The Church, Structural Organization, and Acculturation
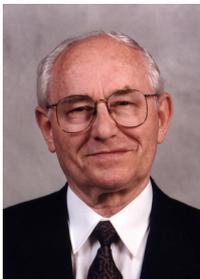
By Bert B. Beach

Object of God's Supreme Regard

There are religionists who today think in terms of a "churchless Christianity." Many encourage an organizationless religion. The idea is that you can worship without going to church—lying on the beach contemplating the blue or starry sky or the waves or just staying in a mountain cabin or simply being at home.

While private, unorganized oblations are fine in their place, they must not be confused with communion in a church communal setting. The Lord's Prayer starts with "Our Father." John Wesley stated that "the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social" (Wesley 1868:xxii).

God loves individuals, but "nothing else in this world is so dear to God as His church,"

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(White 1948:42) and it "is the only object upon earth upon which Christ bestows His supreme regard" (White 1923:49). Therefore, in discussing the church, we are dealing with something of paramount importance.

Defining the Church

There has been in this century a great deal of study regarding ecclesiology. It is a complicated topic. It was only in 1964, after being in existence for well over a millennium, that the Roman Catholic Church adopted a dogmatic constitution regarding the church. Even at Vatican II the original draft was changed radically before final approval in 1964. It is both interesting and surprising to note that in Catholic history infallible pronouncements regarding the doctrine of the church have been consistently avoided.

Defining the church is complicated by two facts: it is human, but it is also God's church. Because it is human, it exists in time and looks at current reality. As a human institution it also exists in space. It has human weaknesses. Nevertheless, it is also God's church. Therefore, it exists for eternity and universality and maintains a glorious

vision of the final eschatological kingdom where God will be all and in all (1 Cor 15:28).

Matters are further complicated by the primitive organization in the early church. There are not many church structures in the New Testament. However, quite understandably, as the church grew, organization became more formal. The same happened with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Some of our early pioneers, as is well known, did not want any church organization.

The People of God

The first century church had both beginnings of presbyterial and congregational aspects, but

The New Testament concept of church leadership was far removed from any monarchical episcopacy or corporate CEO concept, but was based on spiritual gifts, and certainly not on any imitation of secular, state, or industry models. The unifying forces of the early church were the gifts of the Spirit and the universal priesthood of all believers. These are important concepts in facing the issues of this global mission consultation.

Pragmatic Church Organization

As found in a rudimentary way in the New Testament, the Seventh-day Adventist Church today

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the episcopal system was absent. The New Testament Church was not a hierarchal structure. It was the ecclesia, a society of the faithful "called out" to be the "people of God," a movement with a mission to preach the gospel to the entire world in preparation for the return of Jesus Christ as Lord and King. In short, the church is the assembly of all those who believe in Jesus Christ. Thus, the task is essentially to carry on the work of Jesus Christ through (1) witness (*martyrion*), (2) service (*diakonia*), and (3) fellowship (*koinonia*).

operates as congregations, as regional groupings of churches, and as a global church. The General Conference is not a church in the congregational sense. However, through delegated representative authority, it is in effect the church in all the world. For over three-quarters of a century the Adventist Church has been operating on four organizational constituency levels: church, conference, union, and General Conference (including its divisional sections). I believe that this is, to some extent, a pragmatic arrangement, though the hand of God was clearly involved in our

church organization and it had the approval of Ellen G. White.

Anyone looking for the solution to finishing the work by doing away with church organization should not look to Ellen G. White for support. She strongly believed in organization, even in the end of time:

Some have advanced the thought that as we near the close of time, every child of God will act independently of any religious organization. But I have been instructed by the Lord that in this work there is no such thing as every man's being independent. . . . We want to hold the lines evenly, that there be no breaking down of the system of organization and order that has been built up by wise, careful labor (White 1923:489).

What does it take to be part of the church? Jesus himself implies that where two or three (or two or three thousand) are gathered in his name, when he is in the midst of them, there is a church. This is not a hierarchical or juridical concept. Hierarchical and sacramental churches have special problems in facing the issues we are considering. This is not the case of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Seventh-day Adventists need not be dogmatic about church structures. They are important and, in God's providence, have served us well. We are a pragmatic church; we use what works. Experience has shown that our structure has served us effectively, but it is not sacrosanct. It has been tested and proved to be God's own over many decades.

Special Situations Need Special Organization

There are special situations which can only be effectively met by special organizational approaches. This we have done in various ways. Where it has not been feasible to organize churches, we have organized companies. In some areas of the world we organize districts, with district leaders. In some countries it has been felt that neither a conference nor a union conference fits the bill, and we have organized unions of churches. In other places we have "attached unions" or "attached conferences." Where local churches have not been permitted, we have had house churches. These do not fit into our regular structure, but the system works under the circumstances. Where it has not been possible to send missionaries or regular employed workers, "tentmakers" have been sent.

Modified organizational terminology has also been used, such as "field" or "diocese" instead of conference or mission. Other terms for president have been used where this term is not permitted. In places where our churches were closed, the people have met under trees. Where the use of banks, regular accounting, and auditing were not permitted or caused a serious disadvantage for the church, these methods were abandoned. Where the church was banned, underground or secret churches, committees, and cash transactions have been used. Much of this is not in har-

mony with the organizational policies of the church, but in harmony with pragmatic pursuit of the church's mission.

There are areas in the world where the church can function in a regular organizational way. There are places where in order to function, the organizational structures have to be adapted or changed. Then, there are places where the religious liberty situation is such that the church cannot function in an organized way at all. Where that is not possible, Adventist pragmatism dictates that other approaches should and must be used.

ble or inadvisable to operate with regular church structures, we have to work in the best way we can, using ad hoc structures in the most effective way. Certainly, under these circumstances desire for power and control should play no role.

Adaptation is both unavoidable and necessary. Translation itself involves a degree of adaptation.

Helpful Theological Concepts

There are several concepts that are or can be helpful to the global mission of the church. First, the biblical concept of *laos*, designating the church as the people of

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In my view, there are five different possible organizational approaches, depending on the circumstances: (1) ideal church organization, (2) pragmatic church organization, where the ideal is not possible, (3) permitted or experimental organization to test or try out new structural or institutional approaches, (4) underground church organization, where regular church work is not permitted, and (5) no church organization as such.

Organization must be pragmatic and flexible since there are abnormal situations. Where socio-cultural and/or political circumstances make it impossi-

God. This word is mentioned some 140 times in the New Testament. The word *laos* does not represent organizations or institutions as such, but designates the vehicle for God's mission of proclamation and service in the world. *Laos* represents the totality of God's people, including the ordained ministry. It has been a grave mistake to take *laos* and derive from it the concept of laity, thereby dividing the church into groups composed of "laity" and "clergy." To compound the mistake, clergy are often called "workers," implying that the non-ordained do not work for the church.

A second useful concept is of

the church as both visible and invisible. The church is invisible in the multitude of devoted and sincere people of all churches and even those belonging to no organized church, who worship God in spirit and in truth to the extent of their knowledge and understanding.

While hearing the Word is important, Paul makes it clear, however, that there can be salvation for those outside the regularly organized church who have not heard the written Word:

When Gentiles who do not possess the law carry out its precepts by the light of nature, then, although they have no law, they are their own law, for they display the effect of the law inscribed on their hearts. Their conscience is called as witness (Rom 2:14, 15 NEB).

In this connection there are two theological concepts that we might wish to explore and which Catholic theologians use to balance the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church) teaching: (a) "invincible ignorance" and (b) "desire for the church." The thought is that anyone living in "invincible ignorance" of the Christian faith may be living outside the organizational borders of the church, but still belong to the people of God, and therefore, can be saved. Desire for the church and baptism is a related concept. Genuine desire to do God's will and what is right provides an implicit desire for baptism and church membership, though the individual concerned may not even be aware of this.

Thus, a person can be attached to the church though not institutionally a member. Certainly God himself seems to contextualize people when we are told in Ps 87:6: "The Lord shall count, when He writeth up the people, that this man was born there."

Third, it is helpful to note that Seventh-day Adventist Church governance authority moves upward, not downward. This should be kept in mind in starting new work in so called unentered territories. Any authority from above, or from elsewhere, should really be temporary, somewhat like using another car and battery to jump start your car.

In preparing this article, I was surprised to run across the following statement I wrote thirty-two years ago:

In order to keep its missionary outlook and the dynamic character of a movement, the church must continually keep its ecclesiological definitions and institutions operational and evangelistic, within the framework, of course, of the New Testament concept of ecclesia, rather than frozen in narrowly hierarchical and legal forms of church organization, in imitation of political government (Beach 1968:91).

In keeping things operational, organization may require adaptation. Many aspects of organization are not part of the laws of the Medes and Persians. Music needs to be adapted. Reverence in worship, social habits, and parliamentary procedure all need to be acculturized. Ellen G. White gives this counsel:

There is to be no change in the general features of our work, . . . we are to enter into no confederacy with the world, supposing that by so doing we could accomplish more. . . . No line of truth that has made the Seventh-day Adventist people what they are is to be weakened. We have the old landmarks of truth, experience, and duty, and we are to stand firmly in defense of our principles, in full view of the world (White 1948:17).

It is clear to me that she is here speaking about the work of the church in what might be called normal situations. There are situations where one cannot operate "in full view of the world."

organizational apostasy, the windows of vulnerability are smaller and fewer than in doctrine. While the Bible tells us there is one faith, it does not say there is one church organization or structure. In all these issues of acculturization Plato's golden mean is a valuable aid: "Not too much or too little, but just a middle."

Sure Foundation

There are always organizational challenges to be met. Life in a missionary church is not static or unchanging. The church, with God's help, can meet these challenges and foil all

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Windows of Vulnerability

Church leaders need to be aware of the dangers of syncretism—the reconciliation or union of conflicting beliefs, especially religious beliefs. There is one faith, one Lord, one baptism. Indeed, there is "none other name to obtain salvation." On the other hand, Paul encourages Christians to be "all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:22). The motivation is "that I might by all means save some." Paul became a Jew for the sake of the Jews, and without law to those without law (1 Cor 9:20, 21). While there is such a thing as

attacks on her basic organization and beliefs. The foundations are sure and the people of God can build on them evangelistically.

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