

From the G.C. President

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1. DISTORTIONS CLARIFIED: Two journals from the opposite extremes of the theological spectrum recently published startlingly distorted reports of what took place at the 1994 Annual Council and what agenda items were referred to the General Conference Session. Interestingly, both reports rested on similar philosophical arguments: 1) rejection of any authority beyond the local congregation, and 2) the description of that rejected authority as hierarchical and consequently to be distrusted.

One article stated that the proposal would “allow a Conference committee or constituency meeting to disfellowship a local church member that the local church refuses to deal with.” The author went on to state, “Should this proposal be accepted by the General Conference Session in Utrecht,..our church will become more hierarchical in structure, approaching that of the Roman Catholic Church in this respect.”

Let me be very clear in my response. 1) *No such proposal* will be on the General Conference Session agenda. 2) Nothing like this was even suggested at Annual Council. 3) On the contrary, one proposal to the General Conference Session is designed to significantly *increase* accountability to our world membership, by a) increasing the number of laity and front-line workers (pastors/teachers) from the world divisions who attend Annual Council and b) by bringing *every* union president from around the world to the Annual Council. These committee members, representing the constituencies that selected them, will be present to make the critical decisions about the future direction of the Church.

The Commission on World Church Organization did struggle with the conduct of some congregations which ignoring the responsibilities placed upon them by the world membership, bring disgrace on their fellow believers. The Commission invited Dr. Raoul Dederen, from Andrews University, to spend some days presenting the Biblical model of church governance. It was thrilling to dig into the Scriptures with him and find the Biblical principles that guided the development of our current church organization. However, after all was said and done, the Commission reaffirmed the various levels of church structure with their differing spheres of authority.

It is evident that we face challenges of almost every type imaginable. Some groups seem committed to undermine one or more of our fundamental beliefs. Other groups distort a belief and proclaim it as the “orthodox” position. They all seem to have one thing in common: they are uncomfortable with *any* authority.

Sadly, these groups are not attempting to fulfill the gospel commission or teach the distinctive message entrusted to this movement. Instead, gazing inward, they seek out those who will shift their loyalty and support from the church organization to themselves. They subtly attempt to bring about this shift without the

individuals noticing that they have transferred their trust from the collective authority of the membership to that of a single individual. These “leaders” are wise enough to know that attacking the broad authority of the membership would be self-defeating for they would be attacking those whose loyalty they are trying to gain! To avoid this they describe the church organization, with its elected leaders, as hierarchical.

Please remember that in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, authority comes from God and is manifested through the membership and *not* through *any* individual, including the General Conference president. If you have any doubt, you should have attended the 1994 Annual Council, where all ideas and proposals were fully and, often, vigorously, debated. As a result, the Church was served with better decisions.

Be assured that there is *no* move toward centralized authority. Our church, from the congregation to the General Conference, operates by committee. At the General Conference, significant operating decisions are made by committees and many administrative issues come to the 23-member administrative committee. Of course, all policy and major agenda items are referred to the General Conference Executive Committee which in turn refer items to the General Conference Session itself. At every point, representatives of the world church pray for divine guidance as they consider each and every issue. Believe me, there is no “kingly power” here.

To achieve our divinely-appointed mission, every congregation and organization should operate within parameters voted by the world body and documented in the *Church Manual*. Each should take care to exercise its privileges and fulfill its responsibilities. I could hope that annually the pastor would review with each church board the privileges *and* responsibilities of a church and its leadership, as described in the *Church Manual*.

2. SABBATH CLASSES have become a problem in many francophone countries in Africa with the re-introduction of Saturday classes in France where the educational philosophy requires classes six days a week. Ivory Coast is among the countries in Africa following this system. In response to appeals to Pierre Kipre, minister of education, initially all Seventh-day Adventist students were exempted from classes. Subsequently, he ordered that examinations should not be conducted on Saturday. Last week we received word that the government has cancelled Saturday classes for all elementary and secondary schools, and we are praying this decision will be extended to cover universities.