

# From the G.C. President

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**O DATELINE SOUTH AFRICA:** After a five and a half hour flight from Ethiopia we arrived in Johannesburg last Tuesday evening. When I visited South Africa in 1991 our church had two unions and at least two local fields, divided along racial lines, overlapping every part of the country. Ours was one, if not the last, church which, by its organizational structure, provided spiritual legitimacy to the tragic legacy of apartheid.

Since my last visit, both union constituencies voted to unite and elected highly qualified leaders representing the major population segments. Deciding where to locate the union headquarters wasn't easy. Since, until recent memory, blacks and coloreds could not spend the night in Bloemfontein, headquarters of the white union, our black members insisted that it serve only temporarily as the site of the union office. However, the atmosphere of New South Africa has changed. Both the state governor and city mayor are black, and newly elected black and colored church leaders feel so welcome that today none consider relocation as an acceptable option.

At the conference level, in 1994 the constituents of the (predominantly black) Natal Field and the (predominantly white) Orange Free State-Natal Conference also voted to unite. I was anxious to see for myself the effects of the unification process on mission, finances and the spirit of our believers. On Wednesday I spent the morning in Durban, with the office staff and pastors of the newly merged conference and that evening worshiped with our believers. What a thrilling experience. God's blessings have been greater than anybody hoped. All indicators have exceeded expectations. Soul-winning is up. Parity in employee salary and benefits, which critics insisted would lead to bankruptcy, was achieved in only two years, far ahead of schedule! And this is the only local field in South Africa which in 1997 is paying its employees the full salary and benefit package approved by the union. Morale is high among members and employees alike. Apprehension has led many white South Africans to emigrate, a trend also evident among Adventist pastors. Unity may be an antidote to this trend for fewer pastors of the united conference have emigrated than in the racially divided fields.

Thursday morning, I flew to Bloemfontein and spent the morning with the union staff and met with our believers in the evening. Friday, I returned to Johannesburg where the day's activities included radio and television interviews and a visit to Soweto. There we visited several of the 26 Seventh-day Adventist Churches and began to lay plans for a major evangelistic campaign which we hope will double the 26 churches serving this township of over 3 million people. "The gospel and church unity" was the focus of my Friday evening remarks during an informal discussion with many of Trans-Orange and Transvaal Conference workers. And Sabbath was a high day as the 8,000-seat auditorium was filled to overflowing with members from both conferences. After a quick lunch we flew south for the last meeting of this itinerary. Due to having only four hours between our arrival in Cape Town and departure for the United States, our meeting with

the pastors, church elders and leaders of the three conferences in the Cape Town area was scheduled to be held in a hall near the airport.

The constituencies of the three conferences, divided largely along racial lines, met a few months ago to decide whether or not to unite as one conference. The Southern (largely black) and Good Hope (largely colored and Indian) Conferences voted to unite but the constituents of the (largely white) Cape Conference fell 13 votes short of the 75 percent required under their constitution for unification. To the embarrassment of our members, the South African press published this action widely. And, though contrary to policy and constitution, to say nothing of intent, the rumor among white members was that I had come to "force" a reversal of this vote! So it is easy to understand why I was anxious to meet with this group.

However, you can imagine my surprise when, during the 15-minute drive from the airport to the hall, I found that instead of an informal dialogue with a few leaders, over 5,000 members were waiting for a sermon—and my notes were in the suitcases already checked in for the continuing flight to the United States! Life is full of surprises. The music was glorious and we spent time in the Word comparing the transformational effect of the gospel on those who are "in Christ" with the superficial effect of traditional, rule-based, pseudo-Christianity which is inevitably legalistic—whether the list of rules are long (conservative) or short (liberal).

Then we bade our friends farewell and dashed for the airport to begin the 14½-hour, all-night flight to Miami and continuing 2½-hour flight to Washington.

**O BULGARIAN CRISIS:** With 400 percent inflation in January and prices changing every few hours most people in Bulgaria are unable to heat their homes and also buy bread. According to a report I just received, many members are unable to attend church because they cannot afford bus tickets. To give one example: with a salary equivalent to about US\$6 per month a pastor can buy either 13 liters (3.4 gal) of gasoline OR one loaf of bread per day! Please pray for our Bulgarian believers.

**O VIDEO EVANGELISM IN PORTUGAL:** Pastor Henry Feyerabend's (speaker of the Portuguese "It Is Written" telecast) May '97 evangelistic campaign to be held in Espinho, Portugal will be video-taped, duplicated and sent to all 77 churches in the country where the evangelistic series will begin one week later.