

Adapting the Church manual

By Patricia Jo Gustin

As a lay person and somewhat of an “outsider” in church manual issues, my thoughts and reactions as presented in this article may not reflect the views of all. However, my reactions may not be completely irrelevant since I am looking at the *Church manual* from a world perspective to consider the question of whether or not it is necessary to make adaptations of the manual to meet the current needs of a world church.

The Purpose of the Church manual

Perhaps the best place to begin this discussion is by ask-

ing ourselves the question, what is the purpose of the *Church manual*? In the introduction to the present version I read that in the early years of the church, “Actions were taken on various matters of church order in an endeavor to spell out the proper rules for different situations in church life. The 1882 General Conference Session voted to have prepared ‘instructions to church officers, to be printed in the *Review and Herald* or in tract form” (*Church manual* 2000:xix-xx).

The first actual book that was used much as today’s *Church manual* is used, was a personal undertaking published by J. N. Loughborough in 1907 entitled *The Church, its organization, order and discipline*. The first *Church manual* actually published by the General Conference committee was in 1932 with a stated purpose to deal with church government, to set forth our denominational practices and policies, and to preserve our denominational practices and policies.

In simplest terms, the goal of a document such as the *Church manual* is to give guidance for the “daily operation” of the church, to maintain order, promote growth,



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and encourage unity. A church manual has a significant place in the life of the church. It is therefore important that its contents be such that it will be viable and meaningful to churches around the world. If, for whatever reasons, the *Church manual* is irrelevant and not meaningful or applicable in a certain area or for a certain group, the tendency will be to ignore it altogether. The result would then be that with no guidance in regard to church life, groups would tend to create patterns of church life, worship, and governance that might not be acceptable to the world church.

There are several reasons this could happen: (1) if the book is not

Are we considering a change in the present *Church manual* or a practical document designed for general lay use? These are basic questions to consider in looking at the question of adapting the *Church manual*.

Is the *Church manual* “Adaptable” to a World Church?

Our church today has been planted in hundreds of cultures, languages, and religions, both Christian and non-Christian. Included in this variety of backgrounds are a number of different social and economic structures and types and levels of education. We have not always

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culturally relevant, (2) if it is unavailable to church leaders, and (3) if it is written in such a way that it is too cumbersome to serve many cultures, languages, and specific situations. Each of these will be looked at separately.

So why have a church manual? Who uses it? What purpose does it fulfill in the church? Is it an apologetic document meant to support every detail of Seventh-day Adventist Church organization and life, or is it meant to be a practical manual that a local church leader could actually use?

been a world church; however, despite the global reach of the denomination today, our church was planted and grew in its early years in the soil of North America. In a multitude of ways it still reflects those early roots, probably much more so than most North Americans realize. As I read various parts of the *Church manual* I realized how North American our church is in organization, in structure, in governance, and style. The *Church manual* reflects this.

My overall impression is that

it is a good document for North America and maybe a few other parts of the world with cultures somewhat similar to the North American culture. It expresses ideas, addresses issues of organization, and gives detailed answers to questions and issues that interested church members, in these parts of the world, might legitimately ask.

However, the very things that make it a good document for a particular part of the church may, in fact, be its greatest handicap for a world church. The Adventist Church of the twenty-first century is increasingly non-North American. Today the vast majority of our membership (over 90 percent) is now in parts of the world that is culturally as well as geographically distant from the church's North American base and its North American roots. In addition, the growth of the church in previously unentered areas is the mission challenge we face today. For these reasons, I believe there needs to be consideration given to making adaptations to the *Church manual* to enable it to deal with church life and organization in those places. For the church to function in a relevant way and be meaningful in varied situations there must be provision to take all of the differences in language, culture, social, economic, and literacy levels into consideration and allow for variations in how the church operates based on local situations.

My understanding is that each of the world divisions has prepared some supplemental material

to deal with some of these unique conditions that exist in their particular areas. This is as it should be, and as the world church continues to expand into areas more and more culturally different from North America, this will be ever more important. It is also important that these variations should not be considered either temporary or inferior or second class. If our church is to effectively serve a world of great diversity, there must be recognition that different ways of dealing with the same situation are not to be judged as superior or inferior, but simply different. For instance, a church in one part of the world that worships God from week to week with a tabla and a harmonium should never feel that their form of worship is in any way inferior to a church that chooses to worship God with an organ or a piano. Regional variations in all aspects of church life need to be recognized and validated.

My conclusion is that the present *Church manual* is not readily adaptable to the needs of a world church.

Is the Present *Church manual* “Usable” by a World Church?

For the *Church manual* to be usable by a world church it must not only make room for variations due to cultural and language differences, but it must be in a form that is actually usable by those who need it. I have several specific areas of concern about the present form.

First, the present *Church manual* is too detailed, too long, and

too wordy to be of practical use to many local church leaders. It appears that in an effort to answer every possible question a North American member might ask, plus some more recent additions to answer a few questions from other parts of the world, the document is much too verbose. There is too much general commentary and too many details. Today, the Adventist Church is primarily being planted in the previously unentered areas of our world by lay people, by Global Mission pioneers, and other volunteer workers. These church planters and missionaries need a document that not only recognizes and validates their specific situations and needs, but is also practical and concise. The *Church manual* must be user friendly. Paul's advice to the new churches he established is extremely concise. Primarily, he stated general principles, such as doing things decently and in order, giving basic guidelines for choosing leaders, and making general suggestions for proper worship. It would appear that the details of how each church would follow these principles were apparently left to the local leaders. The original decision in 1882 was that the instructions to church officers "be printed in the *Review and Herald* or in tract form." The present book is obviously much too lengthy for either of these forums. Perhaps getting back to that original goal would be worth our consideration.

Second, the present *Church manual* has too many lengthy quotations. Though it is obvi-

ously necessary and helpful to have supportive material from both the Bible (primarily) and the Spirit of Prophecy (secondarily), it seems that in almost all cases, there is an overabundance in both types of quotations. In a document such as this that is meant to be used in a multitude of cultures and translated into dozens of languages, the principles need to be stated clearly and the supporting quotations carefully and sparingly chosen.

When thinking in "world terms" we face an additional challenge in the area of choosing texts and quotations. Inevitably, we choose, read, and interpret everything, including the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, through the lenses of our own culture. We therefore naturally tend to emphasize those texts or quotations that resonate with and reflect our own behaviors, cultural beliefs, values, and worldview. We may thus, inadvertently, ignore other equally powerful texts or statements that present other views of an issue. Since the *Church manual* definitely mirrors its North American roots, the texts and quotations used often represent ways of thinking and acting that are very North American.

An example of this is found in the section on "Church Discipline" (2000:175-190). The Spirit of Prophecy quotations and the Bible texts listed on these pages reflect a very Western way of dealing with problems, misunderstandings, and conflict. In both of these authoritative sources, Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, there are many

other quotations and texts on this subject that reflect other styles of dealing with conflict and discipline in other cultural contexts. We in North America depend almost 100 percent on Matt 18 to define how all matters of differences should be dealt with. This fits well with our cultural mode of dealing with things in a very individualistic and direct way. But Scripture is full of other beautiful ways of dealing with differences in societies where the type of directness, which is

can be used in the church to bring resolution to difficult situations and maintain unity to the glory of God. None of these is recognized or recommended in the quotations in the present *Church manual*.

Third, allowance must be made for cultural diversity in the actual operation of the Adventist Church. There are vast cultural differences in how groups operate, how decisions are made, how leaders are chosen, and how groups worship. There must be

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both appropriate and successful in North America, is neither appropriate nor successful. A few examples would include: (1) the use of parables to bring a point across without causing the listener to "lose face," such as Nathan with David and Jesus with Simon the Pharisee; (2) the indirect approach used by Jesus with the accusers of the woman taken in adultery, and with Judas. These are equally valid and biblical ways of dealing with problems requiring conflict management or discipline in a church, and when used in cultures where indirect, non-confrontational approaches are culturally appropriate, they

room within the *Church manual* for different groups to apply the general principles of church life and governance within their own cultural and social situation. For example, the principle of showing reverence in worship and praising God as a part of worship are basic principles that should be followed in every Seventh-day Adventist Church around the world. But the details of how reverence and worship are expressed are culturally determined. Does one take one's shoes off or wear highly-polished shoes? Does one kneel, stand reverently, or prostrate oneself in prayer? Does one worship God with a tabla, a harp, a pan pipe,

tambourine, a marimba, or an organ? Such questions are simply related to cultural differences, and yet, in the current *Church manual* one of these very cultural worship items is validated, the others ignored. There are frequent references to having a pianist or an organist in a church (see pages 96, 98, 103, 105, 145, 146). This organizational detail of worship clearly relates to a very limited part of the world church. Such details should not be a part of a document meant to serve the world church.

Fourth, there will always be a need for supplemental materials with details for those needing or desiring to study in depth the background and rationale for various areas of church life and practice. Such detail will include rationale, the necessary commentary, and as many Bible and Spirit of Prophecy quotations as needed. These should be available in a separate volume. I believe the present *Church Manual* could work well for this purpose if it were edited and expanded in some areas to reflect more fully the realities of a world church.

Need for a Core Document

To better serve a world church there needs to be a core document that lists basic principles of church life, practice, and governance, a shorter, more succinct document with very few details, a supra-cultural document. In a document created to guide the world church in matters of structure and organization, a shorter, more concise statement of the

basic principles is needed. A basic document for lay use should therefore include the following:

1. The *core principles* in each area with a few basics in organization and governance that would apply to the church in any culture, language, socio-economic, and literacy background.

2. A *simple format* that is not so “word-dense.” An outline format using bullets would be much easier to read, translate, and actually use.

3. There should still be room for local unions and divisions to apply the principles and add essential details showing application to local cultures and situations, making adaptations, amplifications, and even variations as needed. There are responsible, committed, mature leaders in all the areas of the world who can be trusted to “put meat on the bones” of a basic core “skeleton” outline, suggesting details that would be more appropriate for the local setting and better suited to helping new churches grow within their own cultural style, while at the same time adhering to a basic core.

What about the Present Church manual?

For churches located in areas where North American styles of organization are the cultural and social norms, and where the membership comes primarily from Christian urban backgrounds similar to North America and Europe, the present organizational details may be valuable. In addition, as stated above, there will still be a need

for a document similar to the one currently used, one with lengthy, detailed information about each area of church life. Included in this document would be much of the information I previously described as “too detailed, too wordy, and with too many quotations.” When an issue is originally introduced to become a part of the *Church manual*, there is undoubtedly a need for a lengthy presentation of the “case” including both detailed commentary and rationale, as well as scriptural and Spirit of Prophecy support. This type of material is very important for church leaders

Church. Only after Paul and Barnabas encountered Gentiles who wanted to become Christians did questions of church life and practice become an issue. The issues grew out of mission.

In Acts 15 that “Issues Committee” met to consider whether or not the “Church manual” of Judaism and the Jewish-Christian Church must be applied in its entirety to Gentile Christians. The guidelines by which these Jewish Christians functioned went back throughout their history to Moses and Abraham. Many of their practices were given and ordained

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and pastors to help them better understand the historical and theological background for how our church operates.

The First Global Mission Issues Committee

In conclusion I would ask you to think back to the first Global Mission Issues Committee. It met in Jerusalem around the middle of the first century. The Christian Church had been planted in the soil of Judaism with its thousands of years of tradition, beliefs, and religious practice. All of the early Christians were Jews and brought their Jewish heritage with them into the Christian

by God to the patriarchs and written in the Levitical laws. But Paul and Barnabas knew that just as there was no need for a Jewish Christian to give up his Jewishness to become a Christian, there was also no need for a Gentile to become a Jewish Christian in order to be an authentic Christian. People could become authentic Christians as Gentiles.

The decisions of the Jerusalem Council were radical. In essence they determined that within a very short time there would be more than one type of Christian church. These new churches would look, think, and worship very differently. Inevitably, Jewish Christian

churches and Gentile Christian churches located in various locations would not be uniform in many details of church life. But knowing that, they still were guided by the Holy Spirit to make the revolutionary decisions found in Acts 15.

Consider their words. James states: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19).

In the letter sent with Paul and Barnabas to the new converts the leaders in Jerusalem stated:

manual that deals with principles, not details. It must be concise and simple. It must leave room for individual cultures to express their worship and organize their churches in ways that are more appropriate and meaningful within their context, their culture, while also relating to their level of literacy and economic level. A Seventh-day Adventist church in a village or small town in Cambodia or Cameroon or Colorado should look different and function somewhat differently from each other or from one in Nairobi

To meet the practical needs of a world church, we must have a new version of the *Church manual* that deals with principles, not details.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things (Acts 15:28).

With this statement they cut through 2,000 years of Jewish religious customs and practices—customs and practices that had often been ordained and commanded by God. They reduced all that tradition and practice into a brief summary of four major points.

In summary, I would recommend that to meet the practical needs of a world church, we must have a new version of the *Church*

or New York or Newcastle. There can still be unity around principles even though there may be great variation in the details of how those principles are expressed.

As Paul and other early church leaders continued to plant the church all over the Roman Empire and later wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to them, they enunciated general principles of church life and practice, allowing each church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to work out the details. Can we improve on this model?

Works Cited

Seventh-day Adventist Church manual. 2000. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.