

**Mission, Structure, and Function:
An Analysis of Organizational Unity and Mission Particularity
in the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

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This paper is an open invitation for theologians to join this conversation. One frequently overlooked aspect of SDA ecclesiological conversation concerns structuring communities for mission. I suppose that it would be natural that we who are administrative theologians to think about these things! We wrestle with the theological implications of operating mission and business units for the church on a daily basis. But the question of structure has broader importance, because we can argue that ecclesial structuration, the process of creating structures, serves as a tangible expression of a community's self-understanding, as well as its core mission. In its "*diakonia*" to the world, the church actively discloses its understanding of God's kingdom and God's community.

This paper is intended to provide a reflective examination of the ecclesiastical structures existing in the North American Division¹ of Seventh-day Adventists (hereafter, NAD) officially designated as "Regional Conferences."² The ecclesiological implications of such structuring holds significant implications for SDA missiology and ecclesiology. If, across the chronological span of the Christian Church, from its founding to its finality, structuring is seen to have advanced its mission, the question arises as to the limits and

¹The North American Division is one of 13 world divisions of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It consists of Bermuda, Canada, the French possession of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, the United States of America, Johnston Island, Midway Islands, and all other islands of the Pacific not attached to the other 12 divisions. Organized in 1913, NAD numbers 5,243 churches with a membership of 1,090,217 and a general population of 340,583,000 persons. Within the United States are 58 conferences, organized into 8 Unions. Of the 58 US conferences, 9 are Regional Conferences. For more, see <http://www.adventistyearbook.org/ViewAdmField.aspx?AdmFieldID=NAD>.

²Regional conferences describe the 9 geographical units of the SDA organization in North America which house the predominately African-American (black) churches in their respective union territories. Voted on April 10, 1944, the General Conference Spring Council authorized the creation of Regional Conferences. At the time of their creation, the 17,891 black members of the Adventist church were spread across 233 congregations. More information is available at the GC Online Archives at http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/RCO/RCO-02_B.pdf#view=fit. Lake Region was the first regional conference organized on September 26, 1944 with 2,260 "colored" believers. The most recent Regional Conference, Southeastern, was organized in 1981. Regional Conferences today number a membership of approximately 300,000 members. While the primary target population is the 37.6 million African-Americans, the Office of Regional Conference Ministries reports that Regional Conferences also include 70 non-black congregations who have voluntarily united within their fellowship. Regional Conferences are organizational units in every union of the NAD except North Pacific and Pacific Union. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 1192 "The Regional conferences were formed in the hope that the new organizations might, with concentration on work with a specific ethnic group, achieve greater results in a shorter space of time than would be achieved under the previously existing organizations . . ."

For detailed histories that chronicle the creation of Regional Conferences, see Roy Branson, "Adventism's Rainbow Coalition," in *Make Us One*, Delbert Baker, ed. (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1995), 75-80; George Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 2001), 145-150 and R.W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1979), 564-570.

appropriateness of such contextualization. Of necessity, this paper draws on a variety of sources—biblical materials, missiological research, and organizational-effectiveness research from both business and ecclesiastical studies and texts—to explore the question.

In the best selling business work on organizations and structure, authors Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal assert that structure is “. . . a blueprint for officially sanctioned expectations and exchanges among internal players (executives, managers, employees) and external constituencies (such as customers and clients). Like an animal’s skeleton or a building’s framework, structural form both enhances and constrains what an organization can accomplish.”³

Recently, a number of writers and speakers have urged changes in the NAD that intend the dissolution of Regional Conference structures. These calls have been forwarded in the stated interest of “unifying” the Adventist church in North America. Such writers contend that the current structures disclose the unresolved schism between the races in the North American Church. Thus, the existence of conference structures has evoked a variety of descriptors intended to emphasize the “disunity” in the NAD due to the continued existence of these 9 organizational units. Adventist writers or speakers have described the existence of Regional Conference structures as “race-based organizational segregation,”⁴ “Adventist apartheid,”⁵ “the sin we don’t want to overcome,”⁶ “an abnormality,”⁷ “a disgrace,”⁸ “morally untenable,”⁹ and “a lingering evil.”¹⁰ The Adventist Desegregation Coalition on Facebook is an interest group of 2,477 members that boldly asserts that “the Adventist Church is segregated,”¹¹ obviously assuming that such segregation is pejorative.

Other writers and speakers have also urged the restructuring of the NAD, though in less evocative language. In the February 20, 1997 *Adventist Review*, David Williams suggested that the church should “eliminate *all* [emphasis supplied] of the current structures and build new ones

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⁴David K. Penno, “An Investigation of the Perceptions of Clergy and Laity concerning Race-Based Organizational Segregation in the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists” (Ph.D diss., Andrews University, 2009), i, ii, iii, etc. One feature of Penno’s dissertation that raises a crucial methodological question is the failure to define the key word in his title—segregation (note the absence of a definition on pages 12-14). This reader could locate no place in the research where this core term was explicated. Penno’s apparent non-technical use of the term “segregation” raises serious methodological questions that bias his investigation. Under accepted and common definition of segregation, Penno’s claim that the SDA Church maintains a “racially segregated organization” (page 2) cannot be substantiated.

⁵David Person, “Adventist Apartheid” in an online letter to the editor, *Adventist Review* at <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=660>.

⁶Samuel Pipim, “Separate Black and White Conferences-Part 1: The Sin We Don’t Want to Overcome,” at <http://www.drpipim.org/church-racism-contemporaryissues-51/97-separate-black-and-white-conferences-part-1.html>.

⁷See post on July 4th from “explorer” at <http://www.atoday.com/add-your-name-petition>.

⁸Comment posted at <http://h0bbes.wordpress.com/2006/09/05/the-beginning-of-regional-conferences-in-the-us-iii/>, on October 17, 2006.

⁹Comment posted at <http://h0bbes.wordpress.com/2006/09/05/the-beginning-of-regional-conferences-in-the-us-iii/>.

¹⁰See “The Lingering Evil in SDA Divided Conferences,” at <http://njkproject.blogspot.com/2009/12/sda-racially-divided-conference.html>.

¹¹Information as of June 11, 2010 at <http://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=53734749401&ref=ts>.

based on new principles.”¹² In the May 25, 2006 *Adventist Review*, William Johnson, in one of his final articles as editor of the *Adventist Review*, raised and answered the question, “What will it take to bring us together?” Johnson pointed to what he termed “division” between blacks and whites in North America. Johnson wrote: “. . . I have to question whether the current divided structures should continue indefinitely.”¹³ In a February 21, 2008 column published in the *Adventist Review*, columnist Frederick Russell wrote that “we will need at some point to disassemble the last symbols of our historical divide—racially segregated conferences in the United States.”¹⁴ By July 25, 2008, Russell’s column was cited as the basis for an online petition¹⁵ calling for the abolition of Regional and state conferences.¹⁶ On September 29, 2009 Jan Paulsen, then President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, during a globally-televised discussion with young adults from the Washington, D.C. area indicated that he believed that the thinking that produced Regional Conferences [in 1944] is “no longer valid.”¹⁷ On January 16, 2010, Pastor Dwight Nelson of Andrews University, preached a sermon on Martin Luther King Weekend, in which he called Regional and state conferences, “an amazing anomaly,” and “separate but equal.”¹⁸

Given the amount of discussion generated in internet chat rooms, periodicals, websites, and in classrooms, and given the relative silence of the church’s theologians on this subject, it is helpful to initiate an open conversation that moves beyond the heat of assertions to the light of thoughtful consideration of ecclesiological and missiological perspectives on some of the weightier questions raised by the presence of Regional Conference structures in the NAD in 2014. Questions related to this discussion of mission and structure include, but are not limited to, the following: What perspectives might the New Testament hold for determining an organizational structure? Do passages like John 17:21, Eph 2:14-18, or Gal 3:27-28 demand identity of structure? What role, if any, does or should gender, race, culture, ethnicity, and nationality play in our understanding of ecclesiology, mission and community building? Are

¹²David Williams, “The Right Thing to Do: A Divided Church and What to Do About It” in *The Adventist Review*, February 20, 1997, 26. One weakness in Williams’ proposal is the assertion that the primary organizing principle of a new conference structure should be equality. Understandably, within the canon of weighted social values, any value other than equality, tolerance, diversity, etc sounds like social heresy to modern ears. But the selection of this value fully reflects our modern consciousness. For Adventist pioneers, mission is the primary value within the eschatological community and the *primary* determinant of structural form. See section on Adventist Pioneers and Structure.

¹³William G. Johnson, “Four Big Questions” at the Adventist Review Online at <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=538>.

¹⁴Frederick Russell, “The Obama Message” at Adventist Review Online, <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=1665>. Russell is quick to add in his piece that he believes that more than nine conferences are “racially defined.” He does not elaborate on how or whether “racially segregated” differs from “racially defined” conferences.

¹⁵See Adventist Today online petition at <http://www.atoday.com/add-your-name-petition>. Interestingly, while the petition names both black and white conferences, much of the most heated rhetoric is directed toward the existence of Regional conferences. Examples may be seen at the website.

¹⁶It should be recognized that in the NAD, there is no official designation “State Conference.” Non-Regional conferences are simply referred to as “Conferences.”

¹⁷See Adventist News Network at <http://news.adventist.org/2009/09/lets-talk-encore-dc.html>. Paulsen was questioned regarding the validity of the continued existence of regional conferences. Agreeing with the questioner, he was quoted as follows: “Tell leaders you think the reasoning behind regional conferences is no longer valid. I also tell them, but it is good if they hear it from you as well.” Elder Paulsen did not detail or describe the “thinking” referenced in his statement.

¹⁸Dwight Nelson, “The Truth in Black and White” preached at Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University on Sabbath Morning, January 16, 2010 at <http://www.pmchurch.tv/articles.php?id=30>.

“particularized” structures *de facto* violations of an egalitarian ecclesiology, which the church forwards? Should the creation of “ethnic” evangelism and congregations be discouraged or promoted? Should Regional Conferences be considered evidence of “race-based organizational segregation” in the SDA Church? What is the biblical relationship between unity and diversity? And, is the existence of State and Regional Conferences “symbolic” of an ecclesiastical divide between white and black Adventists in the United States?

This paper proceeds as follows: we begin with a cursory look at examples of structure in the communities of God’s people in the Old and New Testaments; next we will summarize how mission and structure data in Scripture was understood by the early Adventist pioneers through the research of scholars in Adventist history; after that, we examine how the contemporary Adventist church currently understands the relationship between mission and structure; finally, upon this biblical, theological, and missiological foundation we will provide thoughtful responses to frequently-asked questions expressed regarding the existence of Regional Conference structures. Below is a list of definitions of key terms used in this document;

Definition of Terms:

Unity—a shared commitment to a common purpose and a common set of beliefs and lifestyle practices. Biblical unity preserves individuality of thought and action, while focusing diversity on the person and work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Unity’s essential, dynamic, and equipoisal nature is described in John 17:21-23;¹⁹

Diversity—the plurality of cultures, races, gender, nationalities, classes represented in the Church. Its parameters are pre-determined by the teachings of Scripture;

Segregation—“the practice of restricting people to certain circumscribed areas of residence or to separate institutions and facilities on the basis of race or alleged race. Racial segregation provides a means of maintaining the economic advantages and higher social status of politically dominant races”²⁰

Desegregation—the removal of legal barriers restricting access to free and open use of public and private facilities, as well as voluntary association between willing parties;

Integration—the voluntary affiliation and/or shared organizational membership of persons of different races, languages, nationalities and sexes in common group settings;

Ethnic—a group of people whose members identify with each other through a common heritage and are connected by shared cultural characteristics

African-Americans--persons of African-descent residing in America (this definition is inclusive of Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Hispanic, and continental Africans in America);

Affinity grouping—the practice of voluntarily affiliating around shared national, cultural, racial, linguistic, or gender commonalities;

Structure—orderly, consensual arrangements formed by and within organizations to allocate human and financial resources, to delegate responsibility and flow of authority, to identify roles

¹⁹Ellen G. White wrote about the principle of unity in diversity, “The unity that exists between Christ and His disciples does not destroy the personality of either. In mind, in purpose, in character, they are one, but not in person. By partaking of the Spirit of God, conforming to the law of God, man becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Christ brings His disciples into a living union with Himself and with the Father. Through the working of the Holy Spirit upon the human mind, man is made complete in Christ Jesus.” (Ellen G. White, Comments—John,” in Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol 5:1148).

²⁰See the Britannica Concise Online Dictionary at <http://www.answers.com/topic/segregation>.

and relationships in an organization, and to ensure an appropriate, effective division of labor in the business or community;²¹

Mission particularity—mini- or macro- mission structures, organizations, and strategies dedicated to, directed at, and/or administered by specific people groups in North America.

Structures in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures

Why is Scripture important to a discussion of structure and this discussion of ecclesiology? We submit that there are at least two reasons. First, as a self-confessed believing community, in our ecclesiology, Adventists actively and intentionally prioritized the pursuit of guidance from the teachings and principles of Scripture. Second, scriptural writers' articulation of the *missio dei* in the world provides a common focus for the discussion of the role of structure in Adventist mission's implementation.

In the Old and New Testaments, a cursory glance at the biblical text reveals that minimal space is given to general discussion of organizational structure and its role in the mission of God's people. Within the pages of Scripture, explicit presentation or discussion of structure rarely occurs. In fact, it appears that in the entire canon of Scripture, we sample only a few examples of structure in the life of God's people. Examples like Patriarchal structures (note Abraham's authority over his household in Gen 18:19; 24:4; 25:6; note Isaac's authority over his household in Gen 26:30), Judicial (see the book of Judges), Prophetic (Moses, Aaron, etc), Levitical/Priestly, and Monarchial, etc.

In the New Testament, across the growth and development of the Christian church we find a variety of structures and models for the growing Christian movement: Temple/Synagogue, Messianic, Apostolic/Communal, Representational (Diaconate), and Domestic/Familial structures. The following chart highlights different dimensions of these varied governance and administrative structures.

Old Testament Governance/Administrative Structures

	PATRIARCHS 4000-2000 BC	PROPHETIC 1900-1500 BC	ADJUCATIVE 1500-1200 BC	MONARCHICAL 1200-800 BC	EXILE 700-400 BC
Leaders	Abraham, Isaac Jacob, etc	Moses 70 Elders, etc	Gideon, Deborah, Samson	Saul, Solomon, David, Ahab, Rehoboam,	Nebuchadnezzar Darius Xerxes
Decision-making method	Oracular	Oracular, Delegated	Oracular	Personal/Prophetic Counsel,	Distributive, with ultimate authority to the king
Resource management	Patriarchs	Tribal leaders	Ruling judges	Kings	Kings, Princes,

²¹See Bolman and Deal, 50. They also argue that “. . . clear, well-understood goals, roles, and relationships and adequate coordination are essential to organizational performance.” Ibid., 46. Adventist writer, William Johnson wrote, “structures aren't necessarily good or evil: they may become bureaucratic, an end in themselves, and a drag on innovation; but they also provide *the essential framework for continuity and concerted action*” [emphasis supplied] See *The Adventist Review*, Nov. 1997, 17.

New Testament Governance/Administrative Structures

	TEMPLE- SYNAGOG UE-400 BC	MESSIANIC 27-31 A.D.	APOSTOLIC 34-70 A.D. (JERUSALEM)	PARENTAL/FAMILIAL²² 34-70 (GENTILE WORLD)
Leaders	High Priest/Priestly caste	Jesus Christ	Apostles Elders Deacons	Overseers, Household Patrons (Romans 16)
Decision-making method	Individualistic	Individual (Matt 10, 28, etc.	Councilar (Acts 15)	Elders/House-church groups
Resource management	Local rulers, Priests, etc	Disciples	Deacons (Acts 6)	Household patrons

Due to its paucity, it is difficult to extrapolate too much from this overview. However, from this brief analysis, we may safely observe the following: 1) The biblical texts summarize a variety of structural arrangements related to the people of God in history. 2) We find no argument in the Bible for a particular structure that is used at all times and in all places. No single structure cuts across eras; 3) organizational structure in Scripture expands, contracts, and/or adapts based on the scope and focus of the mission. 4) Structural arrangement that provides equitable representation is considered a vital dimension of service and witness (e.g., Acts 6); 5) Structures reflect continuity and discontinuity with the organizational structures of surrounding cultures, whether patriarchal or representative; 6) Organizational structures in Scripture reveal the following characteristics . . .

- A. Structures vary across time—from 3000 B.C. to 62 A.D;
- B. Structures vary across location—from Palestine to Rome;
- C. Organizational patterns differ based on the size of the community—Moses' Exodus to the house churches' small groups;
- D. Decision-making progresses from the Old to the New Testament patriarchal command-and-control decision making toward collaboration and consensus—From Abraham to the Apostolic Council (Acts 15);
- E. A variety of ways of handling material resource management--from individual ownership to communal sharing—are evident from Genesis to Acts.

In the next section, we explore how an understanding of Scripture influenced the approach of our pioneers to the issue of structure in the accomplishment of mission. We will see

²²Note David W. Miller, "The Uniqueness of New Testament Church Eldership," *Grace Theological Journal* vol. 6 (1985; 2002), 326: "The book of Acts shows that homes (Acts 5:42; 16:32 ; 18:7-8), synagogues (Acts 9:20; 13:5 ; 17:1 ; 19:8), and the Temple (5:20 ; 5:42) were all centers of evangelistic preaching where unbelievers could hear the gospel. The organizational structures of such places where unbelievers gathered do not have any necessary link with the structure of the local NT church."

that Adventist pioneers saw Scripture as a resource for principles, not prescriptions, in structuring the Advent movement.

Adventist Pioneers' Understanding of Structure

Several Adventist scholars have studied the history of Adventist pioneers' ecclesiology and their debates on the issue of organizational structure.²³ Recently, an important examination of SDA structure was also commissioned by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.²⁴ This commission, organized in 2005 was tasked as follows: [to] "research and evaluate, in the light of denominational mission and unity, the necessity, efficiency, and effectiveness of current denominational structure." It is not our purpose to fully rehearse the growth in pioneers' attitude on issues of mission and structure evident among the SDA pioneers. The dissertations and papers cited in the footnotes will provide the interested reader a detailed presentation of that history. However, we will cite instances from SDA history to illustrate the background to the current Adventist approach to structure and mission.

According to SDA historian, George Knight, "Seventh-day Adventist history represents the full spectrum on approaches to organization. The movement began in an aggressively anti-organizational mindset, but today it is the most highly structured church in the history of Christianity."²⁵ Knight's statement succinctly summarizes the pioneers approach to the role of structure in the accomplishment of mission. In the 1840s some pioneers nurtured in the Millerite movement equated organization with "Babylon."²⁶ But as the church grew into the 1850s and 60s, it became clear to leaders like James White that "gospel order" was needed.²⁷ Note White's somewhat humorous diatribe regarding those who believed that organizational structure would instantly or ultimately transform the Advent movement into Babylon:

²³Andrew Mustard, *James White and Organization* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985); Barry Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present and Future* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989); Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*; George Knight, "Organizing for Mission: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Organizational Structure," at http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-mission-services-structures/. For an anthology of documents that contribute to a better understanding of the historical and contextual currents behind the formation of Regional conferences, see Delbert W. Baker, *Telling the Story: An Anthology on the Development of the Black SDA Work* (Loma Linda, CA: University Printing Services, 1996), 2-73.

²⁴Report to Commission on Ministries, Services, and Structures, "Principles, Possibilities and Limits of Flexibility in the Design of Seventh-day Adventist Organizational Structure," October 4-6, 2006. The report is available at http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/.

²⁵Knight, "Organizing for Mission," 1. Knight's assessment is accepted with one caveat: whether Adventists are more structured than United Methodists is an open question. See United Methodist Church's description of their own structure and organization at http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.1720695/k.4FEC/Structure__Organization_O.

²⁶For example, George Storrs asserted the classic anti-organization statement representing the hostility of many of the Millerite Adventists in the words ". . . no church can be organized by man's invention but what it becomes Babylon *the moment it is organized!*" See George Storrs, "Come out of Her My People," *Midnight Cry*, Feb. 15, 1844, 238.

²⁷Note the following: "With the rapid increase in the number of adherents in the 1850s, several problems arose that brought into sharp focus the need of the church for a name and a corporate existence: the legal problems of holding church property and other assets (originally owned by individuals); the growing need for selecting, directing, and supporting a ministry; and the necessity of controlling personal ambition, fanaticism, and offshoot movements." See "Organization, Development of, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," in *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, edited by Don F. Neufeld (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996), 258.

We are aware that these suggestions, will not meet the minds of all. Bro. Overcautious will be frightened, and will be ready to warn his brethren to be careful and not venture out too far; while Bro. Confusion will cry out, ‘O, this looks just like Babylon! Following the fallen church!’ Bro. Do-little will say, ‘The cause is the Lord’s, and we had better leave it in his hands, he will take care of it.’ ‘Amen,’ says Love-this-world, Slothful, Selfish and Stingy, ‘if God calls men to preach, let them go out and preach, he will take care of them, and those who believe their message; while Korah, Dathan and Abiram are ready to rebel against those who feel the weight of the cause [e.g., James White], and who watch for souls as those who must give account, and raise the cry, ‘You take too much upon you.’”²⁸

But organize they did. *They concluded that what the Bible did not prohibit, it permitted as long as the decision was vetted by counsel and common sense.* Notably, Barry Oliver pointed out that the early Adventists pioneers shunned prescriptive literalism when it came to developing an organizational structure and chose to appropriate biblical principles to inform organizational structure.²⁹ But even after that consensus was accepted challenges occurred along the way.

Oliver points to a developing controversy in the 1890s.³⁰ This was the time when the SDA had grown and was contemplating reorganization in 1903 to match the scope and focus of its mission. A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, noted advocates for righteousness by faith at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference, believed that from their diligent study of the Scriptures, no human being should be called by the title “president.”³¹ Inasmuch as Christ was considered the Head of the Church, in their ecclesiology, no human being deserved any titular designation like “president.” They believed that the title “president” would have assigned organizational leadership to a human being and would constitute a violation of New Testament ecclesiology. This radical ecclesiology threatened to split the church as it approached the 1903 General Conference reorganization. But, Mrs. White did not support such biblically prescriptive reasoning. By the January 1, 1863 organization of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference, Ellen White and the pioneers had come to believe that the Bible did not contain *precriptions* for church structure, but rather *principles* that should be applied to organizational design. The Adventist pioneers believed that commitment to mission effectiveness and efficiency should be the primary drivers of organizational form.³² This way of applying Scriptural principles in light of the obvious need for reorganization that was evident in the 1890s is what the pioneers sought to implement at the 1903 General Conference.

In summary, our SDA pioneers eventually concluded, notwithstanding considerable conflict over issues of organization, that *the Bible contains principles, rather than prescriptions for organization.*

²⁸James White, “Yearly Meetings,” *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1859, 68.

²⁹Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure*, 274-280.

³⁰For an extended description and discussion of this organizational controversy, see Oliver, 184-201.

³¹After Jones and his colleagues reached their conclusions, Ellen White’s declaration that “It is not wise to choose one man as president of the General Conference” was especially taken out of context. See *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers* (College View, Nebraska: College Press, 1897), 29.

³²Oliver, 346-347; Report to the Commission on Ministries, Services and Structures, 5; Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 169.

Current Adventist Perspectives on Structure and Mission

Recently, the work of Adventist scholars in researching and identifying these “Pioneer Principles” were incorporated into the work of a special Commission on Mission and Structure organized by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. For the purpose of this research, these principles in abbreviated form are abstracted from the Report to the Commission on Ministries, Services, and Structures which was voted by the October 15-17, 2007 Annual Council of the SDA Church.³³ A complete version of these principles with elaboration may be found at the General Conference website (see footnote below). These “*Pioneer Principles*” hold the following 7 tenets . . .

1. “Organizational structure is necessary to fulfill the mission of the Church;”
2. “The Bible contains principles rather than prescriptions for organization;”
3. “Commitment to mission is the primary determinant of structural form;”
4. “Organizational structure must maintain a balance between centralization and decentralization, between control and empowerment;”
5. “The design of organizational structure must provide for diversity while preserving unity;”
6. “Flexibility in structure must not sacrifice unity and collective action;”
7. “Changed circumstances warrant new or altered structures.”³⁴

Applied to our discussion of structure in the NAD, Pioneer Principle 1 acknowledges the indispensability of organization as a tool for the fulfillment of the mission. Organizational structure is created within community to define how human and financial resources will be deployed, and how authority and responsibility for mission will be distributed. Pioneer Principle 2 shows that of the numerous structures that have been observed in Scripture, NONE of them constitute a “blueprint” for the post-canonical church. Like the people of God in Scripture, the Adventist church appropriates biblical principles AND organizational elements from a variety of sources as long as the selected elements are considered compatible with the church’s mission. This eclectic approach to organizational structure is adopted because the remnant ecclesiology of the SDA Church is first *missional*.³⁵ Based on texts like Matt 5:13 and 28:18-20, and Rev 14:6-12, the Seventh-day Adventist church’s self-understanding is described in the following statement from Mrs. Ellen G. White:

“The church is God’s appointed agency for the salvation of men. *It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world.* From the beginning it has been God’s plan that through His church shall be reflected to the world His fullness and His sufficiency. The members of the church, those whom He has called out of darkness into His marvelous light, are to show forth His glory.”³⁶

³³See summary of the Annual Council acceptance of the Report on the Adventist News Network at <http://news.adventist.org/2007/10/church-structure-to-be-flexible-reflect-local-ees.html>.

³⁴Report to Commission on Ministries, Services, and Structures, 2-4.

³⁵See Leslie Pollard, “The Function of *Loipos* in Contexts of Judgment and Salvation in the Book of Revelation” (Ph.D Dissertation, Andrews University, 2007), 132-165. In this research, Pollard shows that remnant self-consciousness is intimately tied to the missional identity of God’s people.

³⁶Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 9.

Seventh-day Adventists, from the earliest reflections on structure, determined that mission would be the primary shaper of structural form. A close corollary followed this understanding--the primary engine of mission would be Adventist eschatology. Thus, the current structures, regional and state, stand as derivative structural mediations of SDA eschatology versus an idealized ecclesiology. The Adventist pioneers' commitment to eschatology said to them and the growing Adventist community in the 19th century that "the time is at hand" and the world must be warned.³⁷ Interestingly, Adventist pioneers focused not on an idealized *nature* of the church, but the practical, effective *function* of the church. "Effectiveness of Function" was the principle of organization followed by the pioneers.³⁸ Though SDA's have only recently begun to explore a formal doctrine of ecclesiology,³⁹ the pioneers determined from their reading of the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation, that structures were needed to expedite the mission of the church. Thus, Pioneer Principle 3 in the "Report to the Commission" rightly asserts that mission is the determinant of structure. And because SDA theologians have been silent on these issues, these understandings have prevailed and mono-thematic approaches to how we organize the church. Here is precisely where we have not had a recent, transparent conversation around mission responsibility. May I submit that part of the reason we have such an evocative discussion around Regional Conferences in NAD is because we have not had an open conversation about structure in general, and mission responsibility, in particular. Who in NAD is responsible of reaching the 37.6 million African-americans in NAD? Part of the reason we dispute is because we have not had an honest conversation around race and mission. *In NAD, mission primacy for reaching the 37.6 million African-Americans in NAD has been delegated to Regional Conference ministries.* The present structure therefore, is the tool used to facilitate that mission to deliver the SDA message. Therefore, without launching a defense of any particular structural ideal, *regional conferences appear to be grounded in the mission particularity affirmed in Pioneer Principle 3, namely, "mission is the primary determinant of structural form."* Thus, we affirm the mission particularity reflected in regional structures.

However, twenty-two years ago, Oliver noted that the church was slow in recognizing the need to respond to the diversity of the growing SDA Church in its structures. He wrote,

"While Seventh-day Adventists have become one of the most ethnically diverse Christians denominations in the world, they remain not only in danger of failing to respond adequately to the changes that cultural diversity has brought, but they are even in peril of refusing to acknowledge that diversity necessitates structural adaptation."⁴⁰

³⁷A sense of urgency characterizes Ellen White's call to the Adventist Church of the 19th century. Examples include 9T-11: "We are living in the time of the end . . . The condition of things in the world shows that troublous times are right upon us" and 9T-25: "Unmistakable evidences point to the nearness of the end."

³⁸Knight writes, "The main theological pillar undergirding Adventist church structure is eschatology. Mission is an outgrowth of eschatology since Adventism believes that the message of the three angels must be preached to all the world before the end of time." See "Organizing for Mission," 47.

³⁹See *Toward a Theology of the Remnant*, Ángel Rodríguez, ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009). This book is a compilation of the finest Seventh-day Adventist scholarship on the remnant concept as it relates to the witness of the Scriptures. While *Toward a Theology of the Remnant* avoids an offensive dogmatism, it is clearly affirmative on the application of remnant self-consciousness to the SDA Church, and what that self-consciousness means for SDA mission.

⁴⁰Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure*, 355. What is curious in Oliver's assessment, and possibly an oversight, is that he does not consider any decisions regarding structure beyond 1903. The creation of Regional Conferences is an "Exhibit A" of the structural adaptation that he is arguing for in the SDA Church.

Two decades after Oliver’s ground-breaking research, it seems that his observation regarding the church’s potential failure can no longer be considered absolute. Evidence for the difference in organizational outlook is reflected in SDA leadership’s 2007 vote to receive the Report to the Commission at the Annual Council. Leaders at the 2007 Annual Council, as if in an affirmative response to Oliver’s prescient criticism, voted to accept the Commission report which contained the following:

“Simply stated, there is need for flexibility in denominational structure—a flexibility that permits effective response to a particular set of conditions while at the same time maintaining the global values and identity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The reasons for increased flexibility rather than increased uniformity in structures and procedures may be summarized as follows:

- “1. Diversity of geographical environment. . . .
- “2. Differences in political, legal, and cultural environments. . . .
- “3. Geographical and cultural variations in receptivity to mission activities. . . .
- “4. Differentiation in local capacity, resources, and the need for coordinating and linking structures. . . .
- “5. The need for representation to be based on more than one model or classification of organization. . . .
- “6. Advances in technology open possibilities for new organizational patterns with increased efficiencies and effectiveness. . . .”

Conclusion—Where do we go from here?

In light of what we have seen in Scripture, Adventist history, and current reflection on Adventist, structure and mission, the questions moving forward must be addressed by the churches’ theologians. What is the relationship between our mission particularity and our ecclesiological self-understanding? Are the current default understandings of structure adequate to facilitate the churches’ witness in the world? Is a mono-thematic approach sufficient for our current discussion or should our ecclesiology be a primary resource for discussion in the 21st century. Let us, Academy as well as Administrative theologians, join together in reflecting on these key questions, because these questions have implications for how we handle the other related mission and diversity issues we will surely face. Thank you for listening.

[Formal Bibliography to follow]

Addendum

[In this section of the paper, I apply the insights of these findings to three of the questions common to the discussion of structure is our conversation. Please view them as attempts to apply ecclesiological and missiological perspectives to the ‘every-person’ questions, claims, and counterclaims popular in conversation. However, some of the cited claims include emotive allusions to America’s failed racial history, and thus, import issues into the conversation unrelated to the mission-effectiveness discussion, *per se*. I have yet figured out how to respond in depth to questions freighted with these associations. Les Pollard]

Scriptural Hermeneutics and Structure

In looking at Regional Conferences, there are some in our fellowship who interpret Scripture in a way that prohibits mission particularity in the name of unity. They ask questions similar to the following:

“Recently, our pastor preached a sermon in which he used a sentence from the prayer of Jesus, “I pray that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:21). He said that Regional Conferences and state conferences constitute division rather than unity in North American. Does Scripture recommend a particular structure?”

No, Scripture does not. But to answer your question adequately, we must first establish a baseline for Scriptural interpretation. In biblical interpretation, the science called *hermeneutics* guides the way we apply our ancient Bible to current issues and situations. Hermeneutics is the method used by biblical scholars to interpret, understand, and apply biblical passages. The very first law of hermeneutics is to determine the specific subject under discussion in the biblical passage we are studying. If the subject under discussion in a biblical passage is not the same subject to which we are making a direct application of the text, then we are violating the biblical passage by using it as a *pretext* to support our personal perspectives and/or opinions. This technique is called *eisegesis*—reading into the passage a subject that the passage is not addressing. Now let’s apply this hermeneutical law to John 17:21.

John 17:21 rests in the great priestly prayer of Jesus, that prayer offered just prior to his passion and crucifixion. Christ prays for the unity that his followers will need to survive his imminent passion, and later, the vicissitudes of history. His stated desire is for his followers to enjoy a unity akin to the oneness that He enjoys with his Father.⁴¹ Because Jesus mentions his Father, it is clear that trinitarian unity and its application to Christ’s disciples in John 17:21 is what Christ here addresses. Christ is in the Father, and the Father is in him. And the disciples are in Christ. Notice, the Father and Son, though individuated as personalities, enjoy oneness in purpose and mission. *The issue of a specific structure in the early or later church is not under discussion in John 17:21-23.*⁴²

Biblical unity in John 17:21-23 forwards a profound oneness of mission and purpose, free from the divisive and ambitious strivings that would pit Christ’s disciples against each other.

⁴¹Ellen G. Whites writes, “Unity with Christ establishes a bond of unity with one another. This unity is the most convincing proof to the world of the majesty and virtue of Christ, and of His power to take away sin” (Ellen G. White Comments—John,” in Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, 5:1148).

⁴²In consulting 38 major works, no commentator linked John 17:21-23 to a mandate for a particular type of structure. What they did see was a call to cease the personal striving for supremacy that defined the disciples, and an invitation to share His glory, the glory of self-abnegating and self-sacrificial service.

Remember that the larger historical and biblical context of the prayer of John 17 includes John 13. It was in the upper room that the divided and self-interested disciples would not wash another's feet. However, the glory mentioned in the prayer of Christ is the "glory" that emanates from self-sacrificial service. "Glory," self-sacrifice, is what Jesus prays that the world will see in the disciples' profound commitment to God, and their unselfish service to each other.

John 17:21 when looked at carefully, actually makes the diversity-in-unity case most strongly. Marital unity, like Trinitarian unity, includes the same notion. The "two shall become one" of Genesis 2:24 does not mean that unity of purpose precludes individuation in expression. In fact, when one understands the depth of what Christ is praying for, one could argue that this very passage undermines the argument that the pastor thought John 17 supported. Singularity in organization or uniformity in thought is not required in this passage. In fact, the structure of the church is not even the subject of discussion of John 17:21-23.

Therefore, in order to apply this passage to a discussion on structure, the pastor had to preach John 17:21 through seven undeclared assumptions. First, the pastor had to see structure as the concern of Jesus' prayer. Second, the pastor had to assume that Regional and state structures violate biblical unity. Third, the pastor had to assume that mission particularity is divisive.⁴³ Fourth, the pastor had to assume that spiritual unity requires or implies structural singularity. Fifth, the pastor had to assume that only structural and/or congregational integration equals unity. Sixth, the pastor had to assume that Adventists move from biblical texts to direct prescriptions for structure. Seventh, the pastor had to assume that only integration and/or the multi-racial congregational model of church life answers Christ's prayer.⁴⁴

So what do we have here? Unity in John 17:21 points to collective singularity of mission and purpose. According to the SDA Commentary, John 17:21 indicates that, "There would be diversities of gifts (1 Cor. 12), but there was to be unity of spirit, objectives, and beliefs. There were to be no strivings for supremacy such as had recently plagued the Twelve (Luke 22:24-30). The unity springing from the blended lives of Christians would impress the world of the divine origin of the Christian church."⁴⁵ The pastor exercised this opportunity to go beyond the text to misapply its teaching. In the technical study of preaching (called *homiletics*) the pastor's use of the text to moralize about organizational structure is described by what author Daniel Overdorf identifies as "application heresy."⁴⁶

⁴³For instance, the 2010 SDA Yearbook Online acknowledges 18 mission-particularized ministries listed as official units of the NAD organization, e.g. Asian/Pacific Ministries, Czech Ministries, Deaf Ministries, Disabilities Ministries, Ghanaian Ministries, Greek Ministries, Haitian Ministries, Hispanic Ministries, Hungarian Ministries, Jewish Ministries, Korean Ministries, Muslim Ministries, Native-American Ministries, and a number of others. These individuated ministries are unified around a common purpose, while being configured to meet particular demographic groups.

⁴⁴See Daniel Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon: How to Balance Biblical Integrity and Cultural Relevance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2009), 77-80. Overdorf describes the mistakes that preachers often make by recruiting texts and assigning them to one's personal perspectives. He outlines the difference between a number of "application" heresies, e.g. spiritualizing, moralizing, patternizing, trivializing, normalizing, etc. In relationship to the case raised by the question, Overdorf classifies this case as moralizing. He explains that "Moralizing is drawing moral exhortations from a text that go beyond a text's intention. . . . Moralizing often treats possible implications (good advice) as necessary implications (thus saith the Lord)."

⁴⁵*The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, F. D. Nichol, ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978, 2002), 5:1053. Also Knowles, writes "Because Jesus is one with his Father, and believers are one with the Father and the Son, there should be no room for rivalry and faction." See A. Knowles, *The Bible Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg: 2001), 524.

⁴⁶Overdorf, 77-78. It should be noted that some simply assume and teach that the highest and best expression of congregational life is multi-cultural and multi-racial. However, these have yet to make a compelling

Based on a definition of biblical unity, it may be argued that the NAD is united in mission. Regional and state conferences are united in the mission of declaring the Advent message of Rev 14:6-12.⁴⁷ Unity speaks to allegiance to a common faith, a common mission, and a common set of beliefs and values. Regional Conferences are no more divided from state conferences than state conferences are divided from each other. Regional Conferences focus on a primary target population within a specific geographical region. Thus, the conference structure is simply a mechanism for deploying human and financial resources consistent with its assigned mission. So when we hear John 17:21 (or Eph 2:14-16 or Gal 3:27-28) cited as a basis for structural consolidation in NAD, we know that such usages have no basis in responsible exegesis, nor in Seventh-day Adventist history.

The Relationship between Unity, Diversity, and Mission

Some believe that diversity is an aspect of Christian identity to be overcome in the light of Paul's statement, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, but you are all one in Christ Jesus" Gal 3:27-28.⁴⁸ This passage is seen as a call to color-blind community. And they believe that those who speak affirmatively regarding culture, ethnicity, or gender are simply making excuses for division or "segregation" or maintenance of the status quo. Their position prompts questions similar to the following:

"Are 'ethnic' structures (or congregations) *de facto* barriers to Christian mission in NAD because they are "segregated?"

We place the word ethnic in quotes because ethnicity belongs to all people groups in the NAD, including Caucasians. Gal 3:27-28 is a call to unified, not color-blind, or class-blind, or gender-blind, community. Race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and other aspects of diversity are redeemed and presented in the New Testament by Paul, not as barriers, but as resources for mission.⁴⁹ Many, if not most, Christians have been taught that race and class and ethnicity are dimensions of identity that have to be left behind after becoming a Christian. But biblical unity does not create a diversity-blind community or mission. Unity creates a mission-

biblical case that proves this contention. And where they can point to examples of what they consider New Testament evidence for multi racial and multi-cultural local congregations, they generally fail to show that the example cited, in Acts 13, or Ephesians 2, or Romans 16 is prescriptive for all local congregations. One can only read these passages and get to structural prescription through what Overdorf identifies as the "application heresy" of patternizing.

⁴⁷In a recent publication, Calvin Rock presents a carefully researched and reasoned case for unity in diversity. See Calvin Rock, "Regional Conferences: An Exhibition of Unity in Diversity," *Regional Voice--2010 Special General Conference Issue*, 8-10. In this piece he illustrates missiological insights with relevant sociological data and examples.

⁴⁸An example of the faulty assumption that problematizes diversity itself can be seen in Bruce Milne, *Dynamic Diversity: Bridging Class, Age, Race and Gender in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 23, 25. For Milne, the Christian church is the "... new humanity, in which not only racial diversity but every other major human diversity is both confronted and overcome." This is a flawed assumption because it is grounded in a rejection of diversity. Milne fails to notice that diversity in Pauline perspective, individual and group, is presented as a resource for mission and community. A resourced-based theology of diversity can be seen in Leslie Pollard's 1999 NAD Summit on Race presentation, "What Do We Do With Differences?" in the Adventist Review at <http://www.adventistreview.org/2000-1549/story1.html>. In this article, Pollard develops and presents an original theology of diversity from the Pauline perspective that exposes how the popular fallacy of diversity rejection, diversity blindness, or indifference toward diversity works against effective mission and fellowship.

⁴⁹For a broader development of diversity as a resource for mission, see Leslie Pollard, "Culture Matters," in Adventist Review at <http://www.adventistreview.org/2004-1506/story1.html>.

purposive use of diversity distinctions. In 1 Corinthians 9:18-24, a passage where Paul discusses the missional use of redeemed cultural and ethnic particularity, the Apostle says to the Corinthian community that “To the Jew, I became as a Jew... to WIN [emphasis supplied] the Jews.” Here Paul, who also said to the Galatians in 3:27, where ethnicity, class, and gender were being inappropriately used to establish and advance cultural and religious superiority, “There is neither Jew, nor Greek” now affirms to the Corinthians that his ethnicity did not disappear upon becoming a Christian. His pre-Christian history, culture, race, class, etc. was transformed into a mission-usable resource which he deployed in order to reach other Jews with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul established points of contact that were rooted in important aspects of the ethnic and cultural identity that he *shared* with other Jewish persons. By this means Paul was able to speak the cultural language of his people.

Based on Paul’s missiology, Japanese, Ghanaian, Russian, Hispanics (i.e., Latinos), Korean, African-American, Filipino, Euro-American, and a host of other ethnic congregations in NAD stand as examples of believers who resource important aspects of their racial, cultural, and ethnic identities to advance Adventist mission. These believers know that the grace of God, which is no respecter of persons, is a grace that radiates from all people to all people and through all people (remember Acts 10:34-36). These “ethnic” congregations are committed to meeting people groups in North America in the language, folkways, and cultural idioms that speak the gospel most deeply to their communities of origin.⁵⁰ More importantly, ethnic congregations are open and accessible to any believer who wishes to visit or join. *A “color-blind” missiology would require that racial, ethnic, and national particularity in mission be eliminated.* According to the Britannica Concise Encyclopedia Online, segregation is the “. . . practice of restricting people to certain circumscribed areas of residence or to separate institutions and facilities on the basis of race or alleged race. Racial segregation provides a means of maintaining the economic advantages and higher social status of politically dominant races.”⁵¹ Thus, no Adventist congregation in NAD is segregated. Adventist congregations reflect missional particularity.

Regardless of one’s position on this matter, let us agree that we will be charitable in the framing of this discussion. We note that critics of Regional Conferences are increasingly misusing some of the most polarizing terms from the Jim Crow era of American history. Terms like “segregation,” and “separate but equal” are recently being preached from our pulpits to describe the structure of the NAD. Leaders are being accused of being power hungry, racist, separatist, etc. Such careless and reckless brandishing of these volatile terms is misleading, uninformed, and divisive.⁵² The answer to the question would be “no,” these are not de facto barriers to mission because they do not fit the definition of segregated assembly (see the definition of segregation). The Adventist church does not support segregation. Every Seventh-day Adventist in America is free to attend and/or join any SDA congregation in North America, if in his/her present local church, he/she is a member “in regular standing.”

⁵⁰Donald McGavarn observed a sociological phenomenon that he famously summarized in 1990: “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.” See Donald McGavarn, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 163. However, there are those who dissent with the church growth movement’s description of this “homogenous unit principle.” See C. R. Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogenous Unit Principle,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 6 (1):23-30.

⁵¹See Britannica Concise Encyclopedia Online at <http://www.answers.com/topic/segregation>.

⁵²We note with some curiosity, in the recent dissertation of Penno from Andrews University, the most crucial term in his title, “Segregation,” is not defined. See, his list of definitions in Penno, “Race-based Organizational Segregation,” 12-14.

Structure and SDA Church History

Some are embarrassed by the racial history of the SDA Church that gave birth to Regional Conferences. They believe that the refusal of the SDA Church to accept black members' request for integration in 1944 was wrong, and that decision must now be reversed to reflect societal progress on racial issues. They ask questions similar to the following:

“Are not Regional Conferences a reminder of an embarrassing era in SDA history?”

On one hand, the answer is “Yes.” The regretful history of the Adventist Church’s treatment of blacks between 1890 and 1965 is well documented in this paper. “That conflictual history,” according to some, “is the reason that we should disband Regional Conferences now that the church and society has changed so drastically since 1944.” It is not time that we eliminate “a racially defined organizational structure?” they ask.⁵³

On the other hand, we say “no” because *history does not have to be perfect to be purposeful*. To reason only from the historical occurrences of 1944 and that era is to limit our view of history to horizontal cause and effect. However, Ellen White articulates a vertical view of history that is quite illuminative. In her book *Education* she wrote that “. . . behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, [stand] the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.”⁵⁴ Another oft-quoted statement is “In reviewing our past history, having traveled over every step of advance to our present standing, I can say, Praise God! As I see what the Lord has wrought, I am filled with astonishment, and with confidence in Christ as leader. We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”⁵⁵ Her view is that the hand of God is revealed in “the advance to our present standing.” Her conclusion also means--human interests, power, and passion, notwithstanding--history does not have to be perfect to be purposeful!

Several significant breakthroughs in SDA progress and understanding grew out of the vortex of conflictual history among leaders of the SDA movement. Examples include the testy showdown between G. I. Butler and Uriah Smith, on one side of the righteousness-by-faith issue, and A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner on the other, at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference over the nature of salvation. This is a notable example of historical conflict that yielded significant progress for the theological development of our doctrine of salvation.⁵⁶ Another example is the historical conflict between Ellen G. White and the leadership of the Battle Creek Sanitarium and J. H. Kellogg in the 1890’s over the nature of SDA Healthcare and Church authority yielded clearer and more distinct understandings of our mission in healthcare and its relationship to the ecclesiastical side of our organization.⁵⁷ Another example is the disagreement between the Southern California Conference and John Burden over whether to purchase Loma Linda in 1904 when the Conference President instructed Burden not to proceed with the

⁵³See “What’s Taking So Long?” in Adventist Review Online at <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=1704>.

⁵⁴Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903; 2002), 173.

⁵⁵Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1915), 96.

⁵⁶See the chronicling of this history in George Knight, *A User-Friendly Guide to the 1888 Message* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1998).

⁵⁷For a description of the challenges of this era, see Richard W. Schwarz, *John Harvey Kellogg: Pioneering Health Reformer* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 178ff.

purchase, while Ellen G. White said to go forward.⁵⁸ Other examples from SDA history could be cited. But as we review that history, we see that a greater glory of God was born from the womb of historical conflict.

The life of Old Testament Joseph illustrates a “superventionist” view of history, which is explicated in Ellen G. White’s writings. In Gen 45:5 Joseph, when confronting his frightened brothers over their mistreatment of him, said to them, “And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . .” Their view of history was horizontal. But Joseph has a vertical interpretation of that painful history--“You sold me . . . but *God* sent me” says Joseph. In other words, God did not contravene in this case, He supervened. Over and above their inadequate treatment, Joseph embodied the larger, purposeful accomplishment of the will of God. Reading God’s purposeful will said to Joseph, the victim of his brothers’ treachery, that God had an overarching redemptive purpose in his maltreatment. It was God’s purpose that through Joseph’s horrid history, a greater glory would be manifested on behalf of the suffering Hebrew people. In the New Testament, a similar assessment of human activity is also contained in the Gamaliel principle, “if the plan is of man, it will fail. If the plan is of God, you will not be able to stop it” (Acts 5:37).

Similarly, it is an established fact that in 1944, in the wake of the Lucy Byard incident at Washington Sanitarium, African-Americans requested the full integration of all facilities and structures of the SDA Church in North America.⁵⁹ In response, the General Conference Spring Council of April 8-15, 1944 voted to organize Regional Conferences “where the colored constituency is . . . sufficiently large, and where financial income and territory warrant. . . .”⁶⁰ In 1945 Lake Region was organized. And by December of 1945, 4 conferences were organized for the Negro (colored) people, with a total of 4 more to be organized by 1951. Ironically, from the time African-Americans were given conferences to operate, the work among African-Americans expanded dramatically during the 20th century.

Now we raise a question that to moderns will sound like social heresy: In the context of Adventist missiology, suppose integration would have hindered the embryonic black work? Remember, it was integration that hindered God’s work during the Edson White mission activities around the turn of the century. The segregationist context of 1944 was not substantially different than in 1909. In 1944, full-scale integration was still an extremely *liberal* political idea in racially-conservative America.⁶¹ Today, we assume that if the answer to the

⁵⁸ See Richard A. Schaeffer, *Legacy: Daring to Care, Centennial Edition-1905-2005* (Loma Linda, CA: Legacy Publishing Association, 2005), 139-140.

⁵⁹The reader should be aware that there were in fact, two, in competing streams of thought within the African-American community relative to the Regional Conference idea. There were those voices as early as Elder C. M. Kinney in 1891, and as late as 1929 through Elder J. K. Humphrey who had been seeking conferences as the natural outgrowth of the success of the 1909 Negro Department, headed by Elder William Green (See the General Conference Executive Committee Minutes, April 29, 1929, 838-839). There were also those African-Americans who sought integration into the existing structure. By 1944 the issues had collided in the incident with Mrs. Lucy Byard. See Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 145-149 for a summary of the racial tensions between the years of 1891 and 1944.

⁶⁰From “Actions of the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee,” April 10-16, 1944, 15-16.

⁶¹In an enlightening distillation of the race doctrine of this period, Gunnar Myrdal summarized the social construction of race in America during this period with 6 propositions: 1. The Negro people belong to a separate race of mankind; 2. The Negro race has an entirely different ancestry than white people and cannot be related to white people in any way; 3. The Negro race is inferior to the white race in as many capacities as possible; 4. The Negro race is so different in characteristics and ancestry that all white people can be considered a homogeneous race; 5. The Negro race has a place in the biological hierarchy somewhere between the white man and the

request for integration had been “yes,” the tolerance we know today would have simply been replicated in 1944.⁶² Such a conclusion raises the question of whether we fully appreciate the racial animus and antipathy that pervaded the relations between blacks and whites in the 1940s in America. In criticizing General Conference leadership of that era, we sometimes overlook the fact that 21st century outlooks on race are the cumulative result of 50 years of social upheaval around issues regarding race in America.⁶³ But racial intolerance in 1944, prior to the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s, the social experimentation of the 70s, and the tolerance and diversity movements of the 80s and 90, was aggressively assimilationist,⁶⁴ committedly colonialist, and deeply imbedded in the outlooks and institutions of America, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Accession to the 1944 request for integration of structure, in such a fiercely unwelcoming racial environment might have driven more leaders than Lewis C. Sheafe⁶⁵ and James K. Humphrey⁶⁶ out of the SDA Church. SDA historians and scholars writing about this period consistently *assume* that integration in 1944 would have been the best *missional*

anthropoids; 6. The Negro is more akin to each other than to any white man. From Gunnar Myrdal, *The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy: An American Dilemma, vols 1 & 2* (New York: Harper Torch Book, 1944), 103-104.

⁶²As an illustration of the depth of the racial challenges of SDA leadership during the first 70 years of the 20th century, Frank Hale, documents the resistance to integration of SDA facilities up to and including the 1962 General Conference Session in San Francisco. SDA leadership was public in its criticism of the faith-based communities who participated in the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. Into the 1960s, key SDA educational and ecclesiastical institutions had not integrated. At San Francisco, the issue of desegregation in the SDA Church was prompted by the involvement of the national press. See Frank W. Hale, Jr. *Angels Watching Over Me* (Nashville, TN: James C. Winston Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 157-211.

⁶³And what we call tolerance may be transient. Ellen G. White believed that there would always be a work that only blacks could do for other blacks. Note her comment in 9T-207-208: “The colored ministers should make every effort possible to help their own people understand the truth for this time. As time advances, *and race prejudices increase*, it will become almost impossible, in many places, for white workers to labor for colored people.”

⁶⁴See the insightful analysis and comparison of Regional Conferences and the United Methodist Church’s Central Jurisdiction by Alfonzo Greene, Jr., “[Black] Regional Conferences in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) compared with United Methodist [Black] Central Jurisdiction/Annual Conferences with White S.D.A. Conferences, From 1940-2001” (Ph.D Dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 2009), 352-356. Greene shows the impact of assimilation-in-the-name-of-unity on the United Methodist Church in the history of the dismantling of the Central Jurisdiction. He carefully documents how the assimilation model exacted a high cost to the UMC’s black membership.

⁶⁵See Douglas Morgan, *Lewis C. Sheafe: Apostle to Black America* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2010), 279-311 for an example of the racial situation of the 19th century SDA Church. Lewis C. Sheafe had been a Baptist minister before joining the SDA Church. Possessed of a dynamic personality, he was unable to agree with SDA racial attitudes and practices. Between the years of 1910 and 1915, he was inconsistent in maintaining church membership. He finally left for good. Mrs. White wrote a testimony to him on Feb 10, 1907 (LT. S-44-07). In this letter, Ellen White pled with Pastor Sheafe to not be influenced by many of the apostate elements at Battle Creek, some of whom were exacerbating and exploiting his racial struggles in an effort to secure his support for their own purposes.

⁶⁶James K. Humphrey, was a native of Jamaica, and an ordained Baptist minister before joining the SDA Church. He founded First Harlem SDA Church. By 1920 it had a membership of 600 members. He proposed the formation of a Negro Conference as a member of the 1929 GC Commission on the Negro work. He seceded from the SDA Church after his service on the Commission. For an extensive and scholarly treatment of the career of J. K. Humphrey, see R. Clifford Jones, *James K. Humphrey and the Sabbath-Day Adventists* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006).

decision for the future of Black work.⁶⁷ These assumptions explain why some consider Regional Conferences “God’s non-ideal plan.”⁶⁸

But this assumption not only minimizes the historical context of 1944, it is also predicated on the assumption that, in a hierarchy of values, integration should be the highest value and should have been implemented at all costs.⁶⁹ But we submit that such a position is driven by a view of integration, which somehow sees inter-racial affiliation as a moral imperative.⁷⁰ Interestingly, if Ellen G. White had been similarly ideological in her view of integration, she would have insisted that whites and blacks MUST worship together at the turn of the century, even if it is at the cost of believers’ lives. She could have quoted any of a number of texts to support a morally-grounded position (e.g. Acts 5:31; Hebrews 12:27 or Acts 17:26 “He hath made of one blood of all nations”). But Ellen White was NOT an integrationist ideologue, who insisted that the future vision of the *eschaton* be precisely replicated in our present situation. In this regard, Mrs. White would be classified today as a missional contextualist.⁷¹ One need only read her handling of the mission issues related to the “color line” in the 19th century to

⁶⁷Clifford Jones documents the very difficult and confusing relationship of the Adventist Church toward the Negro from 1840-1930. See Jones, 82-112. He describes the black experience in Adventism as “. . . a saga of paradox, ambiguity and ambivalence.” Jones, 82. Also, Richard T. Schaeffer in *Race and Ethnicity in the United States*, 4th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 4 asserts “Relations between racial and ethnic groups are not like relations between family members. The history of the United States is one of racial oppression.” This model of social dominance is also true of the racial history of the Seventh-day Adventist.

⁶⁸As examples, see the *SDA Encyclopedia*, 1193-1195. See also Samuel Pipim, “Separate Black and White Conferences-Part 1: The Sin We Don’t Want to Overcome,” at <http://www.drpipim.org/church-racism-contemporaryissues-51/97-separate-black-and-white-conferences-part-1.html>.

⁶⁹Minister and sociologist, Calvin Rock rightly questions this assumption. Rock differentiates between segregation, desegregation, and integration. Note his comment in the *Adventist Review*, “The country and the church should honor the guarantees of “desegregation” (one’s privilege of belonging wherever one wishes) and not feel guilty about the natural associational patterns of the races that make general social “integration” an illusion. Racism (exclusivity based on attitudes of superiority) is the enemy, not racial association with those of common interests or likenesses.” Clearly, for Rock, the opposite of segregation is not integration, but *desegregation*. To see the full context of his perspective, see Adventist Online, “Readers Respond to Four Big Questions,” at <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=660>.

⁷⁰On the contrary, it appears that the Apostle ranked certain values over and against their relationship to Christian mission. For example, in his day, slavery and taxation were empire-wide activities of the Roman government. Yet, Paul appears to have ranked the abolition of slavery and personal freedom as subordinate to the spreading his Gospel. He urged the return of Onesimus to his master Philemon. Two realities shaped Paul’s view: 1) Slavery was not an impediment to the slave in receiving Christ; and, 2) Paul’s view of an immanent *eschaton* i.e., “the time is short.” But 1 Corinthians 7:21 also reveals Paul’s outlook. If a slave could win his freedom he should, but Paul did not make it a primary pursuit. He even discouraged the custom of “self sale” in verse 1 Cor 7:23. For more insights into the nature of slavery in the New Testament, see Leslie Pollard, “20th Century Slavery and the New Testament,” *Message Magazine*, (Jan-Feb), 1994: 28-29.

Nineteen centuries after Paul, Ellen White called slavery sin, and urged Adventists to resist it. Twenty centuries after Paul, the moral outlook of modern nations was expressed on December 10, 1948, when the United Nations voted its Universal Declaration of Human Rights which codified the global condemnation of slavery in *Article 4*: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all its forms.” See <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

⁷¹The Negro had been both betrayed and abandoned between the years 1895-1910. The United States’ Compromise of 1877 resulted in the North effectively deciding to leave the conquered south to itself and its radically reactionary elements. During this period, disaffected Southerners tormented, terrorized, and executed many recently freed slaves. For a detailed description of the treatment of the Negro during this period, see Ronald Graybill, *E. G. White and Church Race Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970), 17-34.

observe her mindset.⁷² Before “situational leadership” would be posited some 60 years later, Ellen White demonstrated a case-based approach to resolving mission issues. Based on her counsel to the southern field, she believed in the principle that our mission must interface effectively with the local, cultural, social, and historical context.⁷³ While she initially supported equality at creation and in cross-racial affiliation in her early statements, she was not slavishly bound to that support.⁷⁴ The moral implications of this adjustment in Ellen White’s counsel on the relationship between the races has gone unnoticed by scholars. For her, effective SDA mission was both practically and contextually responsive.⁷⁵

Second, Adventist writers on this period consistently fail to show that Regional Conferences were *also* established for missional purposes.⁷⁶ Like historically black colleges and

⁷²For an thoughtful treatment of Ellen White’s relationship to the 19th century concept of the color line, see Ciro Sepúlveda, *Ellen White on the Color Line: The Idea of Race in a Christian Community* ([Location missing]: Biblos Press, 1997), 25-39. Here Sepúlveda outlines the role of the color line in the SDA Church and general society during this period. See also Roy Graham, *Ellen G. White: Co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company, 1985), 247-249 for how E. G. White moderated the racial debate in three ways through her leadership; First, she declared that there was no superior or inferior race. Second, she reminded the church, especially the Northern SDA Church, that it was the collective responsibility of the entire nation to make restitution to the formerly enslaved Negro. Third, she spelled out contextually-sensitive recommendations for how SDA workers were to proceed with the work for the Southern field.

⁷³Note the following passage, written by Mrs. White from Australia, to the members working for the colored (black) believers: “As time advances, and opposition strengthens, *circumstances warn us that discretion is the better part of valor*. If unwise moves have been made in the work done for the colored people, it is not because warnings have not been given. From Australia, across the broad waters of the Pacific, cautions were sent that every movement must be guarded, that the workers were to make no political speeches, and that the mingling of whites and blacks in social equality was by no means to be encouraged.

“In a council meeting held in 1895 at Armadale, a suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, I spoke of these matters, in answer to the inquiries of my brethren, and urged the necessity of caution. I said that perilous times were coming, and that the sentiments that could then be expressed in regard to what should be done along missionary lines for the colored people could not be expressed in the future without imperiling lives. I said plainly that the work done for the colored people would have to be carried on along lines different from those followed in some sections of the country in former years.

“Let as little as possible be said about the color line, and let the colored people work chiefly for those of their own race.

“In regard to white and colored people worshiping in the same building, this cannot be followed as a general custom with profit to either party--especially in the South. The best thing will be to provide the colored people who accept the truth, with places of worship of their own, in which they can carry on their services by themselves. This is particularly necessary in the South in order that the work for the white people may be carried on without serious hindrance.

“Let the colored believers be provided with neat, tasteful houses of worship. Let them be shown that this is done not to exclude them from worshiping with white people, because they are black, *but in order that the progress of the truth may be advanced* [emphasis added]. Let them understand that this plan is to be followed until the Lord shows us a better way.” 9T-205-207.

⁷⁴Graybill, *White and Race Relations*, 110ff.

⁷⁵Note her statement in 9T-204: “The gospel is to be presented to the downtrodden Negro race. But great caution will have to be shown in the efforts put forth for the uplifting of this people. Among the white people in many places there exists a strong prejudice against the Negro race. *We may desire to ignore this prejudice, but we cannot do it. If we were to act as if this prejudice did not exist, we could not get the light before the white people. We must meet the situation as it is and deal with it wisely and intelligently.*” Again, another passage from her Testimony titled “The Color Line” clearly elucidates Ellen G. White’s missiology: “The wise course is best. As laborers together with God, we are to work *in a way that will enable us to accomplish the most for him*” 9T-215.

⁷⁶The topic of Regional Conferences came to the floor of the GC Committee’s Spring Council held April 8-19, 1944, in Chicago. 22 speakers are on record,. 17 spoke in favour, 3 against the proposal, and 2 sought

universities in America (e.g., Oakwood University), Regional Conferences were responses to exclusion. However, they were much more than that. A careful reading of the documents chronicling their founding *also* shows that it was believed by General Conference leadership in 1944 that Blacks could better organize, manage, and execute SDA mission to black America. What is consistently neglected in the discussion of NAD structure is the accompanying second track of missiological motivation behind the establishment of Regional Conferences.⁷⁷ This is not to imply that GC leaders were guiltless. They were not. It is clear that they chose the path of least resistance on the social front. But, as time passed, the legal and social context of segregation disappeared across the next 30 years, *but the missiological necessity for Regional Conferences did not*. The critics of Regional Conference structures, in their efforts to invalidate or delegitimize Regional structures, ONLY cite the segregationist history and failure of then leaders. They fail to cite the accompanying and stated missiological rationale for the creation of the structures. Therefore, it does not follow, that since the context of segregation has ended, the structures must automatically end also. Regardless of the motives and/or mistakes of our SDA forefathers, Regional Conferences can be viewed as mission-particularized structures created for the missional purpose of empowering Black leaders to evangelize America's black peoples.⁷⁸ And as asserted earlier, history did not have to be perfect to be purposeful.

clarification. For a summary, see Delbert W. Baker "Regional Conferences: 50 Years of Progress" *Adventist Review* November 2, 1995, 11. The following resolution was passed: "WHEREAS, The present development of the work among the colored people in North America has resulted, under the signal blessing of God, in the establishment of some 233 churches with some 17,000 members: and WHEREAS, It appears that a different plan of organization for our colored membership *would bring further great advance in soul-winning endeavours*; therefore WE RECOMMEND, that in unions where the colored constituency is considered by the union conference committee to be sufficiently large, and where the financial income and territory warrant, colored conferences be organized." *Ibid.*, "Regional Conferences," 14.

⁷⁷Notice the language of the General Conference Spring Counsel, 1944 resolution: "WHEREAS, the present development of the work among the colored people in North America has resulted under the signal blessing of God, in the establishment of some 233 churches with some 17,000 members: and WHEREAS, *it appears that a different plan of organization for our colored membership would bring further great advance in soul-winning endeavours*; [italics supplied] therefore WE RECOMMEND, that in unions where the colored constituency is considered by the union conference committee to be sufficiently large, and where the financial income and territory warrant, colored conferences be organized."

⁷⁸If social context is seriously considered, then interpretations like Knight's can and should be called into question. His assertion reads, "While Black [Regional] conferences were certainly not the ideal, their creation seems to have stimulated the denomination's work among certain segments of North America's Black population." See Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 150. However, if the new structure dramatically stimulated and advanced the mission to black America, then why would not that advancement in mission be considered "ideal"? Missiologically-deficient assessments repeatedly overlook the possibility that the God's overarching purpose was realized in the dramatic stimulation and growth of the black work in 1944 and beyond.

Further, two points of rebuttal are appropriate. 1) Point 1 is a clarification of Knight's statement: The financial and statistical growth data shows that with the organization of Regional conferences, a remarkable blessing attending the spread of the SDA message among African-Americans in North America; 2) Point 2 raises a question: Do any scholars question why the request for integration was denied? The fact that the request for integration was denied raises the missiological question of whether integration would have facilitated or inhibited the growth of the work among blacks in America. Dogmatic idealism aside, from a missiological perspective, missional particularity in North America better suited the SDA mission to black America. Again, it appears that our history did not have to be perfect to work for God's higher purpose.