What’s Next?-Part II

Editor’s Note: This is Part II of a series following up on last month’s Regional Conference Convocation. The Convocation was for the purpose of virtual fellowship and also to begin a dialog on the issues facing Regional Conferences-AND, NOT just to TALK about them-but to take action on them. Part I was posted on the Office for Regional Conference Ministry Facebook page on July 15. You can also view said article from the Homepage of this website.

Well-it is a little later than we planned (for which, I apologize) but here is Part II of “What's Next?”-the things that are on the docket as a follow-up to the virtual Regional Conference Convocation.

In What's Next-Part I, we shared with you what happened at the Convocation and the things that were being planned relative to following up. One of the things that was planned was this article-What's Next-Part II. We said that in Part II, we would go back through all the questions and comments from the three Roundtables-the one on Evangelism, the one on Efficiency, and the one on Christian Education. We said that we would then report back to you in this forum about the issues that were raised. Then, we would outline some of the things that the Office of Regional Conference Ministry (ORCM) would try to do to move our Regional Conferences towards closure on some of the issues.

The ultimate aim is to move from dialog to action at the Regional Conference Summit, March 5-7.

Though most people do not know it, that is one of the major responsibilities of the ORCM-to facilitate and coordinate the things that Regional Conferences do collectively. It is a sacred responsibility-one that this office takes very seriously.

Let me be very clear: It is not the responsibility of ORCM to tell our Regional Conferences what they need to do. It is our responsibility to see that the collective things that Regional Conferences decide to do gets done.

In going back through all of the questions and comments arising out of the three roundtables, here are the things that came up the most often (these are listed in no particular order).
1. **The African-American Versus African-Caribbean Challenge:** This came up quite a bit on Friday of the Convocation. It is probably a conversation that is overdue. We are going to have to figure out some way to have some honest, family dialog at the Regional Conference Summit in March; that topic will be on the docket.

And the operative word is *family* (note the word “African” that is the first word in both groups). I do not know whether there really is a division between people in Regional Conferences who are indigenous to the United States and people in Regional Conferences with Caribbean backgrounds (which I suspect includes most people in our churches on the East Coast and Florida).

But even the fact that there *might* be a problem is a problem—and it is a big reason why that while people of African descent make up by far the largest single demographic in the Adventist Church a serious argument can be that we are underrepresented on the upper leadership levels of our church—especially, African-Americans.

I shall repeat what I have said several times before—and as someone with no Caribbean roots but who was privileged to begin my ministry there: If there is *any* kind of split between African-Americans and African Caribbeans, that just may be the dumbest fight in the history of mankind. We came from the same place (Africa) and we got here the same way (in chains). The only difference is our Caribbean brothers and sisters got dropped off in a different place that had better weather.

We have far too much in common to allow other people to play us against each other. If there really is a “fight”, it’s one where both of us lose.

2. **A Regional Conference “Bank” Or, In Denominational Nomenclature—A Revolving Fund:** One of the biggest arguments in favor of why Regional Conferences are still needed is because with Regional Conferences, we get to control our resources to a degree that we would not if there were no Regional Conferences.

A big example of that is the Regional Conference Retirement Program. It is one of the best things that Regional Conferences have ever done. For 20 years now, the Regional Conference Retirement Program has allowed Regional Conference employees to retire in dignity—something that some of the best-known, most productive workers in this church were not allowed to do.

I could tell you some stories that would break your heart (or make you mad) about some major contributors to the mission of our church who struggled to make it on the $1,200 a month (or whatever pitifully inadequate amount the old retirement program paid).

As a young Pastor, I used to wonder why in the world the late President C.E. Dudley would hire all these older Pastors. I used to wonder “Why don’t they retire?” Now I know why—they could not afford to retire on $1,200 a month. Neither could I; I suspect most of you could not either. The Regional Conference Retirement Program changed all of that.

But there would have been less than zero per cent chance of having a Regional Conference Retirement Plan if there were no Regional Conferences. Our leaders in those days would have had to ask State Conferences for their permission to form our own retirement plan after the one that was run by the
brethren went “toes up”. Anybody want to guess how likely it was that permission was going to be granted for that? It helps to control your own resources.

Suppose all the Regional Conferences took all of the funds that others were managing for us, pooled them and managed them ourselves? That is a discussion that is at least worth having; we asked our Regional Conference Treasurers/Vice Presidents for Finance to begin that discussion—and they have. We shall continue it at the Summit.

3. ‘Nationalizing’ Pine Forge, i.e., Treating It Like Oakwood And Having All the Conferences Contribute A Percentage of Their Tithe to Operating It: There was strong support for that—and with good reason. I support that concept myself—a small percentage of ORCM’s yearly budget goes to Pine Forge (I take no credit for that—that was being done when I arrived at ORCM).

We put that on the table in a very preliminary way a few weeks ago when all of the Regional Conference Administrators met virtually at what is called the North American Division (NAD) Black Caucus. That is another topic we shall flesh out more fully at the Summit as well. My commitment is to get a decision on this one way or the other—at the Summit.

I think that is going to be an interesting discussion. I think-in all honesty-collectively, “the spirit is willing”. Even people like me who did not attend Pine Forge, know its importance to the Regional work. It is one of the relatively few institutions that we have—and, one of the few African-American boarding schools in the country. I don’t think anyone wants to see Pine Forge not be a part of our future.

But I suspect that is going to require some difficult choices. I attended and graduated from a boarding school; my son graduated from one as well. I have been involved with schools long enough to know how enormously expensive boarding schools are to operate—they are sort of what I used to say about my children when they were still at home. I used to say that children are “The Great Income Reducers”.

Anyone who knows me knows that there is no greater supporter of and believer in Seventh-day Adventist Christian Education than me. But let’s be real—that is what boarding academies are to conferences-Great Income Reducers.

I believe that every dime that conferences spend on Christian education is worth it. I used to tell my church when I was a young Pastor in Memphis that after we paid our mortgage and our utility bill, if every other dime we collected had to go to our church school, I was prepared to do that. But boarding schools costs a whole lot of “dimes”.

Allegheny East has the highest per capita tithe among all of Regional Conferences. But I don’t know if even they can operate Pine Forge by themselves forever (maybe they can—but I am glad I did not have to find the gazillion dollars that boarding schools cost when I was a conference administrator).

I think there is a sincere desire to share the cost of operating Pine Forge. We’ll see at the Summit if the dollars can be found to go along with that desire. (PLEASE NOTE: The Summit is for the purpose of Regional Conferences sitting down together and making recommendations for each conference to consider in addressing some of the issues that we face. From there, each conference administration/conference executive committee will decide whether to adopt the recommendations.
The delegates to the Regional Conference Summit will have no administrative authority over individual conferences).

4. **Administrative Travel Budgets**: Were a big topic. Let’s start with the obvious: COVID-19 has taught us a number of things. One of them is that not all of the zillion meetings that it *does* take to operate a 2.5 billion dollar entity (that is approximately the total tithe in our church for the last year that I have tithe figures) that operates churches, schools, hospitals, etc. in approximately 215 countries require the meeting participants to physically come together.

We can do some of those things via Zoom (or whatever), we should do some of those things by Zoom, and I believe that post COVID-19, that we shall do some of those things by Zoom (or whatever). Period.

So-let’s deal with the obvious: Is there a lot of travel by most administrators in our church? Yes. Is all of that travel absolutely necessary? We have learned that it isn’t. Will that change going forward? It absolutely should.

Now-for the less obvious-but equally true: If you are a church administrator, your travel costs your organization money, but it also costs you money—not all travel costs are reimbursable. I have run through 5 cars in my time as a church administrator, plus 2 more cars that my wife drove that I used in my church travels. The church paid for none of those cars. And you should have seen my personal American Express card charges when I was a Conference President.

Then there are costs that are less obvious-but no less real-like the time I left home with my then 7 year old daughter crying at the door. I have a number of stories like that; so does pretty much any church administrator.

I have the privilege of doing orientations for new conference administrators; I just did one this week. In *each* orientation, I tell the new administrator that church administration in not marriage-friendly or child-friendly. It just isn’t.

When I was a Conference President, I once had the General Conference President to preach at our camp meeting. Towards the end of his stay, I said to him, “Mr. President-where do you go from here?” He said, “I am going to be gone from home for the next 5 weeks”.

Does anyone think that was something that he *wanted* to do? I had the privilege of being invited to preach in Johannesburg, South Africa last year. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life. But it was a nearly 16 hour flight each way. I was away from my wife for 10 days. The General Conference President has to do that kind of thing all the time.

You may not agree with him (I often do not). But you have to feel some sympathy (as well as some appreciation) for the sacrifices that he-and others-make for our church. The irony of this is that at the same time individuals were saying “Reduce Administrative travel!” in the chat room during the Regional Conference Convocation, someone else was saying in that same chat room “President X-please come to our church”. Travel to churches and schools and for funerals inside the conference makes up-by far-the largest percentage of administrative travel budgets. In my time as a Conference President, some 75% of my travel was inside the conference.
The reason why I know that is every 6 months when I was a Conference President, I would send an itemized travel report of each trip I made to the Conference Executive Committee of my Conference. I did that so people would see that most of my travel was inside of the conference—doing the things that they were asking me to do.

5. **Women’s Ordination:** There was a lot of discussion on this—pro and con-in the on-line chat on the Sabbath of the Presidential Roundtable. To a person, the Regional Presidents/West Coast Vice Presidents were supportive of Women’s Ordination.

At the end of the day, however, that is an issue that thus far has been decided on the General Conference and not the local conference level. Technically, ordination is a Union Conference decision; we shall have to see how the other unions in the North American Division (other than the Pacific and the Columbia Unions, who ordain woman Pastors) will address this issue going forward.

Finally...time did not allow for a full discussion of the issues raised in the Regional Conference Convocation Roundtables. There was a commitment to follow-up on the roundtables with a “Part II”.

This has led to what we are calling our **“5 At 5 Series”**—a series of 5 roundtables, on 5 consecutive Sabbaths, beginning this coming Sabbath at **5:00 p.m., Eastern Time.** Here are those roundtables and their dates:

- **August 29**-Education-Part II
- **September 5**-Presidential Roundtable-II
- **September 12**-Millennial Roundtable-ORCM “Next Gen” Caucus
- **September 19**- Regional Conference Treasurers Caucus
- **September 26**-Regional Conference Secretaries Caucus

We are hopeful and prayerful that not only will this roundtable series provide the promised follow-up to the Regional Conference Convocation but that it will provide an insight to the role that Regional Conferences are playing in fulfilling the mission of God’s remnant church.

And-that’s **What’s Next.**