

Disfellowship Item Removed from 1995 Session Agenda

Will they or won't they? It appears that they will not.

An interesting situation has developed, one which you will want to pay close attention to in the months ahead and at the forthcoming General Conference Session in Utrecht, Holland (June 29-July 8, 1995).

The General Conference has issued a denial of its earlier intention to enact a change in the *Church Manual* and conference policy books, permitting conference offices to supersede the authority of local churches—enabling conference committees to disfellowship church members.

As you may recall, we were the first to give wide publicity to the plan to supplant local church authority over membership rolls (*Objectives of the Commission on World Church Organization [WM—490]* and *Letter to Our Leaders—We Plead with You: Please Do Not Disfellowship Faithful Advent Believers [WM—492]*, both released in October 1993).

Fortunately, the information was mentioned in a brief news note by a local Adventist church. When we were sent a copy of that paper, we spread the news across North America and overseas.

Now the General Conference president denies that the plan was ever in operation. Yet the individual denying it happens to be the chairman of the specially appointed committee assigned the task of preparing that, and other, 1995 Session agenda items which are concerned with tightening controls by church leaders over lesser entities and church members.

Here is some background information regarding this:

In 1993, Robert Folkenberg was appointed chairman of a new commission, the Commission on World Church Organization (CWCO), very likely established by the 1993 Spring Council.

This new commission met, for the first time, for a full week (Monday, August 30, to Sunday, September 5, 1993) at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It obviously had a lot on its agenda to consider.

The second meeting was in March 1994 at Cohutta Springs, Georgia, and several additional meetings were slated after that. All the meetings were scheduled to span a two-year period.

Fortunately, the committee members (as might

be expected) knew all the basic objectives,—and one of those committee members mentioned the existence of the committee and discussed several of those objectives in a news note in a local church periodical.

Here is that local church news note:

“COMMISSION ON WORLD CHURCH ORGANIZATION—I spent the week of August 30 to September 5 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, attending the Commission on World Church Organization. This is a commission chaired by Robert Folkenberg that is spending more than three weeks, over a couple of years, studying the organization of the church and bringing recommendations to the 1995 General Conference [Session] on issues of organization.

“The commission is more clearly defining the roles of the administration and departments of the General Conference. With the growing world membership, the General Conference Session will soon be too large, and so recommendations are being made about limiting the number of delegates. Recommendations will also include electing fewer division personnel at a General Conference Session and electing them at division meetings instead. The General Conference Committee has been very large, and there are recommendations to cut the size of the committee drastically as well as make it more representative of the world church.

“The next meeting will be at Cohutta Springs [Georgia] in March, at which time there will be discussion of more tightly linking the organizational structures of the church. The net effect of such linkage would be to give the higher organizations more authority to prevent lower organizational departure from official church policy. *That discussion will include a proposal that would allow a conference committee or constituency meeting to disfellowship a local church member that the local church refuses to deal with.*

“The world church is a very complex organization, and there are many cultural and national diversities to consider in making organizational change.”—*Gordon Bietz, Senior Pastor, Collegedale Seventh-day Adventist Church, in Churchbeat, Weekly newsletter of the Collegedale (Tennessee) S.D.A. Church, September 15, 1993 [italics ours].*

Well, that disclosure takes our breath away! We find, in that brief four-paragraph news note, a definite four-pronged plan to tighten the reins of control of the entire church in the hands of the chief officers of the church on the confer-

ence, union, division, and General Conference levels,—and to greatly strengthen the power of the General Conference itself.

At the 1901 and 1903 General Conference Sessions, major changes were made in the church structure of our denomination. A new set of major changes are now being planned for the 1995 Session.

What does the above statement say?

Paragraph 1 - The CWCO, which is chaired by Folkenberg, will meet several times between 1993 and 1995. Its overall objective is study the organization of the church and bring recommendations to the 1995 General Conference.

Paragraph 2 - The CWCO's work includes (1) specifying authority and positions within the General Conference itself; (2) reducing the size of the General Conference Committee (by a third, we now know), so far fewer officers will attend spring and annual council; and (3) reducing the number of Division personnel elected at Sessions. All such changes would greatly increase the power of a few men.

Paragraph 3 - The CWCO's work includes (1) more tightly binding together the various branches of the denomination. That could only be done in one or the other of two ways: if we all drew closer to Christ (and no committee can legislate that) or if greater power was given to a few men. (2) Recommending a carefully thought out proposal to the 1995 Session *"that would allow a conference committee or constituency meeting to disfellowship a local church member that the local church refuses to deal with."*

Well, there it is, clearly stated in that September 15, 1993, *Churchbeat* article by Pastor Bietz.

Yet, fourteen months later, the chairman of that committee, Elder Folkenberg has issued a forthright denial. Here are the two significant parts of his denial:

"One article stated that the proposal would 'allow a conference committee or constituency meeting to disfellowship a local church member that the local church refuses to deal with.' The author went on to state, 'Should this proposal be accepted by the General conference Session in Utrecht, our church will become more hierarchical in structure, approaching that of the Roman Catholic Church.' "—Robert Folkenberg, *"From the G.C. President,"* November 28, 1994, para. 1 [italics ours].

The above repudiation is indeed strange, since that which Folkenberg is denying (the italicized sentence, above) is what Elder Bietz said (the exact words) in his September 15, 1993, *Churchbeat* article! (Of course, it was not Bietz who likened such a proposed action to papal rule.)

Immediately afterward, in paragraph 2, Folkenberg said this:

"Let me be very clear in my response. 1) No such proposal will be on the General Conference Session agenda. 2) Nothing like this was even suggested at Annual Council."—*Op. cit.*, para. 2.

The phrasing of the above statement is interesting in two ways: First, in paragraph 1, we have a denial, by Folkenberg, of Bietz's statement. Second, in paragraph 2, we find his denial is quite specific and limited: (1) The recommendation was not suggested to the October 1994 Annual Council, and (2) it will not be presented to the 1995 Utrecht Session.

Folkenberg is not denying that the matter was discussed by the special commission (CWCO). In fact, later in his statement, he hints that it was:

"The Commission on World Church Organization did struggle with the conduct of some congregations which, ignoring the responsibilities placed upon them by the world membership, bring disgrace on their fellow believers."—*Op. cit.*, para. 4.

Apparently, after widespread publication of this plan to supersede the sole right of the local church to disfellowship members,—enough static was received at General Conference headquarters, that the plan was dismissed.

So then, this is good news! Whatever each of our personal convictions may be about church membership, we maintain the right of each believer to retain his or her membership in the denomination.

Will they or won't they? It appears that the delegates to the forthcoming General Conference Session, in Utrecht, Holland, will not be presented with a recommendation, by CWCO, to permit local conference leaders to directly disfellowship believers.

However, in the coming months you will want to remain on the alert to developments! The 1995 Session will convene on Thursday, June 29, in Utrecht, Holland, and will continue through Saturday evening, July 8.

An earlier issue of the *Review* mentioned that all church members are welcome to attend the 1995 Session, but that it will be held in the smaller city of Utrecht, and that all the hotel space there has already been reserved for church leaders and workers who will be attending (only eight percent of the delegates are ever laymen). Therefore, the *Review* said visitors will have to journey 30 to 50 miles to other Dutch cities for nightly accommodations. This plan to convene the Session in a small, overseas town will effectively bar many believers from attending. The overall costs and daily travel time would be prohibitive.