

THE PLACE OF AUTHORITY IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE
OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Introduction

Authority lies at the very root of the mission of the Christian church and by extension that of the Seventh-day Adventist church. It is the hinge upon which swings the doors of mission by which Christians enter into service for Jesus Christ and governance of His church. Commissioning and acceptance of a member into the community of faith for the Christian is predicated upon the availability of authority entrusted to Jesus Christ and made available as a stewardship resource to the body of Christians as revealed in Matthew 28:18-20. That generous source of authority was linked not to leadership position or to a select group of individuals but was extended in trust by the Master to the collective body of believers who bore the stewardship responsibility of administering it in a manner consistent with the message and model of His words and behavior.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was structured in manner consistent with this model which recognizes the supreme authority of the church as residing in its members who participate in a representative model of governance whereby ecclesiastical authority is extended in trust to members appointed by the body to serve as leaders of its various organizations and ministries. All leaders exercise authority upon the basis of their being accountable to the body and ultimately to God. This coupling of divine and the human authority in the church is affirmed by Ellen White in a statement she made regarding the anointing by the members of the church of two men being sent out to represent the New Testament church in ministry: “Both Paul and Barnabas had already received their commission from God himself, and the ceremony of the laying on of hands added no new grace nor virtual qualification. It was merely setting the seal of the church upon the work of God—an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office, and a

recognition of one's authority in that office.”¹ This clear connection between the authority of the body to acknowledge God’s calling and to authorize the appointment of ministers and ecclesiastical leaders sets the biblical as well as the contemporary standard for ecclesiastical authority in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

The representative model of ecclesiastical governance and the organizational structure that supports and administers it in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is being challenged by leadership and management practices within the church that are at best diminishing the effectiveness of the representative model and at worst are moving the denomination toward an episcopal model of ecclesiastical governance.

Historical Perspective

The evidence of history alerts us to the difficulty of maintaining an organizational structure where primary authority rests at the base of the organization rather than in appointed leaders or bodies of leaders. History also reveals the fact that God’s people have consistently been willing to abdicate the authority entrusted to them by passing responsibility on to leaders and rulers who have generally been more than willing to accept it. God’s resistance to the pressures exerted by the people to have a king appointed “like the nations around them,” in place of the distributed model of the confederacy of tribes under the judges or the more ancient relationship model of the firstborn under the patriarchs, was consistent and His acquiescence to the request for a king was reluctant and accompanied by a warning of serious consequences to follow. This social dynamic is ultimately revealed in Scripture as bearing fruit in the form of abusive and controlling governance, enslavement of the people, and the contagious influence of corrupt and unfaithful leaders. The centralized model of kingly authority was not God’s plan yet human organizations invariably turn toward a centralized model. His intervention in correcting the direction of His people frequently involved the forceful replacing of centralized authority with a

¹ Ellen G. White. Review and Herald, May 11, 1911 par. 4

distributed model as evidenced at the Tower of Babel, the Diaspora of Israel, the founding of the Christian church, and the Protestant Reformation.

Church history presents the early church as a distributed model of congregations held together by a common commitment to the person of Jesus Christ, Sacred Scripture, the teaching and admonition of the apostles, and the unifying influence of the Holy Spirit.² That same history also marks the steady move of Christianity toward a “universal” church model under the authority of a single bishop or pope. The stripping of authority from the body of believers guided by a serving leader upon whom the body had laid hands of empowerment and blessing was not a rapid or alarming transition but rather was realized gradually as ecclesiastical authority was surrendered by the body to professional clergy as the church expanded in number and influence. It concurrently granted members the luxury of freedom from the responsibilities of being individually accountable. Religious leaders gradually emerged as positional leaders who owned authority rather than being stewards of the authority granted by the body of believers and said authority was linked to successive generations of leaders claiming ecclesiastical lineage from the ministry of the Apostle Peter.³ In this context generative authority that strengthened and empowered the people was replaced by authoritarianism where leaders exercised power to rule rather than authority to serve. The willingness of the people to surrender authority in favor of a leader vested with personal authority is a reality that must be addressed in the present context as much as the temptation for leaders to assume personal authority beyond the designed limits of their calling.

Contemporary Challenges to Maintaining a Representative Model

² Walker, W. (1985). A history of the Christian church. New York, Scribner. p. 46

³ Froom, L. R. E. (1950). The prophetic faith of our fathers; the historical development of prophetic interpretation. Washington, Review and Herald [1946-54; v. 1]. pp. 498, 499.

The growth of the Seventh-day Adventist church in terms of the increasing number of members creates a logistical, and by extension, a financial challenge to the maintenance and health of a representative governance system. The accountability distance between the leaders at the Union, Division, and General Conference levels and the membership base to whom they account has increased to the point that the average member senses little responsibility for the leaders at those levels and likewise leaders above the local conference level face only marginal pressure for accountability to the general membership of the church. This is clearly marked by the change that took place in 1987 regarding the makeup of the representative constituency that assembled to elect leaders and do business at regular union sessions. Union leaders prior to this change stood before the assembled ordained pastors of the entire union along with delegates selected from the constituent conferences to give account of the use of authority granted to them. Before the publication of the 1987-1988 General Conference Working Policy the constituency was reduced to include a much smaller representative group with very few pastoral representatives as the cost and logistical challenges increased and those chosen as delegates were often sitting members of conference executive committees rather than being drawn from the rank and file members and pastors of the church at large.⁴ The end result was a much more streamlined approach to the electoral and ecclesiastical business process but also a reduction in the membership's sense of efficacy regarding their ability to influence the governance process.

As the distance of accountability between leader and member increases, so also does the temptation for leaders to see themselves as owning authority to manage, control, and direct the body of the church rather than serve as stewards of the body. Lest the Seventh-day Adventist church find itself tempted to assume a degree of immunity from the possibility of taking on a more authoritarian governance stance because of our egalitarian roots or the safeguards in our organizational design, consider the evidence of history and

⁴ General Conference Secretariat (1987-1988). *General Conference working policy*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.

the roots of cosmic rebellion recorded in Scripture which is built upon Lucifer’s precept of “I will ascend!” Ascendency and dominance behavior lie at the very root of the sin issue as presented in scripture. The insidious impact of unrestricted power corrupts legitimate authority as attested to by Plato when he reflected on the tendency of leaders to metamorphose as tyrants—“When he (tyrant) first appears above ground he is a protector.”⁵ And again in the oft quoted observation of Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”⁶ We must be vigilant to guard against the proven tendency of organizations and leaders to consolidate authority in a few while those entrusted with authority willingly relinquish it as a burden.

Ecclesiastical Models of Authority Distribution

The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* identifies four models of governance—Episcopal, Papal, Independent, and Representative.⁷ Of the four only the Independent model is not part of a greater whole made up of congregations affiliated as an organization of churches with a central governance structure. Ecclesiastical authority in the Independent model is confined to the individual congregation. The

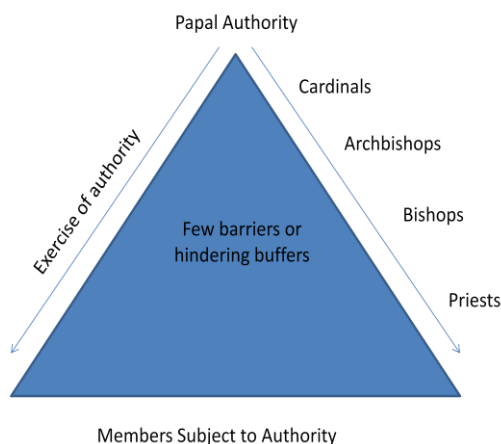


Figure 1- Papal Model

⁵ Plato. *The Republic*. Wren, J. T., Ed. (1995). The leader's companion. New York, The Free Press. p. 62.

⁶ Lord Acton, *Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887* (<http://www.acton.org/research/acton/101-lord-acton-quote-generator.php>).

⁷ GCSDA (2005). *The Seventh-day Adventist church manual*, 17th edition. Hagerstown, MD, Review and Herald. pp. 25,26.

Episcopal and Papal models invest authority in their clergy that flows down to the body from them

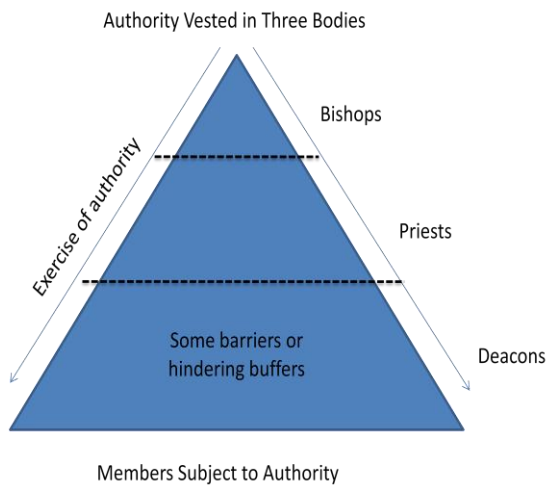


Figure 3- Episcopal Model

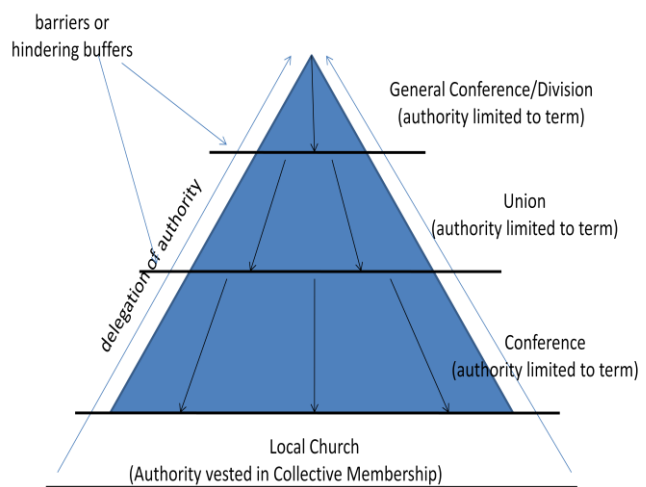


Figure 2- Representative Model

as groups or as individuals (see figures 1 and 2).

The Representative model recognizes authority as residing in the body of members and flows up through elected leaders who lead and manage the church as stewards of that authority but remain accountable to the members (see Figure 3). The following quote from E.G. White expresses this election and authority

arrangement:

“Every member of the church has a voice in choosing officers of the church. The church chooses the officers of the state conferences. Delegates chosen by the state conferences choose the officers of the union conferences, and delegates chosen by the union conferences choose the officers of the General Conference. By this arrangement every conference, every institution, every church, and every individual, either directly or through representatives, has a voice in the election of the men who bear the chief responsibilities in the General Conference.”⁸

⁸ White, E.G. (1948) *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 8. Mountain View, CA, Pacific Press. pp. 236, 237.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is organized as a representative model with the somewhat unique element of authority buffers that limit the exercise of authority between the four levels of church organization—Local Church, Conference, Union Conference, and General Conference.⁹ Each level of this organization functions under a constitution that defines its territory, boundaries, and function and the higher organization is limited in its exercise of authority beyond the boundary that separates it from the next level. These boundaries of downward directed authority have served to check the tendency of organizations to consolidate authority at the higher levels that can when unrestrained result in a ruling rather than serving model. Again, E.G. White supports this organizational model that limits directive authority by higher organization in comments made in regard to the value of union conferences:

“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.”¹⁰

These boundaries are not only being currently blurred in practice but as such are slowly being incorporated into the mental model of how we see the governance behaviors of the church. Evidence is available that clearly reveal mandates being made at higher levels that infringe on the constitutional mandates of union and conference authority. Both casual and legal challenges are being made that involve arguments as to whether the local church has any legal authority in the Seventh-day Adventist system. As the representative model is weakened in response to the logistical and financial challenges of a growing membership it stands to reason that there will be a commensurate increase in expressions of frustration

⁹ GCSDA (2005). *The Seventh-day Adventist church manual*, 17th edition. Hagerstown, MD, Review and Herald.

p. 26.

¹⁰ White, E.G. Manuscript Release 14, p. 279.2

and even rebellion from those who sense a degree of powerlessness in contributing to the process that directs the future of the church.

Authority in Constituency Sessions

The respective constituency sessions were designed as the context where, in addition to the business of the church being conducted, accountability was responsibly handled between representatives of the body and leaders chosen to serve that body. The effectiveness of these meetings can be negatively impacted by unruly behavior emanating from unreasonable passion or anger among delegates. But it can also be negatively impacted by the high degree of control exercised in the agenda and process of the meeting that minimizes the opportunity for expression by delegates and maximizes the predictability of the desired outcome by leaders. Rarely is there healthy recognition of the fact that the session is intended as a means of reaffirming the stewardship of the leaders to the legitimate authority of the body in whom the God we serve placed spiritual authority. E. G. White affirms this accountability to the body in her reference to the authority exercised by the apostles:

"There were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, . . . and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:1, 2). Before being sent forth as missionaries to the heathen world, these apostles were solemnly dedicated to God by fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands. Thus they were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism, and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority.¹¹

These apostles did not set out to minister on their own but rather were sent by the body of Christ as representing the body. This model of leaders bearing authority conferred in trust by the body of believers

¹¹ White, E. G. (1911). Gospel Workers. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald. p. 441

thus finds its origin in the earliest practice of ministry and governance in the Christian tradition. Attempts by leaders to control legitimate accountability events either during or between sessions by means of procedure or control tactics violates the relationship between the leader and the body that she or he serves as steward.

The constituency session should foster openness to input and expression of delegates by planning time and means for the body to be heard. So doing recognizes that the voice of the Holy Spirit legitimately speaks through the members to professional leaders at such gatherings. Failure to do so add to the frustration and distancing of members from the governance process and a loss of commitment to the organization that they feel no longer recognizes their legitimate authority. Such a commitment to openness can seem messy and risky to leaders who are dedicated to managing risk and avoiding conflict over ideas different than they determine to be best for the church but unless the church body rediscovers its voice of authority through its members it will never exercise its authority as owners of the ecclesiastical process. The declines in per capita tithe¹² and in some Divisions the percent of members who regularly attend church¹³ will almost certainly continue to decline. It is also likely that the hoped for empowerment of the laity in the area of ministry will continue to be a hope rather than a reality of mass involvement as long as their legitimate involvement in the governance process is marginalized and the distance between them and professional leaders continues to increase.

Michael Raschko, in discussing the nature of the Roman Catholic Church and authority to change it sees tension between those who emphasize God's activity and human choices in history. Those who

¹²Oliver, Ansel. *Less Tithe a "Deep Spiritual Problem" Say Church Leaders*. Adventist News Network, October 28, 2003. Silver Spring, MD.

¹³Center for Creative Ministry. 2008. NAD Research Project: Demographic Survey—Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. (www.adventistyouth.org/cts/.../naddemographicsurveyreport.ppt)

emphasize human choice in history and minimize the role of God's activity in the process make the assumption that "all traditions, since they are historically contingent, can change whenever the members of the church choose to change them."¹⁴ This is an interesting assumption in the Catholic tradition since it assumes that the members have the authority to make those changes in a system (human choices) that has traditionally placed its authority in the episcopate and in a sense in the person of the bishop of Rome. The governance system of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was designed to avoid the tension that Raschko refers to by clearly establishing the body as the repository of its authority rather than in select positional leaders. God's activity is legitimately recognized as visible in the people.

Current Practices that Challenge the Representative Model

There are documented examples of Union Conferences forbidding a legitimate local conference from calling a constituency session of its delegate members. Such a denial of local conference governance process is a clear violation of the constitutional authority granted to a conference and exercised at the discretion of the president and the local conference committee. Additional documentation exists that demonstrates mandates from a General Conference Division office relating to limiting hiring and capital expenditures by Union and Local Conferences over which the Division has no authority. Anecdotal evidence abounds of violations of both the representative model of governance and exercise of authority beyond the limits set by the organization and there is little evidence that it is ever openly challenged as being an unacceptable practice.

¹⁴ Lennan, R. (2004). *Risking the church : the challenges of Catholic faith*. Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press. p. 135

The move of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the early part of the 20th century toward a fixed district placement of pastors¹⁵ was stoutly resisted by Ellen White but nevertheless became policy by the 1930's. This move itself represented a major shift away from lay exercise of authority that contributed to a decline in lay member's sense of ownership of the process of governance as authority shifted to the pastor and by extension to the clergy in general. Over a century later the evidence seems to point to a continued degrading of the lay demonstration of authority in the overall governance process. Though there are many seemingly good reasons why these changes were implemented it remains that evidence among laity and, even those serving the church professionally, of apathy, cynicism, and general disengagement from the ecclesiastical governance process is revealing symptoms of congregationalism and a loss of the interdependent community that the Seventh-day Adventist system has at its roots. It is possible that these attitudes correlate with the steady increase in the dominant influence of professional administrators leading the process for the people rather than developing means of strengthening the representative process with the people. The church must rediscover a means by which the people are informed and meaningfully engaged in exercising the precious gift of authority that the Master bequeathed upon the body of believers as recorded in the Gospel Commission of Matthew 28:18-20.

Recommendations

The Seventh-day Adventist Church would benefit by revisiting this issue of authority and its place in the governance process of the church. This should be done in a spirit of humility and trust as a means of realigning the governance relationship between clergy and laity along lines more in harmony with the representative model of governance. The church should revisit the recommendations made by Dr. Raoul

¹⁵ Koranteng-Pipim, S., Ed. (2005). *Here we stand: Evaluating new trends in the church*. Berrien Springs, MI, Adventists Affirm. pp. 642-691.

Dederen in 1995 regarding reformation of practices of administering the church.¹⁶ His call for administrative reform addresses the concern of many members that the leaders of the church are “increasingly remote” and that “They don’t seem to care about us, or what we have to say anymore.” Bert and Walter Beach, both highly placed leaders in the General Conference, wrote in 1985 warning that our move toward a presidential model of administration would take us away from the distributed leadership model built into our administrative policy.¹⁷ They added the following to this counsel of concern:

“She (the church) too can become entrapped in a mild form of clericalism that leaves a large majority of the total *laos* unchallenged. Church leadership, including pastors and elders, must spread the responsibilities and involve thousands.... This total involvement applies to worship, shepherding, outreach, and to decision-making.”¹⁸

“A study of church history reveals that organizational principles and structured lines of authority have played a large role in many religious apostacies.”¹⁹

These men did not write as rebels or dissidents with an axe to grind with the church. These were and remain men of faith and commitment that see danger signals in the gradual but steady distancing of denominational leaders from the very base population where God entrusted ecclesiastical authority—the men and women who hold membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Every level of church

¹⁶ Dederen, R. Church authority: Its source, nature, and expression. *MINISTRY MAGAZINE (SUPPLEMENT)*, May 1995. p. 15.

¹⁷ Beach, W. R. and B. B. Beach (1985). *Pattern for progress: The role and function of church organization*. Hagerstown, MD, Review and Herald. p. 69.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 79.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 80.

governance needs to take stock of their leadership and administrative practices to determine: 1) are we (am I) exercising authority as stewards of God's people and are we (am I) making myself available for being held accountable to them?; 2) Are we (am I) extending efforts to seek the will of the people or are we (am I) expending energies to avoid the difficulties and uncertainty of engaging the minds and hearts of those we (I) serve?; 3) Are we (am I) exercising authority or extending power beyond the boundaries of our appointed office or level of organization? Such questions need to be constantly held before our leaders. Lay people, pastors, and teachers need to know that such questions of faithful stewardship of authority are being asked and reflected upon by those elected and appointed to serve the positional leadership functions of the church.

As the church covets involvement by the membership masses in productive ministry leading to growth in membership we must ask whether we are hoping for the emergence of leaders or followers. Does the church want engaged lay leaders and committed pastors and teachers who will express opinions and question decisions or is the church looking for compliant laymen and cooperative employees who will be peacefully faithful in their support of the church and its leaders? Jesus was clear in his narrative of the Good Shepherd in Matthew 16; He is looking for self-sacrificing and committed "owners" who will give their all for the Father's sheep. The hireling has limits on his compliance. The under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd will give their all but first they are adopted and treated as sons and daughters who share ownership and not as employees.

The church must renew its commitment to its root structure where authority flows up from the people and not down from the clergy. She 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.

