

Black Unions

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The Black Unions debate (1969-1980) concerned the wishes of the leadership of eight regional conferences of the North American Division in existence at that time to organize into two newly-created union conferences. Their desire to withdraw from existing unions was fueled primarily by the following:

1. The challenges produced by the rapid membership growth of their conferences: what had been 17,891 members and nine per cent of American church membership when they were organized in 1944 had become approximately 100,000 congregants and twenty percent of church membership in 1968.
 2. The very special needs of America's rapidly expanding, and in many ways, socially distinct, black communities.
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The regional conference leaders' explanation of the "black union" arrangement as being the most efficient means of addressing these challenges was initially registered at the annual meeting of the Regional Advisory Committee, a unit of the General Conference, held April 7-9, 1969, in Miami, Florida.

Their appeal read:

Whereas, the present structure of Regional conference organization has been blessed of God in soul winning endeavor and

Whereas, it now seems in order to suggest that the organizational idea move up one step,

Voted, That we recommend that a General Conference committee be appointed to study the advisability of the organization of a regional union or regional unions in the United States."¹

Several months later, on December 3, 1969, eleven activist black pastors, unaware of response from the General Conference to this appeal, wrote the president of the General Conference, Robert H. Pierson (1911-1989), reiterating the advisory committee's hopes. An abbreviated copy of the letter, asking for immediate for action, was sent to the head of the North American Regional Department and chairman of the Regional Advisory Committee, H.D. Singleton.²

The North American Division Commission (1970)

However, formal response to their request for study of the black union administrative accommodation came, not from General Conference (GC) leadership, but from officers of the North American Division (NAD), who structured a study commission to deal with the matter.

The commission, appointed in close counsel with black church leadership of the NAD, consisted of seventy-one black and twenty-one white members representing all phases and areas of denominational interest. Of this number, sixteen were lay persons (church members not denominationally employed) and seventeen were pastors (sixteen black and one white).³

This group met January 13, 1970, in what would be the first of three decision-making meetings regarding the desire of regional conference leadership to withdraw from existing union structures and establish parallel units. As rationale for their appeal, the black leaders contended that the following benefits would result from it:

1. More relevant administrative direction for regional conferences.
2. More accurate representation of regional conference concerns in meetings of higher levels of church administration (Union, Division and General Conference).
3. Greater opportunity for both horizontal and vertical mobility within the church structure.
4. Greater opportunity for joint planning and programing among regional conferences.
5. Greater employment opportunity for black Adventist laypersons.
6. Increased effectiveness of "indigenous leadership" in local congregations as well as their non-Adventist communities.
7. Increased "role modeling and incentive" benefits for black youth.⁴

The January 13, 1970, assembly found agreement with much of the black unionists' rationale. However, most expressed fear that while black unions would, indeed, provide a number of practical goods, the optics, if not the reality of racial division within the church, warranted examination of alternate solutions. The meeting concluded with the decision to table the motion to proceed with study of plans for organizing black unions within the NAD. This was done with the understanding that the NAD would examine the issues involved and, at an early date, present alternative recommendations for discussion.⁵

As agreed, the commission reassembled on April 16, 1970, at which time it gave attention to a document prepared by NAD leadership outlining arrangements in lieu of black unions titled, "Regional Conferences and Human Relations." This document, better remembered as "The Sixteen Points" (reminiscent in tone of the "Resolution of 1929" proposed by church leaders forty-one years earlier as an alternative to black Adventists' original push for colored conferences), was approved by a vote of forty-one to twenty-eight.⁶ Most black union

proponents were unhappy with this outcome, stating that while they were appreciative of the financial and organizational benefits the document envisioned, it failed to adequately address a number of the critical problems with which they were dealing.

Renewed Consideration (1975-1977)

Five years later, in the spring of 1975, after what they regarded as half a decade of frustration with the weak or unenforceable tenets of the "Sixteen Points," black leadership renewed its appeal for regional unions. This time, unlike the earlier approaches, the request was not initiated by the general base of black administrators. It was instead delivered by those most involved with directing the church's mission in the black communities of America and most respected as spokespersons of that endeavor—the eight regional conference presidents themselves.⁷

NAD leadership accepted their request for renewed consideration and, on August 26, 1976, convened a blue-ribbon commission of church leaders to decide the reasonableness of granting another full-fledged appeal. This meeting held at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, resulted in the decision to ask the NAD President's Group on Administration (PREXAD) to hear the renewed appeal.⁸

In January 1977, PREXAD, determined to study the matter more in-depth than had been done and to bring closure to the discussions, appointed several committees comprised of a variety of academics such as biblical scholars, sociologists, and historians, along with lay persons and ministers (administrators and otherwise) to advise them on the matter.⁹

In the months between their appointment in January 1977 and their report in October of that year, the committees rigorously examined the salient issues involved in establishing black unions within the NAD and reported back to PREXAD. On October 13, 1977, PREXAD's decision, based largely on the committee's reports, was delivered to the attendees at NAD's annual council. On that date, NAD president, Neal Wilson, read to church leadership in attendance an historic position paper that stated:

After the most careful deliberation, it is the confirmed belief of PREXAD that it would not be judicious nor wise to organize regional "black" unions. The following are some of the reasons that have led to the decision:

- 1) A major consideration in the thinking of PREXAD is the concern to keep our people as close together as possible spiritually and organizationally....
- 3) PREXAD feels that we must reject any philosophy which says that only black people can make decisions for black people, or white people for whites, or for that matter any ethnic or language group only for itself....
- 4) The goal of unity of the body of Christ with the parts operating in sympathetic relationship does not seem to suggest going in the direction of black unions....

6) Any further organizational separation than now exists would be misrepresented both inside and outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church....

7) If the North American Division consciously moved in the direction of further fragmentation, thus reducing interchange between all ethnics and cultural groups, it could set the wrong example and have an adverse influence on our sister divisions around the world.¹⁰

Convinced by NAD's second denial that further appeal handled by the division was futile, regional conference leaders concluded that their only hope of success lay in approval by its higher body, the General Conference. On October 19, six days after the PREXAD denial, they wrote Robert Pierson, General Conference president, stating:

We cannot conscientiously support the decision on "Regional Unions" that was read to us at the time of the PREXAD meeting held October 13, 1977.

We share the burden of the leaders of the church to work for a finished work now and to hasten our Lord's soon return; therefore, we feel that the "regional Union" concept is still the only organizational structure that can best meet the needs of the black work in the United States of America.¹¹

Pierson's November 2, 1977, reply expressed sadness and disappointment with unwillingness of the regional conference presidents to accept PREXAD's decision. He further stated hope in their cooperation, in spite of obvious disagreement, to move forward as had been determined.¹²

An Appeal to the Constituency (1978)

However, the regional conference presidents, believing that they had not yet exhausted all means, decided to turn, in earnest, to their constituencies for support. This was a strategy that, until then, they had refrained from engaging for fear of discouraging or confusing membership loyalty regarding church organization. Furthermore, they hoped to minimize opposition among those black leaders who opposed the initiative. These were primarily the majority of blacks currently serving in union, division, and GC posts as well as leaders in the Pacific and North Pacific unions—areas of NAD where there were no regional conferences.

Now, however, believing that they might succeed only if a vocal laity joined them in appeal, they turned to their memberships for support. Their primary approach was the wide-scale distribution of a sixteen-page booklet detailing their position, published in January 1978, entitled, "Together for a Finished Work." Additionally, they engaged a schedule of "town hall" meetings with key congregations in an effort to garner support.

The General Conference responded to this renewed initiative by placing consideration of black unions on the agenda of its Spring Meeting, April 11-14, 1978. This body of approximately four hundred delegates from all over the world listened attentively to PREXAD's explanation and unfavorable decision regarding black unions.

However, as most had little prior acquaintance with the factors involved, after two and a half days of discussion,

they voted to postpone a decision of their own until the Annual Council held in October of that year.¹³

Meanwhile, in an attempt to further define this issue of the NAD administration that had become of interest to the entire international body of believers, the *Adventist Review*, in its September 7, 1978, edition published contrasting opinions by two black leaders in an article entitled: “Black Unions: Yes or No?” The “Yes” position was authored by Calvin B. Rock, then president of Oakwood College, and the “No” by industrial psychologist and lay preacher, Alan A. Anderson, Jr.¹⁴

The General Conference Annual Council, chaired by newly-elected GC president, Neal Wilson, took up the matter on October 11, 1978, and, as had occurred in each prior hearing, after vigorous discussion, the Black Union appeal was denied.¹⁵

Convinced that their cause was just and that they had been disadvantaged throughout the processes of debate, the regional presidents followed this latest vote by designing two quasi-unions of their own that they labeled “Territorial Councils.” These were intended to allow black leaders’ increased focus on their missional needs while yet remaining a part of the existing union conference structures.¹⁶

However, with black Adventism’s celebration of the January 1979 election of black leader C. E. Bradford as General Conference Vice President for North America (a title changed in September 1986 to “President” of the North American Division) and knowledge of GC President Wilson’s active history of advocacy for minorities in church affairs, black leadership, after ten years of trying, abandoned the quest for black unions.¹⁷

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Quoted in Neal C. Wilson, “Recent Developments in the Field of Human Relations in North America,” *ARH*, June 4, 1970, 9.
2. The full letter is published in Calvin B. Rock, *Protest and Progress: Black Seventh-day Adventist Leadership and the Push for Parity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2018), 270-271.

3. Rock, 104.
4. Ibid.
5. Wilson, "Recent Developments," 9-10.
6. Rock, 105, 271-278.
7. Ibid., 106.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Quoted in Rock, 106-107.
11. Published in Rock, 279.
12. Published in Rock, 280-281.
13. Rock, 107.
14. C. B. Rock and Alan A. Anderson, "Should the Church Organize Black Unions in North America?" *ARH*, September 7, 1978, 4-7.
15. Marjorie Hyer, "Adventists Reject Blacks' Proposal," *Washington Post*, October 20, 1978, B6; Rock, 108-109.
16. Rock, 110-111.
17. Rock, 111-113.

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