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Trends *facing* Adventist spiritual leaders

How is our world church to be run? What model do we use to govern a church as big and expansive as the Seventh-day Adventist movement has become? The tendency has been to run the church under what has been deemed the business model. The purpose of this article is to address the trend toward viewing the church in the context of the business model and four of the potential consequences of following that model.

The church and the business model

As the Seventh-day Adventist Church emerged from the nineteenth century, it faced the need for organizational change. Leadership dysfunctions generally tagged as “kingly authority” had emerged in the absence of structures that supported the theological values associated with Christian leadership. The following statement from Ellen White is typical of her during this time: “No man’s intelligence is to become such a controlling power that one man will have kingly authority in Battle Creek or in any other place. In no line of work is any one man to have power to turn the wheel. God forbids.”¹ This kingly model was compatible with the leadership behavior in secular business, military leadership, and organizational management, wherein command and control behavior was expected. Imposing this model upon

the church and its institutions, however, resulted in abusive behavior toward the people and prompted the following comment, “In the past, the Lord’s work has been carried on altogether too much in accordance with the dictation of human agencies. . . . A time of great perplexity and distress is not the time to be in a hurry to cut the knot of difficulty. In such a time are needed men of God-given ingenuity, tact, and patience. They are to work in such a way that they will “hurt not the oil and the wine.”²

As a reaction to this kingly model, changes were implemented in the early years of the twentieth century, and these resulted in a decentralization of the organization and a distribution of the authority of the church. Reforms enacted during the 1901 General Conference Session resulted in a reorganization of the Seventh-day Adventist governance system. The body of members was recognized in a way that represented ecclesiastic authority as opposed to being subjects of authoritarian leaders. Emphasis was placed on the spiritual authority of this body, and a well-defined system of delegating authority to leaders was established. In this representative system of governance, authority clearly flowed up from the body. Buffers that restricted the power of individuals and levels of organization were set up as safeguards against the reemergence of consolidated power and abusive authority.

As the church moved through the twentieth century, the organization’s administrative structure and function has increasingly suffered from the influence of the Western business model, as well as the secular presidential model. Leaders became executives, the president was elevated as chief executive, pastors became employees, and command and control management became common practice in directing the mission of the church. Concurrently, functional authority gradually shifted from the people to the leaders as a result of increased membership, decreased ratios of delegates to total membership, longer terms between sessions, and the simple expediency of getting things done. A sense that the lower levels of the church organization were accountable to the higher levels began to emerge in place of the lower levels cooperating with higher levels and being accountable to the constituencies that elected them. The representative system, which was designed as a hierarchy of order rather than of power, continues as the Adventist model but on a decreasing scale of effectiveness.

The consequences of these changes (and possible solutions) follow.

Silencing the voice of the people

The representative voice of the people has progressively grown more

silent, leading to a disengagement of laity and the local pastor in governance of the church. This is particularly so in the developed Western world. Attempts to empower and reengage laity in ministry in these areas has had marginal impact. Commitment, engagement, and passion are inextricably linked to a sense of personal ownership in the process, but that sense of ownership has gradually passed from the membership level to the corporate level of the church.

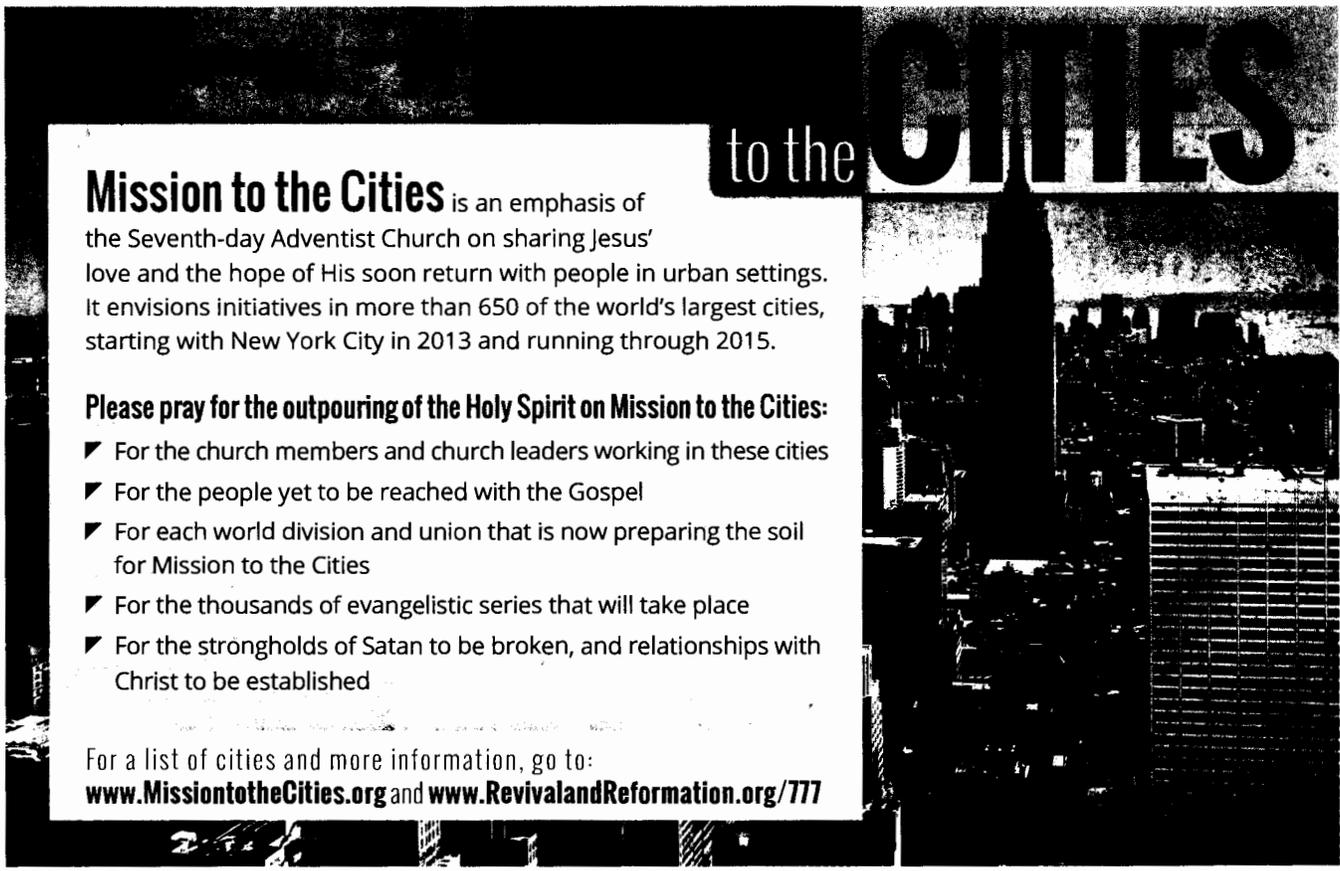
Millions of dollars are spent on media that allow the church to speak—journals, books, television, radio, Internet, and satellite; unfortunately, however, little is invested in increasing the capacity of the organized church to credibly listen. Consequently, the organized church must find a means of listening in a manner that will reinvigorate the voice of the body; after that, an increased sense of ownership will follow.

Our delegate processes upon which the strength of the representative model is founded, must be upgraded to assure that delegates are not voting or counseling in ignorance. Delegates should be provided with information regarding all whom they are asked to consider for election as well as the issues they are required to consider. Ignorance among the members was a primary enabling factor in the move of the early church from a system of distributed authority to a model³ that concentrated all authority in one person. Listening and ensuring an informed constituency has become the responsibility of the church organization and remains a critical need if we are to maintain a solid and effective representative system of governance.

Increase of relational distance

Closely associated with the disengagement of the laity is the progressive

increase in the relational distance between denominational leaders and the body. To many members and pastors, the organizations and leaders above the local conference or mission level are so distant. The link between their actions and the life of the member has become so vague that these organizations and leaders possess little or no relational connection to the people. Also, little significant relationship exists between the local church and what happens at the union and division levels. This breakdown of relationships in an organization designed, not as a business with control structures, but rather as one built around a relational model begs the question: Who is following the guidance of the higher organizations? If the average member perceives that the structure above the conference or mission level has little impact on his or her life, then the relationship needs to be rebuilt, whether the member's perception is correct or not.



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to the **CITIES**

An unintended consequence of an action taken after the 52nd session (1975), and which was published in 1980,⁴ was the disenfranchisement of ordained pastors from membership in the union constituencies. Until 1980, all ordained pastors were voting constituent members of their unions; this created an immediate and large group that clearly represented the local church and whose voice resonated in both the constituency session hall as well as in the local church upon their return. This dismissal of the pastors as a block (a few pastors serving on conference executive committees or elected as delegates-at-large continued to attend constituency sessions) has contributed to an increase in relational distance in the years since.

Similarly, pastors have traditionally been invited to the ministerial pre-session of the General Conference sessions, where connection and relationships are established and renewed between the organized work and the local pastor. The pre-session event was discontinued prior to 2005, in favor of allowing each union to address ministerial training on their own within the North American Division. Again, the unintended impact is a loss of connection and presence and an increase in the relational distance between the pastor and the local congregation and the higher levels of church organization—both leaders and institution.

Leaders at all levels of the church must reemphasize the relational fabric that unites us and reduces the relational distance between members and leaders. Church members, generally speaking, do not know their leaders and perceive that decisions and actions at higher levels have marginal personal impact on their lives and local churches. The church was not built upon a command and control model but upon a network of relationships governed by the Spirit-directed common voice of the body. In order for this relationship to flourish, leaders must not only talk to the body

but also intensely and intentionally listen to it.

Pastors as employees

The business model has resulted in “administrators” and “employees.” Pastors are corporately referred to as employees. This nomenclature fits the business model, but does this describe God’s will for the church? Look at this in the context of the pastor’s salary. As an employee, the pastor is paid for his or her ministry services; in the original context of our church, the pastor was paid so that he or she could provide ministry service. In the latter, the pastor’s service is not linked to a transactional exchange of money for ministry services; the commitment to ministry is pursued, regardless of remuneration. The employee designation assumes a transactional relationship between pay and service. This subtle difference determines whether the pastor owns his or her calling, or is simply carrying out the plans of the organization, the hiring or the shepherd.

The danger that must be addressed by leaders is the tendency for pastors to gravitate toward employee behavior, which can be typified by marginal contribution, low creativity, and compliance rather than commitment. Redefining the pastor as a professional rather than an employee can restore a sense of ownership of the pastoral calling and has the potential to reinvigorate the creativity necessary to meet the unique challenges of local ministry.

What is the church?

The common perception among Seventh-day Adventists is that the church is the organized system of conferences, unions, and the General Conference and divisions. The managed structure of the church has largely replaced the mental model of a collective membership birthed and knit together by the Holy Spirit as a functioning body that represents Jesus and is commissioned to do His

work. Leaders must help the church remember that it was the church—the body—that created the managed church to serve the needs of the body. All leaders draw their authority from the body and exercise their loaned authority on a basis limited by term and scope as stewards of the body.

This concept can be virtually tested with this question: If global disaster, whether natural or man-made, resulted in the collapse of the systems that support our organization (transportation, finance, communication, etc.), would we still have a church? The answer? Yes, but without the benefit and blessing of a professionally directed organization. The body would still exist because *it is the church*.

Leaders must address this issue by intentionally avoiding any leadership or governance behavior that employs episcopal methods. The representative model that allows the aggregate voice of the body to be heard must be addressed by the stewards of the organization in a manner that moves us away from the business model and back into the arena of ministry by a collective of Spirit-directed people.

Conclusion

The issue addressed in this article represents the understanding of one man. Some of what has been mentioned is supported by recent research, but other elements may need to be established or discarded on the basis of careful investigation. An infallible source would suggest that all things should be established in the presence of two or three witnesses. Maybe we could expand that concept and ask the body of believers for their testimony regarding the issues raised above. ❧

1 E. G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: White Estate, 1990), 292.
 2 *Ibid.*, 291.
 3 Ellen G. White, *From Here to Forever* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1982).
 4 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *NAD Constitution, Bylaws and Working Policy* (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1980), C 70 05.

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