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Why do we need an Organised Church?

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what it's all about . . .

Nurturing the individual, strengthening the local church, yet organised to reach the whole world.

why do we need an organised church?

Barry Oliver

Julie and I were watching the broadcast of the Winter Olympics. The long anticipated return of Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean to the Olympic ice was about to take place. But first, there had to be “a commercial break.” We were somewhat peeved by this interruption. One of the commercials was for “Coca Cola,” one for “Pringles,” one for an upcoming program on that channel. We were not really listening.

But the next advertisement immediately caught our attention. We heard the familiar tones of “Aussie kids are Weet-Bix kids.” We listened with considerable interest and felt a bit of a warm glow somewhere inside. We felt just a smidgen of pride in our church and its Sanitarium Health Food Company.

Without a system of organisation the church would not be able to operate a Sanitarium Health Food Company. There would be no Sydney Adventist Hospital, no Pacific Adventist University, no Signs Publishing Company, no Adventist Media Centre, no Auckland Adventist High School, etc., etc. We could not have viewed that TV commercial and felt good about what our church was trying to do. Sometime, do a little exercise and consider how many things the church now does that it would not be able to do if there was no system of organisation. Maybe, just maybe, we take a lot for granted about our Church.

Fundamental to the need for organisation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the commitment of the Church to a global mission. The Church has

taken seriously the words of Christ to “go and make disciples of all peoples” (Matt 28:19). Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a multi-national organisation, it needs to be organised for efficiency. Although the necessity of such organisation should be obvious, let me stimulate your thinking by suggesting some reasons why the church must be organised.

1. Coordination of Function

The support of the global outreach of the church needs organisation. Of course, organisation is necessary not only at the global level, but also at the national and local level. How would your church operate if there were no elders, youth leaders, treasurers, and other church officers? Who would plan the worship services, the social events, and the community services?

Different functions require different levels of organisation. It is unlikely that a local grocery store could mount a series of commercials for “Weet Bix” or “So Good.” At a higher level of organisation the Sanitarium Health Food Company can do that. So it is with the church. Levels of organisation beyond the local church are necessary for local, national, and global coordination of function.

2. Financial Stability

In order to finance the global, regional and local functions of the church, a coordinated financial system is necessary. It would be very nice to live in a world where money was not necessary. But that is not reality. While we must

ever realise that the church is a unique organisation, directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we must also realise that God has placed us in the real world where he expects us to fulfil his commission utilising the systems that operate within our sociological, anthropological and economic context.

It is not easy to find a financial system which is best for all. A global church can fall into one of two traps. On the one hand, it can commit too much funding

The servant leadership of Christ is the model for organisation

to the global aspects of its mission. The result can be that the local church does not have sufficient money to finance its own evangelistic program. Because money is going somewhere else, the level of ownership of the mission of the church can diminish.

Alternatively, the church may retain too many of its financial resources for local use. This can only result in a diminishing effectiveness of the mission of the church as a whole. It will, for instance, make it difficult to send ministers or missionaries into rural areas or to new people groups. Ultimately it will mean the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer.

Neither alternative is desirable. Consistently, the system of organisation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has endeavoured to steer a middle course between these two undesirable alternatives and promote a balanced distribution of finances. A good system of organisation should continue to ensure that such is the case.

3. Unity in Diversity

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the most diverse organisations in the world. There is economic, racial, linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity in the church. One only has to attend a General Conference session to become aware of this. Sometimes, it is good to visit a church congregation which is culturally different from your own. Attending an “anglo” church in New Zealand is a very different experience from attending an Afro-American church in North America, an Aboriginal church in Australia or a local Church in Kingston, Jamaica. There is an immediately awareness of diversity.

In the face of this wonderful diversity, it is necessary that a sound organisation promotes unity. Unity is a New Testament characteristic of the church. Unity is the foundation of effectiveness. Unity is the difference between success and failure in the mission of the church.

But unity is not uniformity. An organisation which demands uniformity will die. The secret to successful administration is the ability to maximise the diverse efficiencies of those who comprise the organisation in order to achieve the goals of the organisation. Unity in diversity is the key.

4. Order in the New Testament

Finally, if the church is to be faithful to God it cannot neglect the New Testament call to organise itself. The churches at Corinth, Rome, Thessalonica, Philippi, Colossae all had church officers who were responsible for the oversight of the work of the churches and for their spiritual condition.

Although the organisation was rudimentary at best because the church was so young, there are indications that it

It means . . .

Anabaptists: Originally a somewhat derogatory term indicating those who were “baptised again” during the era of the reformation, not recognizing infant baptism as genuinely biblical.

Apostolic succession: The theory that authority through the means of ordination is transferred from the apostles in an unbroken chain to bishops in apostolic churches, most importantly through Peter to the pope in Rome.

Ekklesia: From Greek “ek” (out of) and “kaleo” (to call), signifying those that are called out or gathered, hence the church as a group of people - not a building.

Ecclesiology: From Greek “ekklesia” (see above) and “logos” (teaching), meaning the teaching about the church., not the teachings/doctrines of the church.

Corporate: From Latin “corpus”, body.

Creed: From Latin “credo” (I believe), the first word of major creeds in the history of the Christian Church, such as the Apostolic Creed or the Nicene Creed. The creeds developed from baptismal vows to express the fundamental content of the faith and later to position the church or the churches in ongoing philosophical and theological controversies.

was necessary to coordinate the functions of the church beyond the local church level. In 1 Cor 16:2 Paul calls for an offering from the church at Corinth to help the believers in Jerusalem—financial coordination. In Acts 15 there is an important conference of church leaders in Jerusalem to discuss the problems that had arisen between Jews and non-Jews over some important issues to do with the law—doctrinal coordination. Even though the church was so small and so young, it was recognised that organisation, coordination, and order were essential.

Conclusion

There are some voices around today who are saying that the church does not

need to be organised in order to fulfil its commission. While it would be unfortunate if organisation became an end in itself, and while the church must continually monitor its organisational forms and retain a healthy flexibility, it cannot exist if it does not maintain a form of organisation. Voices which call for a dissolution of a global organisational structure may be speaking without realising the implications of such a stand. The basic principles of organisation that have served the church for the past 130 years, have been most appropriate and while continuous discussion must shape the forms that those principles will take, the principles themselves are good. The Seventh-day Adventist Church needs organisation. ■

For reflection . . .

- The article gives four reasons for the need of good church organisation. What do you think of these?
- What are the two financial traps the global church can fall into? How well is our church doing in steering the middle course between these two?
- The writer claims that unity in diversity is the key to good church organisation. How can the church be unified in diversity when these two ideals seem to be in tension?
- Do you agree with the conclusion that the Adventist Church needs organisation beyond the local level to fulfil its commission? What reasons can you provide for your view?