

## THE CHIEF AND THE CHURCH

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Presentation at the Adventist Society for Religious Studies

San Diego, California

November 21, 2014

In September I was in a committee composed of several SDA church employees, some from the General Conference and some from academia. While reviewing various agenda items, the chair noted that recently the General Conference hired an individual to serve as “CIO”—Chief Information Officer. Immediately the questions were raised: What is a CIO? What do they do? And then came THE major questions: *Why* is the Church using these business titles? *Why Chief* Information Officer? *Why* the recent move in the Working Policy to call Treasurers “*Chief* Financial Officers”? *Why* all this emphasis on “*Chief*”? Aren’t we becoming more like a business when we use business titles and terms?

The conversation then moved to more a serious question: Should the church be run like a business? The obvious inclination of the group was that it should NOT! At this point the committee members looked to me, the only committee member with ties to business, for my opinion.

As you can imagine, my first response related to the easiest part of the question: Why treasurers are now called CFOs. That answer is fairly straightforward. There was a desire to create an understanding of what the treasurer of a conference, union, or division really does. The word “treasurer” implies a role of caring for the money in an accounting manner that records money “in” and money “out” as directed by others or by policies. But this individual isn’t only an accountant. The actual function of this member of the organization’s administrative team is much larger than recording money transactions, and the name change was an attempt to better identify what that position requires in terms of role.

However, this is not to imply that language doesn’t matter. Language does, in fact, make a difference. Walter Beach and Bert Beach, in their jointly-authored book *Pattern for Progress*, noted that “The concept of making the secretary or treasurer vice presidents, and thus simply extensions of the president’s office, runs counter to the Adventist model of church government with its inbuilt distributed responsibility” (Beach & Beach, pp. 68-69) because the president is “first among equals” and all three officers have their own constituency mandate. All three were elected by the same constituency that elected the president. As they put it: “The authority of the officers as a group is the combined authority of the president, secretary, and treasurer...The officers have a management function, supported by the department directors, and supervise executive implementation of the actions of the (executive) committee.” (Beach & Beach, p. 69) Thus, the secretary and the treasurer are not extensions of the President, not directly accountable to him or her—as the term “vice-president” would suggest. Their roles are ones of cooperation, not subordination.

But the September committee’s question remains. Does the use of the language: “Chief Information Officer” and “Chief Financial Officer” imply that these individuals are rulers? Does the use of this language mean that the church is a business and not a spiritual organization?

I propose that in fact, the church is both.

### **The Church and the church:**

Please refer to the drawing of a large box at the end of this paper. The large box represents the Church (capital “C”)—which is, in my model, what Ellen White was referring to in *Testimonies*, vol. 6, when she said: “Nothing else in this world is so dear to God as His church.” (White, p. 42)

Inside the large box draw a smaller box. This represents the church (small “c”)—the church organization—that is, the General Conference, Divisions, Unions, and Conferences, as well as the institutional entities such as the publishing houses, colleges and universities, hospitals, food factories, ADRA, ARM, and the organized portion of the local church, such as the pastor and his/her church board.

The smaller box is indeed a “business”—a large and managed organization handling millions of dollars and employing thousands of people. What might “business” share with the small box—the organizational structure of the church—that is helpful?

“Business” (including corporations) can show any organization how to accomplish its chosen task. For example, business processes can inform the church organization how to practice stewardship of financial and production resources. It can model good internal control systems that enhance accountability and transparency while reducing the opportunity for fraud and misuse. It can provide understanding for how best to use production resources, with focus on recycling materials and reducing scrap where possible. It can assist in creating processes that will result in good human-resource decisions so that the church hires wisely, with the needs of the mission and immediate goals in mind. It can provide information as to how to design jobs, develop an employee’s talent, create reward systems, and communicate information effectively to all employees so as to promote understanding and community. Wise management methods can be studied and adopted from various corporations or easily-available management literature. For example, in his book *Leadership is an Art*, Max De Pree, son of the founder of Herman Miller, an innovative furniture-making business located in Zeeland, Michigan, and himself a member of its management team for over 40 years, stated in his discussion of participative management:

Participative management arises out of the heart and out of a personal philosophy about people. It cannot be added to, or subtracted from, a corporate policy manual as though it were one more management tool. Everyone has the right and the duty to decision-making and to understand the results. Participative management guarantees that decisions will not be arbitrary, secret, or closed to questioning. Participative management is not democratic. Having a say differs from having a vote. (DePree, M. pp. 22-23)

This is good management counsel for the church, especially given the representative nature of our church organization.

But the September committee was not interested in hearing about the good things that business can bring to the church’s organizational structure. They feared a business-like atmosphere in the church. However, if I had asked them whether a good internal control system was important for financial transparency and accountability, they would have answered: “Certainly!” I would have received the

same response if I had asked whether we want the church to employ the best human resource procedures, the most refined strategic planning tools, the most efficient production processes in its food factories (as in Sanitarium Health Foods in Australia) and its publishing houses.

So what is the source of the “fear” that was expressed?

I suggest that there is fear that the unethical practices of business could easily become standard operating procedure in the church. There is no shortage of examples of business behaving badly—from environmental destruction (think BP and the Gulf) to financial fraud (think Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Adelphia, AIG, and Goldman Sachs) to layoffs when there is an economic downturn, rather than attempts to maintain jobs—to provide just a few examples.

We do not want the church as an organization to copy any of these unethical business practices. We want the church to always act in an ethical manner. We also do not want the authoritarian structures that are often exemplified in business because in the church, hierarchy is created for order, not for power. We do not want to hear church leaders speak like the president of a privately owned company when asked if his tactics would be different if he were running a public company (i.e., not being both the owner and the manager). He responded: “If I knew my compensation next year would be based on this year’s return on equity, (expletive deleted), I wouldn’t act the same. You’ve only got a few years at the top in a public company to make your killing. You want to put every penny on the bottom line to wind up with the juiciest retirement package you can get.” (DePree, M. pp 82-83).

How can the church avoid being like “business” as defined above, and instead always act ethically?

Frederick Bird and James Waters believe that unethical actions occur in organizations because managers fail to discuss moral and ethical issues due to fear that such talk may lead to organizational disharmony, inefficiency, or cause the manager to appear to be either weak or ineffective because of the perceived idealism and utopian perspective of “moral talk.” (Bird & Waters, p. 890). They argue, however, that unless an organization creates a habit of moral reflection, it will suffer moral amnesia...and moral stress...and ultimately come to the place where moral actions cannot occur within the business culture. Their article was written in 1989. When one reads it today, one wishes that business had “listened” to their suggestions. Perhaps if they had, they would have avoided the actions and results that so many today associate with the term: “being business-like.”

Bird and Waters recommend the “institutionalization” of ethical talk to counter unethical action. To accomplish this, they suggest that the organization: (Bird & Waters, pp. 895-897)

1. Allow for discussion of moral issues and permit legitimate dissent, assuring dissenters that they will not be personally blamed, criticized, ostracized or punished for their views.
2. Focus discussions on what everyone agrees on (i.e., shared long-run objectives and common ethical principles) so that these items appear basic, and factional differences temporary and relative.
3. Use moral talk to identify problems, consider issues, advocate and criticize policies, and justify and explain decisions, while avoiding the abuse of moral talk by refusing to use it to either rationalize or express personal frustrations.

4. Engage each other in reflection and dialogue about one's own experience with moral issues. Such conversations demonstrate leadership's seriousness in seeking efficient and reflective problem-solving with respect to moral issues.

I would add three more points to the list created by Bird and Waters:

1. Remember that decisions are not morally neutral; unintended consequences can occur.
2. Require business education at some level for everyone going into church administration so that basic business terms, which are neutral, do not stop the church (small "c") from engaging in the best business practices to achieve organizational order. For example, it is important to understand when "chief" means ruler or when "chief" means the person charged with the ultimate responsibility for an assigned groups of functions.
3. Share positive stories of business, not just the unethical stories.

### **The Church (capital "C")**

But what about the Church (capital "C")? This is NOT a business. This is the Church—the body of Christ! We cannot afford to confuse the two when we use the word "Church"—for the Church (capital "C") cannot be run like a business. The members of the Church are not employees and they cannot be treated as such. Business policies regarding employees and other stakeholders do not apply to members of the Church. The closest term I can think of as a name for the members of the Church are "God-empowered volunteers." As Max DePree states: "Volunteers do not need contracts, they need covenants." (p. 25).

What is the difference between a contract and a covenant?

A contract is a business term; a transactional term. The evidence of a contract is generally contained in a piece of paper, a legal document, which is signed by the parties to the contract. A contract may be part of a relationship, but it is never the complete relationship. When considering an action in a contractual environment, the individual is likely to ask: "Is the contemplated action legal?" "Is it in accordance with the contract?" Or, to put this in the context of the church (small "c") one might ask: "Is it in agreement with Working Policy?"

A complete relationship needs a covenant, and a complete relationship is what is needed and expected when one is a member of the Church (capital "C"). A covenant is not a legal document; it is a transformational term rather than a transactional term. In religious terms we speak of the covenant written on the heart. It requires an understanding of the nature of the relationship established between the parties—such as a marriage covenant or a baptismal covenant. In a covenant environment, the individual will ask: "What does the contemplated action do to the relationship?" In the context of the Church (capital "C"), one might ask: "Is the action in accordance with Scripture?" thereby inquiring as to the action's effect on the relationship of the body of Christ, the Church, with Christ himself. In a covenant situation, it is insulting to use contractual words or business language. The relationship is not legally defined; the questions asked before actions are contemplated are not the same.

In his essay on intimacy, Max DePree states that "covenantal relationships...induce freedom, not paralysis. (They rest) on shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals... (They) are open to

influence... (They) reflect unity and grace and poise... (They enable one) to be hospitable to the unusual person and unusual ideas. Covenantal relationships tolerate risk and forgive errors.” (DePree, M. p. 51).

Individuals are attracted to the Church (capital “C”) because they have entered into a love relationship with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit and they believe His Church and the people in it share Christ’s values, goals, and mission. In this environment, there must be trust, stewardship, and equity—qualitative rather than quantitative measurements are the ones used.

“Trust is the father of openness....Trust makes it possible to assemble the diverse abilities needed to achieve the potential... (When there is trust, one can recognize that) a diversity of gifts and opinions can be animated by the same spirit.” (DePree, H. p. 3)

Stewardship requires faithfulness. (1 Corinthians 4:2 New KJV) The Church (capital “C”) has been blessed with individuals who carry the gifts of the Spirit. These interdependent gifts come in the form of gifted members, and their very presence results in a large stewardship obligation on the part of the Church (capital “C”) and the church (small “c”) as it uses these resources to fulfill the gospel commission.

Equity means that everyone is granted the opportunity to have equal rights. All have “the right to be needed, the right to be involved, the right to be informed and thus to understand...” (DePree, H. p. 5) and the right to justice. These qualities should be part of the covenant make-up of the Church (capital “C”).

## Conclusion

In the Church (capital “C”) business procedures and policies are inappropriate, but in the church (small “c”) they are essential for organizational clarity, coherence, and order. Thus a CIO fits in the church (small “c”) because that position adds to organizational order and clarity. The Church (capital “C”) empowers its leaders in the church (small “c”) to acquire, manage, and distribute the resources of the Church (capital “C”) for mission and this requires an organizational structure. This structure may use business practices and terminology to do its work. But, there is an inherent danger that because we live in a fallen world, and we ourselves are fallen people, we may misunderstand the roles assigned to us by the Church (capital “C”). Jesus recognized this temptation, and he warned us well when he said in Matthew 20:27: “Whoever is “Chief” among you, let him be your servant.” (KJV)

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