

Pastor's Corner – 10-26-2019 – Ignoring Policy: How we handle non-compliance

A little over a year ago the General Conference Executive Committee voted a highly contentious policy titled: REGARD FOR AND PRACTICE OF GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION AND GENERAL CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ACTIONS. It should have been titled: HOW WE DEAL WITH CHURCH ENTITIES THAT DON'T DO WHAT THEY'RE TOLD. The policy outlines procedures to follow if a church entity is perceived to be out of compliance with voted actions of the General Conference session or the policies voted by the GC Executive Committee.

Briefly stated the process is as follows. 1) If an entity is perceived as being non-compliant then the administrative body directly above that entity is responsible for investigating the matter. So, if a Union is perceived to be non-compliant it is the Division that will look into it. 2) If the administrative entity above the non-compliant group can't (or won't) bring about compliance the matter *may* be referred to one of several Compliance Committees. These committees are to examine the matter further and make recommendation to the GC Executive Committee. 3) If non-compliant entities continue in their non-compliance there could be consequences. The entity may be *warned*, the entity president may be *reprimanded*, or *removed from cause* (lose his voice and vote on the Executive Committee).

A couple of weeks ago the GC Executive Committee met to hold their year end meetings. Over the past year the idea of the compliance committees kind of fell by the wayside. Even though the committees were formed the GC administrators backed off using them. Most everyone assumed that meant that the GC President realized they were a bad idea and that he had decided to step back from the whole thing and try to find a more measured way forward. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

In a surprising turn Elder Wilson presented a recommendation that 4 Unions be *warned* for non-compliance and that 2 other Union presidents be *reprimanded*. The Unions to receive the warning are all in Europe and their area of non-compliance was that they treat both men and women the same when it comes to licensing ministers. The Union presidents that were to be *reprimanded* are both from the North American Division (Pacific Union and Columbia Union) and their crime was that their Unions voted to begin ordaining women to pastoral ministry. The recommendation to discipline came the night before the discussion and vote was to take place and the presidents of these entities were not given prior notice of the possible discipline.

As the debate wore on a number of things happened that make me a bit uncomfortable. First was that the entire policy voted last year was essentially ignored by the GC President. They totally abandoned the Compliance Committee and appeal processes built into the policy and decided to just take matters into their own hands. According to the policy the Divisions were supposed to be the ones addressing Union compliance. There had been some meetings but nothing was resolved. The next step was supposed to be the involvement of a Compliance Committee but that didn't happen. When Elder Wilson was questioned on this during the debate he responded by saying that the policy states the GC *may* refer the matter to the Compliance Committee. He continued by saying (essentially), nobody liked the Compliance Committees so we decided not to use them.

Another disturbing component to this whole thing was that the European Unions were warned for non-compliance when they are actually compliant. The current position of the church is that women cannot be ordained to pastoral ministry. They can be ordained as elders and they can work as full time commissioned pastors, but they can't be ordained as pastors. Make sense? Yeah, not at all.

At any rate, we aren't supposed to ordain female pastors to full time ministry. So, guess what? Those European Unions decided *not* to ordain female pastors. You read that right, those Unions that were just warned *don't* ordain women. Instead what they do is commission them to gospel ministry. This is the alternative recognition that the GC offers for women.

So why were those Unions warned? Well, it's because they stopped ordaining men. These 4 European Unions felt that they had a duty to follow the principles of non-discrimination and so they voted to treat men and women the same. Since they aren't allowed to ordain women as pastors they decided to just give everyone a commissioning. Seems like a reasonable compromise to me.

But not to the GC President. So, those Unions were disciplined because they stopped ordaining men. Nevermind that policy states that commissioning is available to both men and women. No, no, apparently church entities are now required to ordain their men and if they decide not to ordain men than they are non-compliant. Weird.

In the end the 4 European Unions did receive their warning. The two Union presidents from the NAD who were up for reprimand were saved by a late-in-the-game amendment to the motion. Rather than reprimand the presidents it was moved that those Unions receive a warning instead. It seems like a rather trivial matter (warned vs reprimanded) but there's a little phrase in the policy that makes it significant. The statement begins, "when non-compliance continues after public reprimand" the individual who received the reprimand can be removed from the Executive Committee for cause. Notice that this more drastic step can only happen after a public reprimand. It seems that perhaps the GC President was pushing for a reprimand so that he could skip a step in the discipline process and jump straight to trying to remove these wayward presidents from the Executive Committee.

Fortunately, the amendment passed and the two Unions which are ordaining women received a warning instead of a public reprimand. In theory this buys them some time, unless, of course, the GC President decides to ignore more policy and play technicalities with words like *may*.

So how does this affect us here in the local church? Honestly, not at all. From my perspective it matters very little what these people with their important titles vote. Does it change our ministry to Bismarck? Nope. Does it influence what we do on a day to day basis for God? Not at all. I think for me, the most disturbing thing about all this was watching these people debate these issues as if any of it makes a difference. All these committee meetings and decisions are essentially pointless because God's church and her mission doesn't depend on what they vote or don't vote. It depends on our local congregations and our personal faithfulness to God.

I think we sometimes forget that the church is the people in the church and not the administrators or the formal organization. We aren't the Catholic church where the corporate entity is the be-all and end-all when it comes to God working in the world. We're protestants that teach the priesthood of all believers. Councils of men can vote whatever they want but God is isn't obligated to abide by our decisions and he's free to choose whoever he wants to lead. Man or woman, young or old - it's God's choice. If God chooses a woman to be a pastor and he gifts her with ability and passion for the work, who are we to argue with God's decision? The way things have been going lately though, we might almost expect God to receive a public reprimand for being non-compliant.

If the church politics are disturbing to you, I understand. But the church isn't the administration. The church is us. Let's make sure that on the local level we band together, support one another, and move the mission of God forward.

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler