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# Kingly authority: Is it finding a place in the Adventist Church?

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# KINGLY POWER:

*Is It Finding a Place in  
the Adventist Church?*

BY STANLEY E. PATTERSON

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CURRENT HAPPENINGS IN THE NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION ARE UNEXPECTEDLY SHINING A NEW LIGHT ON REALITIES HAMMERED OUT DURING THE PASSIONATE PROCESS OF REDEFINING THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH AT THE GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION OF 1901. THE PRESENT ISSUE IS PARITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVE A PASTORAL ROLE IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH, BUT THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THAT CHALLENGE IS BEING PLAYED OUT IS THE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH.

The North American Division (NAD) was recently corrected by General Conference legal counsel, who reported that the division could not develop policy related to the role of women in church leadership if such policy differed from General Conference policy. Since the division is an extension of the General Conference and has no separate constituency, it has no latitude to authorize such differentiation.

But what about the next rung down on the organizational ladder: the union conferences? Since unions do have a legitimate constituency, would it be reasonable to assume that an action taken by vote of their constituency would have the right to alter policy and practice related to the place and authority of women who lead as pastors?

The answer is not as simple as one might be tempted to assume. Over the years, the latitude available for differentiated action on the part of the union conferences and local conferences has become increasingly restricted. A review of the model Constitution and Bylaws from 1980 to the present will reveal a gradual tightening of the restrictions placed upon union conferences and local conferences by mandating certain elements of the model constitution that must be implemented in order to comply with General Conference policy and procedure. Copies of the model document published in editions of the Constitution and Bylaws and the General Conference Working Policy after 1995 include required bold face type to identify the portions of the model that must be incorporated into the constitutions and bylaws of local conferences and union conferences. It should be noted that it appears that mandate has not been uniformly incorporated across the North American Division.

The prologue regarding implementation of the model

Constitution and Bylaws of 1980 referenced as C 70 05:

“This model is to be followed as nearly as possible by union conferences.”<sup>1</sup> In 1985 it was recorded as follows: “Model Union Conference Constitution and Bylaws for use as guidelines to be followed as closely as possible pending final consideration by the 1987 Annual Council.”<sup>2</sup> The trend becomes clear by 1995, when the same item reads:

“This model constitution shall be followed by all union conferences. The model bylaws may be modified, with the approval of the next higher organization. Those sections of the model bylaws that appear in bold print are essential to the unity of the Church worldwide, and shall be included in the bylaws as adopted by each union conference. Other sections of the model bylaws may be modified ... provided they continue to be in full harmony with the provisions of this model. Amendments to the model Union Conference Constitution and Bylaws shall be made by action of the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at any Annual Council of that Committee.”<sup>3</sup>

The 2010 edition reflects some changes but reads essentially the same as what is put forth in the 1995 edition.

The model constitution that once was presented as guidance and recommendation has morphed into a document that carries significant mandate from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which serves as the determining agent in regard to whether a policy initiative by a union conference or a local conference is in agreement or not. This assumes that the bold-faced items in the model constitution are supported by a vote of the delegates at a General Conference session and not simply the work of a committee at the General Conference office, apart from

a session vote authorizing the mandates.

The question that remains unanswered is how the governance process will play out if a union conference receives (or is given) a mandate by its constituency that requires women to be placed on an equal footing with men when it comes to denominational opportunities and formal affirmations in the pastoral leadership

*The representatives of the Conference, as it has been carried with authority for the last 20 years, shall be no longer justified in saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we.’ The men in positions of trust have not been carrying the work wisely.”* —Ellen G. White

role. What parameters are intended in the policy that grants authority solely to the union conferences to authorize ordination of pastors?

Since there is no formal prohibition against ordaining women to gospel ministry, then what existing policy at the General Conference would be referenced as reflecting the voice of the people (General Conference in session) regarding the ordination of women? Certainly we have guidelines for ordination, but do those guidelines explicitly prohibit the ecclesiastical affirmation of women? Or do they simply describe the process of ordination? Maybe legal experts will be able to uncover restrictive ordination policies that I have failed to discover, but

I find no policy that is being defied by those seeking to establish parity for male and female pastors.

But regardless of the posture of either organization, it must be admitted that the Seventh-day Adventist system was designed to support an upward flow of authority from the people to the leaders who serve the church at the various organizational levels. We must be reminded that such leaders exercise authority loaned in trust by the people—our leaders do not own authority.

Policies were developed not by proactive legislation, but rather by recognition of what was generally or commonly practiced by the people. The Church Manual emerged in such

a fashion, and though it sometimes seems like a patchwork quilt of ecclesial policy, it has the honor of representing the voice of the people rather than expert clerics. What we see emerging in terms of practice at the local conference and union conference levels will certainly be viewed by some as rebellion and a move toward disunity. Careful reflection regarding how our systems of ecclesiology emerged, however, will reveal an exercise of authority by the people that is legitimized through the representative process of the local and union conferences and ultimately at the General Conference Session. It starts at the bottom and is processed upward.

### Accountability

Let’s take a look at who answers to whom in our beloved church. First, let me express a caution. We are culturally conditioned to think in terms of top-down hierarchy when it comes to accountability. We naturally assume that we are accountable to those above us, but this assumption doesn’t apply to the church. Take a moment and recall the words of the Master spoken on Thursday evening before his death on Friday: “He who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves” (Luke 22:26, NKJV). This excerpt is part of a larger discussion in the Gospels that challenges the top-down hierarchical model (Matt. 18:1-5; 20:25-28; Mark 10:43-44; John 13:12-17) that we intuitively draw on when considering accountability. Jesus turned it upside down, and so did the delegates to the 1901 General Conference session. Those who are loaned authority for their term of service by the people should be honored by those over whom they are given authority (Heb. 13:17), but it remains the God-given responsibility of the corporate body of believers to delegate the authority by which each level of the organization functions.

The intuitive assumption is that the “lower” organizations are accountable to the higher organization. This assumption is intuitive but wrong. Accountability in the Seventh-day Adventist system always takes us back to the people, for it is the church members who hold the divine gift of authority, and it is to them that all levels of the church ultimately answer. All positional authority is granted by the people on a basis that is limited by both time and scope—whether the position is General Conference president or local pastor.

### The Consolidation Tendency

The tendency of human organizations is to move from a model of distributed authority toward a consolidation of authority—from authority exercised by many to authority exercised by a few (or, in



extreme cases, one). Consider Israel's persistence in pressing for a king (Judges 8; 1 Samuel 9), wherein God proclaims himself to be rejected in the process. Consider the dramatic consolidation of the radically distributed authority in the New Testament church as it raced toward a papal system that proclaimed the people to be the subjects of authority rather than the possessors of it. Multiple examples of this tendency can be cited throughout biblical history. God distributes authority; people tend to consolidate it.

What about our church? If you review the background leading up to the reorganization of the church in 1901, it will show that the reorganization was a solution designed in reaction to a process of consolidation of power that resulted in what Ellen White referred to repeatedly as "kingly authority." The following quote was penned in 1903, and it provides a sense of time during which the leadership behavior problem was maturing:

"In the work of God no kingly authority is to be exercised by any human being, or by two or three. The representatives of the Conference, as it has been carried with authority for the last 20 years, shall be no longer justified in saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we.' The men in positions of trust have not been carrying the work wisely."<sup>4</sup>

### Except As We Shall Forget

It has been a little over a hundred years since our ecclesial ancestors struggled with the issues of organization and leadership and

came up with the church structure and the leadership guidelines that define our representative system of church governance. Up until that time, the organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church seems to have unfolded in response to practical needs. At first our spiritual forbears resisted organization; then in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century they recognized a need for more order as our numbers and the complexity of the body increased. Finally, late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the church discovered that careful organization was absolutely essential.

The move to organize was not prompted solely by the issue of complexity brought on by growing churches and mission expansion; it was also a response to the leadership behavior of church officials at the highest levels. As far back as the time of the Greek philosopher Plato, humans have recognized the predictable and progressive change in leadership behavior that edged toward authoritarian and dictatorial patterns. In his discussion of rulership and tyranny, Plato wrote, "When he [tyrant] first appears above ground he is a protector."<sup>5</sup> The move from protector to tyrant is a common transition in human leadership behavior—one to which the church has no automatic immunity. Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 both describe Lucifer's journey of self-ascendancy in similar terms but with tragic results.

Ellen White was engaged with the issue of leadership, authority, and power issues much of the time after her return from Australia in September 1900 until her death in 1915. Many

## Columbia Union Vote on Ordination

The vote on July 29, 2012, by the constituency of the Columbia Union Conference to authorize ordination for pastors regardless of gender came because the Columbia Union had never adopted the model constitution. Article III of the model constitution says in part: "and all purposes, policies, and procedures of this union conference shall be in harmony with the working policies and procedures of the \_\_\_\_\_ Division and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This union conference shall pursue the mission of the Church in harmony with the doctrines, programs, and initiatives adopted and approved by the General Conference in its quinquennial sessions."

In contrast, the following language appears in Article III of the Columbia Union Conference's constitution: "*In general*, the purposes, policies,

and procedures of the Union shall be in harmony with the working policies and procedures of the North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *to the extent that these are consistent with the articles of the Union's Constitution and Bylaws*. The Union shall pursue the mission of the Church within the doctrinal guidelines adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in its quinquennial sessions" (emphasis added).

The language in Article III of the union conference's constitution, with the insertion of the phrase "in general," is permissive in nature and allows the Columbia Union to make exceptions to policies and procedures of the North American Division and the General Conference. Notice that this phrase does not include officially voted doctrine.

The constitution makes it clear that the Columbia Union Conference will pursue its mission within the doctrinal structure of the Church.

Ironically, the Columbia Union now faces a bit of a conundrum. Although this union conference has voted to allow ordination regardless of gender, several local conferences *within* the Columbia Union have already adopted the model constitution. This means that these conferences cannot ask for their women pastors to be ordained, because the model constitution says they must follow policies as voted by the General Conference. So the *big* question remains: Is a local conference that has adopted the model constitution forever prevented from having their women pastors ordained, even though the Columbia Union now allows it?

of the statements made and recorded in the book *Christian Leadership* reveal her positions on leadership and organizational behavior in reaction to what was happening during this period. Here is an example of the tone of her counsel:

“No man has been made a master, to rule the mind and conscience of a fellow-being. Let us be very careful how we deal with God’s blood-bought heritage. To no man has been appointed the work of being a ruler over his fellow men. Every man is to bear his own burden. He may speak words of encouragement, faith, and hope to his fellow-workers; he may help them to bear their special burdens . . . ”<sup>6</sup>

There are many such comments in her writings, to be found in context in the manuscripts of her work. She was clearly engaged in turning the church away from both behavior and policies that consolidated authority in one or a few, rather than distributing governance and leadership authority broadly throughout the body of Christ.

## Reorganization

Ellen White was also engaged vigorously in the preparation and conduct of the General Conference Session of 1901. She was present in spite of her poor health and made the following statement in a closed meeting just prior to the session, which was quoted by A.T. Jones:

“But when we see that message after message given by God has been received and accepted, yet no change has been made, we know that new power must be brought into the regular lines. The management of the regular lines must be entirely changed, newly organized.”<sup>7</sup>

She was frustrated by the fact that organizational and leadership behavior issues had been addressed by her to church leaders for more than a decade but with no change realized. Consequently, the issue of change in this arena became part of the work of the 1901 General Conference Session.

The trend leading up to the 1901 Session was a move away from the distributed model and toward a hierarchical model in both leadership behavior and organization. Authority was progressively collecting at the top, to the end that both members and church employees were being made subject to the authority of those residing “above” them. The 1901 Session made a radical shift away from the hierarchical model, wherein power and authority flows down to those who are subject thereto, and instead focused upon the freedom and inherent capacity of the individual member and employee.

Again E.G. White speaks in favor of the distributed model: “Each is to have an individual experience in being taught by the

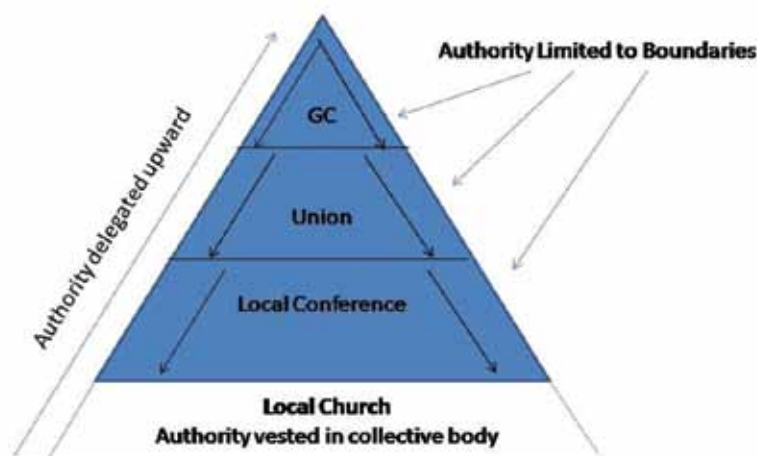


FIGURE 1: SDA AUTHORITY STRUCTURE

Great Teacher, and individual communion with God.”<sup>8</sup>

## Representative Model

The delegates to the session and those immediately following 1901 brought forth a model of organization that tipped the hierarchy of power on its head. Instead of authority being vested in ecclesiastical leaders, it was laid upon those at the base—the members of the church. Authority flowed up through a process of delegation (see Figure 1). It was loaned to leaders at the various levels on a limited basis. No leader owned authority, but rather functioned as a steward of authority until the end of his/her term—and only within the organizational and geographical scope of the defined assignment.

The 1901 reorganization began a process that placed a barrier between each level of the church. This severely limited the personal authority of leaders beyond their immediate placement. The General Conference was limited in its authority over union conferences. Unions were designed as semiautonomous entities with limited ability to dictate to local conferences, and up until 1980 they were held accountable at their sessions by a constituency that included every ordained pastor in the union conference as a voting delegate. Conferences in turn had boundaries that limited their authority in the local churches. Leaders at each level, including the local church, answered to a representative constituency.

Again Ellen White affirms this model: “It has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences. The

power vested in the Conference is not to be centered in one man, or two men, or six men; there is to be a council of men over the separate divisions.”<sup>9</sup>

This model is in stark contrast to the papal and the episcopal models, wherein authority is vested in an individual clergyman (papal) or group of clergymen (episcopal), who exercise it downward to a submissive constituency. The Seventh-day Adventist hierarchy of power was displaced in 1901 by a hierarchy of order that served the organizational needs of the church without consolidating power in any one individual. In so doing, the 1901 Session turned back the process that 1800 years before had led the early church down the path toward papacy.

## The Representative System Today


God gave us an exceptional system of organization. It is the result of committed, God-fearing people who struggled with issues of organization and leadership in honest, open debate and produced a model that is “smarter” than any one of us. It’s a system that takes us back beyond the kings of Israel to a time wherein each son and daughter of God related directly to him as ruler. Gideon referenced this relationship with God in his answer to the elders of Israel when they requested that he become king: “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you” (Judges 8:23, NKJV). Each person carried the responsibility of service before God. So it is that the 1901 reorganization challenged the concept of kingly power and won.

## 1903 GC Session Challenge

Proponents of the centralized model of authority challenged the newly adopted representative model at the 1903 General Conference Session. The delegates defended the idea that it was the people’s church and held to the distributed model of governance and rejected what was referred by some as “kingly authority.”<sup>10</sup> It should not be ignored, however, that the tendency to control rather than to trust the voice of the body remains a temptation that has an insidious and persistent pull upon those called to lead. Remember Plato’s tyrant; he started out as a protector! We must ask ourselves and, yes, even assess our organization to determine whether controlling behavior is impacting the church in a systemic manner. Are we still honoring the spirit of the 1901 reorganization? There is evidence that the church is functionally moving toward an episcopal model as the representative structure crumbles from lack of maintenance.

Much will be revealed in the coming months relative to how the organized church will respond to the initiative by some union conferences in North America to take constituent action

to address parity between male and female pastors regarding formal acts of affirmation. Is such action a legitimate move by the people to address issues that impact their sense of corporate and individual integrity? Or is such action a challenge to the General Conference, which is commissioned to implement the collective voice of the people on a global scale, and thus assure unity and in some sense ecclesiastic uniformity? Looking from the bottom up, it seems to make sense to move forward to address a problem with action affirmed by the constituency. Looking down from the top, it is understandable that anxieties might rise as the certainty of uniform beliefs and corporate behavior becomes less certain.

In the process of solving this problem, the church must renew its commitment to its root structure, wherein authority flows up from the people. In the end we must honor that collective voice, which over the years has grown faint. The denomination must refresh the concept of representative governance and build trust between the organized church and the body of believers by implementing concrete efforts to hear and value the collective voice of the body. The Master intentionally called his disciples friends rather than servants, and in that spirit the organized church must establish a relationship with the people they serve. God’s church is after all, the people’s church. 

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<sup>1</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *NAD Constitution, Bylaws and Working Policy* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1980), C 70 05.

<sup>2</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *NAD Constitution, Bylaws and Working Policy* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1985), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Constitution, Bylaws and Working Policy* (Silver Spring, Maryland: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1995), pp. 165-166.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, “No Kingly Authority to Be Exercised,” from Manuscript 26, 1903, quoted in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 14 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), p. 280; see also *Christian Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1985), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, quoted by J. Thomas Wren, ed., *The Leader’s Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, “Individual Responsibility & Christian Unity,” from Manuscript 29, 1907, pp. 9-10, quoted in *Christian Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> *General Conference Bulletin*, Twenty-fifth Session, Vol. 5, April 10, 1903, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1923), p. 486.

<sup>9</sup> White, “No Kingly Authority to Be Exercised,” from Manuscript 26, 1903, quoted in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 14 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), p. 279.

<sup>10</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *General Conference Bulletin*, in General Conference Session (Oakland, California: GC Secretariat, 1903), pp. 149-166.