimed at reminding Adventists of the counsels of the denomination’s prolific co-founder.

“WWED bracelets will be given, free of charge, to every tithe-paying member of the church,” announced the White Estate spokesperson, Elm Havenne. “The hope is that any Adventist who is contemplating consumption of a beef burger, the purchase of a modest red dress, or investment in a new bicycle would read the bracelet and then consult the Spirit of Prophecy.”

The decision to produce the bracelets was held up in committee for years since bracelets are, after all, adornment. “We decided to overlook this technicality,” said Havenne, “as the WWED bracelets are manufactured in a hideous green to protect wearers from vanity, and they serve such an important function. Just think of them as rubber watches that don’t keep track of time.”

Rich Adventist Brings Camels to U.S. School

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich. — Multimillionaire Adventist Frank B. Worthington has funded major research at the Andrews University School of Architecture. The aim of the project is to design sewing needle eyes that can comfortably allow unobstructed passage of full-grown camels.

Worthington donated an initial \$7 million of his fortune toward the study and has signaled his willingness to contribute much more, saying that the design of this sought-after needle eye is “a matter of life and death.”

To facilitate testing of the needle-eye prototype, a herd of camels have been imported from Israel. The camels have been afforded premium accommodations on the Andrews farm and are currently being trained to navigate a series of obstacle courses on the Andrews campus.

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don’t mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.



Christ at the Center of Adventist Today

October 4-6, 2019 | Portland, Oregon | Embassy Suites Washington Square

What is AT1?

AT1 (pronounced “At One”) is a brand new gathering for the Adventist community. It is a call to be one body in Christ. Our theme is “Christ Challenges Culture.” AT1 will inspire those who attend to reimagine the Adventist narrative in order to fully embrace the reassuring, present truth of God’s love and grace.

What’s the point of AT1?

The whole point of AT1 is to gather as one body of Christ and be inspired by how Jesus challenges culture. This isn’t a time to argue and debate or talk insider baseball about church policy. This is a fresh kind of fellowship where we are encouraged by uplifting music, presentations, and art blending beautifully as we worship and spend time getting to know each other. AT1 is a reminder that there is reconciliation in Jesus.



Who’s this thing for?

You are warmly welcome whether you are an active, happy Adventist, or a lifelong Adventist disappointed in recent decisions by the General Conference, or a person with Adventist family ties and some interest in where the denomination is going. We are inclusive and accepting of all, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, income, gender, sexuality, background, or persuasion.

Why should I care about AT1?

This is an important time to be a progressive Adventist. General Conference leadership is attempting to narrow the parameters of our global community, and AT1 resists this kind of arbitrary approach to faith. We believe that true unity can come only through generous, open faith that takes seriously the love and grace of Jesus. AT1 aims to help write a hope-filled new chapter in the Adventist story, and we need your help to do so.



REGISTER NOW!

www.atoday.org/at1-registration-information/

Who is speaking?

All of our presenters will be pointing us to Christ, who calls us together and challenges us to be positive change agents in today’s culture. Our teaching and worship team so far includes:

Brenda Billings | Chris Oberg | Dilys Brooks | Emily Whitney | Jennifer Deans | Kendra Haloviak Valentine | Marlene Ferreras | Michaela Lawrence Jeffery | Linda Emmerson | Alex Bryan | Don Veverka | Joey Oh | John Brunt | John McLarty | Karl Haffner | Nick Zork

How do I make sure I’m part of this amazing gathering?

Please make your reservation for this event right away for best pricing. Also reserve your room at Embassy Suites at our special rate. If you want to be an exhibitor at this event, please ask to be put on the list for consideration.

Adventist Today

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