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A response to «A Study of Church Governance and Unity»

A statement by the Norwegian Union Conference leaders

The document «A Study of Church Governance and Unity» published recently by the General Conference Secretariat seeks, it claims, to develop unity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The document has a number of weaknesses and is likely to contribute to the splitting of the church over the issue of equality for women in ministry. An attempt to coerce unions to comply with General Conference Working Policy is likely to set in motion a series of uncontrollable and unpredictable events.

Oversimplification

A major weakness of the lengthy document from the Secretariat is over simplification of the issue under consideration: the Adventist church's approach to the ordination of women. The basic assumption on which the argument of the document is based, is this: Unity can only be achieved by getting deviant unions in line with General Conference Working Policy.

It is understandable that the General Conference Secretariat, whose function is to ensure that Seventh-day Adventist entities follow the General Conference Working Policy, writes only in terms of policy compliance, but it is a dangerous oversimplification based on pragmatic rather than moral and spiritual considerations.

Those unions which have ordained female pastors or stopped ordaining altogether, do so because they are convinced that the Bible tells them to treat men and women equally. Their decisions are not grounded in policy, but in spiritual and moral obligation.

The document does not properly take into account the theological understanding that has motivated unions to a course of action different to the stipulations of the Working Policy. This failure in understanding means that the document will not actually provide a basis for stronger unity, but rather the contrary.

The work of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) ended by presenting two opposite understandings of the biblical material on the ordination of women. When a worldwide church study of ordination concluded that both views are legitimate, it is futile now to call upon Working Policy to deny that diversity.

Diversity

Section III of the document discusses "Diversity, Union and Authority" and states: "In the Bible, diversity is a positive quality, not a negative one" (p. 10). The same is true in

the writings of Ellen G. White. The document goes on to raise the question of how the limits to diversity are to be defined. The Secretariat proposes the principle that decisions on the limits of diversity should be defined “collectively and collaboratively, not unilaterally.” (p. 12).

The document considers the early church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) saying it “is significant almost as much for its process as for the theological decision that resulted.” (p 13). The document ignores the fact that there are two major factors for the success of the decision at the Jerusalem council. One factor was how the Holy Spirit lead to positions they previously held unthinkable as well as working mightily among gentiles. In the council, Peter told how he was asked to visit Cornelius, and Paul and Barnabas witnessed concerning their work among gentiles. The second major factor was the apostles’ brave leadership of guiding the church into a totally new understanding of Scripture, making room for different practices in the church.

In the Old Testament, God had prescribed a manner of worship and from their plain reading of the Scriptures, the Jews had drawn the conclusion that “it was improbable that He would ever authorize a change in any of its specifications.” (AA 189). Still the leadership of the church helped members to a broadened view. Ellen G. White says: “the very existence of the Church” depended on this decision (AA 192).

At the General Conference Session in San Antonio in 2015, the Seventh-day Adventist Church decided to deny the principle that guided the Jerusalem Council and made it a success. The work of the Holy Spirit through female pastors in China was not mentioned. Delegates decided against diversity in the practice of ordination. Previously, in the years while TOSC did its work, the General Conference leadership had followed a strategy of conspicuous silence regarding how to handle diversity. The General Conference behaved very differently from the apostles at the Jerusalem council, providing no leadership to the church on a very divisive issue. We believe that the General Conference leadership must take responsibility for its failure to reach a decision that would create the possibility for different practices to exist harmoniously, side by side within the church. Because of the “no-vote” in San Antonio, we are now in a much more difficult situation than we were in prior to San Antonio.

[Need for leadership to lead](#)

The question of ordination of female ministers has undoubtedly been the most divisive and most difficult issue the Seventh-day Adventist Church has faced in recent decades. When facing divisive issues, the church needs competent leadership. However, the General Conference President has made no attempt to create space for divisions and unions to allow ordination of women. The TOSC had not ruled any of the presented views as illegitimate. Therefore there was an obligation for the General Conference leadership to set aside divisive personal convictions and work for a unifying solution.

The General Conference was repeatedly urged to give a recommendation to the delegates to the San Antonio session. Most notably many members of the General Conference Executive Committee pleaded with leadership at the 2014 Annual Council to give guidance to the delegates. Leadership declined. The failure to create space for different views on the ordination of women to ministry was a grave mistake.

Elder Wilson made clear his personal opposition to the ordination of women, but he never attempted to defuse the situation by calling for a solution that would accommodate both sides. If unity was high on the agenda of the General Conference

leadership prior to San Antonio, they did not use the most obvious opportunity to create it.

The study document released by the General Conference Secretariat says not one word about the obligation of the General Conference leadership to safeguard unity by creating space for different practices. That is a major weakness of the document.

Dialogue is better than confrontation

Joshua 22 recounts a story showing the value of dialogue in changing policy. After the conquest of Israel, the account in Joshua 22, describes how some tribes heard that the two and a half tribes that took land on the other side of the Jordan, had erected an altar. The Israelites assembled for war against the two and a half tribes. They would not tolerate a departure from policy.

However, after representatives had talked with the leaders of the two and a half tribes, the situation was defused. War was avoided. The unauthorized altar was accepted.

Ellen G. White comments on the issue: “How often serious difficulties arise from a simple misunderstanding, even among those who are actuated by the worthiest motives; and without the exercise of courtesy and forbearance, what serious and even fatal results may follow (PP 519).

She continues to draw lessons of the greatest importance and relevance for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the present crisis: “While very sensitive to the least blame in regard to their own course, many are too severe in dealing with those whom they suppose to be in error. No one was ever reclaimed from a wrong position by censure and reproach; but many are thus driven further from the right path and led to harden their hearts against conviction. A spirit of kindness, a courteous, forbearing deportment may save the erring and hide a multitude of sins (PP 519.520 *Italics supplied*).

“The wisdom displayed by the Reubenites and their companions is worthy of imitation. ... Those who are actuated by the spirit of Christ will possess that charity which suffers long and is kind” (PP 520).

This is the kind of attitude needed to make sure the Seventh-day Adventist Church stays united. Only actions bearing the qualities of the fruit of the spirit will bring true unity among the people of God. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal 5:22.23).

Assessment of possible outcomes

It has become known that the General Conference is working on a document outlining how to discipline unions that do not comply with policy. Information from the General Conference indicates that the church leadership wants to use considerable pressure to get unions in line with the Working Policy.

It is our experience that few of the documents presented by the General Conference to the Executive Committee, contain any assessment of possible outcome scenarios. Therefore, it is important to ask, what are the implications of the church leadership’s failure to consider possible responses to the propositions in the present document?

We have noted above that the document «A Study of Church Governance and Unity» is oversimplifying the issue. Any thinking along the lines that an Executive Committee action would coerce unions into line, is far too optimistic. The major problem with this thinking is that the General Conference is appealing to policy, but for the unions in question this is a question of a biblical and moral mandate.

In a showdown along these lines, the General Conference is bound to loose. We are Seventh-day Adventists. We know by heart Acts 5:29: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” (KJV).

Here are some possible outcomes that must be considered:

1. Unions accept the urge to return to following the General Conference *Working Policy*. This is probably what the General Conference is intending. It is, however, an unlikely outcome, given the biblical, moral and in some cases legal obligations felt by some unions that they have to treat men and women equally.
2. The General Conference tries to replace union leadership in unions that do not comply with the *Working Policy*. Any such move will most certainly meet with strong opposition, and may turn out to be impossible to accomplish because the actions of these unions are an expression of the convictions of the members in those unions.
3. General Conference will lose further credibility among large segments of the membership because of the handling of the situation.
4. The Church will split. The affected unions may sever connections with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A domino effect may take place where many other unions leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church. By trying to coerce unions, a series of uncontrollable and unforeseen events will develop.

The probability of splitting the church by voting harsh measures against unions which do not fully comply with the General Conference Working Policy is arguably higher than the probability of achieving the desired outcome of unity. That must be a sobering thought for everyone involved, particularly for the members of the General Conference Executive Committee.

[There is always more than one option](#)

The document «A Study of Church Governance and Unity» released by the General Conference Secretariat leaves the impression that the compliance of the Unions is the only solution to current problems.

However, in any situation there are always several options. Discerning leaders will always try to present various options when facing an issue that is a violation neither of any of the Fundamental Beliefs, nor of any clear biblical principle. To think there is only one option available is very dangerous for an Executive Committee facing crisis.

Here are some possible options that may better preserve unity.

1. Leave the situation as it is. Continue a genuine dialogue with all parties in order to find workable solutions.
2. Work constructively toward a healing solution along the lines of Acts 15 opening up for diversity. It is within the power of the General Conference Executive to vote changes to the General Conference *Working Policy* that will ensure unity in diversity.
3. Create a new gender inclusive credential. It is the prerogative of the General Conference Executive Committee to create new policies.
4. Discontinue ordination in its present form. Specify a simple prayer of dedication as the norm when people begin ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
5. Table the proposal and give further study to finding means of healing.

Never before in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have we been closer to a major split of the church. May leaders and members of the Executive Committee take to heart the lessons from Joshua 22 and Acts 15 and make wise decisions that will truly foster unity in our Church, despite our differences.