

Pastor's Corner – 10-20-2018
From the Top Down

This past Sunday at the General Conference Annual Council (the church's end of year administrative extravaganza) delegates were asked to vote on a proposal that outlined procedures for dealing with non-compliant church entities. While the document used general terms to define "non-compliance" everyone knew that (for now) they are trying to deal with unions that ordain women to gospel ministry.

In order to grasp the full meaning of the document that was presented (and voted) it is important to recognize that the Adventist church is a highly organized institution, but we are not a hierarchical institution. The different organizational levels of our church exist to facilitate mission and to, well, organize. They aren't there to rule or govern, but to coordinate mission. The power in the Adventist church is with the people. Those people elect leaders who will guide their work for God. That's how the church is set up.

By design, there exist firewalls between the different levels of the church so that higher levels of the organization can't interfere with levels too far below them. For example, the local Conference President has absolutely no authority over who can be a member of a local church. He can't disfellowship someone or to force a church to take someone into membership. That power belongs to the local church alone.

These limits on authority exist throughout the entire denominational structure. What this means is that each level in the organization has its own sphere of influence and it cannot interfere with the other levels. At least that was the case until last Sunday.

The document that was presented at this year's Annual Council gives the General Conference Executive Committee formal authority to interfere in every level of the denomination so long as the entity is perceived as being non-compliant. If this doesn't scare you, you aren't paying attention.

Here's how it works. If any administrative entity in the church (conference level and up) feels that another entity is out of compliance, they can report this non-compliance to the administrative entity immediately above the offending entity. If this sounds confusing that's probably on purpose. Here's the official statement:

The Administrative Committee of any conference and/or union and/or division and/or the General Conference which identifies an entity they perceive to be non-compliant, shall report the matter in writing to the administrative level of the Church immediately above the perceived non-compliant entity, beginning with the administrative level of the Church closest to the matter. If any level of organization does not report an issue of non-compliance, it becomes the responsibility of the next higher organization.

What this means is that organizations within the church can now tattle on one another. In the North American Division there are two unions that have voted to ordain women. This new resolution allows any conference, union, or division to write a formal complaint accusing those unions of being non-compliant. The next higher level above the union is the division. So, in this case, the letter of concern would be sent to the North American Division.

The NAD simply isn't going to take action against these unions so the new policy states that it now becomes the responsibility of the next higher level of organization to look into the matter. That next higher level is the GC Executive Committee.

The resolution also lays down a process for how to reprimand these non-compliant entities. The administrative entity that gets involved will write the non-compliant entity a letter informing them of their non-compliance. Everybody will pray and hopefully the erring brethren step in line. If not, there is a special new committee called the General Conference Compliance Review Committee that is tasked

with looking into these complaints of non-compliance. This new committee is apparently hand picked by the GC administration.

If compliance cannot be obtained, the General Conference Executive Committee can take disciplinary action. The first step is to warn the entity and the elected representative of that entity. This is basically a letter saying, "You're on thin ice bub, better get your sheep in line!"

If the formal warning doesn't work, the GC EC can vote to publicly reprimand the entity and its elected leader. This means getting called out at Annual Council and Spring Meeting by having a note in the agenda saying you and your entity are out of compliance. Public shaming usually works, but if for some reason it doesn't, there is a third step.

The final step is that the GC EC has the authority, with a 2/3 majority vote, to remove the elected officer from his or her position. Yep, that's right, the General Conference now has a process by which they can reach into any level of the organization and discipline (i.e. fire) someone that was elected by their constituents to lead in their area. All the GC needs is a belief that the entity is non-compliant to some aspect of working policy. Right now they are only looking at unions that ordain women, but the policy has a much broader application.

This is a radical re-organization of our church and is a giant step towards consolidating power at the top. We've essentially created a judicial branch for the church and put the executive branch in charge of it (so much for a separation of powers). Is the next step to establish the Adventist order of Jesuits who will be tasked with rooting out non-compliance in all levels of the church? This whole thing kind of reminds me of Soviet Russia where every entity had to have a member of the Communist party hanging around to make sure everyone stayed in compliance. Maybe we should nominate a compliance officer for our church next time officers are elected?

However you feel about the ordination of women (the issue that started this whole non-compliance debacle), I hope that you will stand united in opposing this unwarranted power grab. The organizational firewalls exist for a reason and that reason is to prevent too much power accumulating at the top. With this one action the GC has left the foundational principles of Protestantism behind and moved forcefully towards a Catholic, hierarchical model. The book of Revelation predicts a lamb-like entity that begins to speak like a dragon. Let's pray that our Adventist church doesn't accidentally fulfill this prophecy.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler