

An open letter to the General Conference ADCOM and GCDO with concerns and recommendations to do with the Document “Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions”.

From the executive committees of the Norwegian Union Conference,
the Danish Union of Churches Conference, and the Swedish Union of Churches Conference.

September, 2018

Introduction and Summary

The Unions of Scandinavia appreciate and embrace the General Conference leadership’s focus on the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s mission at this time in history. We support the General Conference in this. Moreover, we would like to participate constructively and respond helpfully in the current process. We have, however, a number of concerns about the proposed strategy for attaining unity in our Church. Far from bringing unity, we believe that there is a strong possibility that the strategy outlined in the proposals will undermine our Church’s mission, by causing division and polarisation in the world Church rather than the bonds of peace spoken of in Ephesians 4:3. Faithfully committed to our Church, it would therefore be disloyal of us not to address our concerns. We care for the leadership in the General Conference and pray for its success in leading all members of our diverse and international faith community. It is with the interests of the whole Church at heart that we reach out and ask the GC ADCOM and GCDO to consider our concerns and our recommendations.

The Need for Compliance

The Scandinavian Unions support the principle of compliance with policy as long as compliance does not undermine or come into conflict with the values of our Church or its mission. The Church must not tolerate practices that are out of harmony with Biblical ethics, such as misuse of power, abuse, misappropriation of funds, conflict of interest and corruption. Policy already exists for dealing with such situations but may need reviewing in view of new challenges presented by an increasing membership and a rapidly changing world.

Concerns about the document *Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions*.

1. Missional and organizational implications of the proposals

What kind of Church do we want to create? Is the proposed system for bringing about compliance conducive to building a mission oriented and loving community? The Scandinavian Unions are concerned with the space given to compliance issues and the significant energy that will be used on internal discussions. The large apparatus being created will take focus away from effective and innovative mission. Leaders may be afraid to “think outside the box”.

We are concerned that the proposals will lead to an organizational culture within the Church that is less loving because entities are being encouraged to find fault and to be suspicious. We are afraid the current proposal will not help our Church to be more like Christ. It will not build trust or relationships. We fear that future statistics on nurture and retention will be even more troubling than those we were presented with at the last Annual Council.

2. Compliance in relation to mission and credibility

Is the proposed process for attaining compliance suitable for all compliance issues? Circumstances, interpretations, missional necessity, the credibility of the Church and the culture and law of the land



might all create situations where an entity needs some room for maneuver. The current debate on whether women called to ministry should receive the same recognition as their male counterparts is an example of an issue where some unions feel that they are being asked to choose between strict compliance on the one hand and the Church's mission and credibility in that territory on the other hand. Forty years of scholarship have concluded that fair treatment in this matter finds support in the Bible and is harmonious with the Church's doctrines. In cases such as this, we believe there is a need for a different kind of approach, where we can explore options together as brothers and sisters in an unhurried and open manner.

3. The perception that unity is being confused with uniformity

The "Regard for..." document seeks to bring about unity. But what is authentic unity? The document appears to suggest that unity can be attained by outward compliance. The evidence in our part of the world would suggest that the opposite is true. Many of our members and contacts react negatively to the impression that matters of conscience, that are in harmony with both policy (WP BA 60 05) and the Church's fundamental beliefs, are to be decided by committees at the General Conference. Our unity, in faith issues, is found in Christ and the mission he has given to the Church. Unity is therefore a matter of the heart. We understand the need for keeping the Church together and support the necessity of compliance and loyalty where mission is not undermined. However, we believe that authentic unity is best brought about by a common commitment to and focus on our Savior and our mission. We would encourage the General Conference to allow administrators, pastors, members and entities to focus on what brings authentic unity through the Spirit of God. It may also be helpful to make a distinction between missional unity and administrative unity.

4. Differences of opinion as opportunities

Will the present proposals hinder the work of the Holy Spirit through the community of faith? Will the proposals make it difficult for our Church to develop in understanding and make necessary changes to meet new challenges and opportunities? The Unions of Scandinavia are apprehensive that the system being proposed leaves little room for flexibility and development of policy as well as organizational progress. Policy, to some extent, needs to be dynamic, helping us to meet the needs of mission in all parts of the world. We are concerned that policy is becoming more than a servant of mission. If this is the case, it is likely to limit our effectiveness.

5. The appeal process

Is the appeal process fair? We question such systems where the committee that decides whether an entity is compliant is also the one to process an appeal. This is especially worrisome as the committee members appear to have been appointed by and are answerable to the GC ADCOM. This is a process weighted too much in favor of the higher entity. The result will be that any appeal will have little chance of an unbiased hearing. The centralization of authority in this way is, as we see it, a troubling challenge to the system of trust on which our church organization has been built.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in a spirit of constructive dialogue and a desire to contribute to the wellbeing of the world church.

1. A commission on unity.

Our Church is at risk of being disunited. There are tensions between traditionalists and progressives, the global north and the global south, and over some theological issues, to name just a few. We suggest establishing a commission to explore ways in which different groups within the Church can dialogue, leading to a greater understanding of each other's perspectives, cultures and backgrounds. We believe that authentic unity is promoted through relationships that learn together. We recommend that such a commission find a strategy for global trust building.



2. Reconsideration of the document

In view of the concerns outlined above, we ask that the GCDO and GC ADCOM seriously consider withdrawing the document. Is the centralization of authority that is outlined really in the interests of Church unity? Is the strengthening of the hierarchical structure something that we feel safe with, given our history and widely quoted advice from the Spirit of Prophecy? There are policies already in place for dealing with non-compliance. In what ways are these not adequate provisions for dealing with non-compliance? The Scandinavian Unions cannot support a document that we perceive to be a threat to the unity and mission of the Church.

3. Reconsideration of elements in the proposals

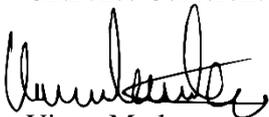
In the eventuality that these proposals be put to the Annual Council we ask GC ADCOM to reconsider the following aspects of the document “Regard for...” and the associated “Terms of Reference”:

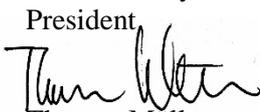
- a) **Limitations on policy development.** By focusing on compliance, are we moving the Church into a situation where it becomes more difficult for policy to be changed, and thereby more difficult to serve the Church’s mission locally in a volatile and changing world?
- b) **Appeal process.** We ask that the appeal process suggested be reconsidered. We suggest the establishment of an independent appeal panel. We need a process in which the leadership and work of the compliance committees, in line with all levels of church governance, are open to scrutiny.
- c) **The usefulness of employing this methodology on all compliance questions.** Are there categories of non-compliance that may be dealt with more effectively in a variety of ways according to different situations?
- d) **Publicly reprimanding executive committee members from unions deemed to be non-compliant, every time they exercise their right to speak.** It is not clear to us what the purpose of this action is. It seems to us that it will achieve nothing but further side taking and polarization, hindering rather than helping openness, dialogue and reconciliation. We therefore recommend that any suggestions of such labelling be dropped from the proposal to the Annual Council.

4. Alternative credential

We ask the GC ADCOM and GCDO to consider establishing an alternative credential, differentiated from ordination by its local and time limited application. We believe that such an adjustment would respect the GC vote of San Antonio, while allowing unions who need to recognize equally their male and female pastors to do so. This policy adjustment could be handled at the Annual Council. This is one alternative tool that could be used to solve one particular compliance issue, and we urge the General Conference to consider this option. This move would enable those unions, for whom this is important, to move on and focus fully on their mission to reach the world with the three angel’s messages.

On behalf of the executive committee of the Norwegian Union Conference, the Danish Union of Churches Conference and the Swedish Union of Churches Conference.


Victor Marley
President

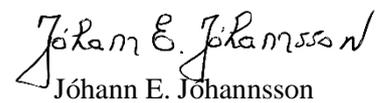

Thomas Müller
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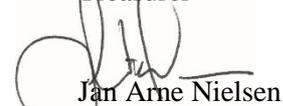

Robert Sjölander
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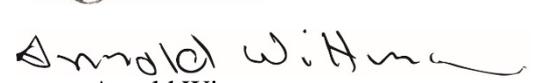

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