

Growing Healthy Churches? Part 3  
Denominational Loyalty

Is the Church Stopping the Church from Growing?

An analysis by Tim Matsis  
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## Introduction

This article examines the incompatibility of the “Growing Healthy Churches” (GHC) plan with Seventh-day Adventist church structure.

Feeble and defective as the church appears at times, the church organisation is a formidable obstacle to try and push around. But why would a pastor or conference president want to separate from the Adventist denomination?

Whereas most problems that exist in a church are spiritual ones that are best dealt with by sound presentation of truth, prayer and hard work, GHC sidesteps most of this and proposes a political solution you can simply vote for! Of course, most conferences and churches won't rush to abandon the church organisation or the beliefs that convicted them as individuals to join it. To address this difficulty, GHC has a well-rehearsed sales pitch to get you there.<sup>1</sup> To a frustrated church leader, who might believe he has vision and talent, GHC can seem a means of bypassing the system.

## The Basis of Church Organisation

**Good intentions regarding unity.** To be fair, most Adventist leaders will not have in mind that they are splitting up or leaving the church organisation. Paul Borden, the Baptist minister behind GHC writes, “[W]e were committed to our denominational identity, and in no way saw ourselves as leaving it or even trying to change it . . .”<sup>2</sup>

However, regardless of this protestation, the fact is that Borden's churches, the American Baptist Churches of the West (ABCW), of which he is the Executive Minister, are independent. ABCW's bylaws state:

Fundamental to ABCW is the autonomy of individual churches to assess their own needs and the needs of the population they serve, and to embrace a unique, spirit-led vision in doing their part to fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>3</sup>

ABCW is governed by its own set of rules and has a tenuous relationship to the larger Baptist denomination by virtue of “voluntary association”.<sup>4</sup> To provide even further distance, ABCW has been renamed “Growing Healthy Churches”, after the programme Borden created.

**Adventist organisation is representative, not congregational.** Unlike Baptist churches, Adventist churches do not stand alone as independent congregations. Our work is a world-wide work that unites all Adventist churches into one body. This unity is evidenced by our worldwide system of mission offerings, missionary programs, tithing, organisational structure and importantly, the *Church Manual*. The *Church Manual* explicitly states that “[t]he representative form of church government is that which prevails in the Seventh-day Adventist Church”.<sup>5</sup>

This representative form of governance is a strong protection against divergent voices which would seek to carry parts of the church in different directions. Despite initiatives launched by separatists, our system is designed to ensure that, like sheep, we stick together and succeed together.

While it does not claim any degree of inspiration, the *Church Manual* is the authoritative statement on how Adventist churches are bound to operate. Note the following from the *Church Manual*:

The content of the *Church Manual* is the expression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s understanding of Christian life and church governance and discipline based on biblical principles. It expresses the authority of a duly assembled General Conference session. “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.” —*Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 261.<sup>6</sup>

Changes to the rules of the denomination contained in the *Church Manual* are agreed to by the world church in a “session”, held every five years. The *Church Manual* requires that if a church or conference wishes to have a change made in the rules, it must be processed by the higher organisational levels, and only then presented to the world church.<sup>7</sup> As will be seen, GHC bypasses all this and instead appeals directly to the local constituents to make their own rules.

Such action is consistent with the “congregational” system of organisation GHC is based upon. Under the congregational form of church organisation “the local church congregation [is] supreme and final within its own domain”.<sup>8</sup> Such form of organisation has been rejected by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>9</sup>

**GHC takes advantage of unawareness.** In the experience of the writer, GHC, as implemented in Adventism, takes advantage of unawareness of the laity regarding Adventist church organisation. Some Adventists are more likely to respect the “personal power” of a president or local church pastor than the rules of church organisation contained in the *Church Manual*.

Consequently, GHC usually begins in a conference with the president and a few influential leaders presenting some negative statistics to the executive committee (the executive) and then balancing the anguish created by presenting a positive plan of action, including concepts about GHC. This is, no doubt, coupled with an earnest evangelistic plea for urgent action. Once the executive is on board, the proponents of GHC have a mandate to push GHC in the churches of their conference.

The following is an example of how uninformed the executive may be about the realities of GHC: One member of a conference executive known to the writer, went along with GHC at

the executive, only to be removed from church office in their local church when the programme was implemented for refusing to sign a pledge of support in favour of the pastor and GHC! Similar stories could be related regarding those in local churches who have voted for GHC.

Next, the GHC plan is politely but aggressively promoted in local churches, usually by someone the congregation is inclined to trust, like the president. Sadly, as congregations are worked into the programme one by one, pastors with reservations may be reluctant to speak out for fear of being accused of “breaking ranks” or being “unsupportive”. Such workers may ultimately be threatened with losing their job.

### **Changing Your Perspective on Church Organisation**

Once GHC is approved by the executive, how does a church or conference end up separating itself from the denomination?

**Use of “vision” and “mission”.** One semantic used to re-educate a church, is use of the terms “vision” and “mission,” whereby the local church or conference is asked to define what its dreams for the future (the vision) are and why it exists (the mission).

While “vision casting” (as it is sometimes called), can be a useful thing if it results in people rediscovering the purpose and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist movement, it can also be used to introduce new directions and new reasons for existing.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is an effective tool for change in a church which has become either overly formal, or has never been properly grounded in a biblical understanding of the remnant church and its mission.

**The mission and vision of the Adventist Church.** Note the following comments from the *Church Manual*:

### 13. Remnant and Its Mission.

The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. This remnant announces the arrival of the judgment hour, proclaims salvation through Christ, and heralds the approach of His second advent. This proclamation is symbolized by the three angels of Revelation 14; it coincides with the work of judgment in heaven and results in a work of repentance and reform on earth. Every believer is called to have a personal part in this worldwide witness. (Rev. 12:17; 14:6-12; 18:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:10; Jude 3, 14; 1 Peter 1:16-19; 2 Peter 3:10-14; Rev. 21:1-14.)<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the “vision” of the Adventist church may be defined in terms of Fundamental Belief #25, “The Second Coming”. These understandings of why we exist as a church and what we hope for, do not permit an Adventist church to say, “we are only here to reach young married people with children” or “we are here to reach youth”. The Adventist church has a biblical mandate to reach “every kindred, tongue, and people” and to hasten the Second Coming of Jesus!

**A new vision and mission.** As churches are encouraged to assess why *they* exist as a local church and how *they* are fulfilling *their* purpose in *their* community, the worldwide church and its message becomes less and less relevant. Each church becomes responsible for the numerical results in their own geographical community.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, local interests become quarantined and focussed on *our* church, *our* vision and *our* mission. Ironically, while these local churches are led to focus on being numerically successful in their own local area, they are also typically led to believe that they are becoming more “outward focussed”! In light of the failures identified by “consultants” in their own church, local churches are encouraged to model their church on churches from other denominations which appear to have numerical success, such as Willow Creek or Saddleback.

How a redefined vision and mission can affect a church's outlook is evidenced by the following example. In one Adventist church, the "vision casters" or "consultants" had determined that to reach the church's chosen target market of young people with children, they needed a new church building. To encourage the church to embrace the idea, the pastor placed in the church bulletin words to the effect of, "we can fit many walking sticks in the foyer of our church but how many prams [baby carriages] can we fit?" Aged people are part of our mission too and such actions clearly contradict our high calling to "reach the world"!

**The local church's mission and vision come first.** GHC does not permit the denomination and its distinctive beliefs to impede the all-consuming objective of fulfilling the self-defined, local mission and vision. Under GHC, local leadership has the right to orientate the local church in whatever way will help it achieve its self-determined objectives. In Borden's view:

. . . [T]he most important people in regional life are the pastors and lay leaders of congregations. The [conference] exists to serve these leaders first, before considering any demands that go with being part of a larger denominational entity.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, by redefining the role of the church in terms of its local ambitions, local church leadership is encouraged to become self-directed, while paying lip service to its role as a part of the worldwide church. Under GHC, local church leadership, under the control of their GHC pastor and GHC conference, is left free to abolish, or ignore, as they see fit, in order to "grow". The rules of the worldwide church contained in the *Church Manual* may be voted out, or simply ignored. This is because, in Borden's view, "judicatories do not exist to serve our denomination. Rather we are denominations who exist to serve our congregations".<sup>14</sup>

More fundamentally however, beliefs, especially those regarding Bible prophecy, that unite Adventists as a people, may be hardly mentioned from the pulpit for fear of turning away potential attendees in the “target market”.

Borden writes:

. . . [The] mission statement caused us to focus on the local congregation as the primary unit of mission. Even though we were committed to our denominational identity, and in no way saw ourselves as leaving it or even trying to change it, our primary commitment was to the local congregations in our region, not the denomination...[when] conflicts arose, the local congregation and its needs took priority.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore,

. . . [O]ur commitment to the mission and vision took precedence over everything, including those specific denominational concerns that we felt hindered the accomplishment of the mission and achieving the vision.<sup>16</sup>

Finally:

We needed to do all we could to bring life, transformation, and health to dying congregations even if it meant, for a while, down-playing the role of national denominational life in our region.<sup>17</sup>

The drift from denominational identity in achieving the new mission and vision goes still further. Borden encourages going outside the denomination to attract “growth pastors”<sup>18</sup> and creating strategic partnerships with other denominations.<sup>19</sup> The aforementioned renaming of ABCW as “Growing Healthy Churches”, in an effort to distance themselves from the Baptist denomination, is an example of the significant local church autonomy existing under the congregational model Baptists employ. Such ideas are foreign to Adventist polity.

Unfortunately, by downplaying the connection to the larger denomination and encouraging a local church to fulfill its own “God-given mission”, the stage is well set for the next step—separation from the denominational structure.

### **Separating Churches From the Denomination**

**The need for a new church organisational structure.** In a bold admission, Borden states:

None of the changes I see as fundamental will occur without a change in structure. In some denominations this is harder to do than in others . . . However, in such cases there may be a need to create shadow structures that are usable and effective, even if they are not recognised officially.<sup>20</sup>

After following the GHC programme for a period of time, it is likely that Adventist churches will find themselves less and less like conventional Adventist churches. If the “vision casting” has been successful, the local church will have very largely re-created itself, at least intellectually, to attract its target market. GHC requires still more fundamental changes in order to consolidate the change in thinking and assist achieving the vision and mission. Borden writes, “I find that all polities inhibit mission and create a conspiracy of smallness that has come to be valued at the expense of effective ministry”.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, the organisational structure gets in the way.

Adventist proponents of GHC often hide or downplay this aspect of GHC when promoting GHC to Adventist churches. However, Borden insists:

. . . the entire system must be overhauled. New systems and subsystems need to be created if the institution is going to move from dysfunction to missional endeavour . . . New values based on foundational principles must be embraced, new strategies reflecting those

values must be implemented, and new structures must be created to allow the new strategies to be implemented.<sup>22</sup>

And again:

. . . We also knew that if we had to spend time keeping the machinery of the bureaucracy going we would not have time to create, develop and implement new strategies and tactics. Therefore we adopted another foundational principle: Eliminate the structure that inhibits the implementation of the mission and vision.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, as Borden suggests, Adventists who promote GHC never intend that it will go that far. One conference which recently had dabbled with GHC, after a change in leadership, saw it necessary to vote to affirm its obligation to follow the rules of Adventist church organisation found in the *Church Manual*.

**Setting aside the *Church Manual*.** In order to effectively change the structure of the Church, one must deal with the *Church Manual*. As already set out, there is a clear process for changing the *Church Manual* which requires submitting proposed changes to higher levels in the church organisation and finally, obtaining the agreement of the world church in session. Despite this, GHC encourages conferences and churches to ignore higher administration and to make their own rules, regardless of what the larger church says.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Ellen White writes:

Brethren, never allow anyone's ideas to unsettle your faith in regard to the order and harmony which should exist in the church . . . The God of heaven is a God of order, and He requires all His followers to have rules and regulations, and to preserve order.<sup>25</sup>

In Borden's own conference, they felt at liberty to set such rules aside. He writes:

. . . we, the [conference] leaders went to the constituents, the congregations, and said that the region should try a grand experiment. We delineated the parts of our [Church Manual] that related to the month by month operating of the [conference] that interfered with new strategies and tactics of ministry being implemented. We told our constituents that we

would like their vote to place these parts of our [Church Manual] in abeyance for three years while new ways of functioning were developed.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in local churches, Borden encouraged the creation of:

. . . a new structure that is aligned with the new outward focussed mission and vision . . . . In many cases we encouraged congregations to follow the example of the region and take those bylaws that related to the monthly operation of the congregation's ministries and vote to put them in abeyance for three years.<sup>27</sup>

**GHC and financial resources.** The approach taken to church governance under GHC affects other areas of church order. For example, in light of the local vision and mission developed under GHC, Borden writes:

. . . a [conference] needs to intentionally [decide] to expend the majority of its financial, time and human resources on meeting congregational needs rather than fulfilling institutional and denominational demands . . . given the obvious scarcity of resources and competition for dollars, it may also mean that some dollars that have normally come to the denomination may need to stay with the congregation for it to have the resources to grow.<sup>28</sup>

### **Protecting Church Leaders from the Church?**

Having advocated an end-run on denominational checks and balances that he feels have obstructed mission, Borden believes that it is the role of GHC leaders to protect each other and the churches they are “consulting”, from the corrective admonitions of the denomination. He notes:

Courage is needed because systemic change breeds suspicion in the rest of the denominational family, since violating perceived family values is considered a greater sin than not accomplishing an effective mission.<sup>29</sup>

Thus it is the GHC consultant's job to hold the denominational leaders at bay while they successfully implement changes in Church structure. Borden explains:

Eliminate the structure that inhibits the implementation of the mission and vision . . . we attacked this issue in describing the status quo as unacceptable and offered a vision of what could be if the structure was different. Second we offered an alternative that we felt would be acceptable to the leaders of the region, who would probably resist a new structure.<sup>30</sup>

It is also evident from Borden's counsels that Adventist denominational leaders should not expect any sense of Christian deference or loyalty from leaders or churches that have imbibed GHC ideology. Borden writes:

We also needed to protect pastors, lay leaders and even congregations from other pastors, congregations, and denominational leaders . . . [D]uring the four years of intervention we had to protect our congregations from people in positions of leadership elsewhere in our denomination.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, GHC leaders intentionally confront, and, in the writer's experience, bully, those they think they can dominate. Borden writes: "We were open to confronting individuals who were unable to make the changes, or who even worked against the changes".<sup>32</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While claiming to be acting in the interests of the church, Adventist leaders promoting GHC put conferences and local churches on a path, which, if continued to its end, would result in their separation from the denomination. It begins with reshaping the values of the congregation in terms of local ambitions. It feeds the new vision and mission by downplaying links to the Adventist denomination and muting Adventism's distinctive beliefs. GHC then consolidates the shift in thinking by changing the rules of operation that formally bind the congregation to the Adventist denomination. During all, GHC proponents gang together to protect each other from anyone standing in the way.

Remarkably, all of this parades itself under the euphemistic banner, “Growing Healthy Churches”. Is all this “healthy”? I don’t think so, and neither does Ellen White:

O how Satan would rejoice if he could succeed in his efforts to get in among this people, and disorganise the work at a time when thorough organisation is essential, and will be the greatest power to keep out spurious uprisings, and to refute claims not endorsed by the Word of God! We want to hold the lines evenly, that there shall be no breaking down of the system of organisation and order that has been built up by wise, careful labor. License must not be given to disorderly elements that desire to control the work at this time.<sup>33</sup>

NEXT: Watch for Part 4: “Who is the Greatest”? Leadership and GHC.

Tim Matsis is a lawyer who lectures in law, leadership and business at the Southern Institute of Technology in Invercargill, New Zealand. In addition to serving in his local church, he has also been involved as a lay member at conference and division levels. He is currently doing further study in the field of Theology and Ministry. He is married to Leslea and has a two year old son named Samuel.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See part 1 of this series.

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye—How Denominations Can aim the Congregation at the Mission Field*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 64, 65.

<sup>3</sup> See clause 2.1 of Bylaws at <http://www.growinghealthychurches.org/art/bylaws.pdf> (accessed 2009-06-15).

<sup>4</sup> The Bylaws read, in part, “2.3 ABCW has entered into a voluntary covenant of relationship with other parties in the American Baptist Churches of the U.S.A. (ABC/USA). Member churches of ABCW have the opportunity and option of relating to the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.”

<sup>5</sup> *Church Manual*, p. 26. “Representative—the form of church government which recognizes that authority in the church rests in the church membership, with executive responsibility delegated to representative bodies and officers for the governing of the church. This form of church government recognizes also the equality of the ordination of the entire ministry. The representative form of church government is that which prevails in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

<sup>6</sup> *Church Manual*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Pages xxi and xxii of the *Church Manual* read, “Changes in or revisions of the *Church Manual*, the Notes excepted (see below), can be made only by action of a General Conference session in which delegates of the world body of believers are assembled and have a voice in making revisions. If revisions in the Church Manual are considered necessary by any of the constituent levels (see p. 26), such revisions should be submitted to the next constituent level for wider counsel and study. If approved, the suggested revisions are then submitted to the next constituent level for further evaluation. Any proposed revisions shall then be sent to the General Conference Church Manual Committee. This committee will consider all recommended amendments or revisions and, if approved, prepare them for presentation at an Annual Council and/or General Conference session.”

<sup>8</sup> *Church Manual*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 68, 69. Ellen White warns: “I know that the Lord loves His church. It is not to be disorganised or broken up into independent atoms. There is not the least consistency in this; there is not the least evidence that such a thing will be. Those who shall heed this false message and try to leaven others will be deceived and prepared to receive advanced delusions, and they will come to nought.”

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful discussion on the nature and importance of Adventist church growth, see Larry Kirkpatrick, “Church Growth—But on Adventist Terms” at <http://greatcontroversy.org/gco/rar/kirk-churchgrowthadventist.php>.

<sup>11</sup> *Church Manual*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> In Borden’s equivalent of an Adventist Conference, their Mission and Vision read like this: Mission: “The American Baptist Churches of the West exist to grow healthy churches”. Vision: To have seventy percent of our congregations growing at the end of five years. See Borden, pp. 64, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Borden, p. 79. Note that in some quotes in this article, as in previous installments, the word “conference” has been used to “Adventise” Borden’s comments.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> For example, in one Adventist conference beset by GHC ideology because of a previous administration, the constituency was forced into voting on whether or not the *Church Manual* was still binding upon it. Fortunately, they voted that it was!

<sup>25</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 274.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that the Baptist churches of which Paul Borden's conference is a part, operate under a congregational system of governance which allows more freedom for churches to adopt their own rules. For example, part of the debate fueling the GHC programme in his church is the denomination's rulings allowing individual churches to permit homosexuality.

<sup>27</sup> Borden, p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 75, 79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 487. She comments further in *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 204, as follows, "The enemy of souls has sought to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error. A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written. A system of intellectual philosophy would be introduced. The founders of this system would go into the cities, and do a wonderful work. The Sabbath, of course would be lightly regarded, as also the God who created it. Nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of the new movement. The leaders would teach that virtue is better than vice, but God being removed they would place their dependence on human power, which, without God, is worthless. Their foundation would be built on the sand, and storm and tempest would sweep away the structure."