

From the G.C. President

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O A MATTER OF HONESTY: This edition of *From the GC President* bears little resemblance to those you receive every week. In this edition I'm going to bare my soul and discuss one of the painful issues with which many of us in church leadership wrestle. The reason we "wrestle" is the absence of easy answers. The issue is this: Should the church respond when members take unfair advantage of the membership at large and, if so, how?

Let me say at the outset, I despise litigation. It distracts from our mission, wastes money, frequently brings reproach upon this movement and it essentially contradicts the character of Christ whom we must represent. If this is true of litigation in general, a Christlike life and the practice of Christian ethics should preclude the necessity of litigation much less utilizing litigation as a remedy for strife. If this is true between members, it should be far more applicable between a member and the membership at large as an organized body. Why then do we even need to discuss the topic? The answer should be clear—"Don't." Yet, the issues remain unresolved.

The church becomes involved in litigation for many reasons but they can be divided into two general categories.

1) The church as defendant—an unwilling participant: American society's litigiousness and anti-organizational bias has not failed to flavor the attitudes and assumptions of the Seventh-day Adventist community. The effect of applying Ellen White's counsel (to resolve conflicts outside the legal system) in this environment can be likened to a "one way street." While it is very rare for the church organization to appeal to the law to protect the interests of the membership, this stands in stark contrast to the constant stream of lawsuits brought by members against the church.

2) The church as plaintiff—initiating litigation: Perhaps feeling protected by our anti-litigation church culture, a few members engage in what I consider unethical (perhaps even illegal) activity which, in a secular environment, would not occur because of the likelihood of litigation. Thus, after attempting other methods of conflict resolution, governing committees must wrestle with the painful issue of whether to appeal to the courts to protect the interests of all church members from the abuses of the few.

Example: To illustrate the problem, let me share an actual situation. In January 1989 the Ellen G. White Estate Board of Trustees authorized the production and sale of a CD-ROM containing all of Ellen White's previously published writings. This was a decision which put the White Estate at considerable financial risk, because the use of CD-ROMs was in its infancy. But the Ellen White Estate Board proceeded because of its commitment to facilitating easy access to Ellen White's writings, so that serious students could search the Spirit of Prophecy conveniently.

Including funds borrowed from the General Conference, the White Estate invested more than US\$250,000 to publish its CD-ROM. Though the books had all been previously published, entering the manuscripts in the computer was still a huge task. The material had to be retyped twice and then compared electronically for greater accuracy. The 367 titles which were re-entered included 124 books, 66 periodicals, 153 pamphlets and 24 miscellaneous collections, Arthur White's 6 Volume *Ellen White Biography*, D.A. Delafield's *Ellen White in Europe* and the KJVs of the Bible. The CD-ROM

was finally produced and is marketed at Adventist Book Centers (with a 20 percent margin) for US\$179.

Misuse by others: Soon after the White Estate's CD-ROM was released, certain individual members of the church simply transferred significant portions of the White Estate's CD-ROM to one of their own and then proceeded to market their versions at a discounted rate! Typographical errors transferred from the original in the process provide ample evidence of their source.

Victims: Not only has the White Estate been victimized, but even purchasers have felt "used" when they discovered the bargain price of the CD they purchased was based on such questionable practices.

Doesn't it seem strange that the ethics of some people who claim to love Ellen White's writings bear little resemblance to her oft-quoted statement: "The greatest want of the world is the want of men ... whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole" (*Education*, p. 57)?

Questions: With this background, some of the difficult questions we face become more evident. For example:

1) Just how far should the church go in following our Lord's mandate recorded in Matthew 18:15-18? Discussions with the offenders? Asking the church to study the situation and make a determination? Reporting findings to the offenders' congregation? And, if the offenders ignore the authority of the church, to consider them "as a heathen man and a publican," with the possibility of taking legal action against them? Should the church really go that far?

2) The Ellen White Estate, at great expense, is currently preparing a CD-ROM containing the remaining 50,000 pages of Ellen White's unpublished writings. This investment of time and money must also be recovered. Should they continue the plan to publish this new release? What if, after another substantial investment, the new material is simply copied and sold at a lower price by others? Should the White Estate be prepared to defend the integrity and its legal rights to this new work?

3) If a legal response were to be initiated, will our members understand the cause and support the action? Is it reasonable to expect that supportive ministries or church organizations will rally to protect the broader church interests? Or will they give aid and comfort to those who take advantage?

Conclusion: These questions address the basic question of how we should individually apply the biblical principles of honesty and integrity in our modern society. They also force us to ask just what the church as a body should do to protect itself in such situations.

As the Apostle John quoted our Lord Jesus: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, **may they also be in us**, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, **so that they may be one, as we are one**, I in them and you in me, that **they may become completely one**, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17: 21-23 NRSV, emphasis supplied) May God help us pull together, not apart!