

Another Journey to Utrecht

— by Russell Standish

Dr. Russell Standish is well-known among historic believers as a solid supporter of the historic beliefs and standards of our people.

The following well-written report was prepared by Dr. Standish. As you will read, he and his brother faithfully attended every business session of the Utrecht Session.

This summary presentation, to which we have added sub-heads, is astounding, and should be shared with others.

BUSINESS CHAOS

GENERAL CONFUSION

The Business Sessions were the most confused and disorganized I have ever seen: Late commencements were routine; unending points of order were made; speakers were continually confused as to which microphone they should use; the issues under discussion seemed to be mysteries to many delegates who spoke on irrelevant matters; chairmen were frequently uncertain when points of order were raised and decisions were far from consistent.

SO MANY OBJECTIONS

One long-time church administrator, a General Conference director for the past fifteen years, said that we have never known such chaos during business sessions at any previous General Conference Session. In the past the Constitution and Bylaws subcommittee has rarely met for more than one hour to consider objections. On one day alone, this subcommittee met for six hours considering objection after

objection to the proposed changes that were presented. In addition, the committee met on other days for long periods.

TOO MANY ITEMS

Is it any wonder, then, that the discussions of the business session got out of hand? Worse still, because we have a General Conference president who is in a hurry to alter vast swathes of areas which have served our church well in the past, the agenda has been burdened with such a list of items that if they were adequately discussed by the 2,600 delegates, the Session would have had to continue to the turn of the millennium.

To abbreviate discussion, delegates were frequently urged to refer items back to either the Constitution and Bylaws Committee or the Church Manual Committee. In one session almost 75 percent of items which were brought to the floor, were referred back to an already over-burdened committee.

The second cause of chaos was a lower level of chairmanship skills than has been evident in my previous attendance at General Conference Sessions. The chairman is always a vice-president of the General Conference or the president of the North American Division. These men alternate in the position. Of the seven officiating on this occasion, over half did not have such a role previously. Many are hesitant, others gave inconsistent rulings, others sought help from other church leaders when they could not evaluate points of order.

In fairness, it must be stated that the controversial nature of so many of the items being pressed

upon the world body, would have tested the chairmen skills of many of the world's most experienced chairmen. It is suspected that each session chairman took his seat with no relish whatsoever. Not infrequently the rulings of chairmen were rather severely criticized by delegates and pleas (almost for mercy) from chairmen, to remember that "we are not always right," were heard more than once. The General Conference secretary and his staff introduced each item. Here again, there was some hesitancy when matters required explanation.

NO SEEKING FOR DIVINE GUIDANCE

The third factor leading to the evident chaos was the most significant. No one, *not one*, inquired on any issue that was raised, "Is there a word from the Lord?" One faithful delegate, pointing to the general confusion prevailing, pled for a season of prayer for divine guidance. His plea was totally ignored. Had God's wisdom been sought, a large number of items contrary to the plainest testimony of Inspiration would never have appeared upon the agenda.

IMPROPER OUSTING OF NORTEY

Pastor Jacob Nortey, president of the Afro-Indian Ocean Division for the past five years was re-nominated to that position. His nomination was referred back. One of the Conference presidents in that Division related the reason to me. He stated that the president of the Nigerian Union had defeated Pastor Nortey by 16 votes to 14. The General Conference president, he

stated, had expressed his disagreement with the decision and requested a re-vote. In the re-vote, Pastor Nortey received one less vote, 13, but because of abstentions motivated by a desire to please the G.C. president, only 12 voted for the Nigerian president. The G.C. president may have won a tactical battle but such interference does not produce respect nor, we would suggest, is it proper.

ECUMENISM IN NORTH GERMAN UNION

The voted merger of the North German and East German Unions was one of a number of merged and divided Unions approved by the G.C. Session. Each was of only local significance and not major impacting items. But the situation in the North German Union sets this merger apart. The North German Union has thrown in its lot with ecumenism. Seven of its pastors went to Upsala (Sweden) and learned tongue-speaking. They are urging church members to speak in tongues. One church leader in the South German Union expressed himself as being afraid that their entire Union may become independent of the SDA Church, so that it could pursue its apostasy.

A GIGANTIC BAZAAR

A hall of huge proportions was devoted to commerce of many kinds. I have mixed feelings about this. Nothing comparable has been seen at previous G.C. Sessions. The setup was in the style of a bazaar. The crowds patronising it were unbelievable. There were little stalls selling trinkets from Africa, Dutch entrepreneurs selling crystal and Dutch artifacts, sellers of linen ware; others selling badges, clothing, cheese, and a large variety of items. Unquestionably millions of dollars of sales took place. Many did appreciate having Adventist food available and no doubt many would sooner do their tourist shopping at the Convention than on the

streets. Yet there must be care not to turn such an important gathering of God's people into a merchandising emporium.

THE BRAZEN SOUTH PACIFIC DIVISION

I had not even considered that the South Pacific Division would dare to show the true colours of that which is occurring in our churches before the world church. Many people streamed out of the presentation.

What appeared on the screen, prepared by our Adventist Media Centre in Wahroonga, would not have been out of place in a discotheque. The music was of the most irreligious nature. One Dutch woman left stating, "I left because I wanted to be in the church not in the world. I knew the Holy Spirit had left." One American stated, "I did not expect a rock concert on the Sabbath day at a General Conference Session." An Austrian said, "I went out because it is an abomination." A German said cryptically, "Sport on the Sabbath!" He referred to the fact that on the Sabbath day rugby matches were shown (Australian rules football). Also on the holy Sabbath day, the delegates were presented with the Sydney Olympics of 2000—athletics, swimming, and gymnastics contests!

A Norwegian pastor took his protest to Pastor Ball. This pastor reported that he was given short shift especially when he pointed out that a converted individual is offended by such a secular presentation. An Austrian woman stated that she had known that the South Pacific Division was in apostasy but had assumed that these reports exaggerated the situation. This sister stated, "After seeing tonight's presentation, I'll never again doubt that the church in Australia has deserted the faith."

A former General Conference vice-president expressed deep concern. The video presentation de-

scribed Australian "ministries" such as puppetry and clown ministries. How tragic. The program was accompanied by laser beams, with smoke generated on stage. It was a night of shame for the South Pacific Division, yet many present saw nothing amiss.

MANY EMPTY SEATS

During the discussion on women's ordination, the delegates' section was packed to capacity. But Colin and I were distressed to see a large number of empty seats when the most serious matters of the church re-organisation and the alterations to the *Church Manual* were under discussion. There were times, especially at the 8:30 a.m. Business Sessions when only a quarter of the delegates were present.

Even during the day it was the rule to see hundreds of delegates chatting outside the Plenary Hall and others shopping. I suspect that Colin, Pastor Restropo, and myself who sat through at least 90 percent of the Business Sessions, were amongst the most faithful attendees. Much expense is employed in sending delegates to these sessions, yet many delegates appear to be oblivious of their obligations and to be totally out of touch with the wide ranging and serious matters under consideration.

BEACH AND EVA

Dr. Bert Beach, of Medal to the Pope fame, was not re-elected as Religious Liberty & Public Affairs Director of the General Conference. He decided to retire.

Pastor David Newman, the Englishman who has been editor of the *Ministry* magazine for a number of years, has been replaced by Dr. Will Eva, son of Pastor Duncan Eva, the South African who was vice-president of the General Conference until 1980. Pastor [W. Duncan] Eva was the first high official of the G.C. who supported doctrines consistent with the New Theology. Some said

he was influenced by Will.

DECLINING TITHE INCOME

While annual worldwide tithe has exceeded \$US one billion dollars since 1993, per capita giving has been declining since the 1980s. This, no doubt, is partly due to the fact that our church growth is largely in nations of low per capita incomes. One self-supporting ministry report, that the United States contributes \$480 million in tithe and the rest of the world only \$2 million (U.S.), requires correction. Our own Division had almost \$50 million in tithe in 1994. Countries such as Korea give close to \$20 million in tithe. Indeed, since 1992, the rest of the world has exceeded North America in total tithe income. Nevertheless, we must hasten to add that North America represents only about 9% of church membership worldwide.

COST OF THE SESSION

Pastor Folkenberg announced that the cost of the G.C. Session was \$15 million. That figure would be multiplied several times if the personal costs of non-delegates were added.

WORLDLY ENTERTAINMENT APPROVED AT 1993 COUNCIL

At previous G.C. Sessions, not only have the musical items been of the highest calibre, they have been sacred. At this Session the woeful results of the 1993 G.C. Annual Council vote at Bangalore, India, was in full evidence. At that G.C. Annual Council, full permission for drama, puppetry, and other condemned forms of church worship was granted. As a result, music with rock and jazz beats was heard almost on a daily basis. In the main auditorium, the hours of the second Sabbath afternoon were profaned by puppetry, dramas, and secular music. The *Adventist Review* reported that these techniques were used in street witnessing for the youth of Utrecht and in addition, clowning and martial arts were uti-

lized.

WOMEN'S ORDINATION

Dr. Gerard Damsteegt is well-known to me. He was the chaplain of the Bangkok Adventist Hospital during two years of my five-year term as president. I found Gerard to be a man of the highest fidelity to the truth of God. In Bangkok, Gerard's preaching skills were of average quality.

But on July 5, the Holy Spirit multiplied his talents and he spoke, not as a Professor of Theology, which he is at Andrews University, but with evangelistic zeal. I thank God that He gave Gerard an outstanding presentation. At its conclusion, the delegates were left with but two options: to rebel against the plain Word of God or to yield in humility to our God's Word. Gerard set the tone when he prayed for divine guidance—a measure which was all too infrequently in evidence during this session.

Dr. Raoul Dederen was clearly shaken by the force of Dr. Damsteegt's presentation. Normally a precise presenter who speaks without great animation but with an air of profound authority, he made the serious mistake of departing from his no doubt carefully crafted script and attempting to nullify Dr. Damsteegt's presentation. Thus at times he was hesitant for he was unprepared. He commenced weakly by asserting that the delegates must be confused. He dismissed Dr. Damsteegt's arguments by stating that the Scriptures he had used referred only to the uplifting of the man's headship in marriage, not in the church. He concluded that "Women should have justice as well as praise."

The vote was 1481 (68.76%) against and 673 (31.24%) in favour. Praise our God that He still guides if we permit Him. But ominously William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, stated in his paper of July 7, two days after the

vote, "We have not heard the last of the matter."

PROCEDURAL RULE CHANGES

Several procedural rules were put in place which maximised the likelihood of the motions being successful. Some of these procedures were voted by the delegates themselves. Among these procedures was a limit of two minutes for each speech. This provided little time to develop arguments objecting to the proposals or supporting them. It did, of course, permit more to contribute. Secondly, no amendments were permitted from the floor. If a matter was not popular, all the delegates could do was to refer it back to the *Constitution and Bylaws Subcommittee* and take their suggestions there. Of course, one sees the procedural difficulty if many amendments were adopted which may have been made without regard to consistency with other proposals or articles of the Constitution. But this effectively prevented delegates from altering any measures unless the Subcommittee saw light in their suggestions.

Thus when the Subcommittee returned the items, whether altered by them or not, still amendments were prohibited. In some cases the majority of an alteration was supported by the majority but certain elements appeared to them to be dangerous. Left to decide whether to vote the package up or down, most chose to swallow their objections and vote in favour of a package for which they were not in total agreement. Too many stated that they would vote in favour "with reservations."

Further, unless a matter concerning the Constitution was brought up by the G.C. and placed on the agenda, delegates were not at liberty to raise other issues. This gives the G.C. almost total control over that which may be discussed and that which will not.

In these circumstances it was a marvel that any brakes were placed on the rush to more and more dictatorial power from the G.C. So much opposition surfaced to the proposal to appoint Associate G.C. departmental directors by the G.C. Executive Committee, that it was decided to retain their election at the G.C. Session, thus somewhat removing control over their appointment from administration.

HENCEFORTH ONE MAN IN CHARGE

However, the delegates voted the G.C. president to be designated as the First Officer of the G.C. While efforts were made to modify the evident authority this title accords, this designation will soon come home to haunt the world church. Inspiration plainly states that we should not have a World General Conference president, let alone a First Officer of the G.C. We are in direct insubordination to our God in making such an appointment. We are plainly admonished, "It is not wise to choose one man as president of the General Conference" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 342).

NOT OBEYING GOD

Indeed there should be no worldwide General Conference for God has declared, "When we first met in Conference it was thought that the General Conference should extend over the whole world. But this is not in God's order" (*General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, p. 68).

If we followed God's plan to use Scripture as our *Church Manual*, much wasted time could be put to better use. In our early G.C. Sessions, men such as Pastors Waggoner and Jones presented over twenty Bible Studies related to present truth. What a time this was to prepare our people for the grand and awful days in which we live! This opportunity was largely passed by. Little urgency was evident. Buying and selling was the order of the day as millions of dollars changed hands in the commercial hall. During the week

days, the crowds in the commercial hall at times exceeded those in the session hall.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Because women's ordination is regarded as a constitutional matter, it could still be voted by any Annual Council as was the matter of women elders in 1984. I suspect that more and more matters of a controversial nature will be designated as policy matters rather than constitutional in nature and thus amenable to decision by an Annual or even Spring Council. Remember that the matter of the G.C. and the Divisions possessing the right to merge or disband Unions or Conferences was deemed to be a policy matter and was enacted outside of the General Conference Session, at the 1995 Spring Council.

It is true that the Constitution was altered to reduce the number of members on the G.C. Executive Committee from well over 300 to 240. All 87 Union presidents will attend the twice-yearly G.C. Committee meetings. The Associate Departmental Directors of the G.C. are no longer ex-officio members of the G.C. Committee. Thus it is expected North America will only comprise about 30% of the Committee members present rather than at least 70% previously. This realignment is laudable, but the claim that the new setup will make the committee more accountable to the world field lacks true substance. Only 22 laymen (9.17% of the total) are mandated. Even, if as expected, another 15 are elected by Divisions, the total of 37 (15.42% of the total) compares very

OTHER UTRECHT STUDIES

Here are several other recent studies we have prepared on the 1995 General Conference Session and its aftermath:

- Disfellowship Item Removed from 1995 Session Agenda** [WM-592]
- Women's Ordination Crisis: 1995—Part 1-2** [WM-598-599]
- The Ominous Utrecht Agenda—Part 1-3** [WM-620-622]
- Our Church is in a Crisis** [WM-625]
- The Utrecht Session—Part 1-5** [WM-634-638]
- Journey to Utrecht—Part 1-3** [WM-639-641]
- Elder Damsteegt: The Truth about Women's Ordination** [WM-646]
- Our New Church Governing System** [WM-644]
- Women's Ordination at Sligo—Part 1-3** [WM-649-651]
- Women's Ordination Rebellion: Oct 95 Update—1-2** [WM-652-653]

unfavourably with the fact that denominational employees will hold at least 203 seats. This latter group represents only 1.6% of our church membership while laity represent 98.4%. Until the number of laity on our committees at all levels of our church represent well over 50%, there will not be adequate accountability to our church membership. As it now is, administration is accountable to administration—a totally unacceptable situation.

Whither goeth God's church after Utrecht? It takes no prophetic gift to predict that increased persecution of and strictures upon faithful believers will be the order of the day. The many changes in the Constitution toward a more dictatorial form of Church Governance demonstrates the desires of Church leadership. That a few of the proposals were refuted and others modified will in no wise alter the hearts of our administrators. They will likely find new and innovative ways to persecute the faithful, as they did during the past quinquennium.

What we saw at Utrecht was God's church; not His church triumphant, but His church militant far down in the shaking process. Will we see Toronto 2000? All who referred to the next G.C. Session did so as if its occurrence is certain. Pray God that in His mercy we will not have this conference. Come Lord Jesus, quickly come.

It is only as we stand for principle and urge others to do so, that we will receive the approval of our Father.

Continued on the next tract

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PILGRIMS REST

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